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“Imperfectly Incarnate”: Father Absence, Law and Lies in Bret Easton Ellis’ *Lunar Park* and John Burnside’s *A Lie About My Father*

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Abstract

Contemporary discussions emphasize crisis, fragmentation and reconstruction in the definition of the “new fatherhood.” In UK law, attempts to reinstate the “Name of the Father” into familial structures have appeared to shore up conventional family forms against the threat of dissolution. This article examines the difficulties of defining and describing legal and literary fatherhood through examination of two recent novels, Bret Easton Ellis’ *Lunar Park* and John Burnside’s *A Lie About My Father*. It suggests that the father of memory and imagination possesses qualities of falsehood and emptiness which mirror the intangibility and symbolic overburdening of the paternal signifier as theorized by Lacan and more recently Žižek. Thus, remembered fathers abuse, neglect, and crucially, lie to sons who long both for the presence of the human father and for the magic of the signifier. It then examines the authors’ strategies for forgiveness of their fathers and their attempts to reconcile the liar with the lying signifier, discussing ways in which imagining the father as embodied individual aid in the rehabilitation of the paternal signifier itself, with implications for sociolegal conceptions of fathers and fatherhood.

Keywords

Fathers, law, family policy, John Burnside, Bret Easton Ellis, lies, paternal signifier, Name of the Father, memoir

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The current moment is frequently defined as a critical one for men, and particularly for fathers.¹ As Richard Collier has written, “[i]n recent years ... it is possible to detect, across Western societies, a distinct heightening of societal concern about whether ‘families need fathers’ – and, if so, what *kind* of fathers these should be.”² Anthony Clare has stated that modern fathers need explaining:

If men still have a role as fathers, then it is time they explained what it is. And it is time they fulfilled this role. What is it that fathers do? What is it that fathers are? What is it that they bring to society that society cannot do without?³

The “crisis” of masculinity and fatherhood extends, of course, beyond the failings of the individual progenitor or authority figure, to the very concept of paternal authority, the psychoanalytic and legal signifier of the Father, in whose Name and Law we are presumed to enter the world of symbols and meaning itself. Slavoj Žižek has argued that the central contemporary trauma is “the demise of symbolic efficiency, or the fall of the father,”⁴ and with him what had appeared to be secure gendered identification. The father now seems unprecedentedly mobile and adaptable as a signifier. Legal commentators have noted his “fragmentation” at various social, legal and cultural levels as the traditional hegemony of the married father (both in social terms, and in the sense that the status of fatherhood was legally presumed to stem from marriage to the mother) appears to be in decline, or at the very least, confusion.⁵ His new mobility has caused debate and anxiety across the political spectrum: the absent father and his companion figure, the lone mother, have become touchstones for a bitter set of arguments in both the UK and USA about the competence of women to head families, the need for social support required by the “new” family forms, and the adequacy of existing gender norms to

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1. Stephen Baskerville, “Is There Really a Fatherhood Crisis?,” *Independent Review* 8(4) (2004); Jonathan Scourfield and Mark Drakeford, “New Labour and the Problem of Men,” *Critical Social Policy* 22(4) (2002), pp. 619–40.
 2. Richard Collier, “A Hard Time to Be a Father? Reassessing the Relationship Between Law, Policy and Family (Practices),” *Journal of Law and Society* 28(4) (2001), pp. 520–45, 520.
 3. Anthony Clare, *On Men: Masculinity in Crisis* (London: Arrow, 2001), p. 159.
 4. Slavoj Žižek, “Whither Oedipus,” in *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 313–400, 322.
 5. Richard Collier and Sally Sheldon, *Fragmenting Fatherhood: A Socio-legal Study* (Oxford: Hart, 2008); Sally Sheldon, “Unmarried Fathers and Parental Responsibility: A Case for Reform?,” *Feminist Legal Studies* 9 (2001), pp. 93–118; Sally Sheldon, “Fragmenting Fatherhood: The Regulation of Reproductive Technologies,” *Modern Law Review* 68(4) (2005), pp. 523–52; Richard Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family* (London: Routledge, 1995); Collier, “A Hard Time to Be a Father”; for the US context, see for example Alan Booth and Ann C. Crouter, *Men in Families: When Do They Get Involved? What Difference Does it Make?* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998); Nancy E. Dowd, *Redefining Fatherhood* (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Nancy E. Dowd, “Fathers and the Supreme Court: Founding Fathers and Nurturing Fathers,” *Emory Law Journal* 54 (2005), pp. 1271–1342.

encompass the pressures and demands of the new global economics.⁶ The British and American Right have focused on the centrality of the father to familial and social structures, arguing that his absence creates social vacuum. In the USA, this debate frequently focuses on the perceived failings of African-American and Latino fathers, although a generalized rhetoric of perceived father absence (with consequent deleterious effects on family and child wellbeing) is common to both countries.⁷ The American New Right commentator Charles Murray links father absence to the breakdown of social bonds and the formation of an “underclass” in Britain and America: “Today’s children are too often going malnourished, malnurtured, neglected and unsocialised not because their parents have no access to material resources but because the mother is incompetent and the father is missing altogether.”⁸

This article takes an interdisciplinary approach to questions of real and symbolic father absence. Looking at fathers as they are represented across contrasting sources, from law, government rhetoric and policy to novel and memoir, provides a useful impression of the span of gender narratives, cultural networks of power, and the various shapes “politics” can take, both personal and governmental. It also allows for thematic links across these forms to be detected. As Collier notes, the “fatherhood debate” is located within a complex array of socio-economic and interpersonal shifts:

[f]rom such a broader sociological perspective, contemporary debates about fatherhood are themselves just part – albeit a very significant part – of a broader process of change involving (amongst other things) major shifts in the structure and experience of employment and “family life”, a reappraisal of issues of sexuality, sexual identity, sexual commitment and, in particular, a rethinking of the relationship between adults and *children*.⁹

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6. On the debates about the increasing numbers of women bringing up children alone see e.g. Elisabeth Bortolaia Silva, ed., *Good Enough Mothering? Feminist Perspectives on Lone Mothering* (London: Routledge, 1999) and Majella Kilkey, *Lone Mothers Between Work and Care: The Policy Regime in Twenty Countries* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000).
 7. Charles Murray, “Keeping Priorities Straight on Welfare Reform,” *Society* 33(5) (1996), pp. 10–12; David Popenoe, “Life Without Father,” in Cynthia Daniels, ed., *Lost Fathers: The Politics of Fatherlessness in America* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), pp. 33–49; see further Daniels, *Lost Fathers* generally. On African-American and Latino fatherhood see for example Gerald Whitmore, “African-American Father Figures and Children’s Achievement,” *Journal of African American Studies* 4(1) (1999), pp. 25–35; Deborah A. Salem, Marc A. Zimmerman and Paul C. Notaro, “Effects of Family Structure, Family Process, and Father Involvement on Psychosocial Outcomes among African American Adolescents,” *Family Relations* 47(6) (1998), pp. 331–41; Scott Coltrane, Ross D. Parke and Michele Adams, “Complexity of Father Involvement in Low-Income Mexican American Families,” *Family Relations* 53(2) (2004), pp. 179–89; J. Downer and J.L. Mendez, “African American Father Involvement and Preschool Children’s School Readiness,” *Early Education and Development* 16(3) (2005), pp. 317–39.
 8. Murray, “Keeping Priorities Straight,” p. 10.
 9. Collier, “A Hard Time to be a Father,” p. 523 (emphasis in original).

The persistence of assumptions of physical *absence* in the contemporary construct of fatherhood is clear if we consider the sort of behavior required to constitute a “bad father.” The phrase conjures images of domestic violence, prolonged absence, drunkenness and/or failure to provide financial support. The “normal” father can remain at a distance from his offspring; while this clearly contributes to the greater freedom and economic independence of men, it also lessens the emotional and individual importance attributed to men’s caregiving, constructing it as optional and secondary to economic activity. There have been widespread public calls to greater awareness of the father’s presence in and contributions to the normative family unit, with political and cultural constituencies of widely differing motivation calling for greater recognition and/or facilitation of paternal involvement in the lives of children in both the UK and USA; the “fathers’ rights” movements and concepts of a desirable “involved fatherhood” appear to have arisen with some simultaneity in both countries.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the contemporary father of political and cultural mythology remains more often absent than not; and this absence is reflected in the legal and social structures which govern paternity. Collier¹¹ notes that “father presence is constructed in the contemporary legal environment as desirable and father absence is constructed as problematic in law. Father presence, however, is built around capitalist imperatives, so that the father’s ‘presence’ assumes absence for most of the working day.’ In this context, it needs to be noted that cultural productions highlighting paternal deprivation in the lives of young men are increasingly prominent. The field of literature, film and television featuring fathers who are either completely invisible, separated from their children through family breakdown or overwork, or otherwise cut off from the family unit, is a large one. Particularly striking examples are Nick Hornby’s immensely popular British novel *Fever Pitch*,¹² where football replaces the estranged, emotionally distant father as a signifier of an approachable, attainable masculinity; the film *Fight Club*,¹³ in which father absence is portrayed as afflicting a generation of young men with violent disenchantment;¹⁴ and the work of the two authors I focus

10. On the development of the “fathers’ rights” and “father involvement” debates, see further Collier and Sheldon, *Fragmenting Fatherhood*; Dowd, *Redefining Fatherhood*; Michael E. Lamb, *The Role of the Father in Child Development* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, fourth edition, 2004); Booth and Crouter, *Men in Families*. On the corresponding negative concept of the “deadbeat dad” and his particular “blameworthiness” in an era of state welfare crackdowns where private, masculine economic support for children is increasingly seen as indispensable, see further Sharon Hays, *Flat Broke with Children: Women in the Age of Welfare Reform* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Jane C. Murphy, “Legal Images of Fatherhood: Welfare Reform, Child Support Enforcement, and Fatherless Children,” *Notre Dame Law Review* 81(2005), pp. 325-86.

11. Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*, p. 202.

12. Nick Hornby, *Fever Pitch* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).

13. dir. David Fincher, 1998.

14. Ruth Quiney (Cain), “‘Mr. Xerox,’ the Domestic Terrorist, and the Victim-Citizen: Masculine and National Anxiety in *Fight Club* and Anti-Terror Law,” *Law and Literature* 19(2), pp. 327–45.

on in this article: the American writer Bret Easton Ellis and the Scottish poet and novelist John Burnside.¹⁵

In two recent works cataloguing lives lived in the second half of the twentieth century, Ellis' *Lunar Park* and Burnside's *A Lie About My Father*,¹⁶ both authors struggle with the father as an alluring but thoroughly inadequate figure who, I will argue, casts an informative light on what Collier calls the contemporary "fatherhood problematic" in the USA and UK respectively.¹⁷ The different locations of the authors – one a West Coast American and materially privileged from birth, the other the son of a Scottish steelworker who progressed through grammar school into the middle class – allow for analysis of the "problematic" across different national and also class contexts. Certain patterns are detectable across the depictions of these problematic fathers: an *emptiness* to the signifier of the father¹⁸ which is seen to affect and even corrupt his living representative, combined with the abandoned and traumatized child's longing for the magic of paternal power. National differences in constructions of the normative father are marked across the two novels: although the fathers depicted retain their particular individuality, Ellis' depiction of his angry, hyper-materialistic, controlling, Reaganite father allows reflection on the considerable impact of neoliberal capitalist ideologies on concepts of paternal authority and masculine success in America, while Burnside's hard-drinking, tough-talking father often embodies a certain (perhaps historical) type of British working-class masculinity.¹⁹

15. Other striking auto/biographical works about father absence and distance are Blake Morrison's memoir *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (New edition, London: Granta, 2006) and Germaine Greer's *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* (London: Ballantine, 1991).

16. Bret Easton Ellis, *Lunar Park* (London: Picador, 2005); John Burnside, *A Lie About My Father* (London: Vintage, 2007).

17. Collier, "A Hard Time to be a Father," p. 524.

18. Brown et al (Leslie Brown, Marilyn Callagan, Susan Strega, Christopher Walmsley and Lena Dominelli, "Manufacturing Ghost Fathers: The Paradox of Father Presence and Absence in Child Welfare," *Child and Family Social Work* 27(14) (2009), pp. 25–34) note that in Western child welfare discourses fathers are rendered invisible to the point of ghostliness: "... men are disproportionately responsible for physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment, but are ignored in research and intervention. Similarly, a review of research into child psychopathology found that it continues to discount fathers ..." (pp. 27–8). Intriguingly for the thesis that the literary and legal father often splits into dangerous/horrific and romantic/magical fragments, they continue:

we surmise from interviews with mothers, fathers, extended family and professionals that children are often uncertain about fathers' value to the family. Some ghost fathers are ostracized by the children as they take on the views of fathers as dangerous and non-contributing. Other ghost fathers seem to be romanticized through their absence, as the unknown father becomes the hero by whom the children wait to be rescued (p. 30).

19. I lack space to discuss in depth the specific impacts of American and British national histories on concepts of fatherhood. In the US context, important work has been done on the importance of the "Founding Fathers" on American national identity, and how a foundational American father-figure has been constructed as central to "functional" American family life; see further Dowd, *Redefining Fatherhood*, and "Fathers and the Supreme Court"; Mark E. Kann, *The Gendering of American Politics: Founding Mothers, Founding Fathers*,

Representations of the desired, inadequate father suggest the falsities underlying the magical paternal signifier. These fathers *lose*, and are seen to lose, repeatedly. They abuse others, particularly wives and children, and are themselves victims of abuse. Crucially, they lie, and/or live out damaging fantasies. At the same time, textual exploration of longing for the lost father also *reproduces* the unachievable magic of the paternal signifier. There is a crucial correspondence here with the powerful and current legal and political arguments about paternal “rights in return for responsibilities” (generally, the financial responsibilities which have generally been expected of men), which tend to focus on an idealized figure or image of the good/powerful/involved father, without providing much solid policy support for his real presence or involvement in his children’s lives, such as more flexible work patterns for workers of both genders.²⁰ I discuss these types of argument in more detail below, but for now I wish to mark the connection of these kinds of unsatisfied literary, cultural and legal longings for paternal plenitude to “wound culture,” an attachment to trauma and pain as signifying and valorizing masculine authority and authenticity.²¹ The trope of a not merely absent, but *false* father is

and Political Patriarchy (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999); Joseph Pleck, “American Fathering in Historical Perspective,” in Karen V. Hansen and Anita Iltta Garey, eds., *Families in the US: Kinship and Domestic Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), pp. 351–61. The greater contribution in the US of reactionary right-wing, fundamentalist Christian and neoliberal capitalist ideology to images of the good/powerful father is also noted by Pleck, Dowd and Kann. In the UK, the importance of the “classing” of the national population to constructions of masculinity are strongly reflected in Burnside’s narrative of his working-class Scottish father; for an intriguing, autobiographical interpretation of British working-class fathering, see further Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago, 1986) and *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London: Rivers Oram, 1992); on British fathering in general see e.g. Jane Lewis, “The Problem of Fathers: Policy and Behaviour in Britain,” in Barbara Hobson, ed., *Making Men into Fathers: Men, Masculinities and the Social Politics of Fatherhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

20. See further Collier and Sheldon, *Fragmenting Fatherhood*; Brown et al “Manufacturing Ghost Fathers”; Richard Collier and Sally Sheldon, eds., *Father's Rights Activism and Law Reform in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford: Hart, 2006); Richard Collier, “‘Waiting Till Father Gets Home’: The Reconstruction of Fatherhood in Family Law,” *Social and Legal Studies* 4(1) (1995), pp. 5–30. The main policy initiative in the UK and US has been enforced child support, a complex system which can be called upon in the political arena to justify certain aspects of welfare reform impacting most severely on mothers carrying out childcare alone (Hays, *Flat Broke With Children*), but may, it appears, lead to increased paternal contact with the children fathers have to pay for! (See e.g. Murphy, “Legal Images of Fatherhood”; Chien-Chung Huang, “Child Support Enforcement in Never-Married Mother Families,” *Fathering* 4(1) (2006), pp. 97–111; Irwin Garfinkel, Sarah S. McLanahan, Daniel R. Meyer, and Judith A. Seltzer, eds., *Fathers Under Fire: The Revolution in Child Support Enforcement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1998); Lewis, “The Problem of Fathers”.)
21. See further Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998); David Savran, *Taking it Like a Man: White Masculinity, Masochism and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); and

important to contemporary “wound culture” as it maps onto masculinity. As Burnside writes, “sometimes the lies are authorised, the textbook lies of citizenship and masculinity and employment we are all obliged to tell.”²² In this sense, the “false” father can point the way to a deeper understanding of the confusions and contradictions within dominant masculine/paternal constructs. What is intriguing in these narratives, as I will discuss, is that the father is rendered as a sort of “double” of the son. The sons discover and seek to nurture versions of themselves by reassessing their fathers.

The contemporary imaginary father in both law and literature represents a specific neoliberal “crisis” of responsibility, authenticity and self-actualization.²³ Particularly important here is the *inauthenticity* of various aspects of paternal and masculine affect: familial dominance, emotional detachment, domestic absence, and self-indulgence. The construct of the “new father” cannot be examined without close attention to his traumatized and traumatizing shadow side, and this applies to both legal and literary work on him. The psychoanalytic concepts of the Law and Name of the Father (and its contemporary “failures”) remain central to the synchronization of political and personal understandings of father figures across different class, racial and cultural locations. The father thus emerges as both a deeply wounded and powerfully wounding figure in “traumatic culture.”²⁴ His affect of dangerous victimhood mirrors some of the ambiguities of political and interpersonal gender roles in the twenty-first century. Accordingly, I must examine here symbolic, literary and legal failures of the father-as-signifier, discussing discourses of violent victimhood as masculine protest and the “doubling” motif which occurs in both novels I will discuss, whereby the son feels himself to be *possessed* by his father's life and emotions. Bearing in mind the massive symbolic importance of the Father of Law, and its representation in the ordinary human father, I note the “failure” of the father of family and law “as an organising and analytical device,”²⁵ and conclude with the possibility of “rehabilitating” wounded/wounding fatherhood, or reconciling the “organizing device” or Name of the Father with “real” fathers. My final argument will be that such rehabilitation may be achieved through apprehension of the father's embodied vulnerability; a point which supports recent feminist theses that issues of vulnerability and care are central to understanding the contemporary gendered subject.²⁶

also the (fictional) trauma “memoir” by James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

22. Burnside, *A Lie About my Father*, 309.

23. Helen Reece, *Divorcing Responsibly* (Oxford: Hart, 2003); Scourfield and Drakeford, “New Labour and the Problem of Men.”

24. Roger Luckhurst, “Traumaculture,” *New Formations* 50(1) (2003), pp. 28–47.

25. Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses*, p. 43.

26. Martha Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 20(1) (2008), Emory Public Law Research Paper no. 8-40, available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1131407>; Lauren Berlant, ed., *Compassion: The Cultural Politics of an Emotion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004); Kathleen Lynch, John Baker and Maureen Lyons, eds, *Affective Equality: Love, Care and Injustice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

I. The “New Father” and Symbolic Authority

Although the political and legal priority of masculinity has been presumed to be in crisis, this perception of fragmentation exists alongside with the continuing hegemony of embodied masculinity.²⁷ The boundedness, rationality and authority associated with masculinity and the male body are constitutive of the “normal” citizen;²⁸ the primary place of the father and his ownership of the mother in the “sexual family” replicates his symbolic status at the peak of the social order.²⁹ Brown et al. note that in child welfare discourses, “Mothers are seen to be *responsible* for their children while fathers are often characterized as having *rights* to their children.”³⁰ The “rights” paradigm continues to be powerful within fatherhood cultures,³¹ although simultaneously, as Collier describes, the promotion of a “new,” “active” fatherhood has been recently emphasized in research and policy:

... a recurring theme within more recent academic research on contemporary fathering and fatherhood is the belief that the promotion and encouragement of “active parenting” on the part of men is something which is, or should be, a desirable objective on the part of liberal democratic governments. That is, it should be part of the role of government, and an objective to be legitimately achieved by legal means, to “make the father figure” by promoting good, effective and socially positive fathering.

The feminist legal scholar Carol Smart has also commented on the broad social impact of the “new father” discourse in law:

For many, to be a father carries very different meanings, emotions and behaviours than in the pre-war period. Such changes have coincided with legal changes in which the father has lost his legal authority whilst being regarded as more and more central to the family in emotional and psychological terms. The father as constituted in legal discourse is no longer the paterfamilias, he is the producer of normal, heterosexual children, the stabilizing anti-delinquency agent, and the bringer of realistic values and the desire for achievement.³²

27. Michael Thomson, *Endowed: Regulating the Male Sexed Body* (London: Routledge, 2007).

28. Thomson, *Endowed*; Michael Thomson, “A Tale of Two Bodies: The Male Body and Feminist Legal Theory,” in Martha Fineman, ed., *Transcending the Bodies of Law* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010); Carol Smart, *Feminism and the Power of Law* (London: Routledge, 1989).

29. Martha Fineman, *The Neutered Mother, the Sexual Family and Other Twentieth-Century Tragedies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

30. Brown et al, “Manufacturing Ghost Fathers,” p. 31, my emphasis.

31. Collier and Sheldon, *Father's Rights Activism and Law Reform*; Richard Collier and Sally Sheldon, “Unfamiliar Territory,” *Guardian*, November 1, 2006, available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2006/nov/01/childrenservices.guardiansocietysupplement1>, accessed November 11, 2009; Collier and Sheldon, *Fragmenting Fatherhood*; Carol Smart, “Equal Shares: Rights for Fathers or Recognition for Children?,” *Critical Social Policy* 24(4) (2004), pp. 485–503.

32. Carol Smart, “The Legal and Moral Ordering of Child Custody,” *Journal of Law and Society* 18(1991), 485–500, pp. 485–6.

Collier sees these paradigm shifts in state relationships with individuals and families as

perhaps epitomized by the government's consultation document of 1998 entitled *Supporting Families* ... Here we see a family marked by the qualities of emotional and sexual equality, mutual rights and responsibilities, a negotiated authority over children, co-parenting and – of particular relevance to discussion of fatherhood – a clear belief in promoting the commitment on the part of both women *and* men to lifelong obligations to children.³³

He also notes that “this variant of the ‘symmetrical family’ is premised centrally on the notion that there has occurred a growing *convergence* in the lives of women and men in relation to *both* the experience of the workplace and in regard to experiences, attitudes, and expectations surrounding the family.’ In spite of – or perhaps because of – this apparent (if frequently overstated³⁴) convergence of familial and occupational gender roles, we should also note recent legal attempts to reinforce the symbolic authority of the father: what appears to be an increasing turn to shared residence arrangements in contested divorce and separation cases, in tandem with the highly active “father's rights” movement;³⁵ attempts, particularly in the contexts of the new reproductive technologies, to bring the “fragmentary” father to a more secure symbolic role in his offspring's life;³⁶ donor anonymity changes for sperm donation (as per Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (Disclosure of Information) Regulations 2004, mandating the importance of nothing less than the name of the (biological) father to each child conceived by artificial insemination;³⁷ and the recent Western legal turn to the language of the punishing patriarch in anti-terror and anti-social behavior legislation.³⁸

33. Collier, *A Hard Time to be a Father*, p. 527.

34. It is clear from multiple studies that the bulk of domestic and caring responsibilities still fall to women in Western countries, with men maintaining economic dominance and continuing to be primarily defined by work rather than familial roles (Collier, *op. cit.*)

35. There is a growing literature on changing judicial approaches to a “gender-neutral” splitting of childcare responsibilities after separation or divorce: see further e.g. Richard Collier, “Father's Rights, Gender and Welfare: Some Questions for Family Law,” *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 31(4) (2009), 357–77; Julie Wallbank, “Getting Tough on Mothers: Regulating Contact and Residence,” *Feminist Legal Studies* 15(2007), pp. 189–222; Rachel Treloar and Laura Funk, “Mothers' Health, Responsibilization and Choice in Family Care Work after Separation and Divorce,” *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 99(2) (2008), pp. 33–7; Smart, *op. cit.*; for interesting recent UK cases see *A v A (Shared Residence and Contact)* [2004] EWHC 142; *S (Children) (Implementation of Care Plan)* [2001] 2 FLR 582 and further Ruth Cain, “The Court of Motherhood: Affect, Alienation, and Redefinitions of Responsible Parenting,” in *Regulating Family Responsibilities*, eds. Joanna Bridgeman, Heather Keating and Craig Lind (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming 2011).

36. Sheldon, *Unmarried Fathers*; Sheldon, *Fragmenting Fatherhood*.

37. See e.g. *R v Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority ex p Blood* [1997] 2 All ER 687, the well-known case of a father being allowed legal parent status post-mortem.

38. Quiney (Cain), “Mr Xerox”; Peter Squires, ed., *ASBO Nation* (Bristol: Polity, 2008).

II. Symbolic/Literary Failure

This analysis of Burnside and Easton Ellis' literary fathers aims to relate them to a broader, underlying sense of the pathetic and tragic *symbolic* failure of the father-figure as adored patriarch, bringer of familial and social order: the declining power of "wait until your father gets home."³⁹ The writers, I suggest, demonstrate both confusion and resentment at this symbolic failure, and eventually use it to try to reconstruct a "new" form of fatherhood and masculinity with which they can identify. Such reconstructions are, of course, subject to the vagaries of authorial self-consciousness, ambiguity, and fictive instability⁴⁰ in both novels; nonetheless, I intend to argue that both authors attempt in difficult, fragile ways to rebuild an embodied, accessible father, identified strongly with the author-self after his death, if not in his life. As noted, New Right commentators loudly mourn the authoritarian father's passing and warn of dire social consequences,⁴¹ while individual men may find in their own (absent or violent) fathers the roots of their own lawlessness. Ellis is well known for his controversial early career and "cocaine lifestyle," which he parodies in *Lunar Park*, relating it to an "escape" from his late father (to whom *Lunar Park* is dedicated, alongside his friend and lover Michael Kaplan):

... in the early fall of 1985, just four months after publication, three things happened simultaneously: I became independently wealthy, I became insanely famous, and, most important, I escaped my father ... my father had always been a problem – careless, abusive, alcoholic, vain, angry, paranoid – and even after my parents divorced when I was a teenager (my mother's demand) his power and control continued to loom over the family ... in ways that were all monetary (endless arguments between lawyers about alimony and child support) ... He remained, always, locked in a kind of demented fury ... And because of this the world was threatening to us in a vague and abstract way we couldn't work ourselves out of – the map had disappeared, the compass had been smashed, we were lost.⁴²

In the following pages Ellis parodies himself in a mixture of fact and fiction:

I threw lavish catered parties – sometimes complete with strippers – in my condo on a whim ("Because it's Thursday!" one invitation read.) ... I attended three fairly exclusive orgies ... My life was an unfolding parade made even more magical by the constant materialization of cocaine ...⁴³

39. Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Penguin, 1975).

40. I am grateful to my anonymous reviewer for this insight and phrase.

41. Murray, "Keeping Priorities Straight."

42. Ellis, *Lunar Park*, pp. 6–7.

43. Ellis, op. cit., p. 10. Ellis seems to employ the same identity play in interviews and public appearances, sprinkling moments of apparent emotionality and conviction into performances frequently characterized by sarcasm, flat affect and the pursuit of critical controversy. Note for example the impression made on a BBC blog interviewer enquiring about the "accuracy" of *Lunar Park*: "Ellis the interviewee is as unreliable as his fictionalised protagonists, insisting, 'I believe every word this protagonist says. I believe all the things he talks about and all the events he describes during these terrible twelve days he endures in the haunted house he lives in'; Aftab Khalem, "Ellis on Ellis on Ellis," BBC Home: Collective, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A6127427> (2005), accessed February 15, 2011.

Ellis' father is later described as being found dead by his young mistress in a seaside condominium, leaving his son several unpaid debts and Armani suits stained with blood from a botched penis enlargement. He, too, has lived "an unfolding parade" of consumption and excess. The son's "bad boy" behavior here reflects the father's, part of a series of motifs in which Ellis identifies himself bodily and emotionally with his father. This has previously been seen as a traditionally *feminine* motif in writing: the mother/daughter relationship perceived by the writing daughter as one of merging and mutuality.⁴⁴ John Burnside also explicitly connects his own drug abuse to disillusionment with his lying, violent, alcoholic father:

Bruno Bettelheim says in *The Uses of Enchantment* that children have to have magic in their lives. "If there's no magic for them as children, they'll often do something later to create that magic and that can be very costly." For Burnside, that magic came in the form of LSD. Constantly striving for more extreme states, acid gave way to other drugs, week-long binges, heavy drinking and, eventually, two spells in a psychiatric hospital.⁴⁵

Both Burnside and Ellis thus depict their fathers as failures on multiple fronts: both unable to escape outdated, useless masculine norms (and thus to prefigure "new" fatherhood)⁴⁶ but also unable to embody traditional masculine hegemony. In place of paternal "magic" we find a toxic absence: an emptiness which carries with it a particular horrific affect for the child. The father's failures afflict both himself and the son with a nightmarish sense of instability and loss. In this sense – and bearing in mind that both these novels deal with a *male* child's sense of loss at paternal failure and distance – these texts provide insight into the types of normative masculinity expected of contemporary fathers; and also those which, if not *expected*, are mourned and longed-for as signifiers of a "better" fatherhood (perhaps) formative of the "new" relationships men may desire to have with their own children.

III. Failures of Paternal Law

Both Ellis' and Burnside's literary fathers thus fail to signify an ideal, authoritative fatherhood. They cannot *usefully* embody the Law of the Father – the father principle as "organizing device." Instead, the "law" they lay down is arbitrary and violent, usually a source of fear and despair to the son who has to invent himself, having, as Ellis describes above, no paternal "map" or compass to live by. The psychoanalytic concept of paternal Law needs further discussion here. The various forms of the father principle tend to

44. On mother-daughter subject-positions in contemporary literature see further Marianne Hirsch, *The Mother-Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989).

45. Stephanie Merritt, "Dad, I Could Have Killed You," *Observer*, February 26, 2006. Available online at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/feb/26/biography.features1>, accessed October 21, 2009.

46. Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*; Collier, *A Hard Time to be a Father*; Scourfield and Drakeford, "New Labour and the Problem of Men."

revolve around concepts of authority, strength, and rationality. The Father may appear as tribal leader, lawgiver or Law itself. There is inevitably “confusion between literal and symbolic fatherhood,”⁴⁷ in that individual fathers come to bear the weight of legal and cultural meaning. The paternal function does not require a physical representative to become active in the subject’s life. Thus, Baron and Mitchell note its presence “when the mother refers to an authority beyond herself”⁴⁸ – as when she warns her exasperating child to “wait until your father gets home.” If individual fathers “fail” in broad cultural terms, the authority and structural security which they signify is also threatened.

Both Lacan, who originally emphasized the symbolic importance of the father in the creation of meaning, and more recently Žižek, emphasize the absence and failure of the paternal signifier. Žižek focuses on the impact of hypercapitalism and contemporary culture on “the fall of the father.” The heterosexual nuclear family of which the father is “head” is of course historically and culturally specific, arising in what we can call its current form over the 18th and 19th centuries.⁴⁹ In the current era, the apparent absence of paternal authority becomes “bound up with a perceived threat to the familial and social order itself”⁵⁰ and “families in which an appropriate paternal masculinity is absent are characterised as dysfunctional.”⁵¹ The father remains the symbolic linchpin of order and hierarchy, albeit under multi-directional threat. Confusion among individual fathers stems from and feeds into this sense of fragmentation: Baron contends that “[t]he psychoanalytic view ... explain[s] [the] desirability of the authoritarian father-figure as confusion between the symbolic role of the father and the ‘real’ person who represents this role”;⁵² “the fact [is] that the real father always turns out to be an impostor, unable actually to live up to his symbolic mandate.”⁵³ “The Symbolic father ... can only be imperfectly incarnate in the real father.”⁵⁴ The Lacanian Law of the Father is a depersonalized, inaccessible one, embodying lack and empty promises: the “Dead Father of the Law, there however weak or absent his living representative, however dominant the mother.”⁵⁵ Thus, the father as a signifier possesses a fundamental *duality*: emptiness alongside authority.

The symbolic and personal absence of the father is replicated within influential twentieth-century discourses of developmental psychology, describing the psychic trajectory of the infant. These focus almost exclusively upon the relationship of mother and child.⁵⁶

47. Paula D. Baron, “In the Name of the Father: The Paternal Function, Sexuality, Law and Citizenship,” *Victoria University of Wellington Law Review* 37 (2006), pp. 307–34.

48. Baron, “In the Name of the Father,” p. 316; Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p. 395.

49. Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*, p. 185.

50. Collier, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

51. Baron, “In the Name of the Father,” p. 330.

52. Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 330.

53. Žižek, “The Ticklish Subject,” p. 334.

54. Jacques Lacan, Seminar of March–April 1957, quoted in Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, p. 394.

55. Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, pp. 364–5.

56. Baron, “In the Name of the Father,” p. 312; Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*, p. 189.

The father exists to break up dyadic intimacy: for Lacan, he enables separation from the mother and entry into the world of language, law and culture.⁵⁷ “It is only by means of the paternal function that the child becomes a ‘subject’ in all senses of that word: the child experiences subjectivity at the same time as he or she becomes subject to law and to language. Thus the individual is not natural, but a legal and linguistic creation.”⁵⁸ Recognition of the father as third party in the Oedipal triangle emerges from the knowledge that the mother is a separate being with her own desires: “[t]he child’s identification with the desire of the mother, its image of itself as her fulfilment, must be replaced by the father’s name, words and symbols.”⁵⁹ According to Freud,⁶⁰ no individual can survive the Oedipal conflict unscathed; the resolution and adoption of a subject-position in regard to the law is always a traumatic experience.⁶¹ The father, I suggest, initiates and comes to represent this trauma; because of the increasing “non-resolution” of persistent ideas of Oedipal conflict in contemporary familial culture (and in the setting of the supposed “breakdown of the family”), the father becomes a site of crisis.⁶² Collier notes the phantom, symbolic nature of the new “involved” father trope itself: the presence expected by law and policymakers is not, in the end, physical, but one of “paternal heterosexual authority”;⁶³ a construct, not a person. Similarly, as I discuss in more detail shortly, Burnside and Ellis offer their readers literary fathers who amount, in the end, to nothing but words, exposing the inability of literature and language to (re)construct the absent, longed-for father. The father’s place in traumatic culture becomes that of a gap, or site of wounding; an emblem of the near-cliché of Lacanian phallic lack.

IV. Victimhood and Wound Culture

Burnside's and Ellis' fathers tread unstable lines between victimhood and aggression. Before examining this in more detail, I want to note the importance of narrative portrayals of the victim-aggressor in the context of the new blame-cultures of the late twentieth century and onwards.⁶⁴ As the criminologist David Garland has described, blame and

57. Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 313.

58. Baron, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

59. Kelly Oliver, “Conflicted Love,” *Hypatia* 15(3), pp. 1–18, p. 13.

60. Sigmund Freud, *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 130–132.

61. Baron, “In the Name of the Father,” p. 315.

62. Vikki Bell, “The Phone, the Father and Other Becomings: On Households (and Theories) that No Longer Hold,” *Cultural Values* 5(3), pp. 383–402.

63. Collier, “Waiting Till Father Gets Home,” p. 20.

64. Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*; Geoff Hamilton, “Mixing Memoir and Desire: James Frey, Wound Culture, and the ‘Essential American Soul,’” *Journal of American Culture* 30(3), pp. 324–33; Savran, *Taking it Like a Man*; in film, to give a few examples, the *Rambo* series, *Falling Down* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1993), and *Fight Club*. Savran writes of “several variations on the theme of the white male as victim” in post-1950s (American) culture: “the angry white male, the sensitive male, the male searching for the Wild Man within, the white supremacist” (*Taking it Like a Man*, p. 5). Both Burnside and Ellis recount the “angry young man”

victimhood are topics of ever-increasing cultural and political valency: “new group relations and social attitudes ... are most sharply defined in relation to the problems of crime, welfare and social order ... often experienced and expressed as highly charged emotions of fear, resentment and hostility.” Such avid blame-rhetoric, in what are perceived as contexts of fractured social bonds and compulsory competitive individualism, is highly active in the debates around fatherhood: specifically so when we see fathers defending their own parenting (and usually, attacking women’s), as in the father’s rights debates; or when (as in the topical disputes around welfare reform) fathers themselves are excoriated as useless, absent “deadbeats” and correspondingly held responsible, along with lone mothers, for a vast range of social ills.⁶⁵ In these narratives, fathers and children (but not mothers) interchangeably occupy the territory of deprived, innocent victims of family breakdown and social fragmentation. These sets of discursive “truths” have encouraged the production of “violent victim” narratives, in which a man’s perception of his own weakness may express itself as aggrieved entitlement.⁶⁶ The “violent victim” trope is strongly reflected in the literary narratives of Burnside and Ellis, which alternately demonstrate hatred and pity for their own useless/absent/violent fathers, and valorize an ideal paternal presence and emotionality, particularly in the delineation of relationships with their own real or fictive sons, as I will discuss later. Self-acknowledged suffering and victimhood creates a problematic, contradictory male hero-protagonist, fracturing “rational,” bounded male identity, since in psychiatric narratives of trauma, the injured subject is taken over by a shocking experience which embeds and repeats in his memory.⁶⁷

What, then, is the general appeal of the victim-position to men? Although the male hero traditionally suffers alone, women’s cultural communities have long organized themselves around perceptions of shared suffering.⁶⁸ Recently, however, the idea of a disenfranchized community of sufferers has been mobilized by men’s groups, perhaps the most famous of which are fathers’ collectives (notably Fathers 4 Justice) aggrieved by the perceived injustices of the family law system after separation or divorce.⁶⁹ What

response to paternal control and disappointment in the father; it will also be seen that both authors take the poetic/spiritual path to reconnect with the lost father, while Burnside also speaks (below) of reconnection through memories of his father’s rage with a wild, monstrosous spirit.

65. David Garland, *The Culture of Control: Crime and Social Order in Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 76. On the cultural pull of blame-and victim-cultures, see further Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 2; Hays, *Flat Broke with Children*; Murphy, “Legal Images of Fatherhood”; Cain, “The Court of Motherhood”; Wallbank, “Getting Tough on Mothers.”

66. See further Quiney (Cain), “Mr. Xerox,” and Savran, op. cit.

67. Luckhurst, “Traumaculture,” pp. 28–9.

68. Berlant, *Compassion*; Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2008); Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

69. Collier and Sheldon, *Father’s Rights Activism*.

has been called the “backlash” of the 1980s/90s era,⁷⁰ voiced in the terminology of individual “rights,” vulnerability and hurt, has encouraged portrayals of women less as victims of their own passions and more as malevolent, blameworthy agents.⁷¹ Lauren Berlant notes that in the “intimate public sphere,” where crises of gendered, political identification are enacted, “[men] claim ... to be traumatised – by progressive social politics, for example, such as feminism and affirmative action.”⁷² The unmarked citizen-body has become unstable. Simultaneously, the victim remains *the* figure of fascination within contemporary literary and visual culture; popular and media culture routinely fixates upon the woman, or child, murdered or assaulted. The suffering man stakes his claim on the territory of victimhood, but marks his difference from these Others by becoming a central spectacle, a dramatic subject (like Fathers 4 Justice’s “superhero” activists), unlike those who represent mundane, feminized suffering. Thus we see the emergence of masculine trauma as machismo or embattled heroism. Nonetheless, the powerful association of suffering with femininity undermines men’s suffering as *the* authentic experience. In a traumatic experience, the *authentic* instant is that of the “feminizing,” dislocating shock.⁷³ In the stories of routine violence told by Burnside’s father, he is aggrandized, a “hard man”; his stories’ focus upon physical wounding demonstrates the narrator’s privileged “access to the pain of existence.”⁷⁴ Burnside’s father also repeatedly portrayed himself as the implausible “hero” of dramatic disaster-narratives and war-stories.

Thus, the portrayal of the violent victim, diverting pain and injustice into strength or superheroism, flows easily into cliché and self-aggrandizement (for which in abundance see Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces*). As noted, Burnside and Ellis portray their fathers as liars. Mirroring their subjects, both books announce an uneasy relationship to the truth from the outset. Burnside’s title proclaims his book to be “a lie”; while Ellis gleefully plays with the dramatic connotations of the celebrity memoir and pulp horror genres when he announces in the first chapter of *Lunar Park*, “[r]egardless of how terrible the events described here might seem, there’s one thing you must remember as you hold this book in your hands: all of it really happened, every word is true.”⁷⁵ The next chapter immediately indicates that the narrator (“Bret”) is self-consciously manipulating “the

70. Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991).

71. The newly blameworthy figure of the “no contact” or “implacably hostile” mother in family law cases is paradigmatic of this conceptual move (Helen Rhoades, “The ‘No Contact’ Mother: Deconstruction of Motherhood in the Era of the New Father,” *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 16 (2002), pp. 71–94; Wallbank, “Getting Tough on Mothers”; Christine Harrison, “Implacably Hostile or Appropriately Protective? Women Managing Child Contact in the Context of Domestic Violence,” *Violence against Women* 14(4) (2008), pp. 381–405; Treloar and Funk, “Mothers’ Health, Responsibilization and Choice in Family Care Work”; Cain, “The Court of Motherhood”).

72. Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, p. 2.

73. Luckhurst, “Traumaculture,” p. 28.

74. Žižek, “The Ticklish Subject,” p. 372.

75. Ellis, *Lunar Park*, p. 30.

truth,” as his wife observes him dressing *as himself* for Halloween: “[y]ou do an awfully good impression of yourself.”⁷⁶ In this way, Ellis (as is his longstanding authorial tendency) deliberately toys with the different identities of “real” writer, narrator, and character. As I discuss shortly, “doubles” populate his novel, with the most emotionally-charged doublings being those played out between Ellis as writer and Bret as narrator, and between his late father and the paternal ghost which haunts the text.

V. Marginality and Violence: Burnside's Father

As already noted, the two writers grew up with fathers at opposite ends of the economic spectrum: while Ellis' father is an arrogant, Reaganite bully using money to control others, the aggression and alcoholism of Burnside's father must be set against his son's unflinching portrayal of the awful conditions in which he worked as a steelworker. The economically marginal man is repeatedly portrayed and constructed as a dangerous figure; public discourse fixates on father absence and abuse in poor and/or black families.⁷⁷ Collier,⁷⁸ arguing from case law, notes that Western paternal authority, and thus perhaps our current cultural notion of the “paternal function,” has inherent links to heterosexual masculine privilege and middle-class values. Similarly, Carabine⁷⁹ notes that men, most frequently working-class men, tend to be subjected to morality discourses in UK law for failure to work or support the family, rather than for the “feminine” faults of deviant sexuality (including having illegitimate children) or adultery, and rarely for violent or abusive behaviour.⁸⁰ In Burnside's portrayal of his father, class politics intersect brutally with those of gender to create an oppressed and oppressive bully. In some respects, Burnside's father epitomises the “failed” working-class patriarch: in one scene, the child Burnside and his mother wait outside shops for scraps of food, as his father has drunk away their housekeeping money.⁸¹ In a similar sense, the historian Carolyn Steedman describes her own working-class, unmarried father as “one of patriarchy's failures (I mean that in the sense of the failure of an analytic and organising device rather than as one man's individual failure)”⁸² (1992, 43).

Burnside himself is deeply affected by his father's sense of crushing unimportance. He emphasizes a specific discourse of working-class fatherhood in which father teaches son to expect little from the world:

76. Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

77. Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*; Joan Carabine, “Constituting Sexuality Through Social Policy: The Case of Lone Motherhood 1834 and Today,” *Social and Legal Studies* 10(3) (2001), pp. 291–314.

78. Collier, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

79. Carabine, “Constituting Sexuality,” pp. 299–300.

80. For an interesting review of recent British policies targeted at the “problem of men,” including governmental attempts to inculcate discourses of masculine family responsibility and care, see further Scourfield and Drakeford, “New Labour and the Problem of Men.”

81. Burnside, *A Lie About my Father*, p. 67.

82. Steedman, *Past Tenses*, p. 43.

For my father, and for whole generations of working-class men, cruelty was an ideology. It was important, for the boy's sake, to bring a son up tough. Men had to be hard to get through life, there was no room for weakness or sentiment. It wasn't what he would have chosen, but he didn't want me to get hurt by looking for something I couldn't have. What he wanted was to warn me against hope, against any expectation of someone from my background being treated as a human being in the big, hard world. He wanted to kill off my finer – and so, weaker – self. Art. Music. Books. Imagination. Signs of weakness, all. A man was defined, in my father's circles, by what he could bear, the pain he could shrug off, the warmth or comfort he could deny himself.⁸³

Burnside's father's story offers a counterpoint to nostalgic pictures of British men of "the old working class," and the decay of the communities built around their dominance and labor. Jeremy Seabrook's heroic portraits of such men mourned "the sense of a shared epic they live through each day: ... the fight of man for survival ... that is the dimension we've lost, the universality of it."⁸⁴ Burnside's version of the "decline" of working-class masculinity portrays his own personal history as a journey away from the "hard man" identity of the hated/loved father.

VI. Doubling: The Failed Father as Self

In an interview, Burnside immediately convicts himself of "lies about his father" due to his intimate involvement with its subject. "On one level or another, it's a lie, partly because it's a one-sided account; there's no way I could write about this man and be impartial."⁸⁵ The father in Burnside's writing, almost as in Ellis' more clearly playful and evasive work, provides only false identifications: "Lies about everything, great and small, were the very fabric of my world."⁸⁶ A deep sense of inauthenticity and isolation from others' "normal" family relationships afflicts the adult Burnside. At the opening of *A Lie About My Father*, Burnside talks to a hitchhiker, Mike, who describes a happy father/son relationship. When asked directly about his own father, he automatically lies.⁸⁷ At Halloween, he writes of being visited by his father's ghost:

Nobody comes but him, the one I don't choose and would prefer to forget. He comes to the fire and stands just outside the ring of heat and light, not the bully I knew, the hawk-eyed predator watching for any sign of weakness, ... but that quiet man I never knew, that man he became when he was alone in an empty house. He has nothing to say to me, he brings no mercy, no forgiveness. He hasn't come to deliver a cryptic message or show me what he has found on the other side. All he is here to say is what he has said already: that we are not so very different, he and I; that, no matter how precious I get about it, a lie is a lie is a lie and I am just as much an invention, just as much a pretence, *just as much a lie* as he ever was.⁸⁸ (2007, 232).

83. Burnside, *A Lie About my Father*, p. 45.

84. Jeremy Seabrook, *What Went Wrong? Working People and the Ideals of the Labour Movement* (London: Gollancz, 1978), pp. 59–60.

85. Merritt, "Dad, I Could Have Killed You," np.

86. Burnside, *A Lie About my Father*, p. 17.

87. Burnside, op. cit., p. 13.

88. Burnside, op. cit., p. 232.

The “real” father, lies just outside the circle Burnside creates to invite the spirits in; he can only conjure him through the inevitably duplicitous, fabricative act of writing. In so doing, he feels himself partaking of his father’s falseness; the duality and emptiness of the (linguistic) signifier is inescapable. “... [T]hese are my words, and *this* is the real lie about my father. I cannot talk about him without talking about myself, just as I can never look at myself in the mirror without seeing his face.”⁸⁹

For Ellis, the author’s combined identification with and dissociation from the father in *Lunar Park* leads to a tragic repeat of paternal history: the narrator Bret’s father is a monstrous presence in his life both before and after death, and Bret is seen to repeat his own father’s mistakes with his son, Robby.⁹⁰ The monsters which haunt Bret are doubles of the father and of Bret himself, who is revealed near the end of the novel to be the source of all the horror that besets him. Bret is, of course, a loosely-disguised doppelganger of the “real” author, Ellis. The book itself also “copies” previous texts, including Stephen King’s horror novels, and its own predecessor, *American Psycho*.⁹¹ At the end of *Lunar Park*, both Robby and Bret seem to vanish, with Bret becoming part of his own text, “in the pages, behind the covers.”⁹² As Bret has endured lifelong separation from his father, and has in turn inflicted that distance on his own son, so both he *and* his son are lost, their relationship only words. The ending of *Lunar Park* also reflects upon the failure of language itself to authenticate the myth of paternal presence and authority:⁹³ Ellis can offer Robby only a father trapped within the confines of a book; a literary construct only.

The doubling motif in Burnside has already been noted, in the vision of the father that Burnside sees whenever he looks at his own face. Burnside's father's fear of death lives within the son; the father's traumatic aggression, the deadly affect of a man who lived and died by physical strength, provoke visions of a repressed, overpowering evil. Here we see the Burnsides’ relationship representing a clash between “new” and “old” formations of paternal authority and presence in children’s lives. Burnside's father personifies Collier’s point that, when socio-legal constructions of masculinity and paternity combine to posit a “natural” father-figure, “the dangerous and the familial share much more than is commonly acknowledged.”⁹⁴ Maria Aristodemou sees such dangerous doubling as one of the necessary themes of both legal and literary scholarship, in the sense that the self or subject of both law and literature can only form around a loss or failure. It is thus intriguing to witness the doubling of potential “ideal” fathers at both literary and legal levels of interpretation:

89. Burnside, op. cit., p. 231.

90. Michael Meier, “The Return of the Father: Lunar Park Renegotiates the Moral Issue,” unpublished MS, University of Zurich English Seminar (2007).

91. Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991).

92. Ellis, *Lunar Park*, p. 308.

93. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this article for this insight and its phrasing.

94. Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*, p. 175.

The self that we are ceaselessly searching for and occasionally and uncannily find in our double, is formed, clumsily and incompletely of course, around a famous object. This famous object is linked in a unique way to the subject's apprehension of death. Without the subject's apprehension of its own mortality, without approaching, however reluctantly, and, more often than not, extremely slowly, their own particular mode of jouissance, what Lacan dubs their little object a, then the analysis of the subject, of law, of literature or, in our case, of law and literature, is a failure (again no other noun is appropriate).⁹⁵

Burnside's terrifying vision of his father's horror at the prospect of death reduces the father's fear and rage to precisely this "object a," pre-symbolic, beyond (or before) meaning:

I wake in the dark. Something has just dropped off the end of the bed and landed softly, its claws – the whisper of claws is unmistakable, even if it is the sound of two feet landing, not four – its hard, bright claws retracted for the moment as it skitters away across the wooden floor ... For a minute or more this is fear in its purest form ... ancient, blood-level, irrational, utterly compelling fear.⁹⁶

To explain this "phantom" as an apprehension of his father's despair and vulnerability, Burnside recalls an event at a bus stop when he was twelve.⁹⁷ At this point, his father had just been involved in an industrial accident. He was

frightened by the sheer random force of events that could take a man like him ... who had stood proud and intact in his own skin for forty years, never once doubting that, physically at least, he was invincible, and alter him overnight into the broken, bewildered creature he had been on the [hospital] ward.⁹⁸

Burnside then describes a shocking outbreak of violence:

I believe he was thinking about – or rather, not thinking, but feeling, enduring in its rawest form – the ordinary and seemingly inevitable failure into which he had fallen when, all of a sudden, standing in that dreary concrete bus shelter, he raised his fist and smashed one of the reinforced window panes ... For the first time, I realised that he wasn't just afraid of death, in the usual way, he was *terrified* ... His fear sat inside his head, a dark, ugly spirit, watching, waiting.⁹⁹

Paternal violence cannot be admitted into the "normal," middle-class life of Burnside himself, who seeks to become an involved and devoted father to his own sons. Rather, the violent, enraged father lurks in the realm of nightmare – just as in *Lunar Park*, the

95. Maria Aristodemou, "The Trouble with the Double: Expressions of Disquiet in and around Law and Literature," *Law, Text, Culture* 11(2007), pp. 1–24, p. 10.

96. Burnside, *A Lie About my Father*, p. 295.

97. Burnside, op. cit., p. 301.

98. Burnside, op. cit., p. 304.

99. Burnside, op. cit., p. 305.

father returns as a ghostly intrusion into Bret's suburban family life. The father in both narratives is mourned continually within the darkest imagination of the writer, having become the "lost object" of both language and love: "[i]t is in its nature that the object as such is lost. It will never be found again ... It is to be found at most as something missed."¹⁰⁰

As Otto Rank ... described it, the problem of the double is the problem of man's relation to the most intimate part of himself, so intimate that it is hidden even from oneself. The double is perceived as possessing, often having stealthily stolen, the subject's innermost essence, sometimes called the soul, hence the distrust with which many cultures treat the photographic image.¹⁰¹

If we look at the motif of the double in terms of the troubled male's revenge against self-dissolution, we can detect links with the dangerous, violent doubling that Burnside and Ellis identify in their own father/son relationships.¹⁰² Feeling itself to be subordinated, the "sovereign" male subject "achieves its revenge through the imposition of suffering and through the predication of a culture of suffering";¹⁰³ "this is the subject who finds that he is not himself, who discovers that his proper being is over there, in that double who enrages him; and who thus expels this exteriority or extimacy within, converting stranger intimacy into stranger violence."¹⁰⁴ Burnside's father thus bonds with other "hard men" through shared experiences of violence and wounding, amplified by self-aggrandizing lies:

[the] wish for a "dark, savage way of life" that assembles a public in redemptive commiseration, dramatically exposes the basic duplicity sustaining contemporary wound culture: an insistence on the explicit display of real wounds ... coupled with an unreal deliverance from them.¹⁰⁵

VII. Rehabilitating the Father

Final expressions of love for the otherwise hated father, and the attempted healing of wounds displayed and inflicted by the father and "doubled" in the son himself, take explicitly linguistic/poetic form in both texts. In the concluding pages of *A Lie About my Father*, Burnside briefly but poignantly writes about his new relationship with his own son, appearing to be contemplating an attempt to embody the "good" father who eluded him in boyhood. Significantly, in so doing he calls an end to the literary recovery of his father, attempting to remove his own fathering beyond the realm of the "lies" spun not only by his own father, but by the book's literary reconstruction of

100. Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 52, quoted in Aristodemou, "The Trouble with the Double," p. 10.

101. Aristodemou, op. cit., p. 15.

102. Hamilton, "Mixing Memoir and Desire," p. 330.

103. Seltzer, *Serial Killers*, p. 117.

104. Selzer, op. cit., p. 146.

105. Hamilton, "Mixing Memoir and Desire," p. 330.

fatherhood, and the falsehoods of Western fatherhood as a whole: the “authorised textbook lies of citizenship and masculinity and employment we are all obliged to tell.”¹⁰⁶ While the father emerges as (partly) recoverable through the privileged route of embodiment, his desperately fallible figure, and its literary reflection exposes the lies and duality implicit in the very concept of paternal authority, and in language itself.¹⁰⁷ Ellis repeatedly (and most frequently and clearly in the final sections of *Lunar Park*) identifies himself directly with his father as a boy (and thus, by association, with his own fictional “son,” Robby). Despite the rampant authorial play and evasiveness which typifies Ellis’ writing, and the fact that (as for Burnside) literary identification with the father is continually threatened, distanced and rendered elusive in *Lunar Park*, the reconstruction of the lost father in both books has considerable emotional and linguistic force.¹⁰⁸ There is an extraordinary poetic sequence at the end of *Lunar Park* in which Bret Easton Ellis (Bret the narrator and Ellis the author seeming to blend together at this final part of the book) begins, at the final scattering of his father’s ashes, to reconnect with his father’s life in reverse, “until he was a child again and smiling and he was offering me an orange he held out with both hands as my grandfather’s hunting dogs were chasing the ashes across the train tracks,”¹⁰⁹ Ellis then imagines the ashes rustling

across the pages of this book, scattering themselves over words and creating new ones – they began exiting the text, losing themselves somewhere beyond my reach, and then vanished, and the sun shifted its position and the world swayed and then moved on, and though it was all over, something new was conceived. The sea reached to the land’s edge where a family, in silhouette, stood watching us until the fog concealed them. From those of us who are left behind: you will be remembered, you were the one I needed, I loved you in my dreams.

So, if you should see my son, tell him I say hello, be good, that I am thinking of him and that I know he’s watching over me somewhere, and not to worry: that he can always find me here, whenever he wants, right here, my arms held out and waiting, in the pages, behind the covers, at the end of *Lunar Park*.¹¹⁰

106. Burnside, *A Lie about my Father*, p. 309

107. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of this piece for this insight.

108. In interviews with Ellis around the time of *Lunar Park*’s publication, the author discusses the powerful impact on the novel of his grief for his lover, Michael Kaplan, who died in 2004, and explicitly connects this loss with the previous one of his loved/hated father; as previously noted, the book is dedicated to both men. See for example Edward Wyatt, “Bret Easton Ellis: The Man in the Mirror,” *New York Times*, August 7, 2005, available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/07/arts/07wyat.html?_r=1&pagewanted=1, accessed February 15, 2011; Nadine O’Regan, “Reading, ‘In Conversation’, and Signing for Lunar Park with Bret Easton Ellis,” *Business Post*, October 30, 2005, available online at <http://archives.tcm.ie/businesspost/2005/10/30/story9129.asp>, accessed February 15, 2011..

109. Ellis, *Lunar Park*, p. 308.

110. Ellis, op. cit., p. 308.

There is an important reversal here, from missing son to missing father, the absent paternal signifier (only partially) recovered through language. There remains a substratum of unmet need, and unsatisfied love: “[y]ou were the one I needed, I loved you in my dreams.” The fantasy, ideal father remains fiction, a literary construct, “in the pages, behind the covers.” Nonetheless, the act of paternal vanishing and concealment is complex. It is only through literary dissolution of self and father that the abusive father can be forgiven, morphing from feared lawgiver into little boy. The vanishing of Bret at the end of *Lunar Park* is in one sense an act of recognition of his own father’s embodiment and vulnerability. Burnside also emphasizes the immateriality and evanescence of the “loved” father. His memoir announces itself on its flyleaf to be “best treated as a work of fiction. If he were here to discuss it, my father would agree, I’m sure, that it’s as true to say that I never had a father as it is to say that he never had a son.” The literary act of remembrance can recover, it seems, nothing but loss and lies. However, moments in the text reconstruct the father, and particularly his body, in different terms. The father is imagined as an abandoned child: Burnside learned after his father’s death that he had been a foundling, left on a Fife doorstep in 1926.¹¹¹ Burnside carefully recreates the scene of his father’s abandonment: “a thin, squalling child of the General Strike, wrapped in a blanket and left on a doorstep in a West Fife mining town”:

Nobody I have ever known was there to witness his abandonment, so I can imagine it as I like: as a scene from a fairy tale, perhaps, the unknown baby left at the door of some unsuspecting innocents, who take him in and try, as well, as they are able, to bring him up alongside their own children, only to tire of him after a while and pass him on to relatives and then, as seems to have been the way of such things, to near strangers. I could imagine it wet and windy, the blanket sodden, the child crying plaintively, weak with hunger and terrified. My father wouldn’t have liked that image, which is why he put so much work into imagining alternatives, some fairly close to the truth, though never as desolate or as cruel as this abandonment must have seemed.¹¹²

The process of forgiving the father involves recreating him as a baby, a boy growing up without symbolic moorings. “He needed a *history*, he needed the sense of a self. By a process that demanded some wit – perhaps a little more than he possessed – and only very casual deception, he invented that self. It took more than a little doing, and who can blame him if he wasn’t altogether successful or wholly consistent.”¹¹³ Burnside ultimately attempts reconciliation with the specter of his father, both through his commitment to his own young son and through the reconstruction of the father as an individual – a person separate from the abstract and demanding construct of the authoritative, inspirational Father. Near the end of the memoir, Burnside imagines his father alone in his garden, and sets this image of a man (temporarily) at peace against his father’s rage and fear.¹¹⁴

Similarly, Ellis reconstructs his father both as a child and as a vulnerable adult in imagination. In the sequence at the end of the book, the father is seen as a little boy: the

111. Merritt, “Dad, I Could Have Killed You,” np.

112. Burnside, *A Lie About My Father*, p. 21.

113. Burnside, op. cit., p. 26.

114. Burnside, op. cit., p. 323.

smiling child holding out an orange refers back to a childhood photograph of Bret himself, glimpsed in an otherwise horrific film of the father's death at his beach house: "... the faded Polaroid of a worried little boy wearing suspenders and a red plastic toy fireman's helmet, innocently holding out an orange to whoever was taking the picture."¹¹⁵ In the same film, Bret's father is seen sobbing in his bathroom with an empty vodka bottle lying nearby, a pitiable rather than terrifying figure.¹¹⁶ As Maria Aristodemou comments,

In psychoanalysis after all, it is the distinction between self and other, subject and neighbour, inside and outside, that is precisely blurred: the most intimate part of ourselves, is actually taken from the outside, from the other. Since the self is made up of other people, not recognising part of ourselves means not recognising the other: and vice versa. As Pessoa puts it, it is other people's rubbish that is piled up in the courtyard of what we take or more accurately mistake for our selves.¹¹⁷

VII. Conclusion: apprehending the father as Other

Thinking back to the legal concepts and controversies around fatherhood with which I began, it is clear that the father's *otherness* is increasingly at stake in both the fictional and legal accounts. The "rubbish" he has piled up for his sons to deal with is that of his absence, combined with unfulfilled desire to *apprehend* him as other, to forge links which go beyond the often catastrophic psychic merging of loved/hated father and self which the sons examined here have experienced. If the father no longer represents the all-powerful third party in the Oedipal triangle, the absence that announces its power *by* its absence, how will he form himself, and how are his children to form identities in connection with his? How are children born in the era of the "new fatherhood" to relate to fathers for whom work-related and other absences continue to dominate their relationships with their children? As constructs of fatherhood adapt, and we see legal and social structures attempt to adapt *to* them, it becomes all the more vital to account for personal and emotional responses to altered concepts of fatherhood. In the novels analyzed here, the falsity of the father represents both the unfulfilled demands made on him by disappointed children and the fundamental alienness of the traditional, absent construct of the Father of Law. In the era of the supposed "new fatherhood," it becomes particularly interesting to note the depth and intensity of emotional identification with the loved/hated father that these writers display. We may perhaps attribute the increased revelation of filial feeling to the impact of confessional culture,¹¹⁸ or the saturation of said culture with outpourings of the personal and previously "private" or repressed, identified by, for

115. Ellis, *Lunar Park*, p. 177

116. Ellis, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

117. Aristodemou, "The Trouble with the Double," p. 20.

118. Ruth Quiney (Cain), "Confessions of the New Capitalist Mother: Twenty-first Century Writing on Motherhood as Trauma," *Women: A Cultural Review* (2007), 18(1), pp. 19–40.

example, Nikolas Rose¹¹⁹ as emblematic of late capitalism. Nonetheless, the idea of nurturing the father is not only clear in autobiographical and literary narratives: we must, I suggest, see it reflected in the new attempts to bring the father to “greater” justice; to (perhaps forcibly) reassert his authority and presence into a “mother-led” family unit sometimes seen to be getting on far too well without him, and to be naturalized and valorized by contemporary family law in particular.¹²⁰ The value and resonance of the symbolic father comes to be inextricably associated with the “devaluing” of his human avatars, forcing the pain of “paternal deprivation” for both fathers and children to be articulated in terms of who has power, who is heard by and in law: as Collier and Sheldon comment, “[i]t may be that the fathers' rights movement's demand for equality should not be heard primarily as a call for practical change but rather as a demand for symbolic recognition.”¹²¹ Recognition of *what else* may be symbolized by the father, spurred by recognition of his vulnerability, might take on political meaning. As Michael Thomson has recently argued in an essay on how feminist legal scholars might better conceptualize the male body: “[r]ecognizing the gendered construction of the in/vulnerable body and the interrelatedness of these bodily understandings allows us to challenge the systems of social organization that rely on the oppositional construction of these bodies.”¹²² I would suggest that recognition of the *symbolic* vulnerability of systems of signification based on empty paternal authority presents another challenge. As Cynthia Daniels has shown,¹²³ and as illustrated by the tough working life of Burnside's father, male vulnerability to work-related and environmental hazard has been traditionally downplayed; and the construction of the male body as the body of power, aggression and war conceals its expendability through personal and state violence. When literary fathers are recovered *as bodies* that recovery is symbolically charged; the omnipotent father comes down to earth.

Teresa Brennan has written that “[s]ymbolization is the means for transformation as the process whereby energy locked up in an alphabet in which it cannot speak (such as traumatic grief) is released back into the flow of life by words.”¹²⁴ The images of the father presented in literature by his child as “imperfectly incarnate” – as an embodied individual, however temporarily relieved of the conflicting burdens of traditional masculine authority and paternal privilege, are helpful in pointing the way to a more positive symbolization of contemporary paternal fragmentation. If the father can no longer appear as a unitary signifier of mastery, all the better to humanize him. Imperfectly incarnate, he

119. Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*. Second edition (London and New York: Free Association Books, 1999); *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power, and Subjectivity in the Twenty-first Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

120. Collier and Sheldon, *Father's Rights Activism*; Collier and Sheldon, “Unfamiliar Territory”; Collier, *Masculinity, Law and the Family*; Smart, “Equal Shares.”

121. Collier and Sheldon, “Unfamiliar Territory,” np.

122. Michael Thomson, “A Tale of Two Bodies,” p. 148; Fineman, “The Vulnerable Subject.”

123. Cynthia Daniels, “Between Fathers and Fetuses: The Social Construction of Male Reproduction and the Politics of Fetal Harm,” *Signs* 22(3), pp. 579–616.

124. Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

can at least be apprehended as an Other among others,¹²⁵ rather than as the false hegemony which continues to dominate and confuse the cultural and legal existences of men in relation to children and women. This is perhaps why the individual, embodied father represents the most important literary and legal corrective to his symbolic counterpart, however fragile and ambiguous it may prove to (re)construct him in words. In Burnside's and Ellis' works, the search for a redeemed version of the flawed human father in the self is at least begun, although it may remain perpetually incomplete. The attempt is made to hold in creative tension the ambiguities and empty spaces of fatherhood; even where law, language, personal and social history provide only inadequate and mercurial foundations for new paternal stories, the telling may yet produce different, useful images of fatherhood to conjure with personally and politically. As Burnside writes in both irony and hope, "[w]hat I need, as a father, is just one story to start things off. The last thing I would want to do is make a lie of it."¹²⁶

125. Kelly Oliver, "Conflicted Love," *Hyppatia* 15(3), pp. 1–18.

126. Burnside, *A Lie About my Father*, p. 324.