

# A Tooth for a Private Eye: James Ellroy's Detective Fiction

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But, at the moment in which I was ready to swoon upon a breast which seemed to be receiving the mouth and the hand of a man for the first time, I noticed that she had a malformed nipple. I panic, I examine, I believe I see that this nipple is not conformed like the other one. Behold me seeking in my head how someone could have a malformed nipple, and, having persuaded myself that it depended on some notable natural vice, as a result of turning and returning this idea, I saw clear as day that, in the most charming person I could imagine, I was holding in my arms only a sort of monster, the outcast of nature, men and love.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* (Book VII)

**A**MONG THE MANY ORPHANS WHO, LIKE ROUSSEAU, DIPPED THEIR PENS into the maternal void, James Ellroy undoubtedly stands out as exemplary. When he was ten years old, his mother's body was found in a bush near El Monte High School, a stocking wrapped around her neck. After four years of fruitless research, the Los Angeles police department abandoned the case, leaving Jean Ellroy's only son with a daunting riddle, yet one that he would eventually turn into a vocation, and become a detective novel writer. "She was the hushed center of the fictional world I'd created," Ellroy says in *My Dark Places*, an autobiographical narrative which combines the story of the police's failure with that of the reopening of the case, led this time by the victim's son. The account of the investigation, however, is not the sole object of the book, which also tells of its author's rather circuitous road to writing—through the parks, slums, jails, and rehab clinics of Los

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Angeles—as well as the city’s mythical past. The case of “The Black Dahlia” was part of it. Elizabeth Short’s horribly mutilated corpse, severed in two, was discovered in the backyard of an abandoned house in January 1947. The crime’s brutality was unprecedented, as was the scale of the manhunt it triggered. Ending a thirty-year fascination with the case, Ellroy’s *The Black Dablia* offered a fictional resolution to the crime and won its author recognition in 1987. Here again, the writer’s role is to compensate for the policeman’s failure.

Yet a man’s motives, be he writer or killer, are never quite so simple. While critics and journalists alike were quick to accept his alibi for writing, Ellroy’s works, to say the least, seem to contradict his vocation as a “righter of wrongs” or “dead woman’s defender.” Indeed, Ellroy’s fictional universe is characterized by both an absence of justice and a hyperbolic violence almost always enacted against women’s bodies. It is not one of remembrance, but rather dismemberment.

Focussing on *The Black Dablia* and *My Dark Places*, I will argue that the formula of Ellroy’s writing—“I write to identify my mother’s killer”—pertains more to mystification than to elucidation. Through close readings of his childhood memories of his mother’s body and of the mutilation inflicted upon his most famous (fictional) victim, I try to bring to light Ellroy’s symbolic guilt over the loss of his mother, as well as the specificity of his narratives, which appear driven not so much by a desire to find the real criminal as to transpose their author’s guilt, a gesture that in turn explains the buildup of corruption and violence with which Ellroy’s fiction challenges the *noir* genre.

### Part I: *My Dark Places*

“[My father] wanted to know if I liked girls yet, I told him I did. I didn’t tell him that full-blown women jazzed me more. Divorced mothers were more precisely my type. Their bodies had these neat imperfections. Heavy legs and bra-strap markings drove me crazy. I liked pale-skinned, red-haired women especially.”<sup>1</sup> To the reader of James Ellroy’s *My Dark Places*, such a confession reveals yet another secret, one that had to be kept from his father, as this description of the lusted-for woman happens to resemble Jean Ellroy, the author’s late mother. Indeed, the 43-year-old divorcee, nicknamed “the redhead” throughout the book, plays no small part in James’s sexual fantasies. A

couple of paragraphs later, the narrator of *My Dark Places* gives an unequivocal answer to the father's question by inviting us into the family's bathroom.

I caught a glimpse of my mother drying off after a shower one night. She saw me looking at her breasts. She told me that the tip of her right nipple got infected after my birth and had to be removed. Her tone was in no way provocative. She was a registered nurse explaining a medical fact.

I had pictures in my mind now. I wanted to see more. (*MDP* 112)

Let us look closely at this scene. The missing bit of breast, which was already missing in our first quotation—euphemized as a “neat imperfection”—literalizes the origins of desire and representation (“I wanted to see more”). “Every image, every representation is founded on a hallucinated breast,” notes Jean Bellemin-Noël in his discussion of the psychoanalytic definition of desire.<sup>2</sup> In other words, what matters even more than the mother's breast is its absence.

A sign of desire, this lack also functions as Jean Ellroy's distinguishing mark, that is, as the singularity that will enable the police to identify her newly discovered corpse. “The victim's right nipple was missing” (*MDP* 7). Not unlike Rousseau, the police speculated on the cause of this anomaly. One of them, Ellroy explains, even identified it as a bite from the aggressor.<sup>3</sup> Such an idea had to impress a 10-year-old boy, who indeed gave it some unconscious credit. Recalling his passionate interest, as a teenager, in police investigations and violent crimes, Ellroy mentions the case of Caryl Chessman, a famous Los Angeles killer associated with a sinister rumor: “My father told me Chessman bit a woman's nipples off and drove her insane” (*MDP* 129).

Discovering the Black Dahlia in a book that he received from his father for his eleventh birthday, Ellroy also discovered his mother's fate, which for obvious reasons he had thus far repressed. “She came to me in a book” (*MDP* 123), he declares at the outset of the chapter that recounts the origins of his fascination with violence.<sup>4</sup> With its ambiguous pronoun, the sentence overdetermines the interdependence of Jean Ellroy and Elizabeth Short in his emerging imagination, which was also destined to settle “in a book.” The writer's fixation on the Dahlia, however, is not due solely to the indisputable resemblance of the two cases. It also appears to have been triggered by certain aspects of Elizabeth Short's bodily mutilation. Jack Webb's description of her

wounds, Ellroy confesses, sent him “way off the deep end” (*MDP* 122–23). Interestingly, this description focuses on the young woman’s breasts. “[Her body] was nude. It showed evidence of slow, deliberate torture. There were neat, deep slashes around the breasts and on them” (Webb 25). By zooming in even further on the scene, the narration of *The Black Dahlia* confirms the crucial importance of this particular mutilation. “The breasts were dotted with cigarette burns, the right one hanging loose, attached to the torso only by shreds of skin; the left one slashed around the nipple. The cuts went all the way down to the bone . . .”<sup>5</sup>

The baby’s aggression against its mother’s body, in this case her breasts, has been the object of many studies by child psychologists and psychiatrists. The infant bites and scratches the breast that fails to satisfy it. Moreover, as Melanie Klein has suggested, the unsatisfying breast is eventually perceived as different from the fulfilling one. “The mother’s breast . . . becomes split into a good (gratifying) and bad (frustrating) breast.”<sup>6</sup> In this split, literally inscribed on Jean Ellroy’s chest, lies the origin of the ambivalence of the infant’s feelings, leading eventually to the splitting of the maternal figure into the “Good Mother” and the “Bad Mother.” Significantly, the recounting of the discovery of his mother’s breasts leads the narrator to this very ambiguity: “I hated her and lusted for her” (*MDP* 112).

James Ellroy’s “dark place,” and the singularity of his Childhood,<sup>7</sup> is the hatred he felt as a child for his mother. The news of her death, he writes, did not sadden him at all. “I hated her. I hated El Monte. Some unknown killer just bought me a brand-new beautiful life” (*MDP* 101). His tears in the bus that carried him and his father back to Los Angeles on the night of June 22 were faked. He much preferred his father’s custody. For want of any idea as to how to raise a child, Armand, a noncertified accountant and womanizer who claimed to have slept with Rita Hayworth, was above all a permissive weekend father. “Weekdays meant restricted drudgery. Weekends meant freedom” (*MDP* 107). Armand and James would spend Saturday afternoons at the movies. The son lived on Cheese Whiz and crackers, enjoyed unlimited access to his father’s collection of erotic magazines, and went to bed at 2 a.m.

The depiction of this Golden Age, however, gets touched up in *My Dark Places*. Armand is manipulative and never fails to use his son to settle a score with his ex-wife. “He told me she was a drunk and a

whore. He told me she was fucking her divorce lawyer" (*MDP* 105). To win custody of his only child, Armand strove to prove that Jean was not "morally respectable," and enjoined James to spy on her and report on all the men she met. Whatever their explicit purpose, however, one can very well imagine that for the boy these paternal requests would convey another message: his mother has other men (than himself). She gives her breasts to someone else. Indeed, if James's jealousy is (too) carefully expunged from his narrative, it remains easily readable. One day during an argument with his mother, James called her a whore and received a robust slap. As revenge, then, he fantasized about "scratch[ing] her face and ruin[ing] her looks so men wouldn't want to fuck her" (*MDP* 111). In other words, while his rage seems to be a response to physical aggression, a closer look reveals that it is in fact motivated by his mother's affairs, which the solitary child resented. Incidentally, this fantasized defacement of Jean matches the second mutilation inflicted on the Black Dahlia. "But the worst of the worst was the girl's face," the narrator, Bucky Bleichert, remembers. "It was one huge purpled bruise, the nose crushed deep into the facial cavity, the mouth cut ear to ear into a smile that leered up at you, somehow mocking the rest of the brutality inflicted" (*BD* 77).<sup>8</sup>

If mutilation is a form of language, as the narrator of *My Dark Places* observes, the meaning of such language is to be found in the vicinity of this bitten breast, that is, in the relationship between the infant and the mother's body. The missing nipple, as we said above, is *par excellence* the figure of the "bad breast." According to Melanie Klein, the shortcomings of the breast are not just a matter of lack, a failure to satisfy the needs of the child; the splitting of the object entails its personification.

It is because the baby projects its own aggression onto these objects that it feels them to be "bad," and not only in that they frustrate its desires: the child conceives of them as actually dangerous—persecutors who might devour it, scoop out its body, cut it to pieces, poison it—in short, compassing its destruction by all the means which sadism can devise.<sup>9</sup>

These terrors in turn define the child's sadism. "The phantasied onslaughts on the mother follow two main lines: one is the predominantly oral impulse to suck dry, bite up, scoop out, and rob the mother's body of its good contents. . . . The other line of attack derives

from the anal and urethral impulses and implies expelling dangerous substances out of the self and into the mother."<sup>10</sup> Once again, the Black Dahlia's mutilation is a literalization of impulses turned against the mother. Not only has Elizabeth Short's body been "cut in half at the waist," but scooped out below. "There were no organs inside" (*BD* 77). As for the anal-sadistic impulse, it is exactly that for which *My Dark Places* seeks to make amends.<sup>11</sup> After her death, James's hatred for his mother turned into the systematic desecration of her memory, which of course also allowed him to deny his loss. "I thought I knew you. I passed my childish hatred off as intimate knowledge. I never mourned you. I assailed your memory" (*MDP* 98). Defamation is nothing but a figurative defacement. The boy who fantasized about disfiguring his mother in order to render her unattractive, and the man who later described her as promiscuous, ultimately shared a common anxiety: that of losing her or, more precisely, losing the exclusivity of her body and breasts.

This defamation serves a second purpose: slander is a way of projecting one's own mistakes and failures (or "wastes") onto another. Calling his mother a whore, James is evidently transposing the guilt he felt at his own incestuous desire. Reparation, in that sense, consists of unveiling this subterfuge. Far from idealizing his mother, or even concealing her weaknesses, *My Dark Places* gives an uncompromising depiction of Jean Ellroy, yet without trying to disguise the painter's bias.

Raised in the complete absence of authority by a father who passed away when he was only seventeen, James rapidly descends into juvenile delinquency—after his own peculiar fashion. From petty theft, he moved on to voyeurism, and from there to breaking and entering, choosing as targets the houses of the women he spied on. Surviving on a meager allowance, he soon lost his apartment and spent five years alternating between vagrancy and imprisonment. The 1960s were already roaring in Los Angeles, and the city overflowed with drugs. James discovered Benezdrex inhalers, whose active ingredient, propylhexedrin on a cotton swab, allowed him to "fly on righteous ten-hour speed highs" (*MDP* 163). A lung abscess, however, and a psychotic breakdown eventually brought an end to his Summer of Love . . . . In light of such habits, the shot of bourbon that Jean Ellroy enjoyed after work each night seems harmless enough, and the reader may wonder whether her "drunkenness" was not another projection on the part of

the son who would spend years in Alcoholics Anonymous. Likewise, in unveiling Armand's obsession with sex, the narrative also unveils his bias in accusing his ex-wife of loose behavior. Armand's perspective on life and women is subtly, or maybe not so subtly, revealed by his son's description of him. "He was drop-dead handsome and possessed a massive wang" (*MDP* 103). What moral authority, finally, can we grant a man whose final words to his son were "Try to pick up every waitress who serves you" (*MDP* 149)?

Part of the narrative strategy of *My Dark Places* is to deconstruct the charges that Ellroy had previously assembled against his mother. Whereas the portrayal of Elizabeth Short, ready to do everything to succeed in Hollywood, does nothing but reinforce the misogynist assumption that female victims are responsible for their own sexual assaults, the portrayal of Jean Ellroy brings to light the fallacy of such reasoning. In many ways, *My Dark Places* is a feminist reading of *The Black Dahlia*.<sup>12</sup>

Fifteen years after his encounter with his mother in the bathroom, James Ellroy recounts how she returned to him in the same place.

I was in the tub. I was jacking off to a cavalcade of older women's faces. I saw my mother naked, fought the image and lost. I jerry-rigged a story straight off. It was '58. My mother didn't die in El Monte. She wasn't drunk. She loved me woman to man. We made love. I smelled her perfume and cigarette breath. Her amputated nipple thrilled me. (*MDP* 174)

This textual repetition of James's erotic initiation induces the reader to compare the two moments, and to identify their difference as the presence/absence of the mother. Her absence, however, carries another meaning. By substituting the son's compulsive masturbation for the mother's exhibitionism, the narrative displaces the guilt from the woman to the man. Although he fell in love with notorious victims, the narrator insists that he remained aware of women's tragic fate. "I instinctively understood that life. It was a chaotic collision with male desire" (*MDP* 126).

These two crucial scenes of bathroom seduction share yet another element. The description of the mother's body again revolves around Jean's missing nipple. As a sign forever sealing the disappearance of its referent, a dizzying absence (the breast, the mother) that signifies itself as absence (the nipple), this lack not only symbolizes the abyss from

which male desire emerges, but also this desire's violence, as a wound left on the woman's body after her "chaotic collision" with it.

The guilt that haunts the narrative of *My Dark Places* turns out to be deeper and more complex than mere remorse for having denigrated one's mother. The book's autobiographical chapters *per se*<sup>13</sup> appear to be the story of punishment, in this case psychotic meltdown followed by confinement. "I knew that booze, drugs and my tenuous abstention from them caused my brain burnout. My rational side told me that. My secondary response derived straight from guilt. God punished me for mentally fucking my mother" (*MDP* 180). Yet James's Bensedrex-induced paranoia reads slightly differently. The "voices" that haunted him for five years accused him not of incest, but of murder. "Lloyd called the voices 'amphetamine psychoses.' I called them a conspiracy. President Richard M. Nixon knew I murdered my parents and ordered people to stalk me" (*MDP* 172). In James's delirium, sexual and lethal impulses converge, just as they do on Jean Ellroy's amputated breast. "The tenant next door . . . hated my porno books. He knew I murdered my mother and killed my father with neglect" (*MDP* 171). James's true crime, as it stands revealed in *My Dark Places*, is not so much that he fantasized about his mother, but that he let his desire kill her. "The Voices got very specific. They said you fucked your mother *and* killed her" (*MDP* 174). The voices, in a way, give voice to the inexpressible. They assert a causality to which the narrator can only allude: "I hated her and lusted for her. Then she was dead" (*MDP* 112).<sup>14</sup>

## Part II: *The Black Dahlia*

While Ellroy's obsession with sex crime is commonly ascribed to the sexual nature of his mother's murder, our reading points to a different cause, that is, the unconscious association of sex with crime, cemented in a young boy's simultaneous discovery of his desire for and the murder of his mother. In order to escape his guilt, the young James invents plots that obviously reverse this causality. This was initially the function of the Black Dahlia case. "I rescued Betty Short and became her lover. I saved her from a life of promiscuity. I tracked down her killer and executed him" (*MDP* 126). Here, James's desire no longer causes death, but brings instead resurrection, while responsibility for the murder is assigned elsewhere. The fantasies of Bucky Bleichert,

who narrates *The Black Dablia*, provide yet another grateful twist, relieving him even of responsibility for his desire. "Betty [was] begging me to fuck her or kill her killer, she didn't care which" (*BD* 280). Here the equation of sex with revenge serves not only to mask the unbearable equation of sex and murder, but also legitimates sex with the mother, figured by Elizabeth Short, as a reward for a heroic action.

No wonder James felt so strongly attracted to crime fiction. "It was a literary formula preordained directly for *me*. It let me remember and forget in equal measure" (*MDP* 116). He can forget the horror of Jean's end, of course, and perhaps even more likely, forget that Jean's killer was none other than himself. If failing to remember somebody, as the proverb has it, is killing him or her a second time, then James's amnesia certainly carries the weight of a symbolic murder. In addition, one could argue that his fantasmatic constructions involving Jean entail a *killing of the mother* analogous to that of the father whose status is disputed. Writing crime novels was therefore for Ellroy a way to project this guilt onto others, to stage an actual murder in lieu of a symbolic one—and not the other way around! If James's literary vocation is undoubtedly related to Jean's death, it implies a reversal, that is, a concealing rather than a revelation of "who did it?" Only such a reversal could explain the trademark of Ellroyian crime fiction: corrupted justice in the form of false accusation.

"All detective novels," Michel Butor observes, "are based on two murders. The first one, perpetrated by the assassin, is nothing but the opportunity for the second murder, in which he is the victim of the pure and unpunishable murderer, the detective."<sup>15</sup> Truly, no one could be less innocent than the Ellroyian detective. On a path that often leads them to psychosis, Ellroy's investigators never hesitate to use the very methods of the criminals they pursue, often outdoing them in the process. In *The Black Dablia*, Lee Blanchard hinders the investigation by conjuring away crucial evidence, while his partner, Bucky Bleichert, grows sexually obsessed with the victim and engages in a passionate affair with a witness, Madeleine Sprague, who happens to look like her. Far from responding to the call of justice, these two men joined the police force in order to expiate their "sins:" for Lee, the failure to prevent the kidnapping and death of his little sister, for Bucky, the denouncement of Japanese friends to the authorities, and for both men, the violent and fraudulent world of professional boxing.

It is as though the author sent his two main characters off to exonerate himself, and simultaneously to restore a purity that haunts their very names: Blanchard from “*blanchir*” and Bleichert from “*bleichen*” both derive from the French and German words for whiten.<sup>16</sup> To say the least, the role of these two men in the Black Dahlia’s investigation is to promote injustice. By saving Madeleine Sprague, whom he sleeps with and believes to be innocent, Bucky Bleichert in fact protects the axe murderer of his partner Lee as well as the daughter of the Dahlia’s killer! In addition, the novel’s ultimate revelation is not so much the criminal’s identity, but rather the fact that Lee Blanchard was aware of it all along and had committed any number of misdeeds to keep it secret, including a \$1,000,000 extortion from the Sprague family.

In many respects, *The Black Dahlia* is a novel about identity falsification. The novel’s title is a nickname, given by the press to Elizabeth Short. “Bucky” is not the narrator’s real name either. Dwight Bleichert was called this because of his buckteeth. Other important characters exhibit a positive taste for disguise. In order to lure Bucky, Madeleine Sprague dresses up as Betty Short. Her mother, meanwhile, is known in the neighborhood for her “theater.” The bitter Ramona Sprague used to organize plays for children in her front yard, apparently innocent skits that were in fact meant to ridicule her husband, Emmett, whose flaws and misdemeanors were unwittingly caricatured by his own children and their friends. Caught up in a system in which one mask serves only to cover another, Emmett himself owes his fortune to the very institution of disguise, that is, Hollywood, whose giant letters, on the hill overlooking the family property, seal this comedy of identity.<sup>17</sup>

In a way, Betty’s wounds also contribute to this phenomenon, her identity being radically altered through defacement. Promoting the confusion between the perpetrator and his victim, the narrative stages another defacement, that of George Tilden, Ramona Sprague’s lover and partner in the slaughter of Betty, but also Madeleine’s illegitimate father. When Emmett Sprague found out that Madeleine was not his, but his old friend George’s daughter, he decided to . . . erase George’s paternity! He disfigured him with a razor, literally scratching out his resemblance to Madeleine (*BD* 322). Once again, however, it is the Black Dahlia’s mutilation that points out the “true” criminal as no one else than the narrator of the crime. “The nose crushed deep into the

facial cavity, the mouth cut ear to ear into a smile" (BD 77) mirror crucial episodes of the novel. First, this crushed nose is Lee's under the fist of his soon-to-be partner Bucky during the boxing match that opens the novel. "I felt the unmistakable crunch of nose cartilage, then everything went black and hot yellow" (BD 43), the former pro recalls. "The croaker told me later that Blanchard's nose was broken, and that his cuts required twenty-six stitches" (BD 43). Before promoting him to the Warrants Squad, the narrative introduces Bucky as a violent individual. Moreover, his description as a "poet of speed and guile" (BD 20) (in the words of the prematch hype) establishes a literary connection between Betty's broken nose and her other facial ravage. Her "smiling wound" is a direct reference to Victor Hugo's *Laughing Man*, the novel that was found at the site of her torture and murder, and that will also serve as a clue toward the eventual incrimination of Ramona Sprague.

Ellroy's resolution of the crime derives its inspiration from Hugo's novel. Not only did Ramona slash Betty's cheeks to make her look like Gwynplaine, but the text of the *Laughing Man*, read out loud in her own voice, dominates the scene like an incantation (BD 345). This allusion to literature, however, seems gratuitous in Ellroy's eminently brutal and uncultured fictional universe. One might wonder whether Hugo's novel was really the motivation for Betty's murder, or whether it simply served to cover her screams . . . Just as detective novels did for the young James Ellroy, literature functions here as a screen concealing the crime's true motive which turned out to be incest.

As the novel reaches its end, connections are made between the underworld of pornography to which Betty's failed acting career had led her and the Sprague clan. It was George Tilden who had spotted Betty on the set of a pornographic movie produced in Emmett's studios, was enthralled by her resemblance to Madeleine, and asked Emmett to "give" the young woman to him.<sup>18</sup> In exchange for his silence regarding Madeleine's true paternity and his own embezzlements, but also to settle a score with his wife Ramona, Emmett Sprague agrees to this sordid transaction. But Ramona learns about it, and, wild with jealousy, arrives at George's shack shortly after the Dahlia. Knowing his necrophiliac tendencies, she easily convinces him to witness Betty's torture and murder.

If this scenario, in which a father's incestuous desire for his daughter leads to her death, brings us closer to Ellroy's own "dark places," it still

involves a reversal of roles—a father desiring his daughter standing in for a son desiring his mother—but one that can easily be decoded through close reading. When George Tilden finally became his prime suspect, Bucky decided to search his house. What he discovered was a horrifying laboratory of jars in which the insane anatomist kept the parts of his various, disinterred corpses. There, Bucky's nausea reaches a peak when he reads, in the meticulous diary of his graveyard raids, that George had actually visited the cemetery where his own mother, Greta Bleichert, was buried. "I dropped the book and reached for the blanket for something to hold" (*BD* 328). The unreadable is, in other words, the mother, or rather the inescapable relationship between her possession and her death, figured here by the violation of her grave.

Ellroy's detective is always a double agent: tracking down "criminals," he is merely covering his own tracks, which lead the reader back to the original *murderer*, the storyteller himself, and the false evidence that is his work. Is there a better image of duplicity, for that matter, than the duplication of Bleichert and Blanchard, whose last names mean the same thing? Mr. Fire and Mr. Ice, as they were called in their famous boxing match, represent nothing but two states of the same matter, in this case the writer's conflict. Haunted by a mother who died too soon (Blanchard) and a sister who was murdered (Bleichert), the two men literally wander in their creator's footsteps, or more accurately, share the fate of the main character of *My Dark Places*. The truth ("I killed my sister") is too hard for Lee Blanchard to bear. Like his namesake, Lee Ellroy ("James" is actually a *nom de plume*), he is doomed to lose his mind over it. As for Dwight Bleichert, he only survives by repressing the guilt whose return is inscribed in his nickname. Indeed, the prominence of his teeth brings us back to Jean Ellroy's bitten breast.

The detective's overbite elicits remarks from all the women in the novel, from his future wife Kay to Madeleine and Jane Chambers. Even Madeleine's father Emmett refers to him as her "toothy chum" (*BD* 319). The threat it poses to a woman's body does not go unnoticed either. At the end of a dysfunctional dinner at the Sprague's, Madeleine's sister, Martha, a brilliant graphic arts student, gives Bucky a drawing she has just completed. "Madeleine was still muttering apologies when I looked at the picture. It was the two of us, both naked. Madeleine had her legs spread. I was between them, gnawing at her

with giant Bucky Bleichert teeth" (*BD* 148). The narrative thus creates another link between the character of Bucky and the Dahlia's mutilation: the man with fists powerful enough to disfigure her face could also very well eat her inside(s) out. What is more, in one of the many displacements that shape Ellroy's dream-like or rather nightmare-like plot, Bucky Bleichert becomes involved in an episode of cannibalism—which the text puts "en abyme" in a jar found in George Tilden's den, filled with teeth still lodged in their jaws. Soon after breaking into this appalling shed, Bucky is assaulted and severely bitten by George all over, until he manages to shoot him in the eye, thereby affixing an appropriate signature to the whole oedipal affair.

Hard on the heels of Betty Short's killer, these characters and their author—as depicted in *My Dark Places*—are in fact running away from the truth of Jean Ellroy's murder. In Ellroy's intimate cinema, Betty is not merely the actress playing Jean's role. She is also, and primarily, the screen concealing the guilt occasioned by Jean's death. "I seized on Elizabeth Short and hoarded the details of her life. Every bit of *minutiae* was mortar with which to build walls to block out Geneva Hilliker Ellroy. This stratagem ruled my unconscious" (*Crime Wave* 54). Thus the enigma "Who killed Betty?" principally serves as a diversion from the more insistent question: "Who bit Jean?" The "stratagem" lies in this very displacement, away from a query as problematic as its answer is obvious. It is neither the Black Dahlia's killer, nor Caryl Chessman, nor even Jean Ellroy's elusive murderer, but Jean's son who damaged his own mother's breast. "The tip of her right nipple got infected after my birth and had to be removed" (*MDP* 112). In light of this reading, the "failure" to identify who killed Jean Ellroy, which structures the narrative of *My Dark Places*, again points to the same displacement: the mother's killer is impossible to find . . . since he is the one who searches. Displaying a disturbing photograph of Jean Ellroy's cadaver, the book jacket of the hardcover edition plays with this ambiguity: whose eyes are looking at this woman? The writer's or the killer's? On another level, the "failure" of Ellroy's investigation unveils another aspect of literature, which not only serves to hide the true crime (at least as Freud would have considered it)—incestuous desire—but also, and consequently, to perpetrate false identification.<sup>19</sup>

As a tribute to Poe's purloined letter, Jean Ellroy's blind nipple exposes the crime while rendering it invisible to the (private) eye. Obviously, the blind nipple figures the blindness of the detective, as

well as his oedipal guilt, and ultimately the writer's work, whose story represents what is not there, and why. Like that other famous orphan, Rousseau, Ellroy turned to literature in order to make sense of his mother's absence. Yet, far from giving women up, as the prostitute in our epigraph eventually urges Jean-Jacques to do, Ellroy cannot tear himself away from the site where their corpses lie, savagely torn by a ravenous Sphinx, for he is torn as well: to answer the enigma, as we know, is to admit that one is Œdipus. A son, in other words, cannot solve the mystery of his mother's murder. Ellroy's writing is to be understood in the light of this logical impossibility. If the formula of his literary production is quite obviously "I write to identify my mother's killer," I hope to have shown that in his case such ambition partakes less of elucidation than mystification, a literal darkening—as his titles indicate. The Ellroyian detective not only fails to identify the real criminal, he actively works to accuse somebody else, thereby becoming a criminal himself, and exposing the deeper logic of accusation, which is nothing but a projection of the subject's guilt onto another. The blind spot on his mother's body, in that sense, is none other than James Ellroy's dark place.

#### NOTES

1. James Ellroy. *My Dark Places* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997) 111.
2. Jean Bellemin-Noël, *La psychanalyse du texte littéraire* (Paris: Nathan, 1996) 27.
3. "Keith [Tedrow] saw the Jean Ellroy crime scene. He spread a stupid rumor about Jean Ellroy's body. He said the killer bit one nipple off" (*MDP* 325).
4. This book is Jack Webb's *The Badge: A Tribute to Los Angeles Police* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1958).
5. James Ellroy. *The Black Dablia* (New York: Mysterious Press, 1987) 77.
6. Melanie Klein. "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms: Introduction." *The Selected Melanie Klein*. Ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1986) 176.
7. We are borrowing this appellation from Richard Coe, who names "Childhood" any autobiographical narrative centered on the first years of its author.
8. One could add that this mutilation also mirrors the killer's face, which has been "scratched out" precisely because of incestuous desires, as I will explain below (14).
9. Melanie Klein. "The Psycho-Genesis of Manic-Depressive States." *The Selected Melanie Klein*. Ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1986) 116.
10. Melanie Klein, "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms: Splitting in Connection with Projection and Introjection." *The Selected Melanie Klein*. Ed. Juliet Mitchell (New York: Free Press, 1986) 183.
11. To take up another Kleinian concept related to the feelings of pain, guilt, and fear of losing the object that has been aggressed ("Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms," 189). The prologue to *My Dark Places*, addressed to the mother, defines the book as a reparation.

12. Or a deconstruction, as Woody Haut argues in his convincing presentation of Ellroy's writings. See W. Haut, *Neon Noir: Contemporary American Crime Fiction* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999) 144–54.
13. Part II: "The Kid in the Picture" (chap. 6–11).
14. Note how this unbearable causal link between his desire and his mother's death is both denied by the period and promoted by the adverb.
15. Michel Butor. *L'Emploi du Temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1957) 147. (My translation.)
16. Lee's ghosts—a sister whose murder he secretly celebrated (BD 82)—hardly veil those of James, while Bucky's dénoncement of a friend repeats the defamation of Jean Ellroy by her son.
17. In the novel, the Hollywood hills play a role that is more than simply decorative. Not only did Emmett Sprague make a fortune as a (crooked) realtor in this neighborhood, but the story's dénouement coincides with the removal of the four last giant letters of the word "HOLLYWOODLAND."
18. At this point, the novel comes full circle: Bucky wants Madeleine because she looks like the Dahlia, whereas George wants the Dahlia because she looks like Madeleine. The logic of false identity in the novel thus appears closely connected to the very nature of desire, which necessarily misses its object.
19. This very act is what, according to Marthe Robert, defines the novel as a genre (see Marthe Robert, *Origins of the Novel and the "Family Romance"*).

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This is Ellroy's first novel and is written with a lot less spastic splattering of beaten and battered words that have become the hallmark of his mature writing. James Ellroy often starts public appearances with a version of the following: "Good evening peepers, prowlers, pederasts, panty-sniffers, punks and pimps. I'm James Ellroy, the demon dog, the foul owl with the death growl, the white knight of the far right, and the slick trick with the donkey dick." Fritz Brown is already almost the typical Even the Demon Dog of American fiction had to start somewhere, and this debut noir bears the hallmark naivety of a first novel whilst setting out a clear mission statement for all that would come from the pen of James Ellroy. It's just a bit dull and obvious however. For much of his literary career, James Ellroy has shrewdly avoided the usual pitfalls that crime novelists fall into when interacting with the "true crime" genre. Truman Capote's critical reputation... Bibliography. Allamand, C. (2006) "A Tooth for a Private Eye: James Ellroy's Detective Fiction." *Journal of Popular Culture*, 39.3: 349-364. CrossRefGoogle Scholar. Browder, L. (2010) "True Crime." In Nickerson, C.R. (ed) *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Google Scholar. Davis, M. (1992) *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*. New York: Verso. Google Scholar. Dunphy, J. (2005) "Ellroy Confidential, A Conversation with the Demon Dog of American Letters." *of the Century*. Edited by James Ellroy & Otto Penzler. 1923-1928: TOD ROBBINS Spurs. 1928: JAMES M. CAIN Pastoral. In fact, the two subcategories of the mystery genre, private detective stories and noir fiction, are diametrically opposed, with mutually exclusive philosophical premises. Noir works, whether films, novels, or short stories, are existential, pessimistic tales about people, including (or especially) protagonists, who are seriously flawed and morally questionable. The private detective story is a different matter entirely. Raymond Chandler famously likened the private eye to a knight, a man who could walk mean streets but not himself be mean, and this is true of the overwhelming majority of those heroic figures. Born Lee Earle Ellroy in 1948, James Ellroy is one of the most critically acclaimed and controversial contemporary writers of crime and historical fiction. Ellroy's complex narratives, which merge history and fiction, have pushed the boundaries of the crime fiction genre: *American Tabloid*, a revisionist look at the Kennedy era, was *Time* magazine's Novel of the Year 1995, and his novels *L.A. Confidential* and *The Black Dahlia* were adapted into films. Much of Ellroy's remarkable life story has served as the template for the personal obsessions that dominate his writing. From the brutal, unsolved In his new novel, 'This Storm', crime-fiction provocateur James Ellroy burros deep into the second World War. No surprise: It is very dark there. "OK, James," he says and orders a lobster cocktail, a bone-in rib eye "medium well, no butter, blackened on both sides" and a Caesar salad. I ask about his interest in World War II until recently, after all, most of his work has been set in the 1950s and 1960s. Jack Kennedy was the mythological frontman for a particularly juicy slice of our history, Ellroy writes in 1995's *American Tabloid*. It's populated with characters from Ellroy's earlier books, like Dudley Smith, the roguish homicidal detective from the first L.A. quartet, and Kay Lake, the heroine of *The Black Dahlia*; Elizabeth Short, teenaged and very much alive, makes an appearance.