

# Love, Death and the Photographic Image: James Ellroy's dark places through Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*

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She is a theme of honor and renown,  
A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,  
Whose present courage may beat down our foes  
And fame in time to come canonize us  
- *Troilus and Cressida*, II, ii, 199-202

Since the publication of *The Black Dahlia*, James Ellroy's hardboiled crime fiction has increasingly attracted both popular and critical attention, the latter focused primarily on Ellroy's representations of gender and violence.<sup>1</sup> In his second novel, *Clandestine*, as well as *The Black Dahlia* and the subsequent three volumes of 'The L.A. Quartet' (*The Big Nowhere*, *L.A. Confidential*, and *White Jazz*), Ellroy invariably reworks the same subject matter: violent crimes committed against women by men in the (fictionalised) social context of Los Angeles in the 1940s and 1950s. Such criticism has understandably tended to contextualise Ellroy's crime fiction in terms of the history and conventions of the genre. Nonetheless it has often been suggested, not only by journalists and reviewers but, most notably, by Ellroy himself, that much of his writing has been influenced by the traumatic event of his mother's murder when he was a child. Indeed, Ellroy has consistently promoted this view in his publicity campaigns for *Clandestine*, *The Black Dahlia* and his autobiographical crime memoir *My Dark Places*.<sup>2</sup>

The emphasis that Ellroy places upon the significance of his mother's murder is not reflected in the body of criticism on his writing to date, however, despite the fact that Ellroy

explicitly links his mother's murder to his writing, or more precisely, to his treatment of this subject matter in the prefaces to each successive text. *Clandestine*, in Ellroy's own words, is his 'first attempt to fictionally address the murder of my own mother'.<sup>3</sup> Ellroy subsequently dedicates *The Black Dahlia*, a fictionalised account of one of the most notorious unsolved murders in American history, to his mother as a 'valediction in blood'.<sup>4</sup> But according to Ellroy, his quasi-autobiographical characterisations of his mother as 'a tortured drunk with a hyperbolically tortured past ... a nine-year-old son and an evil ex-husband who physically resembled my father' in *Clandestine*, for instance, were only 'surrogate fictions'.<sup>5</sup> In *My Dark Places*, Ellroy addresses his mother's murder from an autobiographical perspective, re-enacting the circumstances leading up to her death and relating the story of his own efforts to solve the mystery of her murder.

Nevertheless, Ellroy is not exclusively concerned with establishing the facts of his mother's murder in *My Dark Places*. Rather, he energetically appropriates the role of interpreter of his own writing, giving what amounts to a detailed psychosexual explanation of the thematics of his crime fiction. It is to be expected that Ellroy would give some account of his motives for becoming a writer, given that it is an autobiographical text. Yet Ellroy conflates being a writer with the writing itself, attempting to impose an overarching thematic coherence upon his writing (or *oeuvre*, as Ellroy perhaps would have it), a thematic coherence that is authenticated by his own real-life experiences. For this reason, it is essential to consider the strategies – most importantly, the inclusion of photographic images – that Ellroy uses in *My Dark Places* to authenticate the self, as a writer, in order to fully grasp the significance that he ascribes to his mother's murder.

On first examination at least, Roland Barthes' eulogic meditation on the photographic image in his final book, *Camera Lucida*, would seem to have little bearing upon Ellroy's representation of his mother's murder in *My Dark Places*. Nonetheless, Barthes' undeniably realist affirmation

of the self in *Camera Lucida* is reflected in Ellroy's own treatment of the photographic image in *My Dark Places*. In her introduction to *A Roland Barthes Reader*, Susan Sontag neatly sums up *Camera Lucida* as 'part memoir (of his mother), part meditation on eros, part treatise on the photographic image, part invocation of death'.<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the obvious generic and formal differences between the two texts, Sontag's classification of the thematics of *Camera Lucida* (the author's mother, love, the photographic image, and death) is also equally definitive of *My Dark Places*. Both texts are structured around the 'event' of the death of the author's mother. What is more interesting than the fact that an autobiographical parallel of this kind may be drawn, however, is the way in which Barthes' representation of the wound caused by an identification with or internalisation of an image of the lost loved object, and then his 'resurrection' of the beloved, is likewise played out by Ellroy around the photographic image in *My Dark Places*.

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes seeks to isolate the 'evidence' of photography, to define what separates out the photographic image from the 'the community of images'.<sup>7</sup> To this end, as Barthes claims in an interview 'On Photography', he employs an 'entirely subjective' method of analysis, reflecting on the relationship between the photograph, the subject observing the photograph, and reality, with reproductions and descriptions of 'several arbitrarily chosen photographs' from the public domain punctuating his arguments throughout.<sup>8</sup> Barthes differentiates between two elements whose co-presence defines his interest in the photographs that he observes: *studium*, or 'the general, cultural, and civilised interest one has in a photograph',<sup>9</sup> and *punctum*, or the photograph's ability to disturb, to provoke the shock of a sudden, eidetic recognition of meaning, usually in response to some detail (pp.26-7). Proceeding from photograph to photograph with the refinement of his own perceptions of these two elements as the object of his inquiry, Barthes nonetheless abandons half-way into the text his investigation into what may be termed a 'pleasure of the image' (rejecting his own pleasure as an 'imperfect mediator' through which

to 'recognize the universal' [p.60]) in favour of 'a more painful reflection on an episode of mourning, on grief'.<sup>10</sup> From this point onwards, Barthes postulates 'a certain "promotion" of private photography ... images that represent a loving relationship with someone and possess all their power only if there was a bond of love, even a virtual one, with the person in the photo'.<sup>11</sup>

Barthes explains in Part Two of *Camera Lucida* that after the death of his mother he searched for a photograph that would keep her memory alive: 'my grief wanted a just image, an image which would be both justice and accuracy' (p.70). He claims that he then was able to recognise such a true image in the Winter Garden Photograph of his mother, taken when she was a five-year-old child: 'In this veracious photograph, the being I love, whom I have loved, is not separated from itself: at last it coincides' (p.109). Barthes' particular choice of the Winter Garden Photograph underscores his assertion that the nature of this truth does not lie in the fact that he recognised it to be a good 'likeness' of his mother since it is a photograph of a child that he, of course, could never have known.

Although Barthes includes reproductions of numerous other photographs in *Camera Lucida*, he does not allow the reader to see this photograph of his mother. He explains: 'I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the "ordinary" ... for you, no wound' (p.73). With this in mind, it then becomes significant that in *Camera Lucida*, unlike in his other autobiographical texts *Roland Barthes on Roland Barthes* and *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes has chosen a linear narrative form, a discursive structure which dramatically builds up to the revelation of the singular truth of the Winter Garden Photograph. For what Barthes in fact enacts through his refusal to include a reproduction of the Winter Garden Photograph in *Camera Lucida* is the very structure of the relation between this image and the death of his mother in which absence paradoxically becomes a kind of presence. 'In

the Photograph', Barthes writes, 'what I posit is not only the absence of the object; it is also, by one and the same movement, on equal terms, the fact that this object has existed and that it has been there where I see it' (p.115).

According to Barthes, his discovery of the Winter Garden Photograph then led him to undertake to 'interrogate the evidence of Photography ... in relation to what we romantically call love and death' (p.73). Echoing a passage from *A Lover's Discourse*, in which he states that the lover fears 'a mourning which has already occurred, at the very origin of love' since the beloved as object is always already absent,<sup>12</sup> Barthes writes

I now know that there exists another *punctum* (another 'stigmatum') than the 'detail'. This new *punctum*, which is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* ('that-has-been'), its pure representation ... In front of the photograph of my mother as a child, I tell myself: she is going to die: I shudder, like Winnicott's psychotic patient, *over a catastrophe which has already occurred*. Whether or not the subject is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe (p.96).

In the photographic image, the object is undeniably always present ('that-has-been') but only in the past tense, its presence already deferred. As a reflection on love and death in terms of what Susan Sontag describes as 'the obsessional energies' of the imagination,<sup>13</sup> *Camera Lucida* is thus 'symmetrical to *A Lover's Discourse*, in the realm of mourning', as Barthes himself points out.<sup>14</sup>

What in Barthes' view sets the photograph apart from other types of images, however, is 'that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time' (pp.88-9). Just as 'every photograph is a certificate of presence' (p.87), every photograph also contains the imperative sign of the observing subject's future death. Barthes explains in 'On Photography':

Even if the person in the picture is still alive, it's a moment of this subject's existence that was photographed, and this moment

is gone. This is an enormous trauma for humanity, a trauma endlessly renewed ... [E]ach perception and reading of a photo is implicitly, in a repressed manner, a contact with what has ceased to exist, a contact with death.

Where there is an identification with or internalisation of an image of a person who has since died and with whom there is 'bond of love, even a virtual one' on the part of the observing subject (as in the instance of the Winter Garden Photograph), the experience of loss of self through the loss of the other in the present and fear of future death coincide.<sup>15</sup>

As a result, the observing subject's identification with or internalisation of such an image is doubly traumatic. 'The Photograph', Barthes writes, 'becomes a bizarre *medium* ... false on the level of perception, true on the level of time: a temporal hallucination, so to speak, a modest, *shared* hallucination (on the one hand "it is not there", on the other "but it indeed has been"): a mad image, chafed by reality' (p. 115). It is in this sense that the photograph's capacity to wound, its divisiveness according to Barthes, is then fully realised, with the photograph in turn embodying the very structure of this trauma through its potential to reproduce to infinity what has only occurred once.

Nonetheless, Barthes affirms in *Camera Lucida* that the Winter Garden Photograph for him 'accomplishes the unheard-of identification of reality ("*that-has-been*") with truth ("*there-she-is!*")'; it becomes at once evidential and exclamative; it bears the effigy to that crazy point where affect (love, compassion, grief, enthusiasm, desire) is a guarantee of Being' (p.113). Both the loved object and the subject (as a unified self) are resurrected. The '*intense immobility*' of the photographic image, its evidential power, subsumes into itself the divisiveness of time (p.49). With the revelation of the nature of the truth of the Winter Garden Photograph, the mythic narrative subtext of *Camera Lucida* reaches its epiphanic conclusion: after death, or the wound ('stigmatum') caused by an identification with or internalisation of an image of the loved object who has died, comes

'resurrection' via the photographic image manifest in the religious imagery that Barthes uses (pp.96;82).

The singular truth of the Winter Garden Photograph, as an effigy 'made by the hand of man', is for Barthes purely subjective ('it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity'), residing wholly in the perceived quality of its correspondence to the uniqueness of his 'fond desire' (pp.82;73;107). He explains: 'when I confronted the Winter Garden Photograph I gave myself up to the Image, to the Image-repertoire' (p.75); the photograph being, as he claims in *A Lover's Discourse* 'already (again, always) a memory' since its nature is 'not to represent but to memorialize'.<sup>16</sup> 'The other is my good and my knowledge: only I know him, only I make him exist in his truth', writes Barthes in the fragment of *A Lover's Discourse* entitled 'Truth':

Conversely, the other establishes in me truth: it is only with the other that I feel that I am 'myself' ... Always the same reversal: what the world takes for 'objective', I regard as factitious; and what the world regards as madness, illusion, error, I take for truth ... The truth is what, being taken away, leaves nothing to be seen but death.

It is not 'the truth which is true' but the relation to the beloved which 'endlessly affirmed, against everything, becomes a truth'.<sup>17</sup> This affirmation of value is the only consolation to be found in the face of inevitable loss, suggests Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse*. So in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes' understanding of the imagination as individualising the self and the world in such a way as to make reality and truth coincide (reality for him) is an affirmation of faith.

Bearing in mind Barthes' claim that the photographic image must be understood anthropologically in terms of the 'crisis of death' beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century – the problem of where to locate death and of how to attribute meaning to it in a secular society – it becomes significant that he thus invokes or (more precisely) inverts a Christian archetype in *Camera Lucida*. Where a

Christian faith in an absolute Other served to enhance and to preserve the self in the act of self-devotion, according to Barthes, guaranteeing the continued existence of the self beyond death, with the detheologising of love and death from Romanticism onwards love and death come to be understood in terms of their self-referentiality. In particular, love-as-passion – the idealised form of an identification with or internalisation of an image of the beloved – to a large extent imaginatively replaced the Christian notion of a union with an absolute Being as a means of deferring and thus transcending death. Yet what becomes apparent is not simply that romantic love may be understood as an inversion of Christian faith, but that the mythic narrative archetypes of Christianity, as well as its language, continue to inform the representation of romantic love in literature.

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The title page of 'Part I: The Redhead' of *My Dark Places* is dominated by the reproduction of a photograph taken in 1958 when James Ellroy was ten years old. It shows a woman's partially undressed body lying face down in an ivy patch, a stocking and a cord knotted around her neck and her naked back blotched with visible signs of postmortem lividity. Ellroy explains in the opening chapter that the photograph of the woman – subsequently identified by the woman's neighbours in response to a local radio bulletin as 'Jean Ellroy' – was one of several official police photographs taken by the L.A. County Coroner's deputy at the site of the 'body dump'. Retrieved by Ellroy at the age of 46 from a file in the L.A. police archives marked 'unsolved', this photograph is the reader's introduction to what Ellroy represents as the formative event in his life: his mother's murder.

As witness to the past it is, of course, common practice for writers to include reproductions of family photographs in their autobiographies. To the extent that such images refer to reality as prior to and outside of the text, one effect of this

convention is to enframe the text within an historical construction of time. Unlike language, which is 'by nature ... fictional' and therefore not able to authenticate itself, as Barthes suggests in *Camera Lucida*, the photograph's referent ('that-has-been'), is 'authentication itself' (p.87). Consequently, the relation between this photograph of Ellroy's mother and the text *appears* to be a straightforward one: an unsentimental variation of this convention, characteristic of a writer noted for his provocatively hard-boiled prose. For insofar as *My Dark Places* may be read as a real-life detective story, Ellroy's reconstruction of the circumstances of his mother's murder and his attempt to retrace a trail of decades-old clues in order to uncover her killer necessarily both relies upon and instantiates an historical construction of time. The irreversibility of the death of Ellroy's mother, as an historical fact evidenced by this photograph, in turn underwrites Ellroy's objectification of the past and his quest-like compulsion to excavate its secrets (the detective's *raison d'être*). But as Barthes also suggests in *Camera Lucida*, history is 'constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it – and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it' (p.65). Such an account of the relation between this photograph and the text in *My Dark Places* is therefore clearly incomplete, failing to allow for the 'dark places' to which the title of the text refers – that is, Ellroy's own obsession with 'clandestine sex and the random desecration of women'.<sup>18</sup>

As a traumatic image, 'true on the level of time' as Barthes would have it (p.115), this photograph of Ellroy's mother in Part I is indeed witness to the irreversibility of her death, understood retrospectively by Ellroy as a wound to which his obsession with other dead white women can be retraced. But, as Barthes claims, what is most shocking about a photograph of a corpse is that

it certifies, so to speak, that the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing. For the photograph's immobility is somehow the result of a perverse confusion between two concepts: the Real and the Live: by attesting that the object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces

belief that it is alive, because of that delusion which makes us attribute to Reality an absolutely superior, somehow eternal value (p.78-9).

Although 'false on the level of perception' (*Camera Lucida*, p.15), this photograph of Ellroy's mother is thus suggestive of the nature of his obsession, in which his mother lives on for him as a corpse. It follows that the 'event' of his mother's death cannot be seen as one event, the order of Ellroy's identification with and internalisation of images of other dead women condemning him to repetition.

Ellroy gives an account of the origins and development of his obsession in Parts I and II of *My Dark Places*. He begins in the opening chapter of Part I by reconstructing the events following the discovery of his mother's murder in dispassionate detail. Ellroy explains that as the child of acrimoniously divorced parents, he initially welcomed his mother's death as 'a gift' that enabled him to live permanently with his father (p.83). When reunited at the police station after hearing of her murder, 'Armand Ellroy hugged his son. The kid hugged him back. They both looked relieved and strangely happy' (p.13). On the day of her funeral, 'Jean's son copped a plea and stayed away. He spent the day watching TV with some friends of his dad's' (p.60). By referring to himself in the third person, Ellroy indicates his emotional disconnection from his mother's death at that time. Yet to refer to oneself in the third person is mortifying, and Ellroy thereby establishes his identification with her death from the outset.

'Part II: The Kid in the Picture' is prefaced by a photograph of Ellroy himself taken at the time of his mother's death. Ellroy explains: 'My wife found the picture in a newspaper archive. She bought a duplicate copy and framed it. I'm standing at George Krycki's workbench. Its 6/22/58 ... That picture was 36 years old. It defined my mother as a body on a road and a fount of literary inspiration. I couldn't separate the her from the me' (p.206). Ellroy explains how he internalised his mother's death (although he did not come to this conclusion until years later), developing an obsession

with other dead women in place of grief. Ellroy states that he had incestuous thoughts about his mother prior to her murder, and that after reading newspaper clippings about his mother's murder, his sexual curiosity and curiosity about the particular circumstances of her death became fused: 'I got a spooky feeling that it was all about sex'. He further explains that his obsession was fuelled by his discovery of and immersion in crime fiction: 'I wanted answers – but not at the expense of my mother's continued presence. I diverted my curiosity to kid's crime books'. Crime fiction, understood retrospectively as 'a literary formula preordained directly for *me*', allowed him to 'remember and forget in equal measure ... blessedly unaware of the internal dynamic that made them so seductive' (p.95).

Ellroy goes on to describe how he developed a voyeuristic interest in real-life crimes that shared some similarity, real or imagined, to his mother's murder: 'CRIME linked my worlds – inside and outside. Crime was clandestine sex and the random desecration of women' (p.115). Triggered by a resemblance between his mother and a photograph of the victim, Elizabeth Short, Ellroy writes that he became fixated upon the famous unsolved Black Dahlia murder: 'Betty Short became my obsession. And my symbiotic stand-in for Geneva Hilliker Ellroy' (p.103). His preadolescent fantasies involving the Black Dahlia, according to Ellroy, invariably took this form: 'I rescued Betty Short and became her lover. I saved her from a life of promiscuity. I tracked down her killer and executed him' (p.104). Through adopting the persona of the Black Dahlia's lover, Ellroy is able to figuratively prevent her death:

My one great hero was myself, transformed. I mastered marksmanship, judo and complex musical instruments in a microsecond. I was a detective – who just happened to be a violin and piano virtuoso. I rescued the Black Dahlia. I zoomed around in sports cars and bright red Fokker triplanes. My fantasies were richly anachronistic.

And sex saturated.

Jean Ellroy-type women craved me. I took 40-ish redheads glimpsed on the street and gave them my mother's body (p.111).

By imagining himself as the hero of his crime fantasies, Ellroy also attempts to deny his mother's death, to bring her back to life. After his father died when Ellroy was seventeen, such fantasies became the only constant in Ellroy's increasingly self-destructive, peripatetic lifestyle. Describing a drug-enhanced masturbatory fantasy that he had when he was twenty-one, 'just that transgressive and worthy of divine intervention' (p.149), Ellroy writes

It was '58. My mother didn't die in El Monte. She wasn't a drunk. She loved me woman to man.

We made love. I smelled her perfume and cigarette breath. Her amputated nipple thrilled me.

I brushed her hair out of her eyes and told her I loved her. My tenderness made her cry.

It was the most impassioned and loving story I'd ever perpetuated. It left me ashamed and horrified of what I had inside me.

I tried to live the story again. My mind wouldn't let me. All the dope in the world couldn't bring the redhead back (p.144).

What Ellroy asserts as ultimately transgressive is not merely that he had incestuous fantasies about his mother but that he understands these fantasies to be love. As a stand in for the real thing, as Ellroy explicitly states, there is no apparent discontinuity between this affirmation of love for his mother and his romanticised obsession with other dead women as the expression of this love. For Ellroy this obsession is paradigmatically structured, instantiating an interpenetration of past and future, in Ellroy's terms 'the time-lost/time-regained dynamic' (p.293), through a reworking of the same subject matter: the interlinking of sex and death and voyeurism.

'Part III: Stoner' is prefaced by a photograph of Bill Stoner, the retired homicide detective who helps Ellroy reinvestigate his mother's murder. When Ellroy obtained the police file on his mother's murder he discovered the

photograph of his mother's dead body, amongst others. He writes: 'I opened the last envelope. I saw my mother dead at Arroyo High School ... I saw the sash cord and stocking cinched around her neck. I saw the insect bites on her arms. I saw the dress she had on. I remembered it. I looked at the black & white photos and remembered that the dress was light and dark blue'. He continues: 'I went to bed early that night. I woke up way before dawn. I saw the pictures before I opened my eyes' (p.215). According to Ellroy, this discovery then motivated him to persuade Stoner to help him reinvestigate her murder, to discover the truth of his mother by learning about her death. Until this discovery, Ellroy writes that 'I knew her only in shame and loathing. I plundered her in a fever dream and denied my own message of yearning. I was afraid to resurrect her and love her body-and-soul' (p.154). Unable to uncover any substantial leads, Ellroy and Stoner organise for a re-enactment of her murder to be screened on the television show *Unsolved Mysteries*, with this becoming perhaps the most concrete expression of Ellroy's desire for a rapprochement with his mother through the re-living of the event of her death. But Ellroy and Stoner fail to uncover her murderer, the mystery remaining unsolved.

Ellroy gives an account of Stoner's personal history, focusing particularly upon his relationship to the victims whose death he investigated. Through Stoner, who becomes a role model for Ellroy ('Stoner was my teacher. I knew I was shaping my detective persona to his exact specifications' [p.265]), Ellroy then ostensibly gains an insight into the nature of his own obsession with his mother's death. Like Ellroy, Stoner is haunted by these murder victims: 'Dream logic distorted the details. Victims moved between crime scenes and displayed conflicting signs of death. They came to life sometimes ... The instant resurrections were unnerving. The women were supposed to stay dead. Murder brought them to him. His love began the moment they died'. As for Ellroy, 'dead women fired up his imagination', but significantly Stoner 'didn't let them run his life'. Stoner also tells Ellroy that 'Homicide detectives loved the movie *Laura*. A

cop gets obsessed with a murder victim and finds out that she's still alive. She's beautiful and mysterious. She falls in love with the cop. Most homicide cops were romantics' (pp.157-9). Tagged as a 'race of victims' (p.169), objects of male desire and of competition between men, women are the detective's *raison d'être* (a cold, mortifying code) or a theme as in Ellroy's own writing.

After looking at photographs of his mother contained in the police files, Ellroy states that he realised that she looked nothing like the person he remembered or a person that he ever knew: 'I memorized her body early on. I reworked her dimensions. I altered her contours to match my taste for lustily built women. I grew up with that nude vision and accepted it as fact. My real mother was a much different flesh-and-bones woman' (p.318). Ellroy explains that he then sought to learn more about her life. After subsequently contacting relatives that he had never met, Ellroy looks through family photographs of his mother: 'I came to the most stunning pictures ... My mother was sitting on and standing by a split-rail fence. She was 24 or 25 years old. She was wearing a plaid shirt, a windbreaker, jodhpurs and boots that laced up to the knees ... This was Geneva Hilliker. This was my mother with no male surname ... She was standing alone. She was defying all claims past and present' (p.340). It is one of these photographs with which Ellroy prefaces the final part of the text, an epiphanic image in which for Ellroy (as for Barthes) reality and truth coincide. After acknowledging the fictional nature of his obsession with his mother via his recognition of this 'true' image, Ellroy affirms that he is then able to resolve his obsession, to finally 'separate the her from the me' (p.206).

Ellroy's inclusion of the photograph of his mother's body on the title page of *My Dark Places* is integral to a reading of the text as a disturbingly fixated love story, 'with a beginning, an end, and a crisis in the middle' (Barthes)<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, Ellroy directly follows this photograph with a passage addressed to his mother, separated out from the body of the text, in which he asserts his desire 'to burn down the distance



raphy'?<sup>20</sup> To what extent perhaps should *My Dark Places* be read as an attempt at persuasion rather than a uncompromisingly honest confession of the origins and development of an illicit obsession, as Ellroy would seem to have us believe? And why does Ellroy insist that his shameful feelings towards his mother are, above all else, feelings of love in a romantic sense?

Before attempting to answer these questions, however, it is important to take into consideration the tradition of confession in Western autobiography. As the telling of the story of one's life, especially one's inner or hidden life, autobiography has traditionally been seen as a 'natural' way to talk about oneself. What separates out autobiography from fiction is precisely that an autobiography purports to be an account of the 'real' events and episodes that constitute the life of a 'real' person. For this reason, the reader is always implicitly required (and often explicitly invited) to make judgements as to the autobiographer's truthfulness. The reader's perception of the veracity of the autobiographical text is largely determined by his or her evaluation of its author as an ethical character. In turn, the autobiographer characteristically adopts strategies which serve to reinforce (or undermine, in some instances) the reader's perception of the autobiographer's 'natural' honesty. One such strategy in particular – the confession of shameful thoughts and episodes – is a key feature of Western autobiography, exemplified in Rousseau's *Confessions*.

As the autobiographer of his own shame, in marked contrast to his mother who has no control over Ellroy's representation of her life – 'I robbed your grave. I revealed you. I showed you in shameful moments' (p.355) as Ellroy himself acknowledges in the final passage – Ellroy's confessions indeed serve as an authenticating strategy throughout the text, reinforcing the supposed objectivity of the narrative. Ellroy applies the detective's methods of inquiry to himself, becoming a witness to and giving evidence of his own motives. He also owns up to a long history of dishonest behaviour, dating from his early childhood and defining his

adult relationships with women, apart from his wife (and mother). He recounts in detail how he lied to his parents from an early age; conned money out of his college fund from his Aunt Leoda as a teenager ('I snow-jobbed her regularly' [p.109]); became a petty thief; convinced the US army that he was insane so that he would be discharged ('I did it. I fooled them and duped them and made them believe me' [p.122]). Although such confessions may well be read as a guarantee of Ellroy's honesty, now, as a (penitent) autobiographer, it is nevertheless entirely plausible that the reader is being deceived by the appearance of honesty, that Ellroy is in fact still telling lies. For it is impossible to determine *when*, for example, Ellroy experienced his evident satisfaction in deceiving 'the entire U.S. army' (p.124): was it when this event actually occurred or was it some time in the future when Ellroy looked back upon and wrote about this event in the past tense?

The relationship between the past tense narrative and the discursive voice of the present in *My Dark Places* becomes inseparable from the question of the text's 'realism'. Ellroy appropriates the detective genre, reconstructing the circumstances of his mother's death from a past-tense third-person perspective. In the opening chapter, Ellroy describes the road next to which his mother's body was discovered:

King's Row was 15 feet wide. The sports field ran along the northern edge. A shrub-covered chain-link fence ran behind the southern curb line and a 3-foot-wide ivy thicket. The body was positioned 75 yards east of the Tyler-King's Row intersection.

The victim's left foot was two inches from the curb. Her weight had pressed down the ivy all around her (p.5).

As in this passage, the third-person narrative in *My Dark Places* is generally constructed as a series of details. Each carefully described detail is not only potentially a clue, but an independent event that instantiates a sense of place and time. One effect is that all of the individual perspectives in the text, including Ellroy's, appear to be a function of place and time. Ellroy further reinforces the idea that the past is potentially knowable from the objective perspective of the present by

interspersing the body of the narrative with excerpts from police evidence. Yet by including sometimes contradictory excerpts from witness statements and interviews ('Witnesses convinced themselves that certain things were true and stuck to their statements hell or high water' [p.264]), as well as his admitting the fallibility of his own memory, Ellroy undermines the objectivity of this perspective.

Language and memory for Ellroy, in his detective persona, combine together to form an inky stain on the reality of the past. Nonetheless, it is through writing that Ellroy attempts to master the indeterminacy of language in the service of truth. Ellroy describes the image of his mother's dead body: 'Her right arm was bent upward. Her right hand was resting a few inches above her head. Her left arm was bent at the elbow and draped across her midriff. Her left hand was clenched. Her legs were outstretched' (p.3). Through an accumulation of detail via his use of repetitive sentence structures, staccato-like repetition of pronouns, and a stripping back of any kind of adjectival or metaphorical equivocation, stylistic devices that characterise *My Dark Places* as a whole, Ellroy attempts to approximate or re-enact an authentic past. Ellroy again appears to contain the indeterminacy of language by treating language as a function of place and time. Nevertheless, the sequence of participles which Ellroy uses in this passage – bent, resting, bent, draped, clenched, outstretched – may also be read as indicative of the trauma of someone who repeatedly accepts and then denies that the photograph is of a corpse (rather than of someone who was merely resting). In this context, Ellroy's repetitive use of pronouns can also be understood as an attempt to deny his mother's death. Moreover, by denying her death in this way, Ellroy invokes her presence as corpse throughout the text, a correlative to his obsession with her death. As a direct consequence of this repetition, the narrative style of the text is curiously inert. Figuratively embodying the nature of Ellroy's obsession with his mother's death, the 'realism' of *My Dark Places* subsumes into itself the supposed objectivity of the detective's point of view.

In ultimately choosing to conceive of himself as a writer rather than a detective, Ellroy redefines his quest for 'truth'. From this point onwards, rather than trying to dig up 'courtroom evidence', he begins to search for the subjective truth that his mother represented for him: 'I wasn't chasing active suspects. I wasn't chasing facts to conform to any prestructured thesis. I was chasing knowledge. I was chasing my mother as truth' (p.323). It is with respect to Ellroy's redefinition of truth that the relationship between narrative and discourse in *My Dark Places* may be understood. For Ellroy not only intersperses his third-person narrative with excerpts from police evidence but also interrupts it with discourse, the past tense of narrative giving way to the present tense of reflection, as in this passage where he describes his adult relationships with (real-life) women:

I remade those women in the image of Jean Ellroy sans booze, promiscuity and murder. I was a tornado sweeping through their lives. I took sex and heard their stories. I told them my story. I tried to make a string of brief and more extended couplings work. I never tried as hard as the women I was with.

I learned things in the process. I never down-scaled my romantic expectations. I was a chickenshit cut-and-run guy and a heartbreaker with a convincingly soft facade. I took the ax to most of my affairs. I dug it when women got my number and grabbed the ax first. I never axed my romantic expectations. I never took a soft line on love. I felt bad about the women I fucked over. I went at women less ferociously over time. I learned to disguise my hunger. That hunger went straight into my books. They got more and more obsessive (p.208).

Just as Ellroy uses prosaic language and repetitive sentence structures in an attempt to approximate or recreate an authentic past in his third-person narrative, he likewise uses these stylistic devices when he writes in the first person in order to authenticate the self. Indeed, when Ellroy does write in the first person, particularly when he reflects upon shameful behaviour as in this passage, his use of these stylistic devices often becomes *more* pronounced than in his third person narrative. In this sense, there is very little discontinuity between the third person narrative and the discursive voice of

the present in *My Dark Places*. Rather, as Ellroy's use of enframing photographs and first person passages suggests, the third person narrative is ultimately subordinate to the discursive voice of the present. In attempting to discover the truth of his mother, whether it be that of the circumstances of her death or the subjective meaning of her life for him, Ellroy's focus is essentially self-referential.

In such passages, Ellroy asserts an image of himself as tough and uncompromisingly honest. By using emphatically active sentence constructions, Ellroy creates an impression that he is aware of and responsible for his (shameful) behaviour, the realism of the text overall becoming a defence against charges of narcissism. Ellroy stresses that he learnt over time to control his obsessive drives, the necessity for self-control being a vital dimension of his understanding of masculinity as a measure of moral and physical strength. Ellroy develops his view of what it means to be a man in relation to his perception of the standards set by his parents and peers. Repeatedly, Ellroy emphasises the weaknesses of his parents, particularly his father. Describing him as 'an ineffectual man' (p.84) and 'a weakling' (p.111), Ellroy explains that as a child he gradually lost respect for his father, becoming repulsed by him after he had a stroke: 'He used to be a virile bullshit artist. He became a soft child in a week's time' (p.119). It is only by imagining that his father killed his mother that Ellroy is then able to subvert his awareness of his 'father's passive nature' (p.109). Ellroy also recalls that his father 'thought I was weak, lazy, slothful, duplicitous, fanciful and painfully neurotic. He was unhip to the fact that I was his mirror image' (p.115). Echoing this description of himself, he writes that 'My mother portrayed my father as weak, slovenly, lazy, fanciful and duplicitous in small ways. My father had my mother categorized more concisely: She was a Lush and a Whore' (p.87). Ellroy further explains that he was an object of ridicule at school, his friends having 'a keen instinct for weakness' and being 'skilled at male one-upmanship' (pp.115-6). As a defence against being judged weak by his peers, Ellroy routinely engaged in anti-social behaviour, devising ways of shocking his predominantly

Jewish friends such as expressing admiration for the American Nazi party and imitating Nazi rhetoric.

Just as Ellroy identifies with his father, he also sees himself in his mother. Despite the fact that she 'fronted a stern rectitude' (p.80), his mother's death according to Ellroy was more or less a consequence of the fact that she 'craved weak and cheap men' and alcohol, a tendency towards profligacy which Ellroy states that he inherited from her (p.318). Although Ellroy explains that he found positive role models in crime fiction, casting himself as a hero in his crime fantasies, it is not until he meets Bill Stoner that he has a living positive role model with whom he can identify. Ellroy acts out his identification with Stoner by taking on a detective's persona, by shaping this persona to Stoner's 'exact specifications' (p.265). Most significantly, however, Ellroy writes that he and Stoner share similar insights into male behaviour:

Sloth and disorder could be sensual and seductive ... It came back to testosterone. You had to control. You had to assert. It got crazy and forced you to capitulate and surrender. Cheap pleasure was a damnable temptation. Booze and dope and random sex gave you back a cheap version of the power you set out to relinquish ... Crime was male energy displaced. Crime was a mass yearning for ecstatic surrender. Crime was romantic yearning gone bad ... Free will existed (pp.293-4).

Unlike his parents, whose lives according to Ellroy were defined by their desires for 'cheap pleasure', Ellroy represents himself as ultimately able to determine his own destiny, to prove himself to be a man through his writing. Through his relationship to Stoner, Ellroy rejects the model of masculinity that he found lacking in his father.

Barbara Johnson also suggests that 'any man's ... autobiography consists in the story of the difficulty of conforming to the standard of what a *man* should be' whereas the 'problem for the female autobiographer is to describe a difficulty in conforming to a female ideal which is largely a fantasy of the masculine, not the feminine, imagination'.<sup>21</sup> Johnson's use of the words 'standard' and 'fantasy'

suggests that there is a fundamental difference between the ways in which masculinity and femininity are culturally prescribed. Johnson implies that men believe that they should apply some quasi-objective measurement of masculinity to themselves, a belief that is inseparable from the idealisation of the autonomy of the individual underlying Western rationality. In contrast, femininity according to Johnson has been prescribed for women by men, with women cast in a relatively passive role in relation to the representation of femininity by this very fact. In making this distinction, Johnson draws upon the notion that the hierarchical dichotomy of active (subject) and passive (object) are tropes of power which historically have been used to assert an ideology of masculine superiority as 'natural', informing the construction of gender in language and literature.

Whether or not Johnson's generalisations hold true for all autobiographical texts written by men and women is debatable. It may be argued, for example, that writing about the 'self' – as a 'self' conscious of itself as extant in time, for instance, or as a 'self' that preferred, as Ellroy states that he did, hot dogs scorched on the stove-top to canned spaghetti for dinner as a child – will reflect the gender of the writing subject in many ways yet cannot be understood to be solely or irreducibly a function of gender. Still, Ellroy is clearly concerned in *My Dark Places* with the idea of what a man should be. Through his confessions of shame, Ellroy portrays his passage towards manhood as an active, even heroic, process; Ellroy's representation of his masculinity becoming inseparable from and even magnified by the 'realism' of the text.

Ellroy asserts himself as actively in control of his own destiny through his confessions of shame and the realism of the narrative style in *My Dark Places*. Yet Ellroy's representation of himself as a man of action appears to be markedly at odds with his representation of his domination by images of his mother and other dead women. For Ellroy's identification with his mother is to a large extent an identification with the passive, with what Ellroy understands to be her victimhood

and that of all women as a potential 'race of victims' (p.169). Ellroy's rhetoric of transgression is ultimately undermined by his representation of his domination by his mother's Image as something that happened to him over which he had no control. As a voyeur, notwithstanding the familiar implications of complicity inherent in the voyeur's perspective, Ellroy again adopts a passive role, at least in comparison to the perpetrators of the crimes with which he is obsessed. Alternatively, Ellroy's relating of episodes of shame in *My Dark Places*, like that of Rousseau in his *Confessions*, can be read as an expression of a fear of maternal omnipotence and the need to deny identification with his mother and to renounce her as a forbidden sexual object. Indeed, by figuratively bringing his mother back to life through his writing, Ellroy inscribes her absence as object.

By resurrecting his mother as an idealised Image in *My Dark Places* ('I pledged my devotion on blind faith' [p.216]), Ellroy not only inscribes the absence of his mother as object, but also justifies a fantasy that his mother has posthumously endorsed his decision to become a writer. 'I will justify it all in the name of the obsessive life you gave me', writes Ellroy in the final passage of the text (p.355). Initially the 'gift' that enabled Ellroy to live permanently with his father, her death becomes the gift that 'assumed its final form in language' (p.206). In a pragmatic sense, when faced with such loss, it is commonplace for people to try to put their lives in a proper perspective. Yet Ellroy represents his mother's death as a more or less happy martyrdom, exemplified by his choice of the final photograph in Part IV, through which she bestowed upon him both his obsessive need and subsequent ability to write. Although Ellroy's mother clearly has no control over his representation of her life or death in the text, Ellroy nonetheless strives to preserve his mother's separateness and difference as an autonomous individual through his inclusion of this photograph, which significantly shows her at a time in her life before she had a 'male surname' (p.320). His mother's importance as a fictional subject or a theme in Ellroy's writing, and thereby

his salvation or destiny as a writer, is only guaranteed by the ascendancy of her Image, unique in its difference.

Ellroy writes that after years of substance abuse, he was admitted to hospital at the age of twenty-seven with an abscess on his lung and 'post-alcohol brain syndrome'. He explains that he subsequently feared that he would suffer permanent brain malfunctions: 'Those few insane hours summarized my life. The horror rendered everything that went before it irrelevant. I reprised the horror all my waking hours. I couldn't let it go. I wasn't telling myself a cautionary tale or gloating over my survival. I was simply replaying the moments my entire life had worked toward' (p.147). Where his mother's death is represented by Ellroy as the formative event in his life, his fear that he would become permanently insane is represented as equally definitive in retrospect. Ellroy's fear that he may become incapacitated like his father is the crisis that is pivotal to a reading of *My Dark Places* as a love story. For Ellroy, his mother's death and fear of loss of the self are inextricably linked, his mother's death anticipating his own. Just as Ellroy's obsession with his mother may be understood as an attempt to deny her death and overcome the divisiveness of time, Ellroy's resurrection of his mother as an idealised Image is likewise a means of deferring his own loss of self in the present as a consequence of his identification with her death and a denial of the inevitability of his own future death.

Yet it is by defining himself as passive in relation to his mother as loved object that Ellroy is able to actively reinvent himself. Although understood rationally by Ellroy as a random act of violence, his paradoxicalisation of his mother's murder as *destiny* absolves him of all responsibility for his choice of loved object, assigning him a passive role. By enframing the text as a love story, Ellroy thereby imposes an overarching pattern upon his life: the years which he spent as an alcoholic and drug addict along with his history of dishonest behaviour are represented by Ellroy, to a large extent, as both a consequence and an expression of his denial of the truth of his feelings towards his mother. Ellroy's

transgressive feelings for his mother, precipitated and sanctified by an external force beyond his control, in fact become a justification for his passivity (his weakness).

As an act of the imagination, Ellroy's resurrection of his mother as an idealised Image is synonymous with the rebirth of Ellroy as a writer; the truth of this Image of his mother being inseparable from his privileging of writing – or more precisely, of *being* a writer – as an idealised form of self-determination. Ellroy conceives of the imagination as a visionary, transcendent and liberating power in the Romantic tradition, maintaining that he became increasingly able to control his destiny by tapping into his own imaginative powers: 'Free time meant time to dream and cultivate my sense of potent destiny' (p.127). For Ellroy, imagination and destiny are, however, ultimately one and the same. Insofar as Ellroy equates language with love, the 'ending' of *My Dark Places* – Ellroy's reinvention of himself as a writer – is not only a means of resolving his obsession with his mother but may also be read as a 'beginning'. Indeed, through representing his obsession with his mother and its resolution in terms of an inversion of the Christian myth of death (sacrifice), resurrection, and finally salvation, Ellroy asserts himself as imaginatively able to transcend measurable time and space, to move freely between the past and present, the inside/outside of the text.

The notion that the ideological metaphors inherent in Johnson's definitions of the problems that male and female autobiographers variously face are 'natural' is undermined by Ellroy's insistence that his transgressive feelings toward his mother are love in a romantic sense. As Barthes suggests in *A Lover's Discourse*, 'in any man who utters the other's absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized. A man is not feminized because he is inverted but because he is in love'.<sup>22</sup> The 'something feminine' to which Barthes refers is the passivity of the lover in relation to the other's absence. In the case of *My Dark Places*, this waiting is played out through Ellroy's obsession with other dead women.

Although Ellroy often defines masculinity and femininity in terms of a hierarchical dichotomy of active (subject) and passive (object), equating passivity with weakness or victimhood, the stability of these definitions is eroded by his enframing of the text as a love story, the relationship between the two terms becoming one of shifting interdependency.

It is important to note that recent feminist theory in particular has to a large extent rejected such a rigid conceptualisation of gender and power. On the one hand, Ellroy implies that such a view of power as a commodity that a group of people automatically possess on the basis of gender is limiting and reductive by enframing the text as a love story. Yet on the other, in taking on the role of interpreter of his own writing, Ellroy draws on this dichotomised model of gender, as a way of thinking that is deeply embedded in Western culture, in order to explicate the psychosexual origins of the thematics of his writing. For this reason, Ellroy not only invites judgement of himself as an ethical character through his confessions of shame, but also sets himself up to be evaluated as critic of his writing. In *My Dark Places* there is a tension between what may be regarded as the poetic or imaginative truths of the text as *writing*, and Ellroy's representation of the truth of his mother for him – in other words, his account of the thematics of his writing, the origins of which are rooted in his relationship with his mother. Despite Ellroy's insistence upon the transgressive nature of his writing, this is not reflected in his conceptualisation of his writing practice. By conflating being a writer with writing itself, Ellroy subscribes to the traditional view of the author which has been challenged by theorists such as Barthes.

As an authenticating strategy, Ellroy's insistence that his feelings towards his mother are love in a romantic sense serves a dual function. The transgressive nature of his feelings for his mother marks Ellroy out as different, his confessions as heroic. Through his confessions of shame in which the hardboiled 'realism' of the narrative often becomes particularly accentuated, Ellroy proselytises the

reader, attempting to inculcate a belief in his uncompromising honesty. Consequently, the evidential power of the photographic images which Ellroy includes in *My Dark Places* does not simply lie in the fact that they attest to reality, prior to and outside the text. As the locus of an interpenetration of past and present in which reality and subjective truth coincide, the sequence of photographic images that Ellroy uses to enframe the text as a love story bears an iconographic significance that Ellroy, as the expert on himself, would appear to be most qualified to interpret. Yet by enframing the text as a love story, Ellroy then makes it impossible for the reader to evaluate his truthfulness without looking *outside* the text since love-as-passion is by definition a form of closed self-referentiality that resists assimilation into any other interpretative system. In both instances, the efficacy of this strategy depends upon the fact that Ellroy admits little or no discontinuity between the self and its representation.

#### NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Josh Cohen, 'James Ellroy, Los Angeles and the Spectacular Crisis of Masculinity' in *Criminal Proceedings*, ed. Peter Messant (London: Pluto Press, 1997), and D. S. Neff, 'Anoedipal fiction: schizoanalysis and 'The Black Dahlia'' in *Poetics Today* 18:3 (Fall 1997) p.301 for accounts of the relationship between masculine identity and the violence of urban culture in *The Black Dahlia*.
- 2 *My Dark Places* was one of the winners of Salon's 1996 Best Books of the Year commendation. In a tie-in interview promoting *My Dark Places* entitled 'Oedipus Wreck', Ellroy relates how he also exploited his mother's murder in order to attract publicity for *Clandestine* and *The Black Dahlia*. See the website <http://www.salon.com/dec96/interview961209.html>. Journalists and reviewers have also emphasised the influence of the murder of Ellroy's mother on his writing. See, for example, Steve Dougherty, 'The nightmare of his mother's murder is echoed in James Ellroy's grisly new novel, *The Black Dahlia*' in *People's Weekly* 28:24 (December 14, 1987), p.112; Steve Biosson, 'James Ellroy: Crossing the Dividing Line' in *Writer's Digest* 76:7 (July, 1996), p.26; Bruce Jay Friedman, 'Unsolved Mystery' in *The New York Times Book Review*

- (November 24, 1996), p.11; Paul Gray, 'A Death in the Writer's Family' in *Time* 148:24 (November 25, 1996); Kim Hubbard and Stanley Young, 'Telltale Heart: A Writer Confronts His Murdered Mother's Ghost' in *People's Weekly* 46:22 (November 25, 1996), p.93.
- 3 James Ellroy, *Clandestine* (London: Arrow Books, 1996), introduction. Although *Clandestine* was originally published in the U.S. in 1982, Ellroy subsequently added this introduction to the Arrow Books edition.
  - 4 James Ellroy, *The Black Dahlia* (London: Arrow Books, 1987), preface. The body of Elizabeth Short, a.k.a. The Black Dahlia, was found disembowelled and severed at the waist in a vacant lot in Los Angeles in 1949. Although Elizabeth Short's murderer was never found, Ellroy does 'solve' the crime in *The Black Dahlia*.
  - 5 James Ellroy, *My Dark Places* (London: Century Books, 1996), p.207.
  - 6 Susan Sontag, 'Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes' in *A Roland Barthes Reader* (London: Vintage, 1993), p.xxxv.
  - 7 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 1993), p.3. Subsequent references to this text will be included in the body of the article.
  - 8 Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), p.357.
  - 9 See the interview 'From Taste to Ecstasy', *The Grain of the Voice*, p.352.
  - 10 *The Grain of the Voice*, p.352.
  - 11 *The Grain of the Voice*, p.358.
  - 12 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p.30.
  - 13 *A Roland Barthes Reader*, p.xix.
  - 14 *The Grain of the Voice*, p.352.
  - 15 *The Grain of the Voice*, p.356; 358.
  - 16 *A Lover's Discourse*, p.194.
  - 17 *A Lover's Discourse*, pp.229-30.
  - 18 *My Dark Places*, p.115. All subsequent references to Ellroy's autobiography will appear in the body of the article.
  - 19 *The Grain of the Voice*, p.286.

20 Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p.146.

21 *A World of Difference*, p.154.

22 *A Lover's Discourse*, p.14.