**“There's a feeling I get when I look to the West...” - The Gothic Topography of Bret Easton Ellis’ *Less Than Zero***

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In American generational novels there is frequently a feeling that the West represents the end of the road, a *non plus ultra* site for the young protagonist, or their last shot at glory and redemption. In Bret Easton Ellis’ debut novel from 1984, *Less Than Zero*, the inscriptions of the Western topography are complicated by several circumstances.

First, the protagonist Clay is actually from Los Angeles (“West of the West,” as Theodore Roosevelt once remarked about the state of California as a whole), but when we encounter him at the novel’s start he is freshly returned from his first year of Ivy League college in the East. He thus has an opportunity for the first time to see the West from an outsider’s perspective, having become contaminated with the dirt and age of the East during his time away.

Second, the novel clearly represents the city of Los Angeles as a site of voidance of meaning and sense, reversing the mythology of the traditional West as the cradle of manhood, especially by depicting Clay’s friends as homosexuals and perverts. Thus the epigraph from Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven”, which the novel uses and which I have appropriated for my title, is shown to be highly ironic: Clay’s return to the West evokes no feelings in him other than spleen and nausea.

Third, the only emotionally charged elements of the novel treat Clay’s childhood and early teenage memories, which center on his interactions with his family in their summerhouse in the Californian desert (Palm Springs, in other words actually east of LA). Here he suffers a drawn-out loss of innocence as his family disintegrates. These scenes are further marked as special by being printed in italics, and their tonality is different from the rest of the novel by being redolent with Gothic elements, which however slowly invade the city-scape of L.A. itself as the novel progresses and Clay’s adult moral *déroute* intensifies.

I therefore propose to read the novel as a blank *Bildungsroman*, which borrows from a series of conventions – part Gothic, part Western – to show the moral vacuity of the 1980s and its yuppie generation, whose own borrowings and appropriations have left them with less than zero ethical capital on their moral bank accounts.

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In their seminal book on the writers of the so-called Blank Generation writers of the mid-1980s, Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney were the first critics to engage with authors such as Easton Ellis. Young writes specifically about the literary topography of Ellis’ early work:

The aggressive territoriality of Ellis' books suggests that geography and place, once a fictional hinterland for critics to interpret as they might, have gradually come to dictate the themes and structure of the novel, leaving emotional issues to become amorphous, to function as background. (Young & Caveney, 1992:22-23)

The very first chapter of *Less Than Zero* sets the tone of representation of place by ascribing a set of values to the two American coasts. Its protagonist Clay, an aptly named malleable young man, has just arrived from New Hampshire, and the trip has been “rough” (Ellis, 1985:9), which has left visible signs on Clay's appearance, which is altogether too Eastern for California. The signs are “the mud that had splattered the legs of my jeans, which felt kind of cold and loose, earlier that day at an airport in New Hampshire” (9); “the stain on the arm of the wrinkled, damp shirt I wear, a shirt which had looked fresh and clean this morning” (9); and “the tear on the neck of my gray argyle vest, which seems vaguely more eastern than before, next to Blair's clean tight jeans and her pale-blue T-shirt.” (9) Thus the East is associated with dirt, and wear and tear, whereas the West is indexed through Blair, his ex-girl friend, as clean and fresh. In a sense the East thus represents something old and the West something new, mirroring a traditional Europe versus America dichotomy found in American letters from the days of Washington Irving and onwards.

Immediately before page 9, we have read the two epigraphs to *Less Than Zero*, one of which I have already quoted: “There’s a feeling I get, when I look to the west” Coupled with the other song quote, from L.A. band X (whose guitarist and vocalist Dave Alvin incidentally later released an album entitled *West of the West*), we get a notion of what that “feeling” might be, but also a notion that the feeling will not stay the same: “This is the game that moves as you play” (5, unpaginated paratext). This indicates that the events within the book may be of the nature of a game being played by the characters, or possibly between the author and his readers. A game that will also play with whatever feelings we might have or have had about “the West”.

Young notes other differences figured under Ellis’ metaphor of East and West coast(s):

From the first page of the book, in addition to the note of fear, a tension, a *difference*, is established between the East and West coasts of America. The East signifies Education - Clay's college is implicitly superior to Blair's attendance at U. S. C. – “the University of Spoiled Children.” The East is pallid, intellectual and sloppy. (Young & Caveney, 1992:27-28)

California, and Los Angeles in particular, is alternatively figured as less formal in its dealings with social interaction and institutions such as marriage, educational facilities, the law etc. The West seems serious about only one thing: consumption of commodities. Young sums up about the informal surface of California:

The flip throwaway tone of Californian cool is already all-pervasive and this adds intriguing depths to the East/West dichotomy. Here, in California, in the decadent sub-tropical heat the social tone is enforcedly one of rigid cool. It is in the cold East, we infer, that there is the heat of intellectual debate, of passionate engagement. (28)

Thus the differences between coasts can be reduced to very simple dichotomies in the form of colour metaphors (pale versus tanned) and metaphors of heat and cold/cool, for intellect versus mannerisms. This set of dichotomies is, however, only temporarily sustainable, as Clay becomes more Californian in appearance as the novel progresses, and the tanned cool of the ‘native’ Californians is revealed, as artificial and (what else) only skin-deep.

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Clay is dislocated at the novel’s beginning, since he has barely adapted to the transition to Eastern mores and sun-level before he has to re-reinvent himself in order to spend a pleasurable Christmas partying in L.A. Everything seems strange and ominous to him, and Los Angeles, and its plethora of signs, evokes a positively gothic shudder in him. His former girlfriend, Blair, meets him, but they fail to connect emotionally during Clay's stay, although the novel furnishes us with plentiful flashback scenes to earlier and somewhat happier days of their relationship. Clay also has extreme difficulties re-connecting with other old friends in his peer group, since he cannot remember their faces and telephone numbers, and rarely can reach them anyway. He is particularly interested in hooking up with Julian, his former best friend, who unknown to Clay, has lapsed into a deep dependence on drugs and therefore is forced to live as a male prostitute to finance his habit. In general terms Clay drifts from party to party, from sexual encounter to sexual encounter, and witnessing one depraved and criminal act after another during his holiday. In the end he makes an effort to shake off the callousness and inhumanity of his friends' lives and take a moral stand against them, but he never manages to verbalize his disgust with them, although he decides to change his plans again and actually go back to college for another term.

The cityscape is frightening to Clay, since strangers may attempt to interact with you, since coyotes, lizards or phantom Indians (206) may invade it, since houses may collapse (114), since you might drive around and suddenly be lost in it (as Clay confesses to his psychiatrist (122)), since cars never really take you anywhere outside the cityscape, except into the desert, but they crash and burn sometimes, and kill or maim people (195), and especially since messages may force themselves upon you and interfere with your sanity.

Clay has a propensity for seeing messages directed specifically at him, where none may actually be there. He reads bathroom walls and finds cries for help (120) that seem addressed to him, and messages involving his particular friends, especially Julian. ("Julian gives great head. And is dead." (137)) The messages are a strange mix of slander and truth, of threat and prophecy, since Julian actually is a prostitute and "gives head", and actually will end up "dead". Clearly Clay's conscience is making him the receiver of these random messages which he then promptly over­interprets. That he thinks that they are all addressed to him is a clear symptom of his narcissism and solipsism, which eventually costs him the use of language to compose any ethical program for himself.

Other messages may come through the TV, through images, commercials and other channels forcing their way into the novel's diction and into the protagonist's mind where they fuse together into a paralyzing image of the terror of the world of Los Angeles and its inhabitants.

The very first symbolic message that Clay is exposed to is given to him in casual conversation when Blair picks him up at the airport: "People are afraid to merge on freeways in Los Angeles" (9) Clay first reports the sentence as "the first thing I hear when I come back to the city" (9), but then the sentence is repeated in direct speech and attributed to Blair. Thus the agency of prophetess is ascribed to her and her role in Clay's life subtly underscored, though Clay has a problem acknowledging to himself her importance (The prophetess/divinity role is underpinned by the note previously referred to (122)).

Clay's extreme preoccupation with the sentence is further seen in his comparisons between this sentence and other sentences and observations: "All it comes down to is that I'm a boy coming home for a month and meeting someone whom I haven't seen for four months and people are afraid to merge." (9-10) This is the third occurrence of the sentence, which is rapidly becoming mantra-like, but a mantra of fear rather than solace. People are afraid of merging sexually and emotionally, and they prefer mutual isolation. The breathless and certainly comma-less summation of what it "all comes down to," indicates that Clay is hurtling towards some end, some apocalypse of loneliness which will end in his having to make some tough choices if he is to live through the merging fear.

Another casual remark, overheard by Clay, this time spoken by one of his cynical little sisters, also insinuates itself into his mind and takes on a larger, re-contexted meaning. His sister jokingly says about a boy "'I wonder if he's for sale'" (23), and the phrase comes back to haunt him in the next scene where a man keeps staring at him in a restaurant. Clay thinks: "All I can think is either he doesn't see me or I'm not here. I don't know why I think that. People are afraid to merge. *Wonder if he's for sale.*" [Ellis' italics] (26) This weaves together the two first micro-thematics: Everybody is isolated in their own being, everybody is potentially an object for sale. If the gaze dwells upon you for any prolonged time, it must therefore mean either that you are being sized up for valuation, or that you do not exist. This also initiates another symptom of Clay's malaise, a profound doubt of his own ontological status. Does he exist, is he going anywhere, do things mean anything, or less than zero?

This new symptom of the ontological fear is expressed in his interpretation of a random, contextless message that imposes itself upon Clay as he is driving through the city in the early morning. Suddenly there is "a billboard that I don't remember seeing and I look up at it. All it says is 'Disappear Here' and even though it's probably an ad for some resort, it still freaks me out a little and I step on the gas real hard" (38). These three thematic tics finally all pile together in Clay's mind when he hits an all-time Christmas low during the family dinner he has to endure ("I hope I'll never have to do this again" (67)). The melt-down looks like this:

I think about Blair alone in her bed stroking that stupid black cat and the billboard that says, 'Disappear Here' and Julian's eyes and wonder if he's for sale and people are afraid to merge and the way the pool at night looks, the lighted water, glowing in the backyard. (66)

After this pile-up of anxiety (the symptoms are rattled off in the same comma-less fashion as we saw before) Clay has some peace from his fear mantras, but partly this is due to his escalating drug use and other sense-deadening activities. This last coupling of Julian's behaviour with the question of whether he is for sale, however, signals the denouement for Clay *vis-à-vis* Julian's true nature and complete *déroute*. Clay ends up accompanying Julian on a visit to a customer and tells himself: "That I want to see if things like this can actually happen [...] that I want to see the worst." (172) Here is what he sees:

I light a cigarette.

The man rolls Julian over.

*Wonder if he's for sale.* [Ellis' italics]

I don't close my eyes.

You can disappear here without knowing it. (176)

This finally exorcises some of the mantra from Clay's mind. He has seen the worst, and in the future he can walk away from things like the rape of the twelve-year-old girl without having to see it. He has looked directly at a merging of sorts. He has had his question answered about who is for sale. He knows the risk involved in disappearing here.

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We have previously discussed Ellis' *Less Than Zero* in terms of its representations of East and West, where we concluded that these images emptied themselves of specificity, and that what was an index of one thing, could rapidly either become an index of the opposite, or simply be voided of stable signification. There are, however, whole sections of the novel that are narrated differently, and which also have a more stable signification structure, partly because they refer to past events narrated in flashback, partly because they deal with a prelapsarian subject matter related to family life and happiness. These scenes are almost all set in the desert.

We are quite far into the novel, before we encounter the first such scene. It is marked quite clearly as distinct from the rest of the narrative, both because of the typeface which is suddenly italicized, and of course because the narration changes to simple past tense. The story that unfolds in this first section is told as a tentative memoir of Clay's and incidentally we are given information about his life before his family fell apart. Clay tries to probe into his motive for going to the old family house in the Palm Springs desert, which is now abandoned, but as is not unusual for him he has problems fixing on any epistemology whatsoever, so the section ends with the usual: "I don't know." (Ellis, 1985:44) However, it is clear to the reader that Clay has come in a moment of crisis that goes deeper than nostalgia, when he has to "sit down in my school uniform on the steps of the empty pool and cry." (44) The significance of this show of emotion, which Clay in the present stream of the novel would be quite incapable of, is as yet unclear to the reader. The next Palm Springs instalment lies further back in time and is a representation of the height of every family idyll: Christmas.

The problem is that all the traditional Christmas indices are absent from Clay's recollections of the season, which is exclusively focused on how hot it would be there during the holiday. The desert becomes nightmarish because of the heat and takes on Gothic and uncanny features, such as going deadly quiet and having “weird white clouds [that] would drift slowly through the sky and disappear at dawn.” (69) Clay's grandfather has “heard strange things at night” (70), but cannot explain himself more closely. The dog “would look freaked out, its eyes wide, panting, shaking” (70). All in all Clay becomes more and more paranoid as the desert seems more malevolent and full of signs that cannot be interpreted properly.

All the while the desert becomes more threatening to the humans, sending rattle snakes to die in the swimming pool and producing "eerie" effects on Clay who locks himself up in the house, “listening to the strange desert wind moan outside my window.” (138) Thus Clay and his family are in fugue from the encroaching desert which, through the Gothic vocabulary and symbols, is becoming associated with death, waiting to penetrate the family's home. The scenes come faster and faster, while getting briefer, and all refer to death, and reflect the declining health of Clay's grandmother. Finally, Clay flashes back to the last day the family spends together in Palm Springs, and ends the italicized scene by narrating her death, and his memories of her. Because her death comes almost as a result of the family leaving Palm Springs, for Clay the association of the desert and the house with his grandmother remains active, and this finally explains the crying scene in the first flashback.

After that there are no flashbacks until the novel's end, until one final scene set on the night before he leaves for college, by which time the flashbacks have been brought as close to the present time as they will get. Clay tries to postpone the parting with Blair by inviting her to Palm Springs with him, but she refuses to come. The parting is very flat, emotionally, and as it turns out, the two will not talk again until those events take place that begin the narration of the novel. Thus Clay returns again and again to the locus of what vestige of family happiness and love he has had in his teenhood and young adult life, but he cannot manage to inject his beloved into a Palm Springs setting, and the desert overwhelmingly signals a sequence of *memento mori* to Clay.

In *Less Than Zero*, the desert is a harbinger of death, but also of nature encroaching on man-made things and relationships, reminding the humans that they cannot master everything, in fact that their bubble lives in the desert behind windows and in air-conditioned cars is a short-lived postponement of inevitable decay. Things fall apart, even down in the desert.

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In conclusion, we can infer that Ellis never allows Clay to become a rounded character, nor lets his development go very far. Despite the vague indications that Clay does learn something from his Christmas season in L.A. Hell, and the fact that his *déroute* through snuff movies, voyeurism and male prostitution, the finding of corpses, and finally the offered and declined rape of a minor is instructive enough for him to walk away from this path of destruction, he never finds a set of positive values instead, so his *Bildung* is left incomplete at the end of this novel. In the sequel, *Imperial Bedrooms*, which Ellis published in 2010, we learn that Clay has become a character as bad as, or possibly even worse than any of his former friends, and our long harbored suspicions that Ellis is a cultural pessimist as regards his own generation’s accomplishments are fully borne out by this harrowing update of Clay’s life story.

References:

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