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Invisible Monsters and Palahniuk's Perverse Sublime

Andrew Slade

The Sublime is an idea belonging to self-preservation.

—EDMUND BURKE

Introduction: Searching for identity

Invisible Monsters is a novel about the search for identities—sexual, family, gender, social—that is never at ease with the search. The characters in the novel wish to put an end to the need to search for an identity and to draw to a close the need and urge to represent themselves to others. These are characters who wish to be what and who they are without apology or argument but are ill-equipped to do so. They cannot find the means by and through which to put the seeking to an end. It may be tempting to diagnose them as if they were people who could sit on the couch—if they wanted to—as living in fear and denial as addicts chasing a sense of belonging that addiction pretends to offer but fails to make good on. It might be tempting to figure out what is wrong with them as if therapy is what they need and what the novel intends. It might be tempting to do as Brandy Alexander pleads and to seek to live a life beyond labels and definition, beyond the claims of identity and family, of the law and

the troubles of living a life of desire in a world that demands that we conform and renounce our most intimate desires. These characters cannot, for whatever reasons, be as they are without anxiety.

Palahniuk's novel is no morality play in which the answers to human problems are presumed. Instead, the novel can show the drama and great effort involved in the struggle to accept the identities we forge for ourselves—identities that are distinct from those childhood influences that we idealize, idolize, abhor, or destroy with an energy and ambivalence that can be frightening to recall. The central characters in the novel seek identities to live out in the moment. At the same time, they seek constantly to be someone other than they are. None of the characters in *Invisible Monsters* wants to be who they are. All of them struggle with the relationships that suggest to them a fixed and stable identity. The novel's narrator, Shannon McFarland, is a daughter and a sister by virtue of her position in a family. While such a basic observation might seem too simple to mention, Palahniuk uses these basic relations as rigid designators against which his narrator and character can fight for a sense of authentic existence apart from those fixed points that she believes define her. The same can be said about her parents—who are minor figures in the novel—and her brother, Shane, who appears as Brandy Alexander.

Freud, Lacan, identity formation, and the family

In his essay, "Family Romances" (1909), Freud describes the process of coming into our identities as a romance. No romance is without drama or pain where moments of sentimentality brush up against the resistances of lived experience and the desires of others. The romance is a family affair: the struggles between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, and the murderous wishes of the children against everyone even while the same children, sweet and tender and angelic, caress their mothers, fathers, and brothers and sisters. Extra-familial relations also fuel the drama of the romance. Children will seek models other than their parents to test their own possibilities and to try out different ways of being in relation to themselves and others. The romance implies a level of

experimentation and imaginative work that leads us to achieve an identity. For Freud, this achievement is an accomplishment. How can it be otherwise with so many other desires seeking to control and shape us as we manage to break away for ourselves? *Invisible Monsters* can be understood as a reinterpretation of the family romance in as much as it is a novel about the struggle to articulate an authentic identity.

In his most famous essay, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" (1936, 1949), Jacques Lacan characterizes the process of acquiring a specular, imaginary ego distinct from the other as the effect of a drama. Lacan writes that:

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from the fragmented image of the body to what I will call an "orthopaedic" form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure. (78)

The acquisition of the imaginary ego is a struggle from a position of insufficiency to one of anticipation, that is, from dependence on the other to the threshold of a distinct identity to an identity as "armor" that the subject puts on. The distinct specular identity that Lacan describes—and which has been widely cited and commented upon—implies an ambivalence of defense and aggression. The distinct specular ego has a protective function. It protects us from attacks from without and it keeps the fantasies of our interior life from getting too far away from us. The specular identity that Lacan describes is like a shell. Palahniuk's characters are on the lookout for a substance of identity that is not an alienated identity. They are looking for what belongs essentially to the interior of the shell.

Neither Freud nor Lacan suggest that there is an essential character in the drama of the family romance or as the effect of the mirror stage. No authentic being is inside that armor that could resolve the conflicts of an alienated ego. The drama of the assumption of identity is a struggle fraught with conflict and ambivalence. How can we hate, as we all do at particular moments, those we most cherish and most love? How can those who protect us, hold us so

dear that we never want to be without them become objects that we blame, deride, detest, despise, and wish to be without? What parent has not wished, however secretly, to be childless? If, at one moment or another, you do not want to kill your mother, you have got a problem. If your father does not disgust you, get to therapy. If you are unlucky enough to have a brother or a sister, there are ways around that injustice too. Every time my students say that their brother or sister is their best friend, their closest ally, they forget the most banal cliché about friends and enemies and who you should keep close to you. If you are that close, I ask, what is the reason for it? What is it about your friends that you need to keep them so close? Freud and Lacan knew about the fantasies that form the core of our desires for love and belonging and they knew that even the most warm, sentimental, nostalgic feelings have a deep and violent side to them as well. They knew that our most tender love could become, sometimes without warning to ourselves or others, the most violent and aggressive desire. Children love their mothers and fathers and also, sometimes often and often with great guilt, wish to kill them. The younger child may idealize the older ones and secretly—sometimes not so secretly—want them dead. The older child wishes the younger one to disappear, to go away, or to die. Juliet Mitchell has recently emphasized the importance of the brother or sister in psychoanalytical accounts of the family and identity. While much psychoanalytical theory focuses on the vertically oriented, intergenerational conflict, in her book *Siblings: Sex and Violence* (2003) Mitchell reflects on how the relations between brothers and sisters may fuel conflict in the formation of identities. Fantasies about parents and siblings share the quality of ambivalence.

The ambivalence of the fantasies that constitute family relations form the structure on which we assume our identities as the armor we wear to protect us. The characters in *Invisible Monsters* suffer from the ambivalent desire that emerges from the formation of identities in the standard course of family life. The family in Palahniuk's book is in many ways a stereotype of what passes as the conventional, American family—two parents and two children, a boy and a girl, Shane and Shannon McFarland. Shannon is beautiful and becomes a model—Shane commits the ultimate crime against the family and against the father by transitioning his identity and body from male to female. The stereotypical family serves as a stable structure against

which Shannon and Shane—Brandy Alexander—revolt. Palahniuk uses the stable family structure as a mechanism to work through the fluidity of identity that the novel displays and which his work as a whole tends to demonstrate. Flux and fluidity are only visible upon a stable ground. The family functions as that stable ground that allows him to illustrate the experimentation with identity that Shannon comes to admire in her brother and Brandy Alexander.

Shane becomes Brandy and seeks an identity beyond the limits of the one given to him by his location in the constellation of Mom, Dad, and Shannon. Shane is not transgender or transsexual as an authentic expression of identity. He does not feel that conflict between his most intimate sensibility and his body that characterizes the experience of many trans people. Shane becomes trans as a way to deny the reality of his family life and the identity assigned to him in that structure as son and older brother. Sex reassignment surgery does not give him an authentic bodily experience that his birth denied him, rather it gives him a chance to become free from all of those expectations that the family, commanded by the father and enforced by the mother, forces on to all of us. In this novel, an experience of authenticity is central to freedom and the function of father and the family seem to be the chief obstacles to the access to that authentic existence. “Brandy says, ‘Don’t you see? Because we’re so trained to do life the right way. *To not make mistakes.*’ Brandy says, ‘I figure, the bigger the mistake looks, the better chance I’ll have to break out and live a real life’” (258). The real life that he seeks has less to do with gender or sex identity than it does with a refusal of the father’s function in the transmission of identity and of the place the he is forced to occupy as his father’s son.

The novel as magazine: From authenticity and fetishism to the sublime

Invisible Monsters unfolds like a glossy magazine article—that is how Shannon tells us to read it—as if it were, “a *Vogue* or a *Glamour* magazine chaos with page numbers on every second or fifth or third page” (20). Jump around, she says, read it to find the products that we like to see since we are all products anyway (12). The novel insists that the reality that we share is a construction and that the authentic life

is absent or that it is to be found in the unreality of the constructions themselves. Everyone knows that the glossy magazines are full of fakes. The models are airbrushed, digitized, and photoshopped to look however the editors want them to look. The referent to the real of photography has been erased in the service of selling products to the products we have all become. The erasure of the referent implied an erasure of the difference between consumer and product. If everything is a product then there is no difference between the product and its consumer: both are produced. Everything is reducible to glossy construction. If authentic life has yielded to the constructions of the glossy magazines then either authentic existence is an object of nostalgia or yearning or we can, "just go with the prompts" (21) that the glossy magazines give us and live life authentically in constructions. The highly wrought, malleable, contingent, inauthentic life of the glossy is authentic life.

Palahniuk's novels are obsessed with authenticity, as Eduardo Mendieta has claimed in his essay, "Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk" (2005). The obsession with authenticity, with finding and being the real thing, whatever that might be, is at the center of *Invisible Monsters* as the sublime figure of a fetish. A fetish can be a perfectly benign object in the economy of desire yet, in Palahniuk's text, the fetish becomes the object of a perverse fascination. *Invisible Monsters* is a novel that elevates the fetish to the grandeur of the sublime. The main character in the novel, the "queen supreme" Brandy Alexander, the narrator's transsexual brother, becomes the object of the narrator's quest to know herself by knowing her brother, by situating herself in the economy of a family where identity is malleable and constructed. Brandy Alexander serves as the narrator's sublime fetish that gives an authentic meaning to her life. Shannon seeks to cover the flash and jumps of her glossy magazine narrative of a life with the grandeur of the queen supreme whose overvalued presence puts the narrator in proximity with her brother's real life, all the while turning her real life into an unliveable, monstrous fantasy. Palahniuk's perverse sublime turns the fetish into the core of identity. The hero of this novel, the queen supreme Brandy Alexander, dies as such seeking a way out of the tyranny of labels and the glossy magazine products that she covets.

The psychoanalyst Paul Moyaert describes three essential values of the fetish. In one sense, a fetish is a relic or a token of a loved one.

Among certain widows, for example, it is a common practice to keep the ring of the lost husband on a chain to be worn around the neck. The ring is a token of the lost husband that signifies a presence of the absent husband. A fetish can also support or scaffold desire. It is a structure that bears desire on its way. When the beloved wears the fetish, desire for the beloved becomes inflamed. This fetish can be clothing, a gesture, a scent. Any of these can support the advent of desire all the way to its end or waning. These two senses of the fetish operate well within the range of the common life of desire. The third sense of the fetish is perverse. A fetish is perverse when the fetish takes on a life of its own outside of the economy of desire (55). In perverse fetishism, the fetish is isolated from the common course of desire and absolutized as the source of pleasure and meaning. This fetish does not signify beyond its own lustrous appearance, it is unequivocally itself, beyond any doubt. According to Moyaert, the perverse fetish attains a value beyond measure for the pleasure of the subject. Without the fetish, the subject's desire comes abruptly to a halt. Desire is given over to the fetish that alone determines the course, the aim, and the pleasure of desire. The fascination with the lustrous fetish eclipses everything that is not the fetish.

Invisible Monsters operates according to the logic of a fetishism that is perverse at its core. The fetish object, the Queen Supreme Brandy Alexander, is elevated beyond the ordinary circuit of desire. She is elevated and absolutized as the defining signifier that anchors all meaning and significance. The characters in *Invisible Monsters* circulate around her and acquire their significance in relation to her luminous presence. All of these characters exist at the margins of social life, people who in another time would be openly and regularly attacked as perverts. In the American political and cultural imaginary, the pervert is a freak of social life. Perversions are imagined as moral deficiencies and perverts are imagined to be degenerates who live on the periphery of social life where their presence is doubtful and shocking to those who do not live on the margins. They can be tolerated as long as they are closeted, as long as they "don't go around shoving it in everybody's face," as colloquial usage in the United States sometimes puts it. The name pervert, in this frame, is a sign of hatred. The appeal to the pervert attempts to justify hatred as a socially accepted and acceptable, even desired, set of beliefs. Those people are sick, as the saying goes. While I am not using the term in this sense, Palahniuk's text banks

on this sentiment being attached to these characters. Without these marginal characters, the central and stable hetero-normative family structures cannot be put into question.

According to Freud, perversion is a descriptive category. Perversion is the use of an organ for a purpose other than its anatomically determined one or it arises when we stop the regular aim of genital sexuality at a preliminary object. Perversion is not a different kind of desire, but a possibility of all desire. All desire has the potential to become perverse. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Freud writes, "Perversions are sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path toward the final sexual aim" (150). The pervert seems to want it all—who does not?—and tries to get it all. The pervert is hyper-attached to his pleasure. The fetishist is a pervert whose identity and desire are bound to the presence of the fetish.

Bruce Fink is right to point out that the pervert only seems to get what he wants and that Freud emphasizes the subject's "refusal to give up satisfaction" (179) as the chief characteristic of the pervert's desire. The pervert cannot yield to the basic reality that we cannot always get what we want. Perverse desire is not perverse because of its object, as the tradition of cataloguing perversions in the manner of Kraft-Ebbing suggests. The pervert's object does not satisfy his desire and he refuses to yield to the reality that the object is incapable of providing the satisfaction that he wants. The pervert chooses an object that will not satisfy though he cannot bear to admit that the object will not satisfy him. The pervert holds "two incompatible positions at the same time," as Laplanche and Pontalis describe the fetishist (119). The name for this defence against anxiety is disavowal. Like other subjects, the pervert does not have what he most wants—he is castrated, in psychoanalytic terms. Disavowal is his defence against castration anxiety.

Disavowal is a structure that characterizes perversion in the same way that repression characterizes neurosis (Fink 170). *Invisible Monsters* is not a ghost story about the return of the repressed or a gothic novel where the representations circulate around objects that are highly invested with repressed material. The disclosure of the secrets of this novel's representation will not serve as the key

that will allow us to resolve the conflicts that it stages. Finding the hidden, repressed thoughts in *Invisible Monsters* will not disclose the truth of the novel. Instead, *Invisible Monsters* is about disavowal of the family. Bruce Fink describes disavowal as a “making believe about the paternal function” (170). According to him, disavowal involves something like the following thought:

I know full well that my father hasn't forced me to give up my mother and the jouissance I take in her presence (real and or imagined in fantasy), hasn't exacted the “pound of flesh,” but I'm going to stage such an exaction or forcing with someone who stands in for him; I'll make that person pronounce the law. (170; inverted commas in the original)

We can follow Fink's description of disavowal in Brandy Alexander's discourse on identity. Brandy constructs the father as giving a command that he never gave in order to institute a new law over and against which the uncompromising father will persist as if actually present and powerful. By choosing to become trans, Shane becomes Brandy as a way out of the demand the father never issued to get a pleasure she was never denied. Brandy Alexander is the name of Shane's disavowal—she becomes the castrated body to escape the pressures of castration anxiety. The position that Brandy occupies has to be strongly distinguished from people who experience Gender Identity Disorder and who seek sex reassignment surgery. Such people transition from one sex and gender to the other as part of an effort to live authentically and they can succeed at it. Shane becomes Brandy to uphold two contradictory positions that he attributes to an other and at whose hands he continues to suffer as Brandy Alexander.

In Shannon's narrative of disavowal, Brandy becomes the Fetish object. Brandy's body is a body that is wrought, constructed, and idealized. She is doubly marked by the ostentatious names of lipsticks and rouge—“Burning Blueberry,” “Rusty Rose,” “Aubergine Dreams,” “Plumbago.” Scattered throughout Shannon's narrative of Brandy Alexander these names signal the malleability of identity. Shannon banks on the name of the color giving Brandy some depth where all that she has is surface. The emphasis on the surface is in the service of the disavowal of the depth and dynamism that identity linked to the family implies.

Shannon is a failed daughter and Shane is a failed son to parents who have failed to parent even if they—belatedly—try to rectify their choices. The dramas of their identities descend through the mother and father who are represented as clueless of their children's worlds or concerns. For Thanksgiving dinner before Shannon is disfigured and after Shane has disappeared—died of AIDS, he construes for his parents—Shannon sits at the table with a new tablecloth that her parents made from fabric that they had intended to sew into a panel for the AIDS memorial quilt. They believed their son to be gay and so part of a culture that operates with specific codes that they do not understand, “We just ran into some problems with what to sew on it,” (90) her mother tells her. The problem that they encountered is one of signification and shame. Whatever colors they use on the panel, they fear that they will signify something about Shane that they do not want others to think is true. Even in death, the parents prefer their son to be closeted. One set of colors signifies “leather sex” (91); a pink triangle is a Nazi symbol for homosexuals (91). Red signifies fisting, yellow watersports. The conversation strains over the table with Shannon wishing for new parents—“Give me new parents” (90)—and the parents doing their best to perform as parents who could have produced children who could have lived in the world—though they have been unable to do so. That the children have failed means that the parents have failed. The parents are not villains or despots—they might have been good enough for their children to live quality lives. Precisely this characteristic of the parents allows Palahniuk to show Shane's mania for authenticity against the wish of all children to come from a good enough family that can propel them to a fecund and joyous life, an authentic life.

The parents are not authentic enough for Shane to develop his authentic identity—Shane fails to assume the place in his family that he believes that he is required to assume. He believes that he is required to assume it precisely so that he can refuse it. In time, Shannon needs the parents to prefer her to her brother—“Shane's dead,” she laments, “but he's more the center of attention than he ever was” (92). The conflict and drama of the family in *Invisible Monsters* has a vertical structure and a horizontal one. The vertical structure produces intergenerational conflict. This is the conflict that Freud describes in “Family Romances.” The horizontal conflict is the ambivalent love between Shannon and Shane and the idealization that proceeds from Shannon to Brandy

Alexander. These conflicts take place in the conversation at the Thanksgiving table as the enumeration of the ways that certain sexual practices are signified. The miscommunication occurs at the end of that dinner when Shannon thinks her parents ask her to tell them what "felching" is. It turns out that her mother had asked her about "fletching" a turkey (93–4). The process of disavowal is an effort to force the father to demand of the son and the daughter that which he never demanded. Shane becomes Brandy Alexander to materialize his response to that very demand. In this passage, Shannon supports Shane's disavowal by giving the father what he never demanded—an account of felching. Brandy Alexander is thus the fetish at the center of *Invisible Monsters*. Felching is the signifier of the brother who is present as his disavowal.

The disavowals that characterize *Invisible Monsters* take the form of the most extravagant and lustrous characters of the novel as the sublime figures around which the discourse of the novel unfolds. Edmund Burke writes that the sublime has its source in anything that is "terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (36). Feelings of terror put us in touch with "the strongest emotions of which the mind is capable of feeling" (36). For Burke, our strongest feelings are linked with pain and death rather than with the positive pleasures of those that "the most learned voluptuary could suggest or than the liveliest imagination, and the most exquisitely sensible body could enjoy" (36). The sublime is a pleasure that is attached to elements of experience that threaten us. Though the experience may in the end prove exhilarating or enlivening, in the first instance we come into contact with pain and displeasure. The experience of the proximity of pain and death, "the king of terrors" (36), from a certain distance can produce the most intense of pleasures. Those most intense pleasures of the sublime Burke names delight.

Delight is not a positive pleasure, but a negative one that we feel when terror, pain, or death press in upon us and yet we are relieved from having to experience terror, or pain, or death. We brush up against them and feel their power over us and, even so, are relieved that they do not destroy us entirely. In the modern history of aesthetics, the sublime is also associated with all of those things that are lofty, noble, or command respect, reverence, and awe. The sublime object humbles us without humiliating. At the moment before we would cross over into the pain and terror of

death with an impossibly massive or powerful object that would, in the very next instant, destroy us, a distance appears and we are relieved from terror and given over to the exaltations of delight. Kant describes the experiences as a momentary checking of the vital forces followed by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger (246). The classical sublime is an experience of exaltation that proceeds from proximity to destruction. For Kant, the sublime puts us in touch with our suprasensible vocation (*ibid.*)—a sense of who we ought most essentially to be. Without the encounter with pain, however, there is no exaltation—without pain, no delight.

The fetishist's object brings him to the brink where his enjoyment expends and depletes itself to make way for his enjoyment again. The feeling rather than the object drives the fetishist toward his pleasure leading him to mistake his enjoyment for his object. The fetishist moves from a benign enjoyment to a perverse one. The shift is not a matter of quantity or power, but of structure. In nonperverse fetishism, as Moyaert describes it, the fetish stands in the place of a lost object—as a token—or as a screen for the object of desire that activates and sustains desire for the object. The fetish is a station on the way of desire and not the destination. The fetishist turns the fetish into the destination of his desire to make good on the promise of delight that will annihilate, he hopes, the separation between himself and the object that the fetish cloaks. In seeking to overcome that separation he passes over the object in favor of the effects of the fetish.

In the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant is clear that the sublime is an emotion attached to a structure of the mind as the faculty of imagination seeks to present the unrepresentable to the faculty of judgment. The sublime sentiment, an experience of pleasure in the pain of that failure, is the destabilizing feeling that accompanies the presentation of the unrepresentable. The perverse fetishist invests the fetish with a power and magnitude that surpasses the power and magnitude of the object that bears his fetish. The fetish itself is a sublime object. The object becomes the support for the fetish and the subject tries to combine the affect with the object. To make the object bear the sentiment, the subject will have to come up short. *Invisible Monsters* demonstrates the subject coming up short from start to finish. Virtually no character gets what he or she wants. The fundamental experience of these characters is to not have what they want—in psychoanalytical language, they suffer their castration.

That is, they lack the object that could satisfy their desire. If an object appears that seems to satisfy their desire, it is an object that will have been isolated and removed from its common location in communal and social life. Shannon describes her breakfasts with Manus and his understanding of an object that can satisfy his desire by which he means every man's desire:

At home in my apartment I'd have Manus with his magazines. His guy-on-guy porno magazines he had to buy for his job, he'd say. Over breakfast every morning, he'd show me glossy pictures of guys self-sucking. Curled up with their elbows hooked behind their knees craning their necks to choke on themselves, each guy would be lost in his own little closed circuit. You can bet almost every guy in the world's tried this. Then Manus would tell me, "This is what guys want."

Give me Romance.

Flash.

Give me denial. (69)

Shannon and Manus come to a point of conflict surrounding the object of desire and the source of pleasure. Manus and Shannon are an impossible erotic couple; she seeks romance, even if the romance that she invokes is laced with irony, as the path along which desire travels. Manus is tied to the impossible image of a male body circled around itself in its autoerotic, oral and genital pleasure. Shannon continues the narrative,

Each little closed loop of one guy flexible enough or with a dick so big he doesn't need anyone else in the world, Manus would point his toast at these pictures and tell me, "These guys don't need to put up with jobs or relationships." Manus would just chew, staring at each magazine. Forking up his scrambled egg whites, he'd say, "You could live and die this way." (69-70)

To live and die this way is an articulation of a vocation, a way of life. The fetishist believes that the fetish—whatever it might be—is the total object of all satisfaction—you can live and die by it. Of course, that is an error. The pervert's sublime object derails his or her desire. The characters in this novel chase their objects as if

getting them to close the circuit of desire like Manus's self-sucking men, and liberate the subject into a vocation beyond life and death where they can be authentically themselves.

The sublime object as perverse sublime is fascinating and frightening like all sublime images. Attachment to that object will situate the subject in a place where he or she will always come up short. Every guy has tried to do this, Manus says. Every guy wants to, wishes he could; every woman envies it even if she may deny that envy. The perverse wish—as articulated by Palahniuk in this novel—is to be a completely closed circuit. This is the narrative that Shannon wishes to deny or disavow. Brandy Alexander is the most sublime of these closed circuits because she represents the masculine and feminine configuration of the body. She is the perfect example of the closed circuit around which the rest of the universe gravitates. Brandy Alexander is the most sublime of perverts!

Conclusion: The real as copy and the perverse sublime

Invisible Monsters invests the delight of sublime sentiment in the figure of Brandy Alexander and the universe that circulates around her: "On the planet Brandy Alexander, the universe is run by a fairly elaborate system of gods and she-gods. Some evil. Some are ultimate goodness. Marilyn Monroe, for example. Then there's Nancy Reagan and Wallis Warfield Simpson" (76). Palahniuk's narrator, Shannon McFarland, seeks the truth about her brother, Shane, who has become Brandy Alexander. In this manic search, Brandy becomes the focus of all agency and action. She is the planet at the center of a universe that is organized and run by fakes. Palahniuk's vision of social life is one in which feelings override objects and where the objects themselves have been so extricated from the authentic site of their social value that the question of authentic meaning becomes irrelevant. The truth of an object is the truth of its copy. There is no original though his characters long for their origins. Shannon introduces Brandy Alexander and Evie Cottrell in a burning manor house in the opening sequence of the novel. At that early stage in her narrative, truth lacks an original model—the world is composed of copies of copies: "What's burning down is

a re-creation of a period revival house patterned after a copy of a copy of a copy of a mock-Tudor big manor house. It's a hundred generations removed from anything original, but the truth is aren't we all?" (14). Just as a house can be copied from an original model, human identities get forged through copying other models. Much of the drama of *Invisible Monsters* centers around the conflicts between characters who are—literally—models, and the discourse of the rhetoric of the novel—the glossy fashion magazine—is a showcase of models. All of these models are copies of some other copy. Brandy Alexander is not satisfied with the copy or being a copy—she is in search of the original.

If the world is made up of copies of copies without an original model, if our identities function in the same way, there is no reason for us to fret about who or what we are. Yet, the narrative of *Invisible Monsters* is obsessed with the original and authentic model of identity. If Shannon's view of the relationship between the model and the copy is the right way to view the world, what reason can there be to seek an authentic model? Shannon's narration does not accept the absent model as absent. Instead, the absent model of the copies of copies becomes first an object to be found again, and once it is named, it becomes the most sublime fetish from which all reality derives its meaning.

Had Palahniuk's narrative sought to find the lost object, it would remain a neurotic's narrative with a neurotic's sublime at the center of the narrative. The neurotic's sublime is a fetish, to be sure, but only in the sense that it is a token or a screen for the neurotic's lost object. The neurotic's sublime masks repressed material and points toward it. Palahniuk's narrative is a pervert's narrative with a perverse sublime. The pervert is overrun by the affect of the fetish that he mistakes as the enjoyment of the object. A perverse fetishism seeks the presence of the fetish to gain the sentiment of the sublime. The sublime sentiment, as Kant describes it, involves an encounter with a limit to the vital forces followed upon by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger. The fetishist convinces himself that he is alive by seeking the outpouring of vital forces through the fetish—the most sublime object. The fetishist believes that he is most alive when he is alone with the object that alone seems to satisfy his desires. But, the satisfaction is merely a seeming satisfaction that masks the anxiety and suffering that motivate the choice for the

fetish or other perversion. Palahniuk's characters follow this path in their search for an authentic existence.

In *Invisible Monsters*, Palahniuk presents a perverse sublime. I have argued elsewhere that mutilation is the textual figure that announces Palahniuk's sublime. All of his characters, in one way or another, are mutilated or undergo an experience of mutilation. The mutilated body becomes the occasion of a sublime sentiment and the source of access to an authentic life. As much as his characters undermine the stability of identity and an authentic existence, and approach identity and authenticity with an ironic pose, nearly every one of Palahniuk's characters yearn for both as if being known for wanting what they want is as painful as not getting it. They plead for an authentic existence. The authentic existence that the characters of *Invisible Monsters* seek is an existence undetermined by the power and force of the father. They seek a world where the father's demands never have to be met but in which they construct a more outrageous set of demands for themselves. The sublime of *Invisible Monsters* is a perverse one that gives its characters a life that is bound to pain in the search for an authentic existence and freedom. Yet, the freedom that they find is a freedom to suffer, it is pleasure in pain in the name of an authenticity that is impossible to materialize.