Serial Killing and the Dismemberment of Identity

A census taker tried to quantify me once. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a big Amarone.

—DR. HANNIBAL LECTER in Thomas Harris’s The Silence of the Lambs

INCOHERENT SUBJECTS

We can start with Foucault’s famous and endlessly circulated statement in The Order of Things: “It is comforting, however, and a source of profound relief to think that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear as soon as this knowledge has discovered a new form” (xxiii).

Man the Universal Subject, a cookie-cutter mold of technological and post-technological identity, stamping out simulacra of individuality. But why should we be “comforted” and experience “relief” at the thought of his imminent dissolution? Perhaps because, at least from Adorno on, the subject of reason has also been identified as the subject of violence. The universal Man of the Enlightenment has been reconceptualized as the universal killer, armed with the most potent of weapons—representation. In their introduction to the collection typically entitled The Violence of Representation, Armstrong and Tennenhouse offer the basic formula of this approach: “The violence of representation is the suppression of difference” (8).

In this particular reading of Foucault, the discursive constructedness of identity is directly responsible for corporeal violence inflicted by some postmodern subjects upon others. In his recent book Serial Killers and in the series of articles that preceded it, Mark Seltzer applies this insight to the fascinating and grisly phenomenon of serial killing, variously identified also as “stranger
killing” and “lust murder.” For Seltzer the enigma of the serial killer’s personality consists in “an experience of typicality at the level of the subject”: “The serial killer, I will be arguing, is in part defined by such a radicalized experience of typicality within. Simply put, ‘murder by numbers’ (as serial murder has been called) is the form of violence proper to statistical persons” (1993, 30–31).

Violence of representation, representation of violence, and violence per se smoothly link into an unbroken chain, leading from statistics to mayhem and from typology of subjects to fingerprinting putrefying bodies. My goal is to put a hitch into this chain, to question the easy fit between discursive molds of identity and the individual self-experience of serial killers, and to suggest that representation may be not so much the cause of violence as a post factum defense against it.

The difference between the serial killers and the monsters I discussed in the last chapter is that the serial killers exist. This is not such a trivial observation as it may appear, for it has important consequences for the narrative construction of identity. Being purely fictional constructs, horror’s monsters are passive mirrors of the particular cultural interpretation of violence that I analyzed under the heading of “the subject of torture.” Serial killers, on the other hand, besides inhabiting the interlocking genres of the thriller and true crime, are also self-aware subjects who actively engage in their own self-representation. Their autobiographies provide a fascinating glimpse of the way in which narrative molds of identity fit actual human beings. And what they suggest, I will argue, is that while it is impossible to have identity outside narrative, individual agency may well reside in the cracks and fissures of narrative discourse. Torn between two conflicting plots of their violence, serial killers exercise their freedom of choice by refusing to choose. Their murders are as sublime as the spectacle of the violated body in horror, and they exert a similar influence on the coherence of their narratives. But a fictional vampire may be a walking oxymoron; the actual Ted Bundy must somehow reconcile the violent sublime with a life-story. The (inevitably failing) attempt to do so constructs the serial killer as a hybrid subject of violence, occupying the unstable boundary between torture and discipline.

The serial form of violence is conditioned not so much by the monolithic coherence of representation as by its breakdown. The behavior of a serial killer is not a direct outcome of any social construction but a random choice, which is retrospectively and partially incorporated into a generic narrative of identity. His repeated ritualistic violence, then, becomes a means of reinforcing this identity but achieves precisely the opposite, its complete disintegration. Rather than being generated by representation, corporeal violence offers a resistance to it. On the one hand, the narrative of the serial murderer is a
product not so much of what Seltzer calls the general “wound culture” of postmodernity as of specific scientific narratives of deviance whose conflict and interaction I will analyze below. On the other hand, these narratives, the representational molds of the criminal self, always fail to explain and thus to contain the excessive and irrational violence whose unruly opacity constitutes their raison d’être. In fracturing scientific discourse, the violent sublime exceeds its determinants, creating a self whose freedom lies neither in some impossible essence beyond the reach of cultural conditions nor in the uniform resistance to monolithic representation, but rather in the inconsistencies, gaps, and fissures within representation itself.

While the actual incidence of serial killing remains small compared to other kinds of violent crime, the literature on the subject is enormous. This literature spans the entire spectrum of narrativity, from fiction to science, bounded on the one end by the best-selling mystery novels of Thomas Harris, Patricia Cornwell, James Patterson, and others, and on the other end by criminological explorations of the serial killer’s mind. By far, the largest part of the spectrum is covered by the murky genre of “true crime,” predominantly consisting of the biographies of every significant serial killer of the last thirty years. With a string of blockbuster films on the subject, from Hitchcock’s classic *Psycho* to *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Seven*, *Kiss the Girls*, *Hannibal*, and others, the serial killer looms disproportionately large in the contemporary universe of discourse.

Whatever their genre, writings on the phenomenon of serial killing often stress its representative role. The killer becomes what the protagonist of Caleb Carr’s novel *The Alienist* portentously calls an image of “all that is dark in our very social world” (592). Maria Tatar, in her analysis of the iconography of lust murder in the culture of the Weimar Republic, points out its “virtually ubiquitous presence,” which she derives from the ubiquity of misogyny (4). A number of writers subscribe to the argument that serial killing is a recent phenomenon brought about by the conditions of modernity. Colin Wilson, for example, boldly states that “there were no sex killers before the late-nineteenth century” and links this new phenomenon with his somewhat idiosyncratic diagnosis of the modern malaise (3). Finally, Seltzer suggests that the postmodern creation of the “pathological public sphere” with its confusion between public and private, action and image, natural and technological, body and machine is the underlying cause of the proliferation of Jack the Ripper look-alikes. His project traces “the links between the problem of serial murder and the more general problem of the body in ‘machine culture’... the forms of repetitive and addictive violence produced, or solicited, by the styles of production and reproduction that make up machine culture” (1993, 92). Jeffrey Dahmer becomes the monstrous offspring of “machine culture,”
a latter-day Frankenstein's creature. For Seltzer serial killers are “emptied” of their psychic interiority by social forces and their violence “might be taken as the traumatized intimation, at the level of the subject, that his interior states are nothing but outer or social forces and fantasies turned outside in: the subject, as it were, flooded by the social and its collective fantasies” (1998, 126).

All such schemes, however much at odds with each other, share one feature—emphasis on a tight causal connection between killer and social milieu. They are all driven by the necessity to “explain” the serial killer in terms that assimilate the corporeal particularity of violence to some abstract modality of meaning. This explanation generally takes the form of a narrative of origin. Such narratives, freely exchanged between literature and science, treat violence as a symptom or an outer manifestation of a hidden truth, an oblique symptom of an intelligible cause.

However, taken as a whole, the bulk of the available cultural narratives of serial killing is fissured by unresolvable contradictions. The stories are not merely different from each other but incompatible, representing the killer as either a monster or a victim, either a chameleonic “man of the crowd” or a hideous mutation, either the product of severe psychopathology or somebody “abnormally normal” (Seltzer 1998, 106). The problem is not a shopping list of identities, which every postmodern subject supposedly carries around. The difference between the serial killer and other such subjects is that his narrative of the self is structured around an act of radical physical violence that cannot be fully accommodated by any explanatory model. Quoting Hannah Arendt’s observation about the banality of Nazi evil, Seltzer claims the serial killer represents “the replacement of the soul and, in this case, the soul of evil, with knowledge systems, expert and scientific” (Seltzer 1998, 107). However, necrophilia, dismemberment, and cannibalism are not banal (and neither was Nazism). The unexpected appearance of the “soul of evil” alongside “knowledge systems” testifies precisely to the insufficiency of any kind of causal model, whether psychological, cultural, biological, or sociological, to account for the serial killer’s violence.

Rather than offering a choice of identities, the discourse of serial killing piles all the models together in a vain attempt to cover up the emptiness at its core. The result is incoherence. Seltzer notes how pop culture representations of serial killing tend to deploy mutually exclusive clichés indiscriminately and then gravitate toward “nonexplanation and noncomprehension as a way of conserving the mystery of evil” (1998, 120). However, his own reference to the “soul of evil” seems to suggest that the fault lies not only with the shallowness of pop psychology but with the nature of the serial killer’s violence itself.

As opposed to the violence of war, state persecution, or terrorism, the violence of the serial killer is devoid of political imprimatur: it is nonideological.
and therefore, at least partially, situated outside the discursive field of power. Seltzer compares the putative psychology of the serial killer with that of the fascist male described by Klaus Theweleit. But the fascist always acts in a group where extreme violence is rendered meaningful within the group's weltanschauung. There is a profound difference between the state-sponsored concentration camp and the private torture house because the latter is not subordinated to any collective goal. Serial killers are sometimes represented as Storm Troopers in search of an ideology (see Fox and Levin). What they may be looking for is the kind of selfhood the fascist male possesses, the selfhood that, reinforced by external ideology, can contain extreme violence without being blown up into pieces.

If all narrative constructions of identity fail, the resulting subjectivity is bound to be a narrative failure too: splintered, incoherent, and fragmented. As Cameron and Frazer point out, serial killers' accounts of themselves are "representations, often consciously constructed, which draw on cultural as opposed to individual resources" (71). But when these "resources" are radically self-contradictory, the resulting account is necessarily hybrid, monstrous, and mutant. Thus representation, rather than being a seamless conduit between social compulsion and individual violence, becomes a site of their conflict.

But it is precisely the resistance of the serial killer to representation that acts as incitement to representing him again and again. In his encounters with an array of forensic specialists, psychologists, medical examiners, criminologists, scriptwriters, and authors, the serial killer functions as a figure of the Real, soliciting explanations and defying or deflecting them. And yet his own paradoxical and tormented subjectivity is delineated precisely by those narratives of violence whose perpetual renewal is the result of their perpetual failure to contain their subjects.1

NERO ON THE COUCH

In his essay "Pen, Pencil and Poison," dedicated to the career of the serial poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, Oscar Wilde chooses a particularly effective way to vex his audience. It consists in refusing any psychological speculation on the motivations of the man who was a promising journalist, a talented artist, an admired dandy, and a mass murderer. Any contemporary work in the same genre, from paperback biographies of Ted Bundy and John Gacy to Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem, begins and ends with the question that Wilde nonchalantly brushes aside: why? Nor was this preoccupation with the killer's subjectivity any less evident in Wilde's own time, since both naturalism and the sensation novel made it one of their hallmarks.
Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton, both of whom explored the minds of malefactors at great length, are mentioned in the essay. But Wilde abides by his own dictum that the true mystery lies in the surface, not the depth, and flouts the reader's expectations of a plunge into the abyss of sin or madness. Instead he dissects Wainwright's style.

Discomfiting the audience is Wilde's aim, and his success is the measure of how widespread the assumption is that murder has to be not so much displayed, condemned, or even punished, as explained. Much of nineteenth-century psychological realism bears witness to the power of this assumption—from Adam Bede to the novels of Balzac. Precisely because the murderer's psyche is seen as aberrant and opaque, it functions as a test case for the power of psychological analysis, which derives its prestige from kinship with the epistemology of science. Wilde notes that Wainwright's more famous predecessors in the field of mass killing, Nero, Tiberius, Cesar Borgia, "have passed into the sphere of art and science" where they are free from sanctimonious expressions of moral horror but not from the sharp scalpel of "disinterested curiosity" (856). Wilde's own piece, however, refuses both moral condemnation and psychological explanation, becoming an unsettling comment not so much on the killer himself as on the drive of "art and science" to assimilate his murderous peculiarity to some grand scheme of meaning.

The killer's resistance to this drive is his epistemological crime. In Caleb Carr's retrothriller The Alienist, set in Wilde's own epoch, Dr. Lazlo Kreizler, the "alienist" of the title, is a medical man-cum-psychologist-cum-detective—the combination that has become de rigueur for the serial killers' hunters in contemporary popular culture, signifying the rejoining of science and detective fiction, the blending of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson into a single hybrid figure. Kreizler hunts down a serial killer of boy prostitutes in fin de siècle New York, presciently employing the techniques of contemporary criminal profiling. However, when the killer is captured and interviewed, both Kreizler and his assistant experience increasing frustration, for the criminal refuses to yield the final mystery: not the how, where, and when but the why. Not that he is evasive; he simply does not know himself. When he is mortally wounded, the alienist desperately attempts to wring a death bed confession, only to hear: "I have never known . . ." (574). The psychological scalpel yields nothing and neither does the surgical one: the killer's dissected brain shows "no evidence of either congenital abnormality or physical trauma" (589). All the patiently assembled knowledge of the killer's identity and modus operandi is worthless compared to the one thing the alienist craves: the secret of his subjectivity. But this is the secret that is hidden from the subject himself, and so the narrator's description of Dr. Kreizler as the "man who knew [the killer] as well as he knew himself" (570) becomes profoundly ironic. The ending of
the book displays none of the detective's exuberant smugness, so common in the Golden Age mysteries of Doyle and Christie. Rather, Dr. Kreitzler sounds tired, defeated, and disappointed: "We'll never know now. Ah, Moore—there are so many things we'll never know, now..." (592).

Both Wilde's teasing renunciation of the desire to know the murderer and Dr. Kreitzler's foiled drive to satisfy it, are testimonies to the fascination of the serial killer's benighted subjectivity. This fascination is different from the opacity of the Foucauldian Other of madness who is positioned outside the boundaries of discourse, confronting the classical subject of the Enlightenment "without a possible dialogue, without a common language" (Foucault 1961, 111). A majority of apprehended serial killers do not fall under the McNaghten rules defining legal insanity. Though the rhetoric of madness is an important one in the public controversies surrounding serial killers' trials, most of them are quite competent to engage in a possible dialogue with their society and, in fact, actively do so. A serial killer is a subject who speaks not an alien tongue but a horrifyingly mangled version of the common language, the version that rings unsettlingly familiar but never quite coalesces into meaning. Thus, the necessity and urgency of translating the killer's motivation into discourses of art and science stem not from absolute difference but from uncanny similarity. And it is precisely because of this similarity that his resistance to meaning becomes an epistemological scandal of epic proportions.

The way in which the sublime excess of any murder provokes equal excess of ratiocination will be discussed in the next chapter with regard to the classic detective story. But if all murder has a kernel of irrational mystery, serial murder appears to be irrationality squared. It is not only the sheer brutality of Dahmer's actions but their senselessness that staggers the imagination. Confronted with Dahmer's charnel house or that of his British counterpart, Dennis Nilsen, the public and the media alike insist on answering "the perennial question of how could they bear it, how could they do it?" (Cameron and Frazer 148). When John Douglas, the media-celebrated FBI special agent who was the real-life model for Jack Crawford of The Silence of the Lambs and one of the founders of the methodology of criminal profiling, is asked this question, his answer is a rhetorical sleight-of-hand that establishes the serial killer's rationality but denies that this rationality is rational to anybody but the killer himself: "[the serial killer] is not 'insane' because he isrationally faithful to his own ideas and values. The perpetrator of this type of crime differs from the rest of us in his character and thinking. We find it difficult to comprehend that someone would want to do something so horrible. But that's the way it is" (1997, 265).

Faced with such double-talk from the authority, the public at large has recourse to two seemingly contradictory but, in fact, closely related strategies
of emotional response. On the one hand, it consumes increasingly large quantities of new material, always eager for new and improved explanations of serial murder. As Wendy Lesser puts it, in reading about murder "we want to ask big questions; more than anything else we want to get answers to big questions" (13). Yet on the other hand, she also points out that we get irritated by too facile solutions: "Any explanation for murder that too easily explains away the mystery is likely to strike us as suspect" (69). When a new series of murders occurs, the first public response is to rush to psychiatric and criminological experts clamoring for an explanation, only to deride the experts' diagnosis when the murderer is finally caught. This dynamic was particularly clear in the case of Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper, in which the jury refused to recognize the psychiatrists' contention that the murderer was mentally abnormal. Popular fictions often adroitly exploit this double dynamics, throwing to the reader a handful of explanations, while virtuously preserving the fig leaf of mystery. In Mark Morris's *The Secret of Anatomy*, the protagonist who witnessed the mass shooting by a crazed gunman is "infuriated and appalled" by the media profiling of the killer: he feels that the media "has moved in on this situation and diminished it with their slick neat theories, imposing order on a chaos they couldn't possibly comprehend" (269). This does not prevent the novel itself from imposing "order on chaos" for all of its formidable length, inventing more and more complicated theories to account not only for this specific act of slaughter but ultimately for all of the world's evil.

Even the rejection of a specific narrative does not mean renunciation of narrativity. The man on the street who evinces healthy distrust of fashionable psychiatric theories of the criminal's mind does not thereby remain bereft of explanations. The jury in Sutcliffe's case, as Cameron and Frazer point out, threw out the experts' opinion and applied a different paradigm, that of a willful commitment to evil. Precisely because the serial killer's actions are not unstructured, they cannot be simply banished from the universe of meaning. A series of murders for pleasure is guided by a tight inner logic that assures the repetition of the crimes according to some sort of pattern, but this logic seems to be inassimilable to any collective narrative of art and science. Deciphering the killer's motivation means bringing him back within the purview of such a narrative. An explanation rewrites his opaque inner logic in terms that are collectively intelligible and thus fixes not only the murderer's aberrant identity, but also the identity of the bystander who can now define himself in opposition to what is no more a shapeless mystery but rather a determined signifier of either sickness or evil. It does not matter how grim or apocalyptic the narrative of explanation might be. As long as it makes sense, we keep at bay both the flippancy of Wilde and the epistemological angst of Dr. Kreitzler. As Wilde's essay slyly suggests, we use pen and pencil to revise
the incomprehensible scribbling wrought by poison or, in the case of Wainewright's successors, by blunter instruments.

NATURE AND THE POLICE

Many sciences, including psychology and criminology (but also paleontology and evolutionary theory), are modes of storytelling. What unites them is commitment to "reconstruct[ing] events in the past-sequences presumed to be unique or so hugely cyclic that they are beyond experiment" (Landau ix). Thus, what serves as an explanation for these sciences is not an abstract law to which every particular instance can be reduced as its manifestation but a unique narrative, which obeys the general law only insofar as it is ruled by causality. However, such stories are also molded by generic expectations. Stephen Jay Gould writes: "We think that we are reading nature by applying rules of logic and laws of matter to our observations. But we are often telling stories—in the good sense but stories nevertheless" (1991, 251).

Gould's own position is not the radical relativism advocated by some cultural scholars who see scientific narratives as just-so stories rooted in nothing but the social balance of power. However, his somewhat wistful recognition of the "literary bias" reveals a hunger for what Lyotard calls "strategies of legitimation." Narratives may be more or less interesting, tragic or comic, canonical or subversive, but how do we know they are right?

In Stanislaw Lem's The Star Diaries a scientist, driven to distraction by just such questions, literally tortures matter to extract its secrets. The remedy is extreme but logical. Nature, devoid of consciousness and subjectivity, responds to our queries in a way that seems overdetermined by the form of the question itself. Now, if nature but had a voice, if it could tell its own story, if, in fact, a scientific enigma could be arrested and interrogated, perhaps the threat of relativism would finally be averted. What better strategy of legitimation than a legal sanction?

Lem's joke is based on the similarity between the ethos of science and that of crime detection, between investigation and interrogation. The nexus between science and the police, which Foucault conflates into the common "scientifico-disciplinary mechanisms," is vividly reflected in the nineteenth-century paradigmatic figures of Great Detectives as scientists manqué, Augustus Dupin with his disquisitions on theory of probabilities and Sherlock Holmes with his chemistry kit (1975, 193). Both the scientist and the detective are in pursuit of the elusive "truth" and both are, essentially, tellers of tales. Gould's description of the scientist as a master storyteller is echoed by John Douglas: "a detective's job is to collect as many little bits of information as he can and then work them into a logical, coherent narrative of the crime. That's
the reason I’ve always found good detectives to be among the best storytellers” (1997, 293).¹

Douglas is one of the founders of what was originally called the FBI Behavioral Sciences Unit at Quantico, where combined methods of psychology, forensic medicine, and criminology are used to chart profiles of violent offenders. Criminal profiling, as employed by Douglas and his colleagues, is a practical methodology. Its theoretical underpinnings, however, are rooted in criminal anthropology, which emerged in the nineteenth century as part of the project to make humanity intelligible. “Beginning with the middle of the nineteenth century, people have been speaking more and more of the criminal in the same naturalistic sense which, in our days, found its culminating expression in Professor Cesare Lombroso” (De Quiros 1). In his early history of criminal anthropology, De Quiros links its emergence with psychiatry and population statistics, that is, with all those “human” sciences that share the “old preoccupation and longing to discover in man the relations between body and soul, the correspondence between spirit and matter” (2). Sciences of man went hand in hand with the reconceptualization of crime, both theoretical and practical: “that moment when the sciences of man became possible is the moment when a new technology of power and a new political anatomy of the body were implemented” (Foucault 1975, 193).

What distinguishes the narratives of human sciences from the narratives of natural sciences, however, is the presence of a protagonist. If natural sciences are allegorical, relying on personification to tell their stories of the struggle of evolution or the birth of the solar system, human sciences are novelistic, appropriating the strategies of psychological description to analyze their self-aware and vocal subjects. Sherlock Holmes and Augustus Dupin do not have to be content with inferences since they have the criminal’s narrative to confirm or undermine their own. The detective’s “logical, coherent narrative of the crime” has as its strategy of legitimation the criminal’s confession. The tripartite plot of the classical detective story—murder, investigation, exposure—traditionally culminates in the explanation of the criminal’s motive.

However, as we have seen in The Alienist, this convention often fails in detective fictions dealing with serial killers. And it fails in ways strikingly similar to those in which the first-person narratives of monsters fail in horror fiction. The killer is either totally silent or unnaturally voluble and, in either case, his first-person narrative is corroded by the intrusion of the violent sublime.

In Patricia Cornwell’s series of best-selling mysteries whose criminals always turn out to be serial killers rather than any common or garden variety lawbreakers, there is a conspicuous refusal to grant the antagonist a voice. The resolution is a swift execution by the heroine, the forensic pathologist Dr. Kay Scarpetta, rather than a traditional confession. In other texts, on the
contrary, the killers clamor for the podium. In Harris's *Red Dragon*, Robert Walker's *Darkest Instinct*, and James Patterson's *Kiss the Girls*, to name but a few, whole chapters are narrated from a serial murderer's point of view. However, such narratives are striking by the exactitude with which they conform to the detective's profiling of the criminal. They fail to provide any subjective perspective and merely reproduce the paradoxes inherent in the detective's reconstruction of the killer's motivation. This tautological construction is particularly evident in *Darkest Instinct*, in which the murderer's attempts to preserve the bodies of his victims are glossed by another female forensic pathologist, Dr. Jessica Coran, as follows:

"if you want my opinion, the hand is just the beginning of an escalation."
"An escalation of what?"
"His attempt to preserve flesh, to preserve a victim whole. . . ." (220)

When her perplexed interlocutor asks for what purpose, Jessica replies: "We've got to stop looking for purpose; this bastard's purpose is totally a construct of his own making, having no validity outside his brain" (220). In other words, the criminal's aberrant behavior is a proof of his madness, which, therefore, explains his aberrant behavior (like Dr. Scarpetta, Dr. Coran is supposed to double as a "mindhunter" in the tradition of Douglas, acting as a sort of unwitting parody of the psychiatric and criminological discourses). However, in the parallel chapters narrated from the viewpoint of the criminal, this dubious diagnosis is slavishly confirmed, since he does indeed try to preserve his victims whole for a purpose which has "no validity outside his brain": in the time-honored tradition of *Psycho*, he wants to reincarnate his abusive mother.

If in horror fiction the rationally inassimilable "residue" of violence is displaced on the monster-as-spectacle, in serial-killer thrillers and true crime books the visual aspect is muted (though, as we shall see, not absent). Even a run-of-the-mill shocker, such as *Darkest Instinct*, cannot make the murderer look like a product of the special effects industry and retain minimal plausibility. Instead, madness comes to function as a substitute for true monstrosity. While a majority of real-life serial murderers have been judged legally sane, a majority of fictional serial killers, especially those who are granted a narrative voice, are delusional, their outlandish psychoses soaking up the excess of the violent sublime. But when it comes to actual killers, where baroque madness is not an option, narrative buckles under the weight of violence.

At the opening of their second nonfictional book *Journey into Darkness*, John Douglas and Mark Olshaker attempt something both ambitious and gruesome: a first-person simulated narrative of a real-life sex killer, the man who savagely murdered U.S. Marine Suzanne Collins. The narrative is remarkable
for its chilling sanity. At the end of it Douglas defends his experiment of putting himself in the mind of the killer: “If you understand—not in some academic, intellectual way, but in a visceral, experiential way—then maybe we can begin to make a difference” (6). The verisimilitude of such simulation is seen as a primary tool of the detective. In identifying with the mind of his quarry, Douglas, a “mindhunter,” follows the time-honored tradition of his fictional predecessor, Poe’s Augustus Dupin, who defines his method as “the identification . . . of the reasoner’s intellect with that of his opponent” (216).

However, the more Douglas extols the success of his “mindhunting” technique, the more does it appear to be founded not on the intellect but on a mixture of novelistic imagination and something suspiciously like an unwholesome affinity with the serial killer’s dark desires. The first-person narrative of Collins’s killer, Sedley Alley, is immediately undercut by presenting a third-person account of his confession, which paints a strikingly different picture: according to Sedley, Collins’s death was an accident. After a while, a third version emerges, promoted by Sedley’s defense attorney: that he suffers from multiple personality disorder and that the murder was committed by one of the alternative personalities. Douglas is dismissive of both these explanations, but their very presence puts his own in question. Moreover, the epistemological status of his reading of Sedley’s mind is further compromised by hints that there is something “horrible” about the whole exercise and that its very success indicates a disturbance in the detective himself. Douglas can precariously retain the moral and psychological distance from the killer only by walking a tightrope between scientific detachment and artistic dissimulation, between truth claims and fictional license. On the one hand, understanding the criminal’s subjectivity is the sine qua non of criminal profiling; on the other hand, we are pointedly reminded that “human behavior . . . is not an exact science” (12).

The ambiguity that pervades Douglas’s simulacrum of the sex murderer’s self-revealing narrative is just as evident in those narratives, which are indeed penned by killers. Disconcertingly, in speaking of true experience, which might be expected to correct the “literary bias” of social narratives, serial killers appear to be as confused about their motivation as everybody else. Analyzing the serial murderer Dennis Nilsen’s writing as extensively quoted in his biography *Killing for Company* by Brian Masters, Cameron and Frazer highlight its strangely vacillating and unreal quality: Nilsen not only seems not to remember the exact details of his crimes but more significantly “he has real difficulty in remembering why on earth he strangled the man in question” (150). Attempting to answer this question to himself in precisely the same way as the spellbound and repelled public attempts to wring the answer from bickering experts, Nilsen runs the whole gamut of options available to
him: occasionally, he talks of “compulsion,” occasionally of split personality, occasionally of freely chosen evil. Finally, the only way he can make sense of his own actions is to identify with society that sees him from the outside, a frightening and incomprehensible Other: “It would not do for me to escape just punishment. I am an irresponsible selfish bastard who deserves everything that is coming to him. Society has a right to call me a cold, mad killer. No other category fits my results” (151). Not only are the categories hopelessly confused (a “selfish bastard” is not the same thing as a madman), but more importantly, the resulting identification is nothing more than the tritest of all clichés. We would hardly congratulate a psychologist or a writer on their acumen if the best they could come up with in dissecting a criminal’s mind was “a cold, mad killer.” And yet this is not merely an identification but an identity, not a label but a lived experience.

Cameron and Frazer rightly emphasize that Nilsen’s writing illustrates the impossibility of escaping the discursive categories that construct the Real. The only tools that Nilsen has at his disposal to construct himself as a subject of and in discourse are conflicting narratives of criminology, psychology, and fiction. But, perhaps more importantly, he is also aware that these narratives fail to encompass his experience and yet cannot use this experience to counteract their failure: “In his dilemma, finding that the language cannot adequately describe what he is and utterly failing to make up what the language lacks, Dennis Nilsen graphically illustrates the extent to which our reality is bounded by discourse. For at the same time that none of our categories ‘fit the results,’ so they all do: they all make sense to us, they all give us a way of understanding Nilsen’s acts” (151).

But one cannot live with several mutually contradictory ways of understanding one’s actions, especially if the actions in question are mass slaughter and necrophilia. At the end Nilsen’s subjectivity becomes exemplary not so much of the “bad” or flawed subjectivity of the Other as of the impossible subjectivity of an object. Like nature, he obediently accepts any story that science chooses to tell about himself. Unlike nature, however, he casts himself into the identities projected by these stories, creating a generically hybrid and monstrously inconsistent selfhood.

There are two main modalities of the serial killer’s narrative identity. Both have the imprimatur of science; however, their underlying assumptions and their basic plots are strikingly different. The serial killer’s broken life-story vacillates between the two poles that might be called the Ape and the Minstrel, following the paradigms of Edgar Allan Poe’s classic detective tales.

In Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” Dupin, the prototype of all the subsequent Great Detectives and the man who brings the knowledge of the
“Calculus of Probabilities” to sleuthing, finds the main clue to the solution of the crime precisely in what has left the police baffled: “the seeming absence of motive . . . the atrocity of the murder” (154). As he dispassionately examines the horribly mangled bodies of Madame L’Espanye and her daughter, he concludes that no human perpetrator could possibly commit so bloodily senseless a deed. Therefore, the perpetrator is not human. Q.E.D. Dupin, who likes to boast that “most men, in respect to himself, [wear] windows in their bosoms” (144), is under no obligation to turn his mental searchlight onto the orangutan apprehended for the murder. The beastly nature of the beast is a sufficient, if tautological, motivation for its violence.

It is instructive to compare this tale with “The Purloined Letter,” in which Dupin solves the conundrum by penetrating the criminal’s subjectivity, deeply identifying with his motives and modes of thought. But in this story Minister D. commits an elegant theft, not a disgusting butchery. It seems to let Dupin off the hook; even if, as he half confesses later, there is something criminal about himself, the criminality of a clever blackmailer is not the same thing as that of a lust murderer. However, in “The Mystery of Marie Roget” the body which he “reads” in excruciating detail is that of a rape and murder victim, and the criminal with whom he identifies is a man of superior intelligence and cunning, a moral brute, perhaps, but not a dumb animal. Yet the deed is as cruel as the murders in the Rue Morgue, suggesting that lust murders can be committed not only by monstrous orangutans but also by people very similar to the urbane and intellectual detective.

The two extremes into which the narratives of murder, particularly of serial murder, tend to fall identify the murderer as either the bestial monster or as the detective’s double. In Mindhunter Douglas easily shifts from the serial killer as beast of prey to the serial killer as the guy next door. On the one hand, “It is the thrill of the hunt that gets these guys going. If you could get a galvanic skin response on one of them as he focuses in on his potential victim, I think you’d get the same reaction as from that lion in the wilderness” (1996, 25). On the other hand, “It isn’t always easy, and it isn’t always pleasant, putting yourself in these guys’ shoes— or inside their minds. But that’s what my people and I have to do. We have to try to feel what it was like for each one” (ibid. 26).

Both paradigms generate narratives of genesis. If the killer is a beast, one has to find out, as Dupin does, where it comes from. If the killer is “one of us,” one has to account— as Dupin does not— for his evil transformation. The clash and interweaving of these narratives is prefigured by the conversation between Frankenstein and his creature on the bleak slopes of Mont Blanc. Frankenstein dismisses the creature as inherently defective and views his murderous rampage as an inevitable result of his tainted birth. However,
the monster himself offers an entirely different interpretation in which "his vices are the children of a forced solitude" (147). The book remains open-ended, the two positions balanced against each other in a stalemate that generations of critics have attempted to break in vain. If for Seltzer the grand prototype of the serial killer is Dracula, I would suggest that Frankenstein’s creature, forever caught between the poles of “born bad” and “made bad,” offers a better model of the serial killer’s position in postmodern culture.

In Patricia Cornwell’s first novel *Post-mortem*, Dr. Scarpetta has a conversation on the nature of evil with her precocious ten-year-old niece.

“Maybe he [the current killer] doesn’t mean to hurt them, Aunt Kay.”

“T here are some people who are evil,” I quietly replied. “Like dogs, Lucy. Some dogs bite people for no reason. That’s something wrong with them. They’re bad and will always be bad.”

“Because people were mean to them first. That’s what makes them bad.”

“In some instances, yes,” I told her. “But not always. Sometimes there isn’t a reason. In a way, it doesn’t matter. People make choices. Some people would rather be bad, would rather be cruel. It’s just an ugly, unfortunate part of life.”

“Like Hitler,” she muttered. (39)

This is the Frankenstein debate all over again, in which the options are the ape and the minister, the naturally evil creature and the ordinary person who has gone bad because “people were mean” to him. And it is not likely to be settled any time soon.

**NATURAL BORN MONSTERS**

The view of the serial killer as a born monster goes back to Lombroso’s criminal anthropology, which viewed the offender as a creature of a different species, indelibly marked by the stigmata of biological degeneracy. Enrico Ferri, Lombroso’s son-in-law, explains the purpose of the new science: “as zoology is the natural history of animals, criminal anthropology is but the study of a single variety of mankind” (4). “Variety” here is understood in its primary biological sense: the criminal is, first and foremost, a body whose constitution lends itself to physical taxonomy. The secret of violence can be read in the shape of his skull, the form of his ear, the asymmetry of his face. The typological view of the criminal precedes Lombroso: Morel in 1847 talks about “the strange and unknown types which people our prisons” with the zeal of a naturalist discovering a whole new animal kingdom (qtd. in De Quiros 7). Lombroso himself studies criminality “among the lower organisms, detecting it even in the vegetable world,” and focuses on the “embryology of
The rhetoric of criminal anthropology nudges it closer and closer to natural, rather than human, sciences since its primary goal becomes “the organic study of the criminal, both anatomical and physiological” (Ferri 7).

The end result of criminal anthropology is the incorporation of crime: removed from the sphere of moral or even legal judgment, it becomes the matter not of doing but of being. Paradoxically, criminal activity itself ceases to be of any particular importance in defining the criminal or adjudicating the proper punishment, for if the criminal is born, his actions are mere symptoms, superficial expressions of his immutable nature which precedes and determines any particular instance of lawbreaking. A criminal, in fact, can be detected before he commits a crime. This shift from activity to corporeality is exemplified in De Quiros’s statement: “The criminal type, as the scholastics said of the soul, is in its entirety in the whole body and in each of its parts” (18). This, of course, is a profound break with the classical legal theory that views the criminal as a morally autonomous agent, whose exclusion from the community is the result of his own freely chosen misbehavior. “For classical theory, each being was a person, a subject of law, subject to law” (Pick 136). The criminal was a lapsed citizen and every citizen a potential criminal. Lombrosian criminal anthropology, however, renounces “the assumption that we can measure the moral culpability of the accused” (Ferri 165). Instead, the sole function of the judge is to be a competent taxonomist: “the one and only possible issue between the prosecution and the defence will be to determine, by the character of the accused and of his action, to what anthropological class he belongs” (164).

The criminal’s “class” is his species. In nineteenth-century racial anthropology, polygenism views different races as different species of the genus Homo, creating a science-fictional world populated by racial aliens. For criminal anthropology “born” criminals are “if not exactly . . . a degenerate species, at least . . . a degenerate variety of the human species” and the only “problem” they pose is the same as posed by any fast breeding vampire or werewolf, which is “to diminish their number as much as possible” (238–39). For the teratology of crime, every criminal is Frankenstein’s creature, a misshapen “fiend.” The body itself becomes the locus and breeding ground of evil.

What criminologist David Canter calls “the ‘monstrous creation’ vision of people” generates the poetics of display and menagerie. If serial killers are either “badly built or their original programming got out of control” (Canter 207), the defects, the “missing bits,” can be exposed to “the exercise and decisions of the gaze” (Foucault 1963, 89). Conceived as a disease, criminality blossoms into a show as the “disease, emerging before our gaze, becomes
embodied in a living organism” (ibid. 5). A serial killer is criminality personified, not an individual but an anonymous and typical representative of a species.

A lavishly illustrated coffee-table volume Serial Killers has recently been published by Time-Life Publishers. The book opens with a short introduction, titled “The Nature of the Beast” and printed above an enormous photo of two staring eyes. Turned into a beast of prey, the serial killer becomes the classical subject of the gaze: caged in a textual panopticon and pinned down by a definition. But if for Foucault incarceration in a see-through cage is one of the “technologies of individuals” which produce disciplined human subjects, the visual display of the serial killer makes him into an animal in a zoo, offering him a subject position on the murky biological boundary between humanity and beasthood.

Lombroso’s theory of atavism explains criminality as a throwback to earlier evolutionary stages, thus literally turning the criminal into an animal: “in the criminal there are numerous anatomical traits, especially craniological, that suggest the structure of primitive men and even of the leading mammals” (De Quiros 14). Poe’s orangutan would qualify as a full-fledged felon, after all. Despite its triteness, la bête humaine is far from a meaningless term of abuse. Rather, it expresses the shift from moral condemnation to biological classification. Stephen J. Giannangelo’s rhetoric in The Psychopathology of Serial Murder is an example of how easily the “beastliness” of murder can produce the “beast” of a murderer:

It has been said that the predatory behaviour of prey animals reflects “a neurological basis that is different from that of other kinds of behaviour.” In other words, predatory aggression is different from other aggression, in that it “does not show rage and is not interchangeable with flight behaviour, but is purpose-oriented, accurately aimed, and the tension ends with the accomplishment of the goal.” The calm, purposeful behavior of the accomplished serial murderer clearly reflects the actions of a predatory aggressor rather than the behavior of an excited, flight-stimulated organism. (23)

Since Giannangelo’s purpose is precisely to show that the behavior of serial killers has “a neurological basis that is different from that of other kinds” of violence, his analogy with a predator collapses into an equation that, perhaps unintentionally, resurrests Lombroso’s blunt claim that criminals are throwbacks to “leading mammals.” In Douglas’s comparison between a serial killer and a lion in the wilderness, quoted above, the same dynamics is at work: from the figurative to the literal, from the criminal being like an animal to the criminal being an animal. Animality indicates both the biological difference
that defines the serial killer as “a single variety of mankind” and his accessibility to the naturalistic gaze.

The continuity between the contemporary “monstrous creation” paradigm of the serial killer and Lombrosian criminal anthropology is most evident in their shared opposition to traditional legal theory and practice. If the criminal is “a degenerate species,” then the proper task of the court is not justice but classification. The criminal, not the crime, becomes the focus of the legal proceedings whose function is diagnostic: “to determine, by the character of the accused and of his action, to what anthropological class he belongs” (Ferri 164). In a move calculated to medicalize jurisprudence, Ferri boldly declares that “in every criminal trial the basis of inquiry is or ought to be formed by the data of criminal biology, psychology, and psycho-pathology” (170). He is indignant that ignorant magistrates poke fun at experts’ minute examinations of prisoners’ ears. In his recent book Serial Killers, Joel Norris cites twenty-three visible signs of genetic disorders in suspected serial murderers, which do, incidentally, include misshapen ears. Norris treats serial killing as “an infectious disease” and “a public health issue” (326). Killers are “physically and psychologically damaged people,” displaying unambiguous stigmata of their monstrosity: “scars on their bodies, missing fingers, evidence of previous contusions and multiple abrasions on and around the head and neck area” (17–18). The killer is both the carrier of the disease and the disease itself, deadly to his victims but ultimately the victim of an “epidemic” himself: “the epidemic of serial murder is spreading. Passed on from generation to generation . . . serial murder is actually a disease that is thriving in American society” (Norris 38). Redefined as a hereditary taint, serial killing must free itself from the obsolete shackles of morality and pass from the hands of lawyers into those of physicians. The question of the killer’s responsibility for his actions becomes irrelevant to the diagnosis of his inherent condition. Norris’s critique of the M'Naghten rules for determining legal insanity is couched in the terminology of scientific progress: “To premise a legal definition of insanity on the M'Naghten rules is like applying nineteenth-century medicine to treating cancer or AIDS” (19). The irony, of course, is that Norris paraphrases the criticism of classical legal theory by Lombrosian criminal anthropology, thus, in fact, applying “nineteenth-century medicine” to his newly discovered malady.

Criminological descriptions of the serial killer as an embodiment of a deadly disease or a beast of prey pave the way for the serial killer as a monster. This is the mold for the serial killer in popular fiction and film. Perhaps the most famous popular-culture serial killer is Dr. Hannibal Lecter in Thomas Harris’s The Silence of the Lambs and its sequels, played in the film versions by Anthony Hopkins. Lecter is a prodigy, an evil genius gifted with marvelously acute senses and an uncanny psychological penetration. But his many gifts,
as in the case of Dracula, only underscore his essential monstrosity. In Red Dragon, the first book in the series, he is described by the protagonist thus: “He’s a monster. I think of him as one of those pitiful things that are born in hospitals from time to time. They feed it, and keep it warm, but they don’t put it on the machines and it dies. Lecter is the same way in his head, only he looks normal and nobody could tell” (56). Lecter, in fact, is even physically monstrous, though not in the spectacular way of the Red Dragon, another serial butcher whom he helps to track down. The Red Dragon has a “bat-like” face with a cleft palate; the dapper Dr. Lecter hides his six-fingered left hand.

The assimilation of serial murderers to legendary monsters proceeds apace as, on the one hand, cultural scholars like Seltzer find Dracula and Mr. Hyde in every Ted Bundy, while on the other hand, true-crime writers suggest mythical monsters are merely serial killers writ large. Douglas writes, for example: “Serial murder may, in fact, be a much older phenomenon than we realize. The stories and legends that have filtered down about witches, and werewolves, and vampires may have been a way of explaining outrages so hideous that no one in the small and close-knit towns of Europe and early America could comprehend the perversities we now take for granted. Monsters had to be supernatural creatures. They could not be just like us” (1996, 30).

The last sentence exemplifies the ambiguity inherent in viewing the serial killer as a monstrous creation: monsters, by definition, are not “like us.” The rhetoric of monstrosity, poised on the borderline between metaphor and medicine, forces such an extreme separation between the killer and the ordinary run of humanity that the former appears to be a force of nature, vicious and brutal to be sure, but as impervious to psychological analysis as Poe’s orangutan. For Norris the serial killer is “a nonpersonality type—a nosferatu,” Dracula without his fangs (71). He also explains the legends of vampires and werewolves as somewhat exaggerated but essentially accurate reflections of “individuals who seemed to kill out of a blood lust for the act of murder itself and not from any other motivation” (72). But if so, any attempt by the judicial system to treat “nosferatus” “as though they had volition and were capable of managing their own behavior . . . as though they were within the range of normal human existence,” is misguided. For Norris, serial killers are literally the Undead “who seem to come alive only during the episodic cycle of murder” (60–61). Such a drastic denial of agency is bound to feed contempt for the judicial system, hopelessly mired in the old-fashioned ideas of choice and responsibility. The only certain cure for the plague of serial killing appears to be the one practiced by Dr. Van Helsing, to stop the spread of Dracula and his vampiric cohorts.

If the monstrous creation paradigm is problematic legally and morally, it is even more so narratively. A narrative is supposed to provide the satisfaction of
an ending, to tie up all the loose ends in a decisive closure. But at its extreme, the notion of the killer as a natural-born monster is antinarrative. As a monster on display, the serial killer is frozen into an image whose circulation in culture becomes possible only as an endless reproduction of the same frightening icon, a serial proliferation of simulacra which unnervingly imitates the killer’s own modus operandi. The serial killer acts out a fantasy whose realization involves a chain of substitutions, anonymous victims being merely disposable props in some violent tableau. The narrative of the killer’s desire is looped into repetition. Similarly, the narrative of the public desire for the killer to be known, explained, and exorcised is looped by the typological model into reiteration of the same emblem of monstrosity. Denied the release of an ending, the discourse of serial killing fragments into a series of snapshots that exhibit violence but do not exorcise it. The literature of serial murder, both fictional and criminological, skirts perilously close to the sublime spectacle of fantastic horror.

One way to avoid this ruination of narrative is through the plot of secrecy, in which the serial killer and the police or the criminologist assume the classic roles that Stevenson called “Mr. Hide” and “Mr. Seek.” A Mr. Hide’s monstrosity must be hidden and invisible. If serial killers are, as Norris claims, “obviously physically and psychologically damaged people,” the task of detection becomes simplified out of existence: arrest anybody who displays the tell-tale signs of the “disease” (17). The Lombrosian approach, with its emphasis on the visual, can become embarrassing: what is the function of the criminologist if any rookie can apprehend hereditary criminals by being on the lookout for large ears and prognathous jaws? Both in Red Dragon and in Alienist, in which the murderers are deformed, the reader, after a while, feels impatient with the slow-witted society that allows people branded with such an obvious mark of Cain to walk freely in its midst. The monstrous creation paradigm lacks narrative suspense, which, however, can be supplied by the poetics of hidden monstrosity.

Within this poetics, the signs of the serial killer’s disorder are not self-evident stigmata but rather symptoms that Carlo Ginzburg describes as “infinitesimal traces that permit the apprehension of a deeper, otherwise inaccessible reality” (101). The meaning of violence is hidden within the criminal’s secret anatomy, which necessitates the epistemology of dissection, bent upon rooting out the mystery that seems to be retreating deeper and deeper into the body. Now the criminologist pursues not the visible signs of monstrosity but faulty chromosomes, brain damage, chemical and hormonal imbalance. Apprehended serial killers are often subjected to a battery of psychological and physiological tests meant to elicit the secret of their deviance. There is nothing particularly new in this corporeal sleuthing of Norris’s “new criminologists.”
Lombroso's eureka moment, as he describes it in Criminal Man, occurs at the dissecting table when he reads in a criminal's misshapen skull the cause of his wrongdoings. From the moment of its birth, "essential" criminality is seen as both corporeal and elusive, blatant and hidden, invisible to the untrained eye but triumphantly revealed to the probing gaze and sharp scalpel of the scientist:

"This was not merely an idea but a revelation. At the sight of this skull, I seemed to see all of a sudden, lighted up as a vast plain under a flaming sky, the problem of the nature of the criminal—an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals. Thus were explained anatomically the enormous jaws, high cheek bones, prominent superciliary arches, solitary lines in the palms, extreme size of the orbits, handle-shaped ears found in criminals, savages and apes, insensitivity to pain, extremely acute sight, tattooing, excessive idleness, love of orgies, and the irresponsible craving of evil for its own sake, the desire not only to extinguish life in the victim, but to mutilate the corpse, tear its flesh and drink its blood. (xiv–xv)"

Within the narrative of the secret, the serial killer's body and psyche appear as double-layered, combining the deceptively normal surface and the monstrous depth: "the overwhelming majority of serial killers seem on the surface to be normal-looking individuals. . . . But in reality they are walking time bombs ready to ignite at just the right combination of events. . . . An individual who is on the verge of becoming a serial killer may seem like a dormant volcano. No one knows that beneath the usually bland exterior is a psyche in turmoil . . ." (Norris 40–41).

However, precisely because the work of the criminologist consists in opening up the killer, it bears an unsettling resemblance to the killer's own craving for opening up the victim. The criminal and the criminologist are locked together in a Jekyll-and-Hyde relationship, attested to by the persistent rumor that Jack the Ripper was a physician and incarnated in Dr. Hannibal Lecter, a brilliant savant of the criminal mind, including his own. Cornwell's Dr. Kay Scarpetta is a forensic pathologist whose work is extensively documented in the novels. In detailed descriptions of autopsies, the Scarpetta novels seek to titillate the reader with a show of corporeal vulnerability, while simultaneously positioning their heroine on the side of the angels: it is she, after all, who has to confront the serial killers' handiwork in order to aid their just punishment. But since the scene of the actual murders is generally left to the imagination, Dr. Scarpetta, in cutting open the victims' bodies, appears not so much the killer's nemesis as his proxy.
The doubling of the killer and the detective/physician/psychologist whose function it is to cure the “disease” of serial killing appears with stunning regularity in fictional works which otherwise seem to conform to the monstrous creation paradigm. A gain, the roots of this phenomenon seem coterminous with serial killing itself. Not only Jekyll–Hyde but also Dr. Van Helsing, the fearless vampire killer, with his sharp stake, seems—surreptitiously—to mirror his adversary with his sharp tooth. In Arthur Machen’s 1917 novella “The Terror,” a suspected serial killer is profiled as “a madman only at intervals,” with a “fluid and unstable” personality which is not a unity but “a mere polity, a state in which dwelt many strange and incongruous citizens,” unaware of each other’s existence (351). The man who expounds this theory ends up by suggesting that the lawyer who heads the investigation into mysterious deaths may be the culprit without having “the faintest suspicion that there is another Llewelyn within him, a Llewelyn who follows murder as a fine art” (352). The monster within the law-abiding citizen can appear as another personality such as the Red Dragon, whom the killer perceives as something external to himself or as the “real face” of the detective, as in James Patterson’s Kiss the Girls where the serial rapist and killer Casanova turns out to be a police officer on the case.

The monstrous creation paradigm of the serial killer generates a paradox that explodes the very identity it assigns to its subject. The location of criminality in the body, meant to separate cleanly the normal and the abnormal human species, ends up blurring the very distinction it is supposed to uphold. Once the criminal anatomy becomes a secret anatomy, hidden in the deepest recesses of the body and accessible only to a diligent search, who can be completely sure of escaping its taint? The actions of the psycho-killer and the physician become structurally identical: digging for the secret of the Other that may turn out to be the secret of the self. The monster is one of us, after all.

A FINE LINE

In Cornwell’s From Potter’s Field, Dr. Scarpetta has a peculiar conversation with her psychologist whom she asks to dissect her latest adversary, performing on his mind the same operation she herself performs on the bodies of his victims. The psychologist says, simply and chillingly: “I don’t give a damn why any of them do it . . . I think they should all be hanged” (255). The reason for this default of professional duty may be seen in the dialogue between Scarpetta and her niece quoted above. The niece defends the killer as a past victim, providing her own childish answer to the question “why”: because “people were mean to him.” A psychological analysis of a serial killer
may lead to understanding and then to forgiveness. As Wendy Lesser tentatively suggests: “But is it not possible for murderers to be a different kind of victim . . .?” (83).

Seen as a victim, the serial killer becomes the product of a childhood trauma, most often of abuse. The victimization paradigm and the monster paradigm are, in practice, not mutually exclusive. Most criminologists, even those committed to a genetic or physiological explanation of serial violence, readily admit the etiological contribution of the environment. True-crime books are omnivorous, adopting both explanations with ease. In a typically mixed presentation, Margaret Cheney in *Why—The Serial Killer in America* notes that “many such killers were severely abused as children,” while at the same time referring to serial murder as “disease” (xi). Stephen Giannangelo, in a much more serious investigation of violence, gives equal weight to biological and environmental factors: “The combination of physical predisposition and environmental stressors helps develop a pattern of maladjustment with two major consequences: a distorted sense of self and the dysfunctional sexual component” (27). John Douglas, while stressing that serial killers are not “like us,” is not particularly enthusiastic about straightforward biological explanations. Referring to the Speck case, in which the murderer had originally been supposed to have a genetic defect that was later disproved, he denies that any of “his” killers were biologically abnormal (1996, 21).

However, taken as narrative paradigms, the monstrous creation and the victimization stories are quite different, both structurally and ideologically. The psychologist’s brusque refusal to understand the killer testifies to the fear of finding him pitiable or, worse, sympathetic. The conversation between Scarpetta and her niece recalls the anguished confrontation between Frankenstein and his creature, in which the origin of the monster’s violence becomes the moral crux of their relationship. If the creature is “born bad,” Frankenstein is right in denying all his pleading for justice and recognition as the low cunning of a hereditary criminal. If the creature is forced into violence by his parent’s rejection and society’s cruelty, he is a victim and then Frankenstein himself is rightfully to bear the blame for all the corpses he leaves in his wake. Despite the psychologist’s disclaimer, “I don’t give a damn,” it does matter whether the killer her client is hunting is viewed as an evil alien or as an abused and traumatized human being.

Narratively too, the two paradigms produce quite different stories for their subjects. The monstrous creation narrative focuses on the aftermath of violence; it is the story of search and exposure. The “victimization” story works from the crime backward to account for the genesis of the killer. It allows a psychological identification with the murderer, which is stalled by biological determinism. A monster is the Other, incomprehensible and alien. His sub-
lime subjectivity may be seductive, but it remains out of reach for an ordinary human subject. The victim of abuse, on the other hand, is instantly comprehensible. If we go back in time far enough, we encounter—as in Alienist and The Red Dragon—the serial killer as a helpless child. Even in Postmortem, where Dr. Scarpetta resolutely refuses to consider her niece's proposition that "people were mean to him first," the FBI profiler on the case brings back the victimization theory by suggesting that the "killer was from a 'dysfunctional home' and might have been abused, either physically or emotionally, by his mother" (78).

As the series progresses, Scarpetta seems more and more obviously torn between her professional need to understand the mind of the killer and her resolute denial of any human kinship with the monster. In From Potter's Field Scarpetta encounters a "malignant genius," Temple Gault, who seems beyond any psychological explanation. No profile for him, he just "does what he pleases" (39). Gault defies both models of serial killing: reared in a decent family, he cannot be easily seen as the product of a biological taint either, since he has a "good" twin sister whom he cold-bloodedly murders. A monster is a monster is a monster. When asked what Gault is, Scarpetta answers, "There is no description for what he is" (29). And while she diligently delves into Gault's childhood, all she discovers is the identity of his victim but not of himself.

However, the generic form of the crime thriller inexorably pushes Dr. Scarpetta to account somehow for Gault. And since she cannot do it, the text lapses into incoherence, petering out in an unconvincing gunfight. This is not an option for criminology. Science of crime requires an explanation of the killer's motivation, which always incurs the danger of sliding into empathy. On the one hand, according to Douglas, identification is the sine qua non of detection: "We must try to feel what it was like for each one" (1991, 26) Yet, on the other hand, "feeling like" can all too easily mutate into "being like." The horror of being sucked into the killer's mind through understanding it accounts for the narrator's outburst at the end of Alienist:

I suppose that I, too, should have been deeply gratified at the results of this initial interview; yet as I watched Beecham answer Laszlo's questions—his voice growing ever more compliant and even childish, with none of the threatening, arrogant tone he'd used when we were his prisoners—I became powerfully irritated, disturbed at the very core of my spirit. This irritation soon became outrage, as if this man had no right to exhibit any pitiable human qualities in the light of all he'd done. Who was this enormous grotesque, I thought, to sit there confessing and sniveling like one of the children he'd slaughtered? (570)
Seeing the child-killer as a sniveling kid can flip into seeing any sniveling kid—including one’s own childhood image of oneself—as a potential child-killer. Moore shoots the murderer in a futile attempt to reestablish the boundary between detective and criminal, victim and victimizer. The taint of violence, however, freely circulates across this boundary, carried precisely by those strategies of knowledge that have created it in the first place. In one of the episodes of the TV show The X-Files, the profiler who for three years has pursued a serial killer commits copycat murders after the killer is arrested, having been infected by his madness through a too-close penetration of his mind. The detective in Lewis Shiner’s horror story “Love in Vain” realizes that the serial killer Charlie, whose gruesome exploits he investigates, is part of himself, in fact part of every male, an incarnation of sexual violence implicit in “normal” male sexuality. The mindhunter is both empowered and disabled by his affinity with his prey, as Douglas illustrates in an episode he recounts with wry humor. During a conversation with FBI agents, Richard Speck turns to the agents and says: “You fucking guys are crazy. It must be a fine line separates you from me” (1996, 21).

AM I EVIL?

The narrative aporia of Frankenstein prefigures the aporia of the serial killer’s identity. The two paradigms described above cannot be reconciled, but neither of them is sufficient on its own. Both fail to account for the violence, which necessitates their deployment in the first place. Defining the serial killer as a monster offers a temporary relief from the emotional shock of murder: “Branded a maniac, beast, monster, or vampire, the sexual murderer often escapes psychiatric and legal definition by moving into a special category beyond human terms” (Tatar 26). However, neither criminology nor fictions of crime can accept this “special category” without giving up their raison d’être: the will to know. Their plots require the orderly progression from question to answer, from the killer’s modus operandi to his identity. If the mind of the killer is an alien, impenetrable mystery “beyond human terms,” this progression is stalled.

The victimization paradigm offers easy understanding but leads to the slippery slope of sympathetic identification, at the bottom of which the killer becomes “one of us.” As Charlie says in “Love in Vain”: “You can’t never get rid of me because I’m inside you” (382). But even if the serial killer is Everyman, not every man is a serial killer. Even if inside each murderer hides an abused child, not all abused children grow up to kill. Both seductive and sickening, the pull of identification with the mind of the killer is checked by the gap between fantasy and deed. “Through murder and mayhem, the serial
killer literally chases his dreams” (Fox and Levin 51). But though it may be argued that, as Jocasta says to Oedipus, “all men have dreams like this,” obviously not all men go on to make these dreams real.

Thus, if the monstrous creation paradigm fails to account for the killer’s similarity to the ordinary run of humanity, the victimization paradigm cannot explain his difference. Turned into a monster-hunt, criminology has to abjure its scientific claim to understand the serial murderer’s psychology and motivation. Attuned to the killer’s history of victimization, it fails to account for the unique horror of his violence. And mixed together, however pragmatically useful this may appear, the two paradigms create a narrative muddle. Their blending always fails as they work at cross-purposes, fracturing the text. The real nature of the serial killer is, perhaps, best acknowledged by these fractures, just as the Real can only be glimpsed in the rifts and cracks of the Symbolic.

The doubling of the serial killer in Thomas Harris’s Red Dragon and The Silence of the Lambs provides a startling example of that. Lecter, the psychotic cannibalistic monster (who is also, as many critics have noted, the most appealing character in the books and the films) functions as the full-fledged Great Detective, while the FBI agents Clarice Starling and Jack Crawford play Watson to his Holmes. He appears as a hybrid of Dupin and Minister D., with the ravenous orangutan thrown in for good measure. But ultimately his subjectivity remains the only unsolved (and unsolvable) enigma of the novels, while he easily gets under the skin of everybody else, criminal and noncriminal alike. A mindhunter in his own right, Lecter reconstructs the twisted life stories of Red Dragon and Buffalo Bill, whose violence is ultimately explained as an outcome of severely abused childhood. They are sick, delusional, victimized. Red Dragon is physically deformed, but the text, after some vacillation, settles for the claim that his pathology stems from the rejection and mockery occasioned by his defect rather than from any biological taint. Both he and Buffalo Bill are descendants of Frankenstein’s creature as he sees himself: monsters “made bad,” not “born bad.”

Lecter, on the other hand, seems to be just the opposite: Crawford defines him as a born monster whose evil is a result of some incomprehensible snag in brain chemistry. However, Lecter himself is quite aware of this explanation and mercilessly ridicules it in a remarkable conversation with Clarice Starling who seeks to “quantify” him: “Nothing happened to me, Officer Starling. I happened. You can’t reduce me to a set of influences. You’ve given up good and evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling. You’ve got everybody in moral dignity pants—nothing is ever anybody’s fault. Look at me, Officer Starling. Can you stand to say I’m evil? Am I evil, Officer Starling?” (T. Harris 1989, 20).
“Nothing happened to me” is the ultimate rebuff of all narratives of the killer’s genesis. Neither made nor born a monster, Lecter freely chooses monsterhood. Lesser notes that the film audience cheers for Lecter and explains our “sympathies” with him by the process of psychological identification (51). However, Lecter has no psychology; he is a walking abstraction of autonomous, self-willed subjecthood, the generic Man of philosophy reincarnated as a mass murderer. Unlike Buffalo Bill and Red Dragon, he has no story, he is not shackled by the past or pinned down by an explanation. He flaunts his conscious and carefully tended evil as a badge of freedom from both nature and nurture. In a sense, he is the most traditional identity of all, the ahistorical incorporeal identity of a moral monad. And yet, in the age of scientific causality, of narratives of origin that strive to bind every subjectivity by a memory chain, Lecter’s moral absolutism appears seductively anarchic. He is, in fact, Everyman, but Everyman as a tabula rasa of ethical choice, not as the hidden destructive presence beyond the reach of consciousness. He is not a serial killer inside each of us but a serial killer that each of us can become if we so choose. Lecter the gentleman killer holds the impossible promise of a nonnarrative identity, not conditioned by the past or glumly marching toward the unavoidable future, but created anew in each moment of choice. It is for the sake of this promise that we are willing to forgive his murders. This is why the author, with the connivance of the reader, kills off Buffalo Bill and lets Lecter go free, even though they both commit the same repulsive crime. Bill kills and flays women to make himself a suit of female skin; Lecter escapes imprisonment by tearing off a warder’s face and wearing it as a mask. But Bill is an essentialist; he strives to fashion a real identity for himself because he believes becoming a woman will liberate his true self. Lecter is a bricoleur who creates disposable identities, an opportunist who refuses to be bound by the psychiatric bildungsromans he so deftly imposes upon others. For the culture tired of the stalemate between Frankenstein and his creature, it seems to be a relief to meet a monster who cheerfully says: “I am evil because this is what I have chosen to be.”

MEMORY CHAIN

Of course, a real-life Lecter would be quite a different matter. We applaud Lecter’s sovereign self for the same reason we are seduced by the visionary appeal of horror fiction and film. But meeting the monsters of Midian (see chapter 1) in a dark alley would be a different order of experience. There were, in fact, serial killers who explicitly attempted to realize in their lives the antinarrative freedom of the sublime. Ian Brady, who, together with Myra
Hindley, committed the Moor Murders, was described by his biographer as “a disciple of the philosophy of amoralism and the absolute right of the individual to engage in whatever evil he chooses” (Cameron and Frazer 140). Cameron and Frazer describe Brady’s goal as “masculine transcendence,” a gender-inflected equivalent of the violent sublime. But they fall into the trap of perceiving this transcendence as a coherent paradigm that can, finally, provide an overarching explanation for all serial murderers— if not Buffalo Bill, then Dr. Lecter; if neither a born monster nor a victim, then, perhaps, a too-single-minded reader of Sade. But whatever Brady might have thought of himself, in the long run the sublime experience he sought exploded his identity as surely as the vacillation between different postures exploded the identities of Bundy and Nilsen.

Presupposing that at any given moment one is confronted by two equally weighed ethical alternatives denies the importance of the self-awareness of the past. The dice of choice are always loaded by memory. Lecter’s sublime self is impossible precisely because the memory of his past crimes contributes nothing to the current state of his personality. He has no story; his subjectivity is flattened out into the perpetual Grand Guignol show. But such subjectivity cannot be sustained over time.

Criminologist David Canter sharply critiques both the monstrous creation and the victimization paradigms, noting that both are of little practical use in apprehending criminals. In line with his narrative approach to psychology, he tries to pinpoint precisely what makes the serial killer’s inner plot different from the life-stories of ordinary individuals.

The question still remains. Are there different types of plot? Is there a finite limit to the plots available? How are the plots constructed? Also we have no firm, general answers to these questions, it is clear that the storylines that unfold for violent criminals are a limited subset of all possible life stories. Comedy and satire are certainly not for them and it seems unlikely that the optimistic objectives of romance fall within their realm of thought. Killers and rapists live broken, destructive, tragic lives. (234)

Thus, serial killers seem to have access to the grandest narrative of Western culture, tragedy. But, in fact, Canter’s limited list of genres hardly does justice to the multiple generic molds of popular culture, which constitute the contemporary subject’s reservoir of life-stories. Not Hamlet or King Lear but Dracula and Frankenstein are likely models for a narrative of motiveless violence. What Seltzer contemptuously calls the “pop-psychology” and “pop-sociology” of serial murder are new genres of selfhood that emerge in parallel with the generic explosion of mass culture.
But even within these genres, serial killers' self-narratives are generically contradictory, fragmented, broken beyond repair. Rather than tidily conforming to a particular paradigm, never mind how tragic, serial killers, as Nilsen's writings graphically demonstrate, seem to possess a number of irreconcilable stories, bits and pieces pasted together from a pile of random sources. Ted Bundy was generous with explanations of his murderous rampage for the benefit of the audience of experts, lawyers, friends, and general public mesmerized by the hideous enigma of this smooth, attractive, bright young man who charmed women at day and butchered them at night. He blamed pornography; he blamed his genes, he said that sometimes he felt "like a vampire," he talked of unspecified "unfulfilled desires" which transcended the sexual, he threw in a dash of mysticism, he declared himself to be "the most cold-blooded sonofabitch you'll ever meet" (Serial Killers 6–48). No doubt, many (or most) of these explanations were adopted for specific purposes, to impress the court, to charm a psychologist, or to stay the execution. But it would be wrong to presuppose that somewhere, underneath this ill-assorted pile of clichés, a real Ted Bundy was hidden, intelligible to himself if not to others. Rather, it seems, that as Cameron and Frazer put it, the "discourse by which sex-killing is made intelligible to us, whether it comes from the killer, a psychiatrist or The Sun, is not parasitic on some higher truth: it is the heart of the matter and the rest is silence" (xii).

But silence can be more powerful than words, the determining absence more central than the weakly cohering presence. Serial killing is never made fully intelligible because it is a locus where several discourses collide and shatter into mismatched fragments, which cannot be fitted together into a neat picture puzzle. Like their grand fictional archetype, Frankenstein's monster, serial killers are patchwork creatures, made of crudely stitched partial self-hoods that never solidify into a coherent narrative subjectivity. Canter suggests that we all have a "public" and a "private" narrative of the self, and what distinguishes violent criminals is the radical incompatibility of their "hidden narratives" with their public stories (233). While this Jekyll-and-Hyde model may account for somebody like Bundy, with other serial killers the "public" narrative amounts to hardly more than a threadbare social mask. Rather, what distinguishes a serial killer is the radical incompatibility of all the narratives of the self that make up his subjectivity. In the ritual enacting of his violent fantasy, the killer attempts to glue together his fragmented self with blood. However, the repetitiveness of his murders serves only to mirror the reproduction of loose stories, unanchored in the terra firma of reality, which float around his disintegrating self.

The fragmentation and aporia of subjectivity are not the exclusive province of serial killers. However, precisely the extremity of their self-construction
and self-deconstruction and the glaring failure of human sciences to come to grips with their motivations raise the question of what is missing in the narratology of the self. As I have suggested, the missing category is the violent sublime. However, on the level of psychological motivation, its counterpart is randomness and free choice. Opting for the “high” of violence need not be anchored in any hidden irresistible compulsion. However, once made, such a choice has ineluctable consequences that deform the narrative of identity, pushing it as close as a human subject can come to the broken narrative of the sublime monster.

Having spent an inordinate number of pages on explaining the scientific principles of criminal profiling, having variously suggested that the typical serial killer is a beast of prey, a product of improper upbringing, and a plaything of irresistible and deviant sexuality, John Douglas pauses in the middle of describing the Hansen child murder case to deliver the surprising statement: “I have spent my career studying the complex motivations of criminals, but basically, all the prior influences on an individual resolve down to one key element: the choice to commit the crime” (1997, 98).

Choice is the one element of a narrative that cannot be predicted in advance since it does not obey the law of strict causality. By emphasizing choice, Douglas indirectly renounces his own project. All his psychological profiles are now bound to be approximate, stochastic, imprecise—mere convenient grids forced upon volatile reality. But by giving up the attempt to impose upon the serial killer a typological identity, he returns to him his individual subjectivity. This subjectivity now consists in the freedom to choose, but the choice it makes places it beyond all and every generic mold of selfhood available in the cultural repertoire. By choosing extreme, repeated, and aimless violence, the serial killer breaks away from the limitations of discursive identity, only to find himself stranded in the silence of no-identity, in the mute meaninglessness of the Real, in the wasteland of the sublime.

To answer “yes” to Lecter’s question “Am I evil?” is to accept that there is no deep secret, no hidden truth in the serial killer’s life-story. It is to view his self-chosen identity as irrevocably broken, the psychological equivalent of the hacked bodies of his victims. But this means renouncing the project of human sciences, especially criminology, which has been articulated by one of its early practitioners as follows: “the function of [criminal] psychology is widening to acquire knowledge not only of the conceptions of human beings of themselves but also of everything which occurs or has occurred within them, in other words, not only of their conceptions of, but also the whole of the objective reality of, their psychic life” (Bjerre 16). But if there is no such “objective reality,” if the criminal’s conception of himself is a sufficient determinant of his actions, and if, moreover, this conception is pliant and multiform, constantly
revised by the choices of the hour, the project collapses. And together with it goes the institutionalized identity of the scientist, the mindhunter, the Great Detective who is uniquely equipped to penetrate the criminal's heart of darkness. This cannot be allowed to happen. Thus Douglas retreats from his notion of choice, going back to his increasingly more convoluted, increasingly more desperate attempts to solve, once and for all, the mystery of the criminal mind.

Both criminology and fiction follow him. Since to accept the indeterminacy of identity, the free choice of violence, and the mocking denial of causality exemplified by Dr. Lecter means abandoning their commitment to the scientific paradigm of rational explanation, narratives of serial killing quickly bring out a couple of representative Buffalo Bills, profile them out of existence, reduce the bodies of their victims to numbered exhibits of material evidence, and offer a new and improved theory of bad genes or bad upbringing. After every encounter with the indeterminacy of the Real, narrative picks up the shreds of its exploded models and patiently plods on to construct yet another impossible combination of monster and victim, as science and fiction endlessly weave their narrative nets around the mystery of violence without ever catching their prey.