

**THE REPRESENTATIONS OF  
SERIAL KILLERS**

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**Abstract.**

In this thesis, I have analysed representations of a selection of fictional and factual serial killers from Thomas de Quincey to Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to the autobiographical narratives of real life serial killers Carl Panzram, Donald Gaskins and Ian Brady. My analysis of these texts identifies the portrayals of serial killers in terms of representations as aesthetic, existential, socially othered phenomena. The thesis proceeds from the premise that serial killer narratives often obscure the existential brute reality of murder. As such, I examine serial killing vis-à-vis attempted explanatory shifts in such narratives which represent serial murder and serial killers in terms of aesthetic, psychopathological, moral/religious/supernatural and socio-political phenomena, and I investigate the implications of these shifts. I focus initially on Romantic ideas of the self, and in the relationship between the 'outsider' artist/poet and the textual emergence of the figure of the solitary 'serial' murderer in the early nineteenth century, particularly in relation to De Quincey's aesthetic murder essays. Subsequent fluctuations of the representation of serial killing between mental-health, law-and-order and political/social discourses are discussed in relation to the subsequent texts. I conclude by examining cognitive dissonance theory, A.E. Van Vogt's description of the Violent Man, and James Gilligan's theories on violence, in order to propose a possible synergetic response to narratives and representations of serial killers and serial killing.

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## Introduction

The terms 'serial killing' and 'serial killer' are, perhaps, somewhat morally and legally misleading labels. Killing is not always illegal. In self-defence or in war, the killing of one human being by another may not, depending on the particular circumstances, be deemed to be illegal. Murder, however, as 'the unlawful premeditated killing of one person by another' (O.E.D.) is, by definition, unlawful. A 'serial killer', then, may not necessarily be acting outside of the law. A serial murderer, however, always does.

In his book *Serial Killers: They Kill to Live* (2005), Rodney Castleden includes such figures as William the Conqueror, Henry VIII, Joseph Stalin, Ho Chi Minh and Saddam Hussein among the more consensually accepted figures of the serial killer 'canon', such as Jack the Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe, Jeffery Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy. However, to charge political figures and heads of state, or 'tyrant killers' as Castleden calls them, of being serial killers is problematic in the extreme,

for such people seldom actively and directly participate in the killing of other people. Furthermore, such people, although powerful in the context of their own states, regimes or political movement, could perhaps rather be considered to be the symbolic heads of much larger mass movements. Although, from a viewpoint external to the political context in which such tyrants operated, they are undoubtedly complicit in the deaths of many people, they do not generally meet the popularly accepted criteria of the lone serial killer operating on the fringes of society. Castleden's inclusion of political and state figures among the role of serial killers is, in any case, rare. Nor would we normally consider such a person as the United Kingdom's erstwhile official hangman, Albert Pierrepoint, as a serial killer either, as he was acting as an agent of state. While Pierrepoint undoubtedly killed people, he did not murder them.

While the term 'serial killer' should, in my opinion, be replaced by the term 'serial murderer' to avoid ambiguity, I have nonetheless generally chosen to use the term 'serial killer' instead, in part to reflect its popular cultural resonance. I have also used 'serial killer' to emphasise that the term itself leaves out the connotations of the word 'murder,' and in so doing also somewhat obscures the actual processes of the human act of murder: the planning; the suffering; the repercussions. The snappier and more popularly catchy 'serial killer', however, is vaguer, more romantic, and, unfortunately, lighter than the darker and less evasive term 'serial murderer'. The popularity of 'serial killer' over 'serial murderer' perhaps provides a clue as to the misplaced popularity and fascination in these factual and fictional people. I will therefore tend to use 'serial killer' instead of 'serial murderer' throughout this thesis

as an acknowledgement of this factor, but I do not use the former term with any relish, but, rather, with some regret that the term exists at all.

There is no real consensus as to what constitutes a serial killer. Phillip Jenkins defines serial killing (or murder) ‘as involving an offender associated with the killing of at least four victims, over a period of greater than seventy-two hours’ (1994: 23). *The Crime Classification Manual* states that ‘serial murder generally involves three or more victims’ with a ‘cooling-off period between murders’ of ‘days, months, or years’ (Douglas, John E. et al 2006: 461). For Steven Egger, serial murder ‘occurs when one or more individuals ... commits a second murder and/or subsequent murder’ (quoted in Hickey 2006: 19).

Nor is there a consensus on who coined the term ‘serial killer’, although it has been attributed to Robert Ressler of the F.B.I. in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Mentions of serial murder, however, predate Ressler’s coinage, and as far back as 1838 Thomas de Quincey writes of a sequence of murders which ‘were understood to be no casual occurrences, but links in a systematic series’.<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon of serial killing is often historically traced back to 1888,<sup>3</sup> with the emergence of the unidentified, and much speculated upon, figure of a murderer known by the sobriquet of Jack the Ripper (or Red Jack, or Leather-Apron) in London, who killed a number of prostitutes in the East End of London.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert K. Ressler is a former FBI agent and psychological profiler who co-authored the *Crime Classification Manual*. He is also the author and co-author of several books, including *Whoever Fights Monsters* (1992), in which he claims to have coined the term ‘serial killer’.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Avenger*, published in *Blackwood’s Magazine* in August, pp. 208-33.

<sup>3</sup> ‘The prototype of the serial killer’, writes Mark Seltzer, ‘is of course, the case of Jack the Ripper’ (1998: 8).

Major media, and therefore public, interest in serial killers peaked again in the 1960s, following the release of Alfred Hitchcock's film *Psycho* in 1960, and then again following the release of the film version of Thomas Harris's thriller *The Silence of the Lambs*, in 1991. The serial killer is primarily an aesthetic phenomenon; the crimes of actual serial killers have been framed, re-imagined and re-sold in a variety of ways, from true-crime books and speculative fiction (factual fiction, such as Emelyn Williams's account of the 'Moors murderers' in the 1960s, *Beyond Belief*) to a plethora of films and television documentaries and often lurid media coverage. To all but a very few victims, their families, law enforcement agencies and associated medical personnel, serial killers are primarily media creations. Particular examples of serial killer representations include The Smiths' song 'Suffer Little Children,' (the title of which alludes to the victims of the 'Moors murderers', Ian Brady and Myra Hindley) and Blake Morrison's poem 'The Ballad of the Yorkshire Ripper' which is a vernacular account by an unknown speaker of the crimes of Peter Sutcliffe, the titular 'Ripper': 'Like most serial killers', notes Morrison, 'Peter Sutcliffe has left his mark on literature'.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, Throbbing Gristle's sinister 18-minute track 'Very Friendly' (1975) offers a detached spoken-lyric, kitchen sink realist account of the murder of Edward Evans by Ian Brady.<sup>5</sup> Ian Brady is also represented in the first part of Ken Smith's poetic trilogy 'Figures in Three Landscapes' (1990), in the monologue 'Brady at Saddleworth Moor.' Here, Smith gives poetic voice to Ian Brady upon the occasion of his visit to the scene of his crimes in to try to locate the graves of his

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/mar/15/featuresreviews.guardianreview8> (accessed Sept 11, 2010)

<sup>5</sup> A transcription of which is available at <http://gruntring.blogspot.com/2009/03/throbbing-gristle-very-friendly.html> (accessed 11th Sept 2010).

victims. Smith's first person 'I' locates the aestheticised speaker still at the centre of his universe: 'I can forget, I can remember, I can be mad / I will never be as free again, ever' (Smith 1990: 17).

My study, therefore, focuses largely upon the figure of the serial killer as an aestheticised being, beginning with Thomas De Quincey's accounts of the Ratcliffe Highway murders of 1811. While the Ratcliffe Highway murders would not be generally considered 'serial killings' by most commentators, the genesis of the *idea* of a solitary or 'monstrous' figure who repeatedly kills for no easily understandable motive can be traced to Ratcliffe Highway. In his recapitulations of the narrative of these murders, De Quincey elevated the status of the murderer to a mysterious and remote figure akin to the solitary Romantic poet/artist where he—less frequently she<sup>6</sup>—has remained ever since: ideationally, Hannibal Lecter was conceived in 1811. In essence, De Quincey's account of the Ratcliffe Highway murders established a link between murder and aesthetics, the idea of 'murder considered as a fine art', and, as such, a suitable object of consideration for those who perceived themselves as the possessors of fine sensibilities and discernment. This partly satirical rationalisation established itself in a manner that could be accounted for, taking a lead from Richard Dawkins, in the terms of a robust co-adaptive meme complex.

For Dawkins, a meme is described in the following terms:

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<sup>6</sup> In the *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol 7, No 4, December 1991, S Holmes, Hickey and R. Holmes write: 'Women have been stereotypically viewed as nurturing and vulnerable, not physically or psychologically capable of murder, unless in an abusive situation. Such notions are being challenged as more research focuses on women and their propensity for violent behaviour' (p. 481).

Genes are replicated, copied from parent to offspring down the generations. A meme is, by analogy, anything that replicates itself from brain to brain, via any available means of copying. It is a matter of dispute whether the resemblance between gene and meme is good scientific poetry or not. (Dawkins 1998: 302)

A co-adaptive meme complex is an extension of this idea, by which a complex of two or more memes ‘reinforce each other, and assist each other’s survival in the meme pool’ (Dawkins 1976: 198). Fictional serial killer narratives reflect this same conjoining of concepts, as I will illustrate throughout the course of this thesis. For example, in his novel *The Killer*, Colin Wilson’s serial killer protagonist Arthur Lingard is represented in terms of a sex/crime co-adaptive meme complex:

His fascination with crime was basically sexual. Like sex, crime involved the forbidden; it involved furtiveness; it involved entering places you were not supposed to be in. In this sense, his dreams of being a Napoleon of crime conflicted with his actual dreams — to enter houses. His real inclination was towards burglary and rape. (Wilson 1970: 114)

The survival of the sex/crime meme is, of course, assured by the popular press and has become interwoven with serial killers since, at least, Jack the Ripper. Indeed this particular meme complex has become so strong that some commentators conflate the ideas of sex crime and serial killing to a degree that suggests that all serial killers are primarily sexually motivated. In *A New Century of Sex Killers* (1992), for example, Brian Marriner highlights all possible sexual components in his over-view of serial killers in order to re-describe them as sex killers. He includes, paradoxically, a chapter entitled ‘Colin Ireland—Killing for Fame’ in which he only tenuously implies sexual motivations to the murders committed by Ireland, because of Ireland’s victims being gay.

While not directly dealing here with the Jack the Ripper murders, I will look at texts which draw upon the Ripper mythology, such as Marie Belloc Lowndes's *The Lodger* (1913), in which the press plays a major role in supplying salacious and macabre details to the hearthside of the middle classes, offering a welcome distraction to the grey life of the elderly Mr Bunting. Similarly, Colin Wilson's first novel *Ritual In The Dark* (1960) offers a 1950s series of murders which mirror the Ripper's, and in which the murderer evokes a De Quinceyan aesthetic/murder meme complex which, in turn, prefigures Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter.

As Colin Wilson writes, in the introduction to *A Criminal History of Mankind*:

Crime is renewed in every generation because human beings *are* children; very few of us achieve anything like adulthood. But at least it is not self-perpetuating, as human creativity is. Shakespeare learns from Marlowe, and in turn inspires Wagner. Newton learns from Kepler and in turn inspires Einstein. But Vlad the Impaler, Jack the Ripper and Al Capone leave no progeny. Their 'achievement' is negative, and dies with them. (Wilson 1984: 6)

Yet Vlad the Impaler was, indeed, re-animated, and continues to be re-animated, through such texts as Stoker's 1897 *Dracula*, and in Francis Ford Coppola's 1992 film of the same. Daniel Gonzalez, convicted at the Old Bailey in 2006 for the murder of four people, claimed that he wanted to be a 'famous serial killer'. He also lionized the perpetrators of the Columbine high-school killings and claimed that he wanted to know what it would be like to be like Freddy Kruger (the supernatural killer of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/4763162.stm> Accessed 13-02-07.

Unfortunately, criminals *do* leave the ‘progeny’ of their own stories, which, under the wrong set of circumstances, may inspire other criminals to act out their own lethal scenarios. As the case of Gonzalez highlights, serial killer narratives can be provocative and contagious. This legacy is, however, a memic, rather than a genetic legacy. Unfortunately, since Dawkins’s coinage of the term ‘meme’ in 1976, much of the debate on memetics has been directed at the compatibility of the analogy between memes and genes, and indeed towards the usefulness of the concept at all.<sup>8</sup> However, representations of serial killers have employed several conjunctions of concepts such as the sex murderer, the ultra intelligent killer, and the murder-as-art trope which weld together with the figure of the serial killer other more positive ideas which effectively operate as co-adaptive meme complexes, and which may help to explain the popular fascination with serial killers. The more abstract rhetorical devices of evil and monstrosity, and indeed, hatred, too, may help to sustain the popularity of the phenomenon, as do the philosophical meme-complexes created by the linking of serial killers with ostensibly nihilistic, existential or religious fundamentalist beliefs. Whatever serial killers are represented as, it is rarely, if ever, simply solely as serial killers, however we might understand the term, but invariably in terms of a particular co-adaptive meme complex which effectively conceals the more disturbing and real facts of the phenomenon. Co-adaptive meme complexes, in relation to representations of serial killers, effectively conspire to bias any given particular representation away from the facticity—the particular unmediated brute fact reality of a murder—and towards a construct of ‘serial killing’. This biasing may manifest itself in the

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Robert Aunger’s essay ‘What’s the Matter with Memes?’ in Grafen, Alan and Ridley, Mark 2006. *Richard Dawkins: How a Scientist Changed the Way We Think*, Oxford: Oxford University Press pp. 176-188.

rhetorical devices used within the representation itself, such as allusions to monsters or evil, or to Romantic symbolism and to the conceit of the murderer as artist. However, it may also occur in terms of the aspect of the particular form of the text in which the representation is being made: the framing devices of differing media and/or the expectations inherent in genre, for example, entail a form of co-adaptive meme complex creation that persuade us to look at serial killers as aestheticised anti-heroes.

P.D. Ouspensky wrote:

We have a wrong picture of ourselves, and at the same time we ascribe to this wrong picture real features. But if this picture is false, then everything about it is bound to be false, and its suffering is also false. It may be very acute, but this does not make any difference. Imaginary suffering is generally more unpleasant than real, because with real suffering you can do something, but with imaginary you can do nothing. You can only get rid of it, but if you are fond of it or proud of it, then you have to keep it. (Ouspensky 1971: 175)

Here, perhaps, we can begin to grasp the interest and curiosity that serial killers inspire, for only if we are fond of, or proud of, our own false sufferings do we have to keep them. The popularity of serial killers such as Hannibal Lecter or Jeffrey Dahmer suggests that we are paradoxically fond of and proud of 'our' serial killers. By making monsters of them, i.e. by aestheticising them, we make wrong pictures of them and, simultaneously, ourselves. It is the 'wrong pictures' which many representations of serial killers evoke which are the subject of this thesis. The popularity of the serial killer lies in the manner in which they are represented, and by which the moral and social implications of their actions are distanced in favour of recreating them as something more aesthetically alluring and, therefore, less morally problematic.

## **The Literature of Serial Killing**

Academic studies of serial killing are, by necessity, several steps removed from the reality of the actual appalling act of murder itself, and as such all share the common characteristic of sociologising serial killing. Such attempts to account for serial killing frame and distance the facticity—the brute fact—of serial killing by employing various critical methodologies. In Edward J. Ingebretson's 2001 book, *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear in Public Culture*, the author examines public discourses of monstrosity in popular culture: 'Monstrosity writes out as a public text the social incoherence of identity' (204). By the process of writing that text, however, we fail to realise that the monster emanates from within us, and that existent social structures create the 'norm' against which we create monsters. Ingebretson examines the phenomenon of serial killing in relation to the repetitious acts which constitute cultural identity: '[w]e become "persons" only by submitting to the unceasing attentions of culture, its vigilant and repetitive urgings, its relentless managements of body and gesture' (204). For Ingebretson, serial killing is aestheticised by the addition of monstrosity which is itself derived from the reiteration of dominant texts. Of *At Stake* he states: 'the grammar of monster rhetoric acts like a spell of sorts, and this book is a work of counter-enchantment, a dis/spelling of chants, hexes and fantasies of a potent, political kind' (16). Monsters are, although political, ultimately aesthetic in that they transform the actions of men into the pre-existing tropes of otherness. He cautions us that 'monsters' like Jeffrey Dahmer 'get lost in the representational

flotsam and jetsam’ and that we ‘need to get beyond the surreal Gothics of his [and his victims’] public lives’ (15). As such, Ingebretson is proposing essentially a process of de-aestheticisation, or at least he insists that we be aware of the aestheticising devices of monstrous representations. That the particular existential reality of serial killing is obscured by political and popular references to monsters is an example of what I mean by aestheticisation: the forms of representation which concern Ingebretson here have their origins in mythology, folk tale and religion and it is these pre-existing ideas which overlay the actual killer and his actions. As Ingebretson writes: ‘[b]eyond the limit of the human, as medieval maps attest, “that way monsters lie”’ (Prologue: xvi). The aesthetic of monsterisation is, then, at basis an atavistic trend, of placing serial killers in the conceptual isolation wards of the distant past and of threatening and uncivilised darklands ‘out there’.

Mark Seltzer’s 1998 *Serial Killers: Life and Death in America’s Wound Culture* places the serial killer largely within a context of being the product of a post-industrial machine and media culture. He writes: ‘[s]erial killing ... has its place in a culture in which addictive violence has become a collective spectacle, one of the sites where private desire and public fantasy cross’ (254). Seltzer’s focus places serial killing in the open, in the public gaze, unlike the aesthetic of monsterisation and cultural exclusion which lies at the heart of Ingebretson’s study. Rather than the risk of taint or infection which monsters may carry—thus the need to banish them by monstrous representation—Seltzer’s study deals with ‘a hypnotic mimetic identification’ which ‘is crucial to the understanding of the trauma’ (158). If the threat of the monster is an active threat, then Seltzer identifies the passivity of a ‘crowd gathered around fallen bodies, the wrecked machine’ (280) which enables the

emergence of the collective-subjective, which he calls ‘the mass in person’. Far from the monstrous Other suggested by Ingebretson, for Seltzer the serial killer experiences himself as an embodiment of the crowd, the mass (281). And as serial killers create self-reflexive personas, the processes involved in their *becoming* serial killers resonate uncannily with the social becoming of the ‘ordinary’ person, offering parallels between consumerism and serial killing. Rather than the separation which the aesthetic of the monster compels, Seltzer’s critical stance evokes an aesthetic of absorption and mimesis, a mimetic compulsion by which serial killers and the mass merge into one.

David Schmidt’s *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture* (2005) forefronts the serial killer within the particular context of American identification with media stardom. He focuses on the processes that enable the serial killer to enter into the celebrity meme pool, and how this celebrity is conjoined with that other staple of media focus—violence. In his epilogue, Schmidt argues that since 9/11, the serial killer has provided American culture with a perversely reassuring ‘piece of “Americana”’ and that the ‘serial killer’s presumed Americanness actually reinforces the trio of matched binaries serial killer/terrorist, inside/outside, America/the rest of the world’ (257). Schmidt argues that the killer’s very familiarity as part of American culture serves to place the serial killer in a position capable of reinforcing recognisable American violence in the face of a new and unfamiliar threat. Rather than the contemporary view proposed by Seltzer, Schmidt’s conclusion repositions the serial killer as a folksy figure of the past.

## **Outline of Thesis.**

My focus will be on how representations of serial killers are affected by this process of aestheticisation, and particularly how the process of aestheticisation leads to the creation of the mythologized figure of the solitary serial killer.

In Chapter 1, 'Thomas De Quincey's Murder Essays', I will examine Thomas De Quincey's treatment of the Ratcliffe Highway murders, particularly in relation to the genesis of the representation of the murderer as a solitary Romantic individual whose activities are viewed in the context of a practicing artist who is dissatisfied with the drudgery of everyday life. I will focus on the genesis of the lone outsider killer which De Quincey's account forefronts, even against the evidence of eyewitness accounts. De Quincey's reorientation of murder in terms of the proto-existential self-creation of the murderer is of considerable importance in establishing the idea of the killer in terms of a particular historical shift in how murder is portrayed in terms of motive. De Quincey's account of the Ratcliffe Highway murderer posits the figure of the murderer-as-artist in part to account for the inadequacy of other explanations, and, as such, De Quincey broaches the subject of the motiveless crime, preferring to reframe such unaccountable behaviour than accept that the murderer had more mundane, or disinterested, motives.

Chapter 2, '*Frankenstein*, Romanticism and Serial Killing', will suggest that *Frankenstein* is essentially a representation of a serial killer and consider how Victor Frankenstein's Creature engages with what Mark Seltzer has termed the 'mass in person' and the 'murderer's cogito'. I will also consider Shelley's deployment of the tropes of Romanticism in her representation of the awakening of the Creature as a subject. The Creature's apparent motivations are based upon his status as a complete social outsider, denied family and society, as one who feels his ultimate otherness as an individual and whose ultimate suicide substitutes his failed attempt at social integration for a quasi-patheistic realisation of self. I will then compare and contrast the Creature's experiences of interpersonal and familial relationships with those represented in the real-life writings of serial killer Dennis Nilsen, suggesting a movement towards the estranged view of the individual vis-à-vis society which is characteristic of later representations of serial killers.

In Chapter 3, 'Beyond Jack the Ripper', I will focus on Jack the Ripper indirectly, through two novels which draw upon the 1888 murders, these being Marie Belloc Lowndes's 1913 novel *The Lodger* and Colin Wilson's 1960 *Ritual in the Dark*. The former novel's concern with the influence of the media, specifically newspapers, is illuminating in the context of the public reaction to the Jack the Ripper events, as experienced via the media. Wilson's novel comprises a series of murders which mirror those of Jack the Ripper, although this time in the London of the 1950s and he further exemplifies the lessening of familial and societal ties, especially when compared with Lowndes's portrait of gradually decaying domesticity.

Chapter 4, ‘Thomas Harris: Lecter and Others’, will examine Thomas Harris’s Hannibal Lecter novels in relation to his depiction of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ serial killers, and try to account for the popularity of Lecter. I will suggest that Lecter is portrayed, in himself, as a particularly rigid and unambiguous figure, at least in relation to the ‘bad’ serial killers, Francis Dolarhyde and Jame Gumb, and I will argue that his ethical code constitutes something of a capitulation to ideal social values, tradition and religious ideology, as portrayed through his victims. This chapter will also engage with the rhetoric of good and evil, and examine the issues of individual ‘becoming’ in relation to identity and social integration/exclusion.

In Chapter 5, ‘Serial Killer Narratives: Creating Authorising Narratives’, I will look at the issue of cognitive dissonance in relation to the creation of ‘righteous self narratives’ in the factual writings of three serial killers: Donald Gaskins’s *Final Truth: The Autobiography of a Serial Killer* (1992), Ian Brady’s *The Gates of Janus* (2001), and Carl Panzram’s *Panzram: A Journal of Murder* (2002). I will begin with an account of Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance, Stanley Milgram’s experiments in obedience and authority, and Van Vogt’s ‘Right Man’ theory. I will then argue that, like the aestheticised co-adaptive meme complex evoked by De Quincey, which attempts to sanitise or elevate the consideration of murder to a higher form of human activity, thus relieving the dissonance of dealing with such a subject, so too real-life killers create an authorising narrative by which they can not only rationalise their actions after the fact, but also allow themselves to kill in the first place. Just as much as Ian Brady’s capitulation to an extreme form of moral relativism or faux-panteism in *The Gates of Janus* (2001), most representations of serial killers are also attempts to reduce or even eliminate dissonance—what we might with some

accuracy call to 'aestheticise'—rather than confront the brutal existential and particular reality of serial killing, which, in its undiluted, un-theorised form, would be anything but fascinating or compelling.

## Chapter 1

### Thomas De Quincey's Murder Essays

I have read with some care De Quincey's "Papers on Murder" considered as one of the fine Arts," and while I have certainly been enlightened by them as to the more poetical aspects of human butchery, I do not feel that my personal objections to being knocked down with a slung-shot or paving-stone, dragged up some blind alley and there finished, have been materially softened by his magnificent rhetoric.

Horace Greeley<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I will consider four essays by Thomas De Quincey, written between the years 1827 and 1854. These essays are linked by the subject matter of the Ratcliffe Highway murders which took place near Wapping in London over a period of twelve days in December of 1811, and which left seven people dead. The first attack, on 7 December, took place at 29 Ratcliffe Highway. The victims were a twenty-four year old linen draper, Timothy Marr, his wife Celia, their three month old son, and their shop assistant, James Gowan. Their servant, Margaret, had been sent to buy oysters

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<sup>1</sup> Horace Greeley (1811-1872) was editor of the *New York Tribune* and a founder of the Liberal Republican Party. This quotation is taken from *Love, Marriage and Divorce and the Sovereignty of the Individual*, a discussion involving Greeley, Henry James, and Stephen Pearl Andrews.

and so escaped. The second attack, on 19 December, took place at the King's Arms in New Gravel Lane. The victims were the publican, John Williamson, his wife Elizabeth, and a servant, Bridget Harrington. Their granddaughter Catherine was asleep and not discovered. These murders were attributed to John Williams, although subsequent research has cast doubt upon his guilt (James and Critchley 1971). Williams, a twenty-seven year old seaman, lodged at the nearby Pear Tree in Old Wapping. He was arrested and committed suicide in Coldbath Fields prison. His corpse was subsequently dragged through the streets and he was buried, with a stake through his heart, at the crossroads of Commercial Road and Cannon Street. Whether Williams qualifies as a 'serial killer' depends upon which one of the many definitions of serial murder one refers to; however, crime historian Albert Borowitz describes John Williams as 'the so-called Ratcliffe Highway murderer who introduced London to the horrors of serial killing' in his celebrated guide to fact-based crime literature, *Blood and Ink: An International Guide to Fact-Based Crime Literature* (2002: 154).

Eric Hickey explains the problem of meaningfully representing serial killers in the introduction to his *Serial Murderers and Their Victims*:

Much of what we know, or claim to know, about serial murder is based on misinformation and myth construction. As a result of the sensational nature of this form of murder, the aura surrounding it has assumed a life of its own as it filters throughout both the public and private sectors of society. (2006: 1)

Indeed, such has myth and misinformation coincided, that there is no clear consensus as to what a serial killer actually is in relation to numbers of victims, criminal methodology, victim type or psychological motivation. The stereotypical serial killer, as I showed in my Introduction, is a construct, a composite of individual researchers and theorists' ideas that serve to obfuscate further this thankfully rare and dimly lit

aspect of human behaviour (Skrapec 2001a: 10-24).<sup>2</sup> The contemporary construct of the serial murderer is largely informed by the myths of the past, by ‘an ancient chord in our civilisation which insists that such terrible acts be interpreted in terms of possession by evil spirits’ (Leyton 1992: 11). It is undoubtedly more comfortable that way, easier to confine uneasy challenges to contemporary morality and psychology to a realm of myth and straight-jacketed typologies, motives and patterns, good and evil: the field of serial killer studies is fraught with political claims-making and personal agendas among claims-makers, behind which the subjective experiences of serial killers are often hidden (Jenkins 1994). Candice Skrapec calls for caution regarding conventional methodological approaches ‘in which generic aspects of serial murder such as modus operandi are described and interpreted,’ preferring instead a study which recognises ‘the meanings that we create from our respective lived experiences’ (Skrapec 2001b: 61). For Skrapec, ‘[t]raditional methods of study of serial murderers tend to focus on variables that distinguish them from others ... Where we differ appears to be a function of emotional meanings that become linked to the events and circumstances of our respective lives’ (2001b: 61). This difference has historically been obscured by the epithet ‘monster’.

De Quincey’s ‘On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts’ was published in three parts, the First Paper, Second Paper and Postscript, published in 1827, 1839 and 1854 respectively. Its precursor, ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth’, was published in 1823. De Quincey’s essays have been curiously overlooked in analyses of serial murder, perhaps due to a tendency to view the ‘serial killer phenomenon’ as a

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<sup>2</sup> Skrapec, like Hickey, notes the sensationalistic aspects of serial killing, and outlines some of the discrepancies over victim numbers, time between crimes, and history of the term ‘serial killer’.

recent development; and perhaps to the limiting of many such studies to American culture. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, however, De Quincey's essays are prescient in capturing, in particular, two of the major issues and social dilemmas that inform representations of serial murder to the present: his particular formulation of the murderer/artist co-adaptive meme complex, and also, (borrowing from the title of Paul Newman's essay), the idea of 'murder as an antidote for boredom', wherein 'the deed becomes a craving, for [the murderer] has entered a realm of heightened risk where killing, if you like, has become a "condiment for seasoning the insipid monotonies of everyday life"' (Newman 1996: 73).

### **An Ideal Murder: 'On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*.' De Quincey's Apollonian 'reality' and Nietzsche's useful distinction.**

De Quincey's aestheticised proposal of murder is grounded, on the one hand, in an aesthetic of distance; murder belongs not to the everyday, but has more in common with the idealised representation of Shakespearean tragedy. On the other hand, De Quincey's linking of certain kinds of murder to art entails a social *inclusiveness*, which bestows upon murder the status of a valid and worthy object of contemplation for enlightened members of society. His conceit of murder considered as a fine art is developed from his ruminations on *Macbeth*, which he expounds in his essay 'On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*', first published in *The London Magazine* in 1823

(*On Murder* 2006: 166)<sup>3</sup>. In that essay, De Quincey draws comparisons between the porter's scene in the play, and an episode of the Ratcliffe Highway murders which occurred just after the murders of the first of John Williams's victims, the Marr family. The Marr's servant girl returns from a late-night errand to discover the door bolted against her. Her knocking is unanswered, the inhabitants dead; the murderer is the only living presence in the house. For De Quincey, this apparent instance of life imitating art led to the realisation of the cause of 'a great perplexity on one point in *Macbeth*' (*OM*: 3). This perplexity was the effect that the knocking at the gate, immediately succeeding Duncan's murder, had upon him. To De Quincey, 'it reflected back upon the murder a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity' that he could not previously account for (3). In 'On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*,' he reports on his experience of the reawakening of life from the syncope which watching the murder scene had induced in him:

Hence it is that when the deed is done— when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish: the pulses of life are beginning to beat again: and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first make us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them. (*OM* : 6-7)

De Quincey's experience of the bracketing-off of the murder scene from the quotidian world alludes to a departmentalisation of his experience, elicited by the extreme otherness of murder, which he is made aware of only by being called back by the mundane humanity of the porter's knock. It juxtaposes the sleeping world of normalcy with the transformed humanity of the murderers, which has consumed his

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<sup>3</sup> *On Murder*, edited with an introduction and notes by Robert Morrison. Hereafter abbreviated to '*OM*'.

consciousness in its ‘awful parenthesis’. The everyday world is, for a time, cast off; consciousness stands petrified for the duration of the murder. The murder freezes time, suspends the world and its vicissitudes, yet offers the observer a retreat from the mundane, the stultifying. De Quincey here lays down the foundations of his aesthetic approach to murder, which he would build on in his subsequent essays on murder.

For De Quincey, in ‘such a murderer as a poet will condescend to, there must be raging some great storm of passion, —jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred,— which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we must look’ (*OM*:5). It is in the transformation from the normal and the rational that

the retiring of the human heart and the entrance of the fiendish [is] expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is ‘unsexed’; Macbeth forgets that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils are suddenly revealed. (*OM*:6)

De Quincey’s wording is telling: the Macbeths are ‘conformed to the image of devils’ in that they are assimilated into an existing paradigm of otherness by which their actions are excluded from the ostensible realm of rational, human behaviour, and hidden—abjected—under the cloak of the inhuman. Here De Quincey evokes a memplex by which the act of murder is conjoined with the rhetoric of the monstrous, by which the murderer becomes transformed, safely othered. If *Macbeth* still presents us with a spectacle of two humans, it is in terms of the forgetting of his connection to humanity, his forgetting that he was ‘of woman born’ that Macbeth’s transformation is made. In lieu of an attempt of an understanding that may entail the risk of

infection,<sup>4</sup> De Quincey's account distances the crime from humanity by the murderer's demonic transformation, the cessation of the normal. Yet, the perplexity to which De Quincey alludes at the outset of this essay is resolved not by his examination of the play itself, but is set in motion by an account of the real-life Marr murders by John Williams; the answer to the mystery of aesthetic power of Shakespeare's murder-scene lies in the contemporary world outside of the play. In the rhetoric of 'On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*', the everyday consciousness of De Quincey is, one could say, annihilated by the enactment of the murder he just witnessed; he too, in a sense, is a victim of Shakespeare, his world is banished, albeit temporarily, as surely as the world of the victims of John Williams had been extinguished. The transformation which had occurred to De Quincey in his contemplation of *Macbeth* offers him an avenue by which to explore not only the play and his response to it but also to examine the Ratcliffe Highway murders. For if the juxtaposition between the aesthetic world of the play and the quotidian world resolves his perplexity over the porter's knock, then perhaps, too, the otherwise unfathomable acts of John Williams can be resolved by recourse to an aesthetic response to the latter's crimes. De Quincey's reaction to the syncope is a rationalised aesthetic response which circumscribes the chaos of murder by focussing upon the unreality of the syncope; yet, noticeably, it is partly on account of this dream-like state that he extrapolates the meaning of his perplexity over the porter's knock.

De Quincey's initial sketching out of his aesthetic programme in 'On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*' differentiates between the prosaic and the poetic,

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<sup>4</sup> Joel Black writes, 'murder has defied explanation because to understand it would be to rationalize, and ultimately, to justify it' (1991: 102-3).

and entails the subordination of the former by the latter. There are parallels between De Quincey's nascent poetics of violence and Nietzsche's aesthetic programme as set out in *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1871). Nietzsche's distinction between the Apollonian and Dionysian, and the interaction between them, offers a valuable metaphorical framework for traversing and re-traversing the complex issues of social and personal boundaries that De Quincey's later essay(s) 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts' would attempt to negotiate. Nietzsche's aesthetic approach proposes the duality between the Apollonian principle of individuation, control, and reason on one side, and the chaotic, un-individuated communal consciousness of the Dionysian, on the other. Dreams are the province of the Apollonian by virtue of the process by which we rationalise their meanings, by which we incorporate them into our reality; they are rationalised and identified, enabling them to be acceptable to our 'real' world.<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche writes:

If for once we look away from our own 'reality' for a moment, if we grasp our empirical existence, like that of the world as a whole, as a concept produced at each moment by the original Unity, then the dream must seem to us the *appearance of appearance* (2000: 30)

For Nietzsche, if we conceive our empirical selves as a product of an undivided, un-individuated whole, that concept would enable us to realise the world as one of mere appearance, as revealed to us by the dream. Apollo is the dream-interpreter, under whose guidance the amorphous chaos of the dream may be given rational, understandable form. De Quincey's perplexity at the porter's knock, which elicited

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<sup>5</sup> Goya's well-known title for his Capricho, 'The sleep of reason brings forth monsters' perhaps helps to illustrate this, for monsters resist the careful delineatory organising tendency of human 'reality'.

his return from the dream-like world of murder, has a profound effect because it forces upon him an awareness of the edifice of the prosaic world, the insight that society is a mere veil, that rules and regulations are mere veneers over the chaos which the transformed Macbeths represent, via the act of murder. The knocking at the gate, replicated in the real-life case of the Marr murders, initiates De Quincey's sudden partial intuition of the tenuous Apollonian veneer of control and conformity which is rent asunder by Williams's murderous *début* on the stage of murder.

For De Quincey, the ideal representation of murder, exemplified by Shakespeare—his 'mighty poet!' (*OM*: 7)—is one wherein

the murderers, and the murder, must be insulated—cut off by an immeasurable gulph from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs—locked up and sequestered in some deep recess: we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested—tranced—racked into a dead armistice: time must be annihilated; relation to things abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. (*OM*: 6)

It is interesting, in the light of the Nietzschean idea of the dream considered as the 'appearance of appearance' to consider De Quincey's words in the passage just quoted. De Quincey's explanation for his perplexity over the effect of the knocking goes little further than to claim that it 'makes known audibly that the reaction [to the syncope] has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish', and we are made 'profoundly sensible' by the 'awful parenthesis' that had suspended the human world (*OM*: 6, 7). This partial explanation goes to the heart of his experience of Shakespeare's representation of murder, although not in De Quincey's explanation itself, but in what it omits. De Quincey does not venture an explanation as to *why* he

and the audience does, or should, experience the murder as taking place outside of the human realm in the first place. Why are the Macbeths represented as ‘conformed to the image of devils’ (6); why is it they must ‘be insulated’ from us?

The prosaic world, in De Quincey’s day, as in ours, is measured, time-managed and bound by relationships between individual people and things. ‘Earthly passion’ is constrained and moderated, yet De Quincey seems to accept it as authentic, proper and rational (6). There can be no relationship between this measured world, and the recessed and devilish world of murder; even the measurement of time can have no bearing in the syncope of murder. The realm of the syncope is beyond the restraining principles of the human ‘reality’ of the apostrophised Nietzschean variety. It is beyond, too, the Apollonian principle of individuation and even requires the relinquishment of selfhood, for ‘all must pass self-withdrawn.’ With regard to De Quincey’s later representation of John Williams, the Apollonian *principium individuationis* will be a particularly valuable concept. Here, though, it is the Dionysian primal Unity of all things that De Quincey rhetorically banishes into the syncope; he does not look away from his own reality, as Nietzsche would have him do, in order to realise the ‘appearance of appearance’ of the dream. The murder scene in *Macbeth* that, for De Quincey, retains a dream-like aspect remains incommensurable with everyday human experience. Here murder transforms the human being who indulges in, or even witnesses, it and the murder-scene becomes demonic, dark, Gothic. In ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*’ De Quincey proceeds from a Gothic account of murder, wherein murder is perceived as entirely inhuman and otherworldly, towards a consideration of murder that enables non-moral aesthetic contemplation of murder, and which brings it to heel as the object of socially

acceptable philosophical enquiry. Notwithstanding the partly satirical intent of De Quincey's tri-partite 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts', in the First essay we can trace his first attempts to bring murder to the bearing of Apollonian order. De Quincey concludes 'On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*' with a statement that could be taken as a declaration of Apollonian intent: 'the further that we press in our discoveries, the more we shall see proofs of design and self-supporting arrangement where the careless eye had seen nothing but accident!' (*OM*: 7). It is the 'appearance of appearance', intuited by De Quincey via the juxtaposition of the porter's knock and the parallel instance of the knocking at the door in the Ratcliffe Highway murder case, that enables him to resolve his prior perplexity.

### **'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts'**

Thomas De Quincey's First essay 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts,' (1827) is presented in the form of a paper given by a member of a fictional Society of Connoisseurs in Murder which sets out, by reference to a series of historical murders, the grounds for appreciating murder as art. The so-called 'Williams' Lecture' on 'Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts' is named after the assumed perpetrator of the Ratcliffe Highway murders.

In outlining the considerations which constitute the underlying conceit of the First and Second essays in particular, which elevate murder to a fine art, the narrator asserts that ‘something more goes into the composition of a fine murder than two blockheads to kill and be killed, a knife, a purse, and a dark lane’ (M 13: 12).<sup>6</sup> For society, John Williams’s crimes created a new benchmark by which future atrocities must be measured: ‘Mr. Williams has exalted the ideal of murder to all of us...he has carried his art to a point of colossal sublimity, and as Mr. Wordsworth observed, has in a manner “created the taste by which he is to be enjoyed” (M 13: 12). It is, however, in his ‘invention’ of murder as art that De Quincey created the meme complex which subsequent generations of murder-readers have continued to enjoy. Yet, despite the strength of De Quincey’s art/murder meme, his essay(s) also outline the difficulties of reconciling the reader to a non-moral treatment of murder. The essay undermines its own conceit of art-murder by bringing to the fore the inherent ambiguities and difficulties of reading murder in such a light. Despite the ironic tone and, perhaps, ‘mock-aesthetic standards’ of the First and Second essays, De Quincey, aware of the difficulties of his subject matter, proceeds somewhat cautiously (Borowitz 2002: 153). Before embarking upon the aesthetic debate, De Quincey takes care, in passing, to mention that morality must first be considered, and only afterwards may the crime be assessed in relation to aesthetic taste. He proposes the ameliorative effect of so doing, for when

We dry up our tears, and have the satisfaction, perhaps, to discover a transaction which morally considered, was shocking, and without a leg to stand upon, when tried by principles of Taste, turns out to be a very meritorious performance. (M 13: 16)

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<sup>6</sup> All references to ‘M 13’ refer to volume XIII of David Masson’s 1890 edition of *The Collected Works of Thomas De Quincey*. See bibliography for full reference.

However, the question of whether morality and taste *can* be separated is at the heart of the First essay, and in part, it represents a critique of the Kantian aesthetic. For Kant, art should be approached disinterestedly: that is to say, ‘the beholder was assumed to be free from any interest in, or from any desire to possess or to master, the object of beauty before him’ (Black 1991: 79). While Kant’s aesthetic disinterestedness emphasised the ‘beholder,’ a shift was occurring, by which, during ‘the nineteenth century the idea of disinterestedness began to acquire a profoundly demonic resonance as it was shifted from the relatively passive experience of aesthetic perception elaborated by Kant to the act of artistic creation itself’ (Black 1991: 80). Disinterest became conceived of as an integral part of the creation of a work of art. In crimes of the peculiar ferocity of those attributed to John Williams, the violence of which could not wholly be attributed to the common motivation of pecuniary gain or personal revenge, the cold-hearted, disinterested nature of the criminal aligned itself with the creative arts, as if by a family resemblance. By evoking the aesthetics of Kant, De Quincey’s ironic treatment of an aesthetics based on disinterest could be persuasively transferred to particularly vicious criminal activity, especially as such a proposition could partially account for a series of murders such as those supposedly committed by Williams. The evident lack of motive evokes a level of disinterestedness in the murderer vis-à-vis his victims that paralleled the Kantian disinterested of the artist, and in so doing readily suggested that the murderer’s motive, or lack thereof, was artistically driven. Within the context of the unprecedented nature of Williams’s crimes, it is understandable that De Quincey’s linking of murder to art, while capable of causing consternation, was memorable enough to take hold in the public mind.

However distasteful De Quincey's conceit may have been, it offered, and continues to offer, an alternative to the Gothic rhetoric of the popular press. A handbill of the day, notifying the public of the Ratcliffe Highway murders, reads:

When MURDER stalks abroad with Fury, equal to the Banditties of the Forests of Germany.— When the late ferocious and horrid Massicrees, plainly indicate that among us are Monsters, not to be surpassed even by the most barbarous Nations.<sup>7</sup>

That the reputed anarchy and unrestrained brutality of the primeval forests of Germany was reputed to being replayed in the capital city of the United Kingdom suggested a threat to civilisation itself, and the panic that the Ratcliffe Highway murders evoked spread far afield from London, aided by the (Ann) Radcliffean hyperbole spilling from the printing presses.

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<sup>7</sup> James and Critchley, p. 112.

## Mediated Monsters

Don't tell me that  
Aesthetics are  
Subjective you  
Just know the truth  
When you see it  
Whatever it is.

The Stranglers: 'Ugly'.

As Edward Ingebretson explores in *At Stake: Monsters and the Rhetoric of Fear*, the utilisation of the language of monstrosity and the Gothic in the press is a convenient way of rather arbitrarily separating off particular individuals from the rest of society in a manner which function as an unstated premise as to how people should behave; in short, the Gothic rhetoric of monstrosity in the press silently posits in the antithesis of monstrosity an ideal standard of identity and social behaviour. The rhetoric of monstrosity 'says nothing, or everything at once, all at a high pitch' (Ingebretson 2001: 26). Gothic and monstrous discourses are a way to map out proper behaviour and social identity without actually appearing to preach directly: 'Making monsters is a necessary social hygiene, helping to keep citizens straight' (Ingebretson 2001: 27).

John Brophy argues in *The Meaning Of Murder*, that we can, if we are honest, realise an affinity with murder all too easily: 'The reason for this must surely be that something closely corresponding to murder happens frequently, every day perhaps, in our own minds, that we feel ashamed of it, and feel also that the appropriate treatment for what makes us feel guilty is punishment' (Brophy 1966: 270). On this account, in the first intuition of that unclean thought, we feel the urgent need to abject the murderous thought to other realms, just as, in society, we banish the murderer to the socially hygienic sterility of the prison system. Monstrosity and Gothic rhetorics in

this context are, in effect, memic prisons, wherein people who are connected to actions which provoke the shame of recognition are rendered ideationally other, transformed by metaphor into other forms—monsters, vampires, beasts, abstract Nazis—that no longer correspond to ourselves. Contemporary press and media coverage aim at a recognisable, identifiable audience (witness, for example Bill O'Reilly of Fox News's obsession with ratings<sup>8</sup>). As such, Gothicising and monsterising strategies help the news agency to identify readers and viewers by appealing to a common type of audience member who then, in turn, are enabled to negatively define themselves against the monster or Gothicised form thus created: an audience can be generally relied upon to either instantly recognise, or be persuaded by peer pressure of, the monstrosity of Myra Hindley, for example.

The unlikeness-to-ourselves of monsters is exemplified by an account in the *The Daily Record* of May 27<sup>th</sup> 2010 (online edition), entitled 'Head-in bag killer: Monster Alan Cameron faces life in prison after being found guilty of murdering lover and dumping her dismembered body'.<sup>9</sup> That the subject of the story is not like us is reinforced by the reporter noting that 'Cameron, who cut a strange figure with his white hair and black Hitlerstyle toothbrush moustache, sat motionless and showed no emotion as he was led to the cells'. The strangeness of his stereotypical psychopathic emotionlessness is further accentuated by the comparison of his moustache to that sported by the paradigmatic monster par excellence, Adolf Hitler: identify with Cameron and, the silent rhetoric runs, you identify with Hitler, the

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<sup>8</sup> See for example <http://videocafe.crooksandliars.com/node/38548> (accessed 13th September 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Available at: <http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/scottish-news/2010/05/27/head-in-bag-killer-monster-alan-cameron-faces-life-in-prison-after-being-found-guilty-of-murdering-lover-and-dumping-her-dismembered-body-86908-22288821/> (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> September 2010).

ultimate (we like to assume) Not-U.s. And in not identifying with the new Hitler/Cameron construction, we are coaxed into identifying with those like us, in this case the readers of *The Daily Record*—the common audience—who are also (we like to assume) not like Hitler. We, therefore, assume the role of spectators whose shared spectatorship and commonality consists in that we are not monstrous, and can, therefore, be expected to recognise a monster when and where we see it, whatever a monster might be. And so the news agencies' rhetorics of monstrosity conspire to forge a commonality of opinion among those who gaze at the monster; the attribution of monstrosity is not up for discussion, the individual audience-member's subjectivity is effectively shut down or, at least, deferred to his/her membership of a subjective-collective (Seltzer's mass in person, mentioned in the Introduction). On Ingebretson's account: 'In current practice the term "monster" still registers an uneasy alliance between the abnormal as spectacle and the abnormal as marked out as moral failure; its show is always a special kind of warning' (Ingebretson 2001: 27).

### **‘On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts’: Postscript.**

The Postscript deviates from its two predecessors. In it De Quincey offers a form of true-crime recreation of the Ratcliffe Highway murders that anticipated, by more than a century, such later works as Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* (1966) and Emyln Williams’s account of the ‘Moors Murders’, *Beyond Belief: A Chronicle of Murder and its Detection* (1967). It also presages such novels as Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger* (1942) and the serial murder novels of Colin Wilson and Thomas Harris by positing, intermingled with his aesthetic conceit, an existential (or proto-existential) motive behind murder which emerges from a pessimistic and passive worldview.

In the Postscript, De Quincey suggests that Williams’s motive is born of dissatisfaction: dissatisfied with the ordinary world, he requires something more, a release from this world. De Quincey, as the author of *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), seems to identify with the murderer’s worldview, his drive to be free of the mundane:

All perils, specially malignant, are recurrent. A murderer who is such by passion and by a wolfish craving for blood-shed as a mode of unnatural luxury cannot relapse into *inertia*. Such a man...comes to crave the dangers and the hairsbreadth escapes of his trade, as a condiment for seasoning the insipid monotonies of daily life. (M 13: 96)

Far from displaying aesthetic disinterestedness, here the murderer is enlivened by the dangers inherent in his ‘trade,’ transformed into a ravening beast. The transformation of the everyday, which De Quincey writes of in ‘On the Knocking,’ the suspension or syncope, also involves a release from the everyday, a transportation into the world of the play. De Quincey’s proto-existential recreation of the transformation of the daily life of such a man as Williams is a subversion of De Quincey’s passive witnessing of

the murder-scene in *Macbeth*, yet both involve escapism from the quotidian. The ‘dangers and hairsbreadth escapes’ of Williams’s ‘trade’ evoke a quickening of life in the face of inertia; he is, in effect, rebelling against what Colin Wilson designates the ‘passive fallacy’, the tendency to experience life as an observer, and be effected by the world, but incapable of affecting change on that world.<sup>10</sup> De Quincey’s account of ‘such a man’ as Williams parallels Wilson’s position regarding the similarly ‘motiveless’ serial killer, here summarised by Jeffery Smalldon:

In the case of serial murder, the killer creates an elaborate, high-risk game which pits him against society; the game can be as a desperate attempt to crank up life’s intensity by introducing a new set of incentives, then imagining, time and again, that everything has come down to this one big play...In effect, it is a bid to accomplish what a hypnotist accomplishes by snapping his fingers: the ending of a trance. (Smalldon 1991: 16)

De Quincey’s mention of ‘the insipid monotonies of daily life’ evokes a picture of a conservative Victorian society similar to that drawn by Leslie Stephen in his essay ‘The Decay of Murder’ (1869). In this essay, Stephen complains that there were few ‘good murders’ any more because of the effete uniformity of society. Of his generation, he complains:

We shall abstain from murder because, in common slang, we have not the pluck, and think it ungentlemanlike to attract so much attention...anyone who would introduce the play of strong passions into the milk-and-water commonplace of modern society is forced to be unnatural’ (1869: 726).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Wilson describes the ‘passive fallacy’, which he also calls the ‘unheroic fallacy’ and ‘fallacy of insignificance’ in *The Age of Defeat* (1959), published in the US as *The Stature of Man*.

<sup>11</sup> In the *Cornhill Magazine* July-Dec 1869: 722-733.

Stephens here expresses essentially the same distinction between ‘natural,’ socially constrained, behaviour, and unnatural, unconstrained emotion; in this respect Stephens concurs with the early De Quincey’s identification of the ‘storm of great passion’ which marks out the murderer as worthy of aesthetic treatment (*OM*: 5).

The ‘sublime effects’ that De Quincey focuses upon in the Postscript are revealed in the effect of murder on those who have survived it: as such he retains the Kantian emphasis on the observer, and the reasons for doing so as outlined in ‘On the Knocking’. Ordinary cases of murder, ‘where the sympathy is wholly directed to the case of the murdered person’ because it ‘exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude’ cannot be considered as exhibiting good Taste, for it merely directs attention to the ‘ignoble instinct by which we cleave to life’ (*OM*: 4). This is a key phrase, which distances ‘good Taste’ from the abject—the sense of the interstitial, which, according to Julia Kristeva, initiates ‘one of these violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable’ (1982:1). Good taste requires that we direct attention away from the intuition of the abject, of the interstice of instinctive and social being, and focus upon that which is determinable, distinct, delineated by its otherness that it may be incorporated into the normal fabric of life. De Quincey’s syncopal experience of the murderers in *Macbeth* constitutes a triple abjection. Firstly, it throws off the humiliating realisation of the liminal condition of human life by looking instead upon the murderers; secondly, the ‘un-natural’ passions, the strong emotions, of the murderers are represented as humans conformed to the images of devils; thirdly, the whole scene is disconnected from human reality by the evocation of the syncope. In demonising the murderers, De

Quincey fixes them into identifiable forms, dehumanised on account of their socially improper (unnatural) strong emotions. In short: to be considered aesthetically, the murderer must be assigned a category. Yet, in De Quincey's later Postscript account, the discontented murderer, who kills out of a sense of life's dullness, shares in the affected high manners of a Leslie Stephen. De Quincey's murderer is a doubled presence, half-abjected monstrous artist to the idealised social characteristics and sensibilities of his audience; a monster by category, he is, by the same Apollonian effect of containment inherent in abjection, linguistically and aesthetically admitted to the social order which he enlivens. Far from pushing the murderer beyond the boundaries of human reality, the assignation of the term 'monster' enables his inclusion in that reality, giving rise to the paradox of the monster as not a Dionysian, but an Apollonian figure. This requires the monster to be provided with an established provenance, which De Quincey supplies by reference to the demonically transformed murderers of *Macbeth*, a transformation enabled by the artistry of Shakespeare that, in turn, functions by containment.

If this paradox is resolved by the realisation that the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy is not a dichotomy at all, but itself an appearance of a dichotomy, it does not resolve the complicated exchange between the Apollonian and Dionysian, the individual self and the abject. The Apollonian and Dionysian co-exist in a never-ending ebb and flow of banishments and re-admittances, repulsions and absorptions, abjections and de-oppositions, veilings and unveilings, which enable the recognition of self, the erection of social order. The abjection of the Dionysian enables its Apollonian rehabilitation. 'On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my

safe-guards. The primers of my culture' (Kristeva 1982: 2). The hallucinatory description of *Macbeth* wherein the demon-in-the-human is cast off, recessed, into a region not of this world, conforms to this description of abjection. For abjection itself admits of the Apollonian. Patricia MacCormack writes that:

Using art to encompass and know abjection reduces the author to something akin to the scientist. The object, or in this case, the abject, is analyzed in order that it may be put to 'use' without threatening the scientist/author with the irreducible effect such a concept may have on his subjectivity.<sup>12</sup>

Passing over for now her leading use of the word 'reduces'—for this descants on the discussion of *Frankenstein* below— MacCormack here describes precisely De Quincey's attempt to contain murder by aesthetics, to throw the mantle of Art over the ineffable human mess of the Williams murders. In effect, De Quincey's project in his murder essays is the interrogation of the Apollonian process of abjection itself, as MacCormack realises:

The abject exists through borders, definitions, rigid seals and hermeneutic boundaries. It exists by virtue of what it transgresses yet always depending on that which it transgresses in order to be. All borders of filth, from faeces to the corpse, exist at "the place where I am not and which permits me to be."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cinestatic.com/trans-mat/MacCormack/PPDintro3.htm>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.cinestatic.com/trans-mat/MacCormack/PPDintro2.htm#\\_ftnref1](http://www.cinestatic.com/trans-mat/MacCormack/PPDintro2.htm#_ftnref1)

## The Sublime

In the Postscript, De Quincey cites the effect of a crowd witnessing a great fire, and the exclamations of rapture of those who watch the swirling and blazing clouds of sparks with ‘a sustained uproar of admiration and sympathy’ (M 13: 72). De Quincey continues, ‘but that mood of public sympathy did not at all interfere to suppress or even to check the momentary bursts of rapturous admiration’ at the spectacle (73). ‘Precisely the same treatment is applied to murders’, continues De Quincey, citing the effect of the murderer’s acts on the observer’s ability to be awed (73). Murder here is presented as comparable to the sublime-bestowing acts of non-moral nature; he is likened to a force of nature, of pure unmediated will. Not only is the murder considered as beyond morality, but so, by implication, is the murderer. Williams is ‘this solitary artist ... self-supported by his own conscious grandeur’ (M 13: 75).

The artist, considered *amorally* as an aesthetic phenomenon, cannot on Kristeva’s terms be considered abject for ‘he who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law—rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime’ (Kristeva 1982: 4). But considered as a monstrous presence, ‘the monster Williams’ (M 13: 123) is, indeed, abject, for the word ‘monster’ connotes with, and denotes cruelty, wickedness, *immorality*: ‘Abjection...is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that disassembles, a hatred that smiles...’(Kristeva 1982: 4).

The passive spectators of the fire in his account are moved to rapture and sympathy by the aesthetic phenomenon of the fire, inspired and moved by the

sublime. And Williams has the same effect of transforming the consciousness of his intended victims. On the occasion of the servant Mary's return to the Marr household—the same scene which evoked De Quincey's ruminations in 'On the Knocking'—she hears the footsteps of Williams within; he has already, unbeknown to her, murdered the occupants. As footsteps begin toward her from the other side of the door, the narrator asks:

What was the murderer's meaning in coming along the passage to the front door? The meaning was this: separately, as an individual, Mary was worth nothing at all to him. But, considered as a member of a household, she had this value, viz., that she, if caught and murdered, perfected and rounded the desolation of the house. The case being reported, as reported it would be all over Christendom, led the imagination captive. (M 13: 89)

For De Quincey Mary as functions as a symbol of a larger social group, in this case the household, the destruction of which is Williams's primary, possibly sole, motive. If she had been caught and murdered too, then the slaughter would have been 'full and orbicular' at the 'all-conquering hands of the mighty murderer' (M 13: 89). Whereas in 'On the Knocking' the murderers were transformed, here we find the potential victim transformed: 'Mary was now maniacally awake; she began to ring the bell and apply the knocker with unintermitting violence' (89). Frederick Burwick comments that it is not the murderer 'but their victims [that] have contributed that sense of the sublime that makes the episode worthy of aesthetic contemplation' (2001: 85). But it is De Quincey's attempt to turn murder to good account in this way that exposes the difficulties of exploring the difficult interstitial terrain of the murder-artist. His account of the Ratcliffe Highway murders are fraught with uneasy rhetorical and

discursive juxtapositions in which his aesthetic discourse is co-mingled with the more traditional features of demonic, night-time Gothic:

But afterwards this repulsive stranger, with his cadaverous ghastliness, extraordinary hair, and glazed eyes, showing himself intermittently through the hours from 8 to 11 p.m., revolved upon the memory of all who had steadily observed him with something of the same freezing effect as belongs to the two assassins in “*Macbeth*” who present themselves reeking from the murder of Banquo, and gleaming dimly, with dreadful faces, from the misty background, athwart the pomps of the regal banquet. (M 13: 98-99)

De Quincey’s aesthetic conceit steadily offers admittance to more traditional modes of description, which brings us back into the realm of morality. His artist/murderer becomes transmuted, partly into fog-bound nightstalker and partly into a proto-existential social outsider, the solitary, yet clearly delineated, figure of evil. Again, the transmutation effect first encountered in ‘On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*’ informs De Quincey’s representation of Williams; art informs, transforms life, and, by association, confers upon the murderer these same aesthetic effects.

The partial failure of the aesthetic conceit, its attempt to stave off the continual irruption of normative moral discourse, is perhaps best illustrated at the very end of the Postscript, which concludes with the death of the murderer. Williams’s fate, as recounted by De Quincey, is reminiscent of the death of Ambrosio in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1797). In the last sentences of the Postscript, Williams, having been identified, jailed and taken his own life—all in the space of the final, short paragraph—is buried at a crossroads, ‘with a stake driven through his heart’ where ‘over him drives forever the uproar of unresting London!’ (M 13: 124). ‘The monster

Williams' (123) is finally 'fixed', like an insect on a pin, identified; all, it seems, in accordance with Apollonian social requirements. Yet if 'X' marks the spot—'he was buried in the centre of a *quadrivium*, or conflux of four roads'(124)—that X also gestures to a remaining unknown. The staking and burial of Williams at the crossroads ritually enacts an unspoken need to appease the base forces of the Dionysian. The identified murderer, no longer a monster but the man John Williams, is re-Gothicised, abjected, his body disrupted in death. The unease of the final paragraph of the Postscript admits of the inadequacy of the preceding discourses which have sought, in one way or another, to contain Williams. Despite his attempts to discursively encompass murder by means of the aesthetic conceit, De Quincey's John Williams re-emerges from his grave as a reminder. He is a problem of logic, of linguistics, and of social coherence, a figure who, though kept at a distance, cannot be excluded entirely from human 'reality.' The project to raise the level of discussion above that of normative morality, to the aesthetic, is not sustainable even within the text of De Quincey's essays, and, accordingly, this discontinuity accentuates the unease of De Quincey's narrative. Nonetheless, in so doing, De Quincey uncovers the key area of problematic ambiguity that has continued to haunt all serial killer narratives. By mythologizing the killer, either as artist or as monster, we may succeed in isolating and identifying him, but in so doing we may overlook that the causes that motivate him are already inscribed on the fabric of our social 'realities'; the template for the self-making killer may already have been read by him.

We can detect, then, in the chronological progression of De Quincey's essays a closing down of the space between the extreme murderer and the reader. From the ethereal otherworldliness of the transformed, demonic Macbeths in 'On the

Knocking', through the partial and paradoxical aesthetic attempt at inclusion in the First and Second essays, and on to the immediacy of the Postscript, De Quincey's murder writing traces a de-romanticising of murder from the high, idealised form of Shakespeare to the imaginative street level reconstruction of the Marr and Williamson murders. By 1854, public execution was ceasing to become the carnivalesque holiday of earlier years, and the last such execution would take place only 14 years after the publication of the Postscript (Atlick 1971: 110-114). If the spectacle of death was gradually withdrawing from the public to the private sphere, De Quincey's texts proceeded to close down the distance between real-life murder and the reader, and incorporating the act of murder into the imagination of his readers. The ugly extremes of murder, its implications and reality, began to infiltrate private realities, divorced from the celebratory communality of murder-fanciers, or the festive public gatherings of public execution. However, if De Quincey's murders moved towards the closing down of metaphorical space, his more sensationalistic representations of murder in the Postscript never become merely sensationalist accounts. If they had, we would follow the Marr murders from the perspective of Williams, and not 'in vision, attach ourselves to Mary', the servant-girl, on her late-night errand, nor would we to return with her 'when all is over...and again raise the curtain, and read the dreadful record of what has passed in her absence' (M 13: 85). By focussing upon the sublime terror of the would-be victims, rather than the act of murder itself and its evocation of the unimaginable suffering of the victims, De Quincey employs a 'delicacy of sentiment' and 'power of imaginative insight' that succeeded in recasting his experience of the syncopal, otherworldly act of murder as occurring in the everyday world in which the reader/spectator, murderer and the act inhabit the same universe (Stephens 723). In so doing, De Quincey underscores the very un-aesthetic reality of murder. The extreme

violence of serial murder often retains its fascination because its representations are so far removed from normative experiences as to be alienated from it; as such they often function as an opiate to reality. De Quincey's account of Williams in the Postscript, however, retains an intriguing effect of social instability. This effect is invoked by the dual discourse wherein De Quincey's aesthetic hyperbole and Gothic rhetoric vie for supremacy. While this hybrid, or multi-discursive, form is characteristic of serial killer narratives, De Quincey's Postscript provides possibly the first account of such an effect. Much, if not all, serial killer film, fiction, true-crime is linked inexorably to the discursive dilemma that De Quincey confronts in his essays, and this is a dilemma I will revisit throughout this study.

### **Serial killers as monsters/ Monsters as Serial Killers**

Before the Romantic period, and the emergence of De Quincey's aesthetic conceit, murder was treated purely as a moral issue. Repeat killing, however, seems to inspire an aesthetic response which transcends normative moral and ethical issues, perhaps because such acts are so far beyond normal behaviour that other realms of understanding must be countenanced in order to cope with crime of this type. If the narrative of Cane's biblical fratricide precipitated that original murderer's expulsion from home and family, it also foreshadows the fears of the social outcast and murderous individual. The original victim of the first murderer was, then, his own family. From *Beowulf's* Grendel to contemporary media representations of killers, the

effect upon the social order, the extended social family, largely overshadows the particular identifiable victims of serial killers; this is a telling factor in serial killer narratives. Yet serial killers do not occur in a social vacuum—serial murder is a social phenomenon, which is why identifying serial killers as ‘monsters’ simply fixes and buries—like John Williams, with a stake through his heart—the social problems that their crimes may expose.

### **Grendel: Man or Monster?**

The monster of *Beowulf*, Grendel, is not so easily identified as wholly monstrous, suggests Brian Meehan (1994).<sup>14</sup> Meehan, however, is candid in explicating the re-reading of Grendel in the light of serial murder. ‘The easiest part of this task’ he writes, ‘though the least convincing, is to identify the traits Grendel shares with modern serial killers’ (1994: 1). Meehan instead focuses upon the motivational aspects of Grendel’s murderous acts, and suggests that ‘the raging hatred and repulsive crimes of Grendel may owe less to fiction than we think’ (1). ‘For’, Meehan continues, ‘if Grendel terrifies us, it is because both we and the poet know that his murders flow not from conventions of folklore but from the state of his mind’ (1). One of Meehan’s main concerns in his essay is to argue that the *Beowulf* poet’s representation of Grendel’s murderous state of mind forefronts the essentially human aspects of this ‘monster’. Meehan identifies the causes of Grendel’s murderous behaviour as internal. ‘He is angry, depressed, and paranoid; he lives on the fringes of

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<sup>14</sup> Meehan, Brian 1994. ‘Son of Cain or Son of Sam: The Monster as Serial Killer in *Beowulf*’, *Connecticut Review*, Fall, pp. 1-7.

normal society. Spying on the warriors at night, he especially hates the symbolic ring-giving, as well as the joyful sounds of community, the music of the harp, and the alliterative Anglo-Saxon poetic line, itself created by a kind of bonding' (2). Grendel is described as portraying characters of both man and beast, as a descendent of Cain (ll.100-114). In terms of his emotions, he is depicted as a liminal figure, sometimes man, sometimes beast. If his body is inhuman, his internal state seems to be human. Certainly, Grendel's attacks on the mead hall give a fair approximation to the effects of a serial-killer-at-large on a community:

So Grendel waged his lonely war,  
 inflicting constant cruelties on the people,  
 atrocious hurt. He took over Heorot,  
 haunted the glittering hall after dark,  
 but the throne itself, the treasure-seat,  
 he was kept from approaching; he was the Lord's outcast (ll. 164-169).<sup>15</sup>

Though perhaps it is Grendel's uncertain state that best coincides with contemporary representations of serial killers. In his 'lonely war' (l. 165) against the people of Heorot, we can sense the alienated outsider stereotype of the 'serial killer' and read back into the ancient text meanings for our own times. For Grendel's acts we have since

found clinical terms for these crimes and scientific explanations. But our language will never abandon the old metaphors and myths. They belong to the murderers who are driven to act them out, and to the writers who seek figures to express the unspeakable. Because of the mind of its writer, because of the mind of its murderer, *Beowulf*, like all enduring literature, is contemporary. (Meehan 1994: 6)

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<sup>15</sup> Trans. Seamus Heaney.

Yet perhaps we can read Grendel's repetitive murders and gluttonous consumption of his victims in terms of our own capacity for consuming killers. Here too there is some difficulty in separating the monster and the human. If Grendel, descendant of Cain, is wholly monster, then at least we are free of considering him as a cannibal. In the solitary, stalking figure of Grendel, we can envision the archetype of the serial killer, an amorphous force which is unconstrained by environment, or textual form, an overflowing and cross-flow of timeless imagery which in telling is compelling. The poet(s) of *Beowulf* represent Grendel as a monster, yes, but not yet wholly monstrous. Whatever else Grendel embodies, he figures as an emblem of the dialectic between normality and monstrosity. The thin veneer of social and artistic order which Grendel so abhors and resents places him (for he is rarely referred to as 'it') against order for no apparently recognisable motive, and as such a mythic representation, half-hid and dimly-lit, evoking later representations of Richard Ramirez as 'The Night Stalker,' the fog-bound Victorian streets of 'Jack the Ripper' or Thomas De Quincey's Williams of the Postscript. Unlike Cain, Grendel kills and kills again.

Whatever the merits, or otherwise, of considering the *Beowulf* poet's representation of Grendel in terms of the serial killer, the debate of over the status of Grendel, whether man or monster or monstrous man, provides an exemplary instance of the kind of ambiguous status afforded to repeat murderers by media, true crime, and fictionalised accounts of serial killers. The appellation 'monster' refers to an entity whose status is ambiguous, some how other, yet still recognisably human.<sup>16</sup> For

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<sup>16</sup> In the Glossary of Personal Names in the Norton edition (2000), Grendel is described being a 'monstrous cannibal killed by Beowulf' (249). He must, therefore, be envisioned as partly human to be considered a cannibal.

heroes like Beowulf to exist, they must have an opponent worthy of their opposition, an opponent whose legitimated otherness, while retaining a semblance of humanity which enables some form social circumscription, must still be veiled in myth and codification which specialists, be they Beowulf or FBI agent Robert Ressler, may encounter on our behalf.

It is, for Meehan, the *Beowulf* poet's intention to represent Grendel's state of mind within a context of social reality that includes the invocation of Cain and envisions Grendel as a consequence of the actions of the first murderer, whose Biblical place was not intended be read as purely mythical, but to refer to the theological orthodoxy of the day: 'The poet invokes Cain to make Grendel's murders as real as possible and to account for the dysfunction of his very human mind' (Meehan 1994: 5).

Seamus Heaney writes in the introduction to *Beowulf: A Verse Translation* (2002) that by re-envisioning the poem in terms less of historical fixity and geographical situation, and more in terms of contemporary recreation, then 'we can avoid, at any rate, the slightly cardboard effect that the word "monster" tends to introduce, and give the poem a fresh chance to sweep "in off the moors, down through the mist bands" of Anglo-Saxon England, forward into the global village of the third millennium' (xxvi). Similarly, if De Quincey's Postscript still proffers a partly monstrous view of Williams, it hardly prefers such a vision; his view is modified by his willingness to close down the spaces between the murderer, victim and murder-reader, and to bring murder closer to home by offering the realisation that the 'monstrous' murderer is, after all, human.

## Chapter 2

### *Frankenstein, Romanticism and Serial Killing*

In this chapter, I will discuss Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), focussing on the Creature<sup>1</sup> as a serial murderer. While De Quincey's consideration of the murderer as artist evoked a co-adaptive meme complex that survives to this day, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a representation of a murderer whose emergence comes not from a primarily aesthetic, but from a scientific paradigm. Nevertheless, both John Williams and Victor Frankenstein's Creature are depicted in terms of an overriding Romanticism. The solitary artist of Williams is replaced by the self-isolating figure of Victor Frankenstein, whose self-slavery to his scientific endeavours gives rise to a creature which mirrors Victor's own social and familial disembodiment. Yet the search occasioned by the unnamed Creature is very much a search for self-hood, a search that culminates in an overwhelming sense of self-justified rage, shame and vengeance. I wish to consider Shelley's representation of the Creature in the context of Mark Seltzer's concept of the mass in person and also in terms of Shelley's deployment of the tropes of

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<sup>1</sup> The entity is never given a personal name, but is referred to by a number of monsterising referents throughout the text. For simplicity, I will refer to it as the 'Creature'.

Romanticism in her representation of the awakening of the Creature as a subject. I will then compare and contrast the Creature's experiences of interpersonal and familial relationships with those represented in the real-life writings of serial killer Dennis Nilsen.

In being abandoned by his 'father', Victor Frankenstein, the Creature is left alone to confront the discrimination and violence meted out to it by society on account of its monstrosity. Driven by an ostensibly vengeful enmity for his absent father, Victor, the nameless creature forges an identity for himself by the means of the acting out of the role of an avenger. To inflict the greatest revenge upon Victor, and to impress upon him the feeling of loveless isolation the Creature himself experiences, the Creature embarks upon the murders of those closest to Victor. By proceeding upon this course of action, the Creature's narrative unfolds as a species of *Bildungsroman* which tracks the psychological formation of the Creature from a state of uncomprehending psychological 'infancy', through his limited self-education, to constructing a role and a purpose for his existence: in effect creating an 'I' out of the confusion of his early existence.

Frankenstein's Creature, abandoned by Victor from 'birth', is left alone to negotiate his own understanding of the world, which he undertakes through the pursuit of the missing father figure and the vengeful killing of Victor's family members and friends. The Creature describes his early experiences:

It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original æra of my being: all the events of the period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard and smelt, at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses. (Shelley 1998: 79-80)

The indistinctness experienced by the Creature is manifested in a synaesthetic condition in which he experiences an undifferentiated confusion of sensory input. To him, the world is a confused chaos of competing sensations which he has to learn to order before he can impose structure upon his experience. Yet it is the absence of the father which is the primary drive of the creature's actions: the father as an ordering principle is ever present, but only in terms of an absence.

The father, as a symbolic imposer of order, is usurped by the written word in *Frankenstein*. The creature's drive towards self-knowledge and self-actualisation<sup>2</sup> is furthered by his serendipitous discovery of some books. 'The possession of these treasures gave me extreme delight: I now continually studied and exercised my mind upon these histories' (Shelley 1998: 103). He learns of the broader world through the textual frames of *Plutarch's Lives*, Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Goethe's *the Sorrows of Young Werther*. However, his understanding of these works is limited by his inability to distinguish between fact and fiction; his understanding of them is a literal one: of *Paradise Lost* he explains later to Victor that 'I read it as I had read the other volumes which had fallen into my hands, as a true history'

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<sup>2</sup> Self-actualisation was conceptualised by the neurologist and psychiatrist Kurt Goldstein (1878-1965), and refers to the attempt of a human to achieve his potential. The concept is probably better known in connection with the psychologist Abraham Maslow as a component of his hierarchy of needs. Maslow writes, of the need for self-actualisation, that 'a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy. What a man *can* be, he *must* be. This need we may call self-actualization' ('A Theory of Human Motivation' in *Psychological Review* 50, p. 381).

(Shelley 1998: 104). The expansion of his experience which the books give him is transformative:

I can hardly describe to you the effect of those books. They produced in me an infinity of new images and feelings, that sometimes raised me to ecstasy, but more frequently sunk me into the lowest dejection. In the *Sorrows of Werter*, besides the interest of its simple and affecting story, so many opinions are canvassed, and so many lights thrown upon what had hitherto been to me obscure subjects, that I found it a never-ending source of speculation and astonishment. (Shelley 1998: 103)

Here the influence of Romanticism is made clear: ‘sometimes raised me to ecstasy, but more frequently sunk me into the lowest dejections’ is a key phrase.

The ‘extreme Romantic position’ was, according to Geoff Ward in his essay ‘50 Years of the Outsider’, invented by Johann Wolfgang van Goethe in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).<sup>3</sup> Werther, the protagonist, falls in love with Lotte, a peasant girl, who is engaged to be married to another. Werther cultivates a friendship with the couple, and, returning from a trip, finds they have married. Perceiving the hopelessness of his position, he reasons that the only possible resolution is to kill himself. The unwitting Lotte supplies the guns, believing Werther to be leaving for another trip. Werther composes a suicide note, and shoots himself; he takes twelve hours to die. The romantics, writes Ward, instilled in people the promise of

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<sup>3</sup> ‘50 Years of the Outsider’. The essay is available at <http://colinwilsonworld.co.uk/interviews6.aspx> (accessed 14th September 2010).

a wonderful world there which people had never noticed before, but so many of the Romantics died young and tragically, all through the 19th century, in accidents, illness or suicides. They could experience 'exquisite happiness' but then they would wake up the next morning and find that the real world contradicted this elevated state.<sup>4</sup>

Werther's problem was that his perception of his situation lacked scope and possibility. His own sense of purpose had closed down to one single perspective—the out of reach Lotte—which filled his whole vision. Thus limited, he could see no other way out than suicide. The meaning of his life was deferred to another realm of expectation, one which he has briefly tasted and longs to taste again. He exposes himself constantly to sorrow, which he accepts, never thinking to do anything to alleviate his sufferings; he is a passive recipient of his own withering emotions. Werther is self limiting in that he refuses to take charge of his perceptions and emotions; he is other-orientated to such a degree that his own subjectivity is devolved and absorbed by his view of himself vis-à-vis other people. Consequently, his ultimate self-value is so devalued and beholden to others that the only solution he can think of is suicide. Werther's conception of humanity is that of a failed and limited being:

What a thing Man is, this lauded demi-god! Does he not lack the very powers he has most need of? And if he should soar in joy, or sink in sorrow, is he not halted and returned to his cold, dull consciousness at the very moment he was longing to be lost in the vastness of infinity. (Goethe 1989: 105)

Frankenstein's Creature is also aware of the duality of the human condition that Colin Wilson calls 'the essence of romanticism, the paradoxical feeling that

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

man might, after all be a god' (Wilson 1985: 426). Early on in his educational awakening, overhearing an exposition of Volney's *Ruins of Empire*, the Creature perceives that man 'appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle, and at another as all that can be conceived of as noble and godlike' (Shelley 1998: 95). In his journey towards self-discovery, then, the Creature can be observed to reach a crossroads which entails two potential choices, two roads which he may take. He considers Werther 'a more divine being than I had ever beheld or imagined', and finds his 'disquisitions on death and suicide were calculated to fill me with wonder' (Shelley 1998: 103). He also identifies with Milton's Satan, when he feels 'the bitter gall of envy' rise within him. Yet he realises that, unlike himself, 'God in pity made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image ... Satan had his companions, fellow devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and alone' (Shelley 1998: 105). As Colin McGinn points out, 'this is to exaggerate the aesthetic excellence of man' (1997: 161). The creature has a tendency to recognise himself through the over-romanticised narratives to which he is exposed. The extreme aesthetics and sensibilities of *The Sorrows of Werther* and *Paradise Lost* overlay his own experiences and he comes to understand his early experiences of social rejection by those who he comes into contact with through the framework of these texts.

Bertrand Russell writes of *Frankenstein* that:

Frankenstein's monster is not, as he has become in proverbial parlance, a *mere* monster: he is, at first, a gentle being, longing for human affection, but he is driven to hatred and violence by the horror which his ugliness inspires in those whose love he attempts to gain. (1979: 655)

However, in the context of the Creature's engagement with *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the love he seeks from others is not only spurned, but aggressively

repudiated, and leads the Creature to express himself through a learned conceptual nexus of love, violence and death. For even Goethe's Werther is a violent man, albeit that his violence manifests itself as violence turned against himself. The violence of Shelley's creature, his sensibility fired by Goethe's novel, can be seen as an indictment of romantic emotional self-indulgence. The romantics, Russell continues,

admire strong passions, of no matter what kind, and whatever may be their social consequences. Romantic love, especially when unfortunate, is strong enough to win their approval, but most of the strongest passions are destructive—hate and jealousy, remorse and despair, outraged pride and the fury of the unjustly oppressed, martial ardour and contempt for slaves and cowards. Hence the type of man encouraged by romanticism, especially of the Byronic variety, is violent and anti-social, an anarchic rebel or a conquering tyrant. (1979: 656)

The Creature's own Byronic anti-social tendencies are further fostered by Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* which, as has been noted, he provisionally understands to be a true account of historical events. As a direct account of his solitary life, and as an immediate result of his being denied social or familial interaction, the Creature is also deprived of the knowledge of the myths which 'impose structure and order' upon life (Warner 1994: 19). He is left instead with 'history', which, especially in *Paradise Lost*, he interprets as the historical record of the conflict and chaos of the human race, an understanding which seems to be confirmed by his treatment he receives from those who see him.

Michael Sims writes that as 'a result of our dependence upon the visual, we famously fall for surfaces' (2002:61). In *Frankenstein*, it is the Foucauldian sense of the power of 'the gaze technique of social control' by which the creature is

condemned and alienated to the fringes of human society (cited in Bauman 1987: 42). The one exception, the only person who allows the Creature any of the comfort of human interaction, is someone who is incapable of judging. The Creature soon learns, from necessity, to become invisible, to remain hidden. After being chased away from the village and stoned, he retreats to a shack by a cottage, where he hides and observes the inhabitants, the De Lacey family. The father of the family is blind, and the Creature is able to receive sympathy and kindness from him, in the absence of the other family members. The blind De Lacey cannot condemn the Creature's appearance: that monstrosity is bestowed by sight is evidenced in his acceptance and sympathetic demeanour towards the Creature. The Creature is made aware that his difference is a surface difference: he is judged in terms of aesthetic appearance and he, in turn, assesses others in relation to aesthetics:

I had admired the perfect form of my cottagers—their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how I was terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. (Shelley 1998: 90)

The Creature comes to convince himself of his own monstrosity in relation to the appearance of those around him, and here his own self-image is an inverted image of the family, both the specific De Lacey family whom he calls 'my cottagers' and an idealised concept of family. The injustice he suffers 'has its origins in the dominance of *sight* in human relations: it is the way the creature *looks* that fixes his fate' (McGinn 1997: 161).

The consequence of Victor's scientific endeavour is the abandonment of aesthetic consideration; in bringing together the disparate parts that previously formed natural bodies, Victor has not been successful in his aesthetic goal: his failure is not a failure of, ultimately, of science, but of aesthetics:

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; the teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with the watery eyes, that seemed almost the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips. (Shelley 1998: 39)

Victor's project, as a purely scientific endeavour, has been successful. He has recreated life, found the answer to restoring life to the dead. Yet it is on the grounds of aesthetic taste that he rejects the Creature. In observing the culmination of his labours, Victor realises that 'the beauty of the dream [had] vanished' (Shelley 1998: 39). The romantic ideal, as an unattainable and diminishing aspect of imagination, is reiterated in Victor's rejection of his creation. Victor's evaluation of the Creature is a misreading which echoes the Creature's own misreading of the texts from which the Creature putatively seeks to map out his own individuality. On first shrinking from the Creature, Victor seeks refuge from the realisation of his aesthetic miscalculation, by 'endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness' through sleep (Shelley 1998: 39). His efforts are foiled by a nightmare wherein he dreams of Elizabeth, to whom he is engaged, who transforms into the figure of his dead mother. On awakening from his nightmare, he beholds the Creature, smiling and stretching out a hand, incoherently trying to communicate with Victor. Again,

Victor flees, relating that the Creature ‘might have spoken, but I did not hear’ (Shelley 1998: 40). Victor misreads the Creature’s primary, infantile, attempts to approach him and communicate, an attempt that, from the outset highlights the Creature’s desire to be part of a family group. Victor’s flight from the Creature is reflected in his flight from his dream, a dream which has lost its initial beauty, and becomes transformed into a nightmare. Yet Victor’s insistence upon seeing the Creature as a monster is a product of the disparity between his goal and the impossibility of that goal being realised. The Creature may be a creation of Victor’s labour, but the Creature envisaged as monstrous is a product of Victor’s aesthetic taste, which in turn transforms the Creature’s instinctive need for company into a threat. By his act of rejection, Victor’s own internal solipsistic state and his resistance to the social is made evident.

Yet the lack of correspondence between the external and internal is emphasised by the events which lead to Adam’s expulsion from paradise. The Creature, desperate to be relieved of his isolation and enter society, and all too susceptible to absorbing the narratives around him, equalises his own inner and outer selves by deferring to the consensus opinion of his own ugliness, and, as a consequence, he begins to behave in accordance to his physical form. He spends his formative, educational period reading himself and his own situation into the narrative to which he is exposed, and by so doing comes to appreciate his own nature as one who can easily attune to the higher nature of man but also realises that there is a disparity between his own burgeoning conception of selfhood and how he is viewed by others.

The Creature's monstrosity is a consequence of his being assembled from multiple body parts; in effect, he is a fusion of an indistinct mass of others, a bodily counterpart of the undifferentiated synaesthetic impression of his earliest memories. The irony of the Creature's inability to form social interactions with communities and families is that he is prevented from doing so by a monstrous body which itself is comprised of the bodies of others; it is his physical multiplicity which prevents him from participating in 'the various relationships which bind one human being to another in mutual bonds' (Shelley 1998: 97). His identity as a socially embodied individual is thwarted by the very processes of his coming into being. As Colin McGinn writes, '[t]he self is an enclosed and discontinuous entity, not part of some larger embracing psychic reality. We are created by others, but we do not merge with them; our identity is not theirs' (1997: 155). Yet the creature's very being is an identity which is, from the very start, literally assembled from other dead men. His physicality as a composite being, a collection of diverse others' bodily leftovers, presents a reversal of his ideal family which he initially observes in the De Lacey household. His own past is family-less, at best 'a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing' (Shelley 1998: 97). His discovery of his own genesis comes not through his gradual participation in the everyday rituals of family membership, but upon his discovery of Victor's journal:

Everything is related in them which bears reference to my accursed origin; the whole detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it is set in view; the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors, and rendered mine ineffaceable. I sickened as I read. 'Hateful day when I received life!' I exclaimed in agony. 'Cursed creator! why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? (Shelley 1998: 105)

This, then, is the Creature's genealogy and birth certificate in one. In *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley draws on an analogy between the cohesion of the family groups and the genealogical, bodily, and social incoherence of the Creature. The togetherness and mutual affection shown by the De Lacey family, 'the bliss of my protectors' as he envisions it, which causes the Creature's envy, only accentuates his acute awareness of the disharmony of the circumstance of his creation, and immediate rejection, by Victor. In reading what he takes to be historical accounts of the past, he is sickened by the realisation that his creation is so unlike the narratives he has read and sought to understand, that he becomes more disconnected from his formative sources. His genesis is far from that of the Adam of *Paradise Lost*: 'no Eve soothed my sorrows, or shared my thoughts; I was alone. I remembered Adam's supplication to his Creator; but where was mine? he had abandoned me, and, in the bitterness of my heart, I cursed him' (Shelley 1998: 106).

The Creature defines himself in terms of lack, of disconnection, and his awareness of the weakness that the isolation from family brings. It is ultimately through murder that the Creature finally senses that he can obtain power, to overturn his social impotence; by murderously dismembering the body of the Frankenstein family, he effectively enacts a symbolic reversal of his own creation. In his encounter with Victor's young brother William, he realises that he has recourse to power, in turning the life-giving curse that Victor had bestowed on him into a life-taking means of revenge, of finding a role to play not within society, but as an individual who has pledged to go to war against society.

We can, perhaps, from the distance of 200 years on, consider the Creature of *Frankenstein* as an archetypal monster, based on the multiple cultural manifestations and mutations of Shelley's Creature over the years, in particular those emanating from Hollywood. However, within the novel *Frankenstein* itself, he is represented as being sensitive to, and conforming with, a range to pre-existing cultural values. As Drake Douglas comments, 'the tragedy of this creature is not so much that he was a monster, but that he was, withal, so much a man' (Cited in Yoder and Kreuter [eds.] 2004: 97). The Creature conforms to Mark Seltzer's 'mass in person' (discussed more fully below) by embodying the values of the culture and society in which he exists. Rather than the archetype which the creature has since become over the years, Shelly created him as is an abjected embodiment of the prejudices of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is why Shelly gives the Creature his own narrative, his own *Bildungsroman*. If we consider Shelly's Creature in terms of an early form of Seltzer's mass in person, we can envisage him in terms not of difference, but of assimilation, and his monstrosity, if monstrosity it is, is the mirrored image of social and cultural values. As Kamila Vrankova writes:

The sympathetic approach to the Monster is reflected in P.B. Shelley's review of the novel. According to him, there is in fact no monster in *Frankenstein* and the creature's crimes are not "the offspring of any unaccountable propensity to evil, but flow irresistibly from certain causes...They are the children of Necessity and Human Nature [...] In this the direct moral of the book consists [...] Treat a person wicked and he will become wicked."...There is a problem of the soul, raising the unanswerable question about the Monster's right to live and to find its place in the world of men. Would it be a murder to kill the Monster? Anyway, seeing the Monster as a human creature, the reader is ready to condemn the human treatment of it as cruel and even criminal. (Cited in Yoder and Kreuter [eds.] 2004: 97.)

## **Killing For Selfhood**

One way to win back the feeling of power is through a murderous will-to-power. Serial killer Denis Nilsen complained that Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter is 'a fraudulent fiction. He is shown as a potent figure, which is pure myth...it's not like that at all. My offences arose through a feeling of inadequacy, not potency. I never had any power in my life' (cited in Wilson and Seaman 1992: 311). Through the act of murder the Creature effectually enacts a reversal of power between himself and Victor. From being a victim of societal mores, he is enabled and transmuted into a purposive, future oriented being, rather than merely living furtively from day to day. By killing, he becomes enlivened, and realises his own potentials. Rather than being a slave to the gaze of others, he masters his situation.

In the acquisition of self-knowledge garnered by the revengeful killing of William, Victor's brother, whom he mistakes, it seems, for his son, the Creature has negotiated a particularly destructive form of individuation. Unable to form any kind of interpersonal relationship, he reasons on first seeing the child that William's lack of prejudice would enable him to educate him as his 'companion and friend' (Shelley 1998: 116-7). But immediately the child screams and shields his eyes from the Creature, calling him a 'monster', and 'ogre' and an 'ugly wretch'. He then threatens to tell his father about the Creature and reveals that his father is called Frankenstein, whereupon the Creature kills him:

I gazed on my victim, and my heart swelled with exultation and hellish triumph: clapping my hands, I exclaimed, 'I too can create desolation; my enemy is not impregnable; this death will carry despair to him, and a thousand other miseries shall torment and destroy him.' (Shelley 1998: 117)

By killing William, he empowers himself by the realisation that he has the capability, after all, to retaliate against Victor. Yet he has also broken free from the condemning gaze of his victim; by killing, his victims are rendered incapable of judgement, are rendered blind, like old De Lacey.

As Richard Jenkins writes, '[i]ndividual human selfhood is initially realised vis-à-vis others: they are the necessary foils against which we come to know ourselves. The human developmental process is an interactive process and cannot be otherwise' (2004: 49). Having initially succeeded in developing a selfhood which he himself perceives as monstrous, 'an object for the scorn and horror of mankind', the Creature realises that by killing he can attain an almost god-like status which he finds invigorating, but above all enlivening (Shelley 1998: 114). His deformity means nothing if the would-be gazer is dead. Yet there is a significance to this initial act of murder which parallels the significance of his initial rejection by Victor; his intentions to William, before he discovered his identity as a Frankenstein, were to educate him, to be his companion, just as the boy would become the Creature's companion. His ideal is to recreate the father/son interaction that Victor had denied him, but he is beholden to his own vow: 'Frankenstein! you belong then to my enemy—to him towards whom I have sworn eternal revenge; you shall be my first victim' (Shelley 1998: 117). In the place of mutuality, the Creature's own loyalty to himself takes precedence. It is evident here that the Creature has defined himself in opposition to Victor, specifically, that his life is

given meaning by the idea of revenge. It is also significant that he announces to William just before strangling him that he will be the *first* victim.

One of the Creature's early experiences is of coming across the live embers of a fire on a cold day. He first feels delight at the heat that it gives off, then experiences pain as he places his hand into the embers. 'How strange', he recalls, 'that the same cause should produce such opposite effects!' (Shelley 1998: 81). Overhearing the conversations at the De Lacey cottage, he later narrates to Victor that '[t]he words induced me to turn towards myself. I learned that the possessions most esteemed by your fellow-creatures were, high and unsullied descent united with riches' (Shelley 1998: 96). In comparing his own situation with that of the highest ideals of humanity, he immediately identifies his status, even his typology, to be distinguished only by lack: lack of money, of property, of history. While in most ways the Creature is physically superior to the rest of humanity, enabling him to endure temperatures and diets that humans could not, in general this only accentuates his awareness of difference. The Creature's value systems are determined by what he learns, from overhearing and observing the cottagers and from his book-learning. But his application of the knowledge he acquires is focussed back on himself. In his isolation, his drive to find out his own nature is largely informed by idealised narratives which few could live up to; the knowledge he finds deepens his awareness of the gulf between his own situation and the peaks of human existence. The narratives, spoken and written, to which the Creature is exposed contribute to his awareness of himself as an inadequate being, but, like Victor, he still shares a compulsion to learn:

Of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind, when it has once seized on it, like a lichen to the rock. I wished sometimes to shake off all thought and feeling; but I learned that there is but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death—a state which I feared yet did not understand. (Shelley 1989: 88-9)

The psychologist Jerome Bruner writes as follows, concerning the formation of selfhood:

One cannot resist the conclusion that the nature and shape of selfhood are indeed as much matters of cultural concern as, *res publica*, as of individual concern. Or, put it another way, selfhood involves a commitment to others as well as being ‘true to oneself.’ Selfhood without such commitment constitutes a form of sociopathy—the absence of a sense of responsibility to the requirements of social being. Even so basic a concept in the law as *mens rea*, a guilty mind, and the legal determination of criminal intent would be impossible without this element of social commitment in selfhood. (2002: 68)

The Creature’s selfhood is essentially an uncommitted one; although he has access to language, both spoken and written, his monstrosity denies him all but the most limited commitment to others. His commitment is ultimately to himself and his vow of revenge against both Victor, and mankind in general. The key to the Creature’s decision is found in his confession that the words he had heard at the De Lacey cottage, which educated him of ‘the strange system of human society’ and of ‘the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty; of rank, descent and noble blood’, had the effect of inducing him ‘to turn towards myself’ (Shelley 1998: 96). He begins to wonder about where his place might be in the schemes of human affairs, and although he can find no immediate answers, by this turning inward, he has already set up a binary between himself and society. Yet this aspect of selfhood still needs some level of affiliation, in the absence of the direct human world, and

the Creature gives a sense of that affiliation in the simile by which he describes the knowledge ‘which clings to the mind, when it has once seized on to it, like a lichen on a rock’ (Shelley 1998: 96). It is the drive towards self-knowledge that overgrows the creature: above all, the nagging repeated question: ‘What was I?’ (Shelley 1998: 96-97) Although by nature a kindly being, it is perhaps in relation to this question that the Creature performs his murderous acts. Far from being sociopathic, he never completely relinquishes his awareness of rightness or wrongness; rather, he develops an overarching levelling narrative by which he can explain his motivation; in effect he equates his murderous actions with his passions. He holds fast to his own promise, to have his revenge upon Victor:

I recollected my threat, and resolved that it should be accomplished. I knew that I was preparing for myself a deadly torture; but I was the slave, not the master of an impulse, which I detested, yet could not disobey. Yet when [Elizabeth] died!—nay, then I was not miserable. I had cast off all feeling, subdued all anguish to rot in the excess of my despair. Evil thenceforth became my good. Urged this far I had no choice but to adapt my nature to an element which I had willingly chosen, the completeness of my demoniacal design became an insatiable passion. (Shelley 1998: 188)

The exaltation which accompanied his first murder, that of William, was in the realisation that he could exert power over Victor, that he at least had the capability of living up to his vow of vengeance. His regret at the slaying of Clerval, Victor’s friend, allows him to explore further the depths of his own despair, ‘such as you cannot even imagine’ (Shelley 1998: 188). It is in his despair, however, that which cannot be shared, that the Creature can feel an intensity of emotion which matches his monstrous physicality. He has found a form of internal existence which enables him, in a naïve manner, to fill out his own monstrosity. In so doing, he paradoxically enters into the form of communality with others which he has so long

desired. By acting out the expectations of monstrosity, he achieves a sort of social parity with the societal expectations as he understands them to be, and enters, in a limited way, the society of man. In fact, he manages to accede to the hatred of society, to own the hostility of others, and incorporate it into his own self-identity.

If the creature pities Victor to the point of horror, it is because the pity he feels takes away from his newly found identity. Rather than continue to exist as a monster, an amorphous and indistinct ‘thing’, a signifier without a signified, he defines himself by wresting control of his own nature, and becoming that which he can abhor. There is certainty and deliberation in this course of action which pulls away from the mutable state:

As I read, however I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathized with, and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none and related to none. ‘The path of my departure was free;’ and there was none to lament my annihilation (Shelley 1998: 103-4).

The Creature’s sense of self is under construction here; he is identifying his own self in relation to the differences he perceives between his own situations and those of others; yet he realises that the freedom that his position as an outsider affords is a freedom which plays against his desire to be loved. His struggle embodies that of the romantic outsider, and his difficulties lie in negotiating a sense of self which, to remain recognisably human, requires membership of a group. The struggle for individualism, Shelley seems to be saying, is that the Romantic overdeveloped sense of selfhood is monstrous in that it necessitates the construction of the self in terms of difference; it promotes a sense of otherness. Yet the self which the Creature

has felt to be inherent, has been overlaid by the attitudes and reactions of others. In creating a self that corresponds with how he is perceived and treated by others, he sacrifices his own sense of self to one that corresponds to the tastes of the people he encounters. While, As Aidan Day comments, ‘*Frankenstein* pushes the Romantic model of the solitary, creative imagination to its extreme and illustrates its dangerous and destructive propensities’ (Day 1996: 162), this Romantic model is applicable to Victor’s wilful, driven self-alienation from society, but not to the Creature. The Creature’s notion of being a Self is largely dissipated by his absorption of social and cultural opinion and opprobrium, to the ultimate detriment and destruction of his own individuality, and, lastly, his own corporeal existence.

### **The Mass in Person/ The Oceanic.**

In *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture*, Mark Seltzer notes, after Elias Canetti, that ‘sea, sky, rivers, trees are traditional crowd-symbols’ (1998: 19). Seltzer continues:

The dream of a direct filiation with Nature is the dream of a direct *fusion* with an indistinct mass of others: the complete fusion with the mass at the expense of the individual that forms the inner experience of what I will be calling the *mass in person*. (19)

Seltzer's mass in person can be seen to be at play in relation to the Creature. The Creature's experience vis-à-vis human society essentially entails his adoption of the same attitudes of the masses, even in relation to himself. He becomes a creation of others' attitudes towards him, attitudes which, although always driven from the company of humans, he grows to share with them. His only communion with the world of mass humanity is to achieve a fusion with the masses, even at the expense of his own identity. The Creature's physical monstrosity overlies a normality which initially enables him to sympathise and empathise with others. The Creature's internal monstrosity comes into existence as an account of him taking on board others' views of him; he becomes the mass in person by viewing himself through the eyes of others, by over-writing (not erasing) his own human capacity for goodness by the mass narrative of relative monstrosity. In Sartre's terms, one could say that the Creature was behaving in bad faith, by playing the role of a monster, evoking a pattern of behaviour which corresponds to others' expectations on him. It does appear that he wilfully adopts his monstrous selfhood, although the final scene of *Frankenstein* suggests that his self-knowledge becomes such that he becomes aware even of his own strategy of self-deception.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Mary Shelley's Creature is that rather than have Victor Frankenstein simply animate an intact corpse, his creation is assembled from parts collected from graveyards and charnel houses. Shelley, it could be argued, is taking her cue from the metaphor of the body politic, the assemblage of individuals into a coherent group, such as a nation, political entity, or—which seems more specifically likely here—family. In relation to serial killers,

and Mark Seltzer's idea of the mass in person, however, the Creature's intercorporeality takes on a particular ironic meaning. But it is in relation to his death that the singular un-singularity of the Creature becomes most significant.

The last of the Creature's victims in *Frankenstein*, it seems, will be the Creature himself. Forever an outcast from the human realm, the Creature has, however, assimilated the lessons of justice from the texts and conversations which he has encountered. He has employed the strategy of dead levelling in relation to his avowed revenge on Victor, but he is still very much aware of the innocence of his victims:

But it is true that I am a wretch. I have murdered the lovely and the helpless; I Have strangled the innocent as they slept, and grasped to death his throat who never injured me or any other living thing. I have devoted my creator, the select specimen of all that is worthy of love and admirations among men, to misery; I have pursued him even to that irremediable ruin. (Shelley 1998: 190).

The Creature's discovery that his genealogy traces only as far back as the 'dissecting room and the slaughterhouse' which furnished the materials of his being, and that his race is not naturally that of man, places excessive pressure on his quest to discover what kind of being he is (Shelley 1998: 37). His continuity with the human race is disrupted by Victor's operation in his 'workshop of filthy creation', which, Victor narrates, often caused 'my human nature to turn with loathing from my occupation' (Shelley 1998: 37). The Creature's inability to establish any familial, racial or taxonomic continuity contributes to the type of revenge he takes on Victor: the pain that he seeks to mete out to Victor is to be in cutting away at the familial body of Victor's extended self through the murder of Victor's friends and

family. The body of the family and the body of the Creature are interconnected in that these bodies are both the sites of obsession. Just as Victor's monomaniacal focus—'I could not tear my thoughts away from my employment' (Shelley 1998: 37)—was directed towards the assemblage of dead body parts and bestowing life into them, so the resultant Creature devotes himself to tearing apart the family-body of Victor by recourse to murder. As Victor's experiment sees him become more isolated from his family, he is ironically creating the means by which he will be drawn back to them, through the sorrow and outrage that the Creature awakens in him by removing them from the corpus of his family.

The dissolution of Victor's family at the hands of the Creature functions as a precursor to the Creature's own suicide plans; the completion of his series of murders, leads up to his final act, which Creature envisages as the consummation of the 'series of my being' (Shelley 1998: 190). Having wilfully reconstructed himself as the antithesis of his earlier emergent self, 'whose thoughts were once filled sublime and transcendent vision of beauty and the majesty of goodness' (Shelley 1998: 189), the Creature, in his self-loathing, has formed an equivalence between the human race and his own sense of being; through his actions he plays out the role of monster, in effect he conforms to the script that other people have written for him. Evil becomes the Creature's good because he has decided to believe that he is as others believe him to be. Yet it seems he does this only as a *reductio ad absurdum*; in acting in accordance with others' expectations of him—in playing out the narrative expected of him by others—he engages in a process of levelling off the claims of decency and goodness that others are perceived to embody. He explains that while he has destroyed Victor's hopes:

I did not satisfy my own desires. They were forever ardent and craving; still I desired love and friendship, and still I was spurned. Am I to be though the only criminal, when all human kind have sinned against me? Why do you not hate Felix, who drove his friend from the door with contumely? Why do you not execrate the rustic who sought to destroy the saviour of his child? Nay, these are virtuous and immaculate beings? (Shelley 1998: 189)

In short, the Creature is charging normative assignments of virtuosity and goodness with hypocrisy. If these ‘virtuous and immaculate beings’ abhorred someone whose desire was love and friendship, then, his logic runs, virtue must consist, in practice, of hatred and enmity. Thus, it is in his conformity with virtue, designated as such, that the Creature’s good becomes evil. The Creature’s reading of his circumstances connotes with 2 Corinthians 3:6: ‘the letter [of the Law] killeth; but the spirit giveth life’. And indeed, the Creature, whose narrative of selfhood has been created by the literally understood words and letters of speech and texts, has discovered that even morality and ‘good’ as consensually received, are limited to the ‘letter’ only: the virtuous lessons he overheard at the De Lacey cottage and read in *The Sorrows of Werther* and *Paradise Lost* rarely transcend the texts and become translated into actions. They are just fine words, which are quickly forgotten and over-ridden by self-serving prejudices.

The Creature, however, in the last two pages of *Frankenstein*, breaks through that hypocrisy and condemns his own actions. Turning from the letter to the spirit is the Creature’s last part of his project:

‘But soon,’ he cried, with sad and solemn enthusiasm, ‘I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light

of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell. (Shelley 1998: 191)

Denied his desires in the human world, the Creature seeks the security of the larger, accepting world of Nature. His self-immolation will see the monstrous form which has caused his exclusion from society rendered miniscule, enabling, at last, the incorporation which he seeks. The sea, fire and wind—these natural forces—will accept him unconditionally, where the human realm has rejected him. The forces of nature replace the human realm and, symbolically, take the place of the unprejudiced and inclusive society which he has desired. In death, the Creature conceives that the physical destruction of his body will enable his spiritual freedom from the monstrous prison which has infected it: ‘Polluted by crimes, and torn by the bitterest remorse, where can I find rest but in death?’ (Shelley 1998; 190). In killing Victor’s family members, he has already acted out sacrifices to his selfhood; the prior values he held are also sacrificed along with his victims. In his monstrous acts of killing, the Creature has functioned as the mass in person by embodying the actions of human society, by wilfully acting out the role that society expects of him; as such he illustrates the monstrosity and hypocrisies of society vis-à-vis their purported higher ideals. In so doing he wilfully overrules his own instinctive nature, and adopts, in lieu of an earthly father, a consciously individuated Satanic narrative role to guide his actions. However, both in terms of his own bodily identity, and his balancing act interior/exterior construction of self as killer, and in terms of selecting victims who are identifiably connected to Victor, the Creature effectively functions as a critique of the over-assertion of the self. The Creature, in his suicide, instead evokes the ‘oceanic experience’, an experience of ‘being at one with the entire

universe, and of a feeling of a deep purpose and meaning to every part of existence', which is 'often accompanied by feelings of compassion for all beings' (Bowker [ed.] 1997: 710). The Creature, consoled in life only by his memories of 'the cheering warmth of summer' when he 'heard the rustling of the leaves and the chirping of the birds' (Shelley 1998: 190), instead opts to have his misery borne away by the winds and the waves, that his 'spirit will sleep in peace, or if it thinks will not surely think thus' (Shelley 1998: 191). His proposed suicide and bodily dissolution also entails a destruction of oppositions: fire and water operate together in bringing his spirit to rest, just as the folly of self-definition in opposition to others is erased by the Creature's final desire to become part of everything. And of course, if the Creature is to be rendered a part of everything, rather than as apart from human society, it follows that the route to social integration is not based upon individual selfhood, but in transcending the very causes of division. The Creature's funeral pile represents both the destructive nature of division, and the possibilities inherent in an egalitarian society which does not discriminate and make monsters against its own ideal, but seamlessly blends the higher ideals of its own narratives with its own actions.

Mark Seltzer envisages the serial killer as the mass in person:

The killer's experience of his own identity is directly absorbed in an identification with the personality type called 'the serial killer': absorbed into the case-likeness of his own case. On one level, this points to the manner in which the serial killer *internalizes* the public (popular and journalistic) and expert (criminological and psychological) definitions of his kind of person. (Seltzer 1998: 107)

The Creature, self-described as a monster, yet also realised in the *Bildungsroman* that is *Frankenstein: Or the Modern Prometheus* as a developing Romantic outsider, is represented as locked in a feud between his existence as mass in

person—the embodiment of social mores by which he is treated as a monster and so acts like one—and as a burgeoning individual who chooses to act according to his own will-to-power.

## **Dennis Nilsen and the Sea**

Dennis Nilsen, born in the fishing port of Frazerburgh, North East Scotland in 1945, was convicted in 1983 of six murders and two attempted murders, although he is generally held responsible for the deaths of at least fifteen men and boys between 1978 and 1983. The writer Brian Masters, for his book *Killing for Company: Case of Dennis Nilsen* (1985) gained access to Nilsen's voluminous notes and journals, including drawings and poems.

Being from a town which is dominated by the sea, it is perhaps not surprising that images of the sea are recurring touchstones in Nilsen's writing. But the sea, for Nilsen, is not merely a geographical feature; it also fulfils a symbolic role:

Many years ago I was a boy drowning in the sea. I am always drowning in the sea...down among the dead men, deep down. There is peace in the sea back down to our origins...when the last man has taken his last breath the sea will still be remaining. It washes everything clean. It holds within it forever the boy suspended in its body and the streaming hair and open eyes. (Quoted in Masters 1995: 48)

If we agree, with Elias Canetti and Mark Seltzer, that the sea functions as a symbol of the incorporation of the mass in person, in Nilsen's case it represents a reconnection with a communal origin, especially in relation with his grandfather

Andrew Whyte, a fisherman who died in his bunk at sea, and whom Nilsen describes as his 'great hero and protector' (Masters 1995: 43). The sea represents a reversal of the abandonments which Nilsen has experienced. His grandfather functioned as a surrogate father after his own father had walked out. The complex relationship between death, love and abandonment are highlighted in Nilsen's recollection of the death of Andrew Whyte:

Relatives would pretend he had gone to a 'better place'. 'Why', I thought, 'should he go to a better place and not take me with him?' 'So death is a nice thing,' I thought, 'Then why does it feel so miserable?' Father and grandfather had walked out on me, probably to a better place, leaving me behind in this not so good place, alone...(Quoted in Masters 1995: 46-7)

Similarly, the Creature's realisation that there 'was but one means to overcome the sensation of pain, and that was death' equates death with the idea of a better place (Shelley 1998: 96). And in his death-wish, the Creature's final destination is the sea. As Elias Canetti writes in *Crowds and Power*: '[t]he sea has no interior frontiers and is not divided into peoples and territories. It has one language which is the same everywhere. There is thus no single human being who can be, as it were, excluded from it' (1962: 95). The Creature's own primary self-representation is in terms of striving to meet the ideals embodied in the texts and language he encounters; but it transpires that these ideals do not translate into actions: the ostensible values of society are but played out in the transient passage of words. There are similarities here, too, with Nilsen's disillusionment over a period he spent in the army, which came to a head with Bloody Sunday in 1972: 'Nilsen was horrified to discover that the side of law and order could behave with the same lack of moral scruple as the terrorists, and he felt betrayed, robbed of honour' (Masters 1995: 81). This awareness of the disparity between the ideals of law and order, and the practice,

served to induce a sense of betrayal similar to that the Creature felt with respect to Victor's desertion. Having been a member of the army for nearly twelve years by this time, Nilsen became disillusioned; his disillusionment led him to leave the army and spend a short time in the police. He soon realised, however, that here too was a disparity between the alleged principles of keeping the law and the practice in 'what he perceived as the dangerous aggression exhibited by some police officers who were all too eager to subdue a suspect while resisting arrest, especially if it offered an excuse for violence' (Masters 1995: 82). Thus, the communitarian, inclusive worlds by which Nilsen obtained a social identity, came to be identified by him as violent and other to him. Still, however, striving to maintain a life very much within the system, Nilsen moved on to work at a jobcentre; then, after his 'one attempt at a sustained relationship had failed, he was left with the conviction that he was probably not fit to live with' (Masters 1995: 95). He took up the cause of the disaffected and exploited by getting involved with, tellingly, the union movement. Even in his search for identification, Nilsen's sense of self corresponded to 'failure of distinction between self and others' (Seltzer 1998: 20). He describes his sense of failure as a social being in terms of his utilitarian value, or lack thereof: by Christmas 1978 he describes how he 'felt I had achieved nothing of importance or of help to anyone in my entire life' (Masters 1995: 107). Yet, as Brian Masters writes, Nilsen's 'response to the natural world is that of a sensual romantic...With people, however, he was never "at one"' (Masters 1995: 199).

Igor Krstic writes:

The manifestation of trauma is thus inseparable from the breakdown of boundaries between the psychic and the social, representation and perception, subject and world, because trauma is defined itself as a breakdown of the boundaries between inside and outside—as a violent shattering of the autonomy of the subject.

Compulsive killing follows as a result of this vague borderline between reality and fantasy. The serial killer (or 'mass' murderer) fails to distance himself from representation—he acts out what others merely think and transforms private desires into public acts. He becomes the cross-point of the collective-subjective, the 'mass in person.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.othervoices.org/2.2/krstic/>

## Chapter 3

### Beyond Jack the Ripper: *The Lodger* and *Ritual in the Dark*

The battleground for the Creature in *Frankenstein*, as described in the previous chapter, takes place between his own attempts at forming a Romantic self—an internal ‘I’—and the social order, as embodied in the family, from which he is excluded, which that sense of self requires. Both the individual self and the social world, then, exist in terms of something more than simply the encounter between two polar opposites. The Creature essentially finds himself struggling in the interplay of the Apollonian and Dionysian realms. Indeed, the rise of the romantic violent individual epitomises the interplay between the Apollonian and the Dionysian: the chaotic and Dionysian characteristics of the romantic individual, as illustrated by the Creature, are identified in terms of the Apollonian need to individuate, to circumscribe, to isolate and identify. Monstrosity is, in effect, a product of a failure to meet with the standards of Apollonian identification and order; as such monstrosity is of the amorphous Dionysian realm. In this chapter, I will examine two novels which rework the Jack the Ripper murders, Marie Belloc

Lowndes's 1913 novel, *The Lodger*, and Colin Wilson's 1960 *Ritual in the Dark*, with reference to the Dionysian/Apollonian distinction.

## **Apollonian and Dionysian**

In *The Shrine of Jeffery Dahmer*, Brian Masters writes that

every human being has dark, shameful, nasty impulses—the combined inheritance of the species. They spring from Dionysian urges of drama, destruction and anarchy, and they have to be kept in check by the structures of civilisation, including religion and morality (1993: 18-19)

Masters here evokes the rhetoric of the Apollonian/Dionysian in order to describe the actions of the serial killer. He posits the binary oppositional polarity of chthonian, hidden and uncontrolled nature which stands in opposition to the ordered structure of human culture and civilisation, the Apollonian. This rhetoric is derived largely from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*, published in 1872, and revised in 1874. However, as Nietzsche is as some pains to point out, the Dionysian and the Apollonian can hardly be considered as binary opposing forces. The relationship between them, rather than being overtly polarised, exists more as a syzygenic interplay between them—a fluctuation, a shuttling back and forth which itself, applied to the serial killer, serves to illuminate the complexities of these embodied sites of the eternal flux of the human condition between his animal inheritance and the controlled arena of civilisation.

The Apollonian, derived from the *pricipium individuationalis*,<sup>1</sup> imposes order and identity on nature, which, in reality, exists outside of human circumscription, but is imposed by recourse to the ordering of science; the dogmas of religious faith or by a process akin to Julia Kristeva's abjection, by which the unpalatable taboos of the Dionysian are veiled, cloaked in a manageable otherness which distances, separates and disconnects that realm from the Apollonian. The strict individuation of the Apollonian functions by a process whereby

Apollo overcomes the suffering of the individual by means of the luminescent glorification of the *eternity of the phenomenon*; beauty triumphs over the suffering inherent in life; pain is, in a certain sense, deluded away from amongst the features of nature. (Nietzsche 1993: 80)

On the other hand, while Dionysian art also bids us to 'conceive of the eternal delight of existence' it functions by wishing

us to acknowledge that everything that comes into being must be prepared to face a sorrowful end. It forces us to look at the terrors of individual existence, yet we are not to be petrified with fear...for a brief moment we really become the primal essence itself and feel its unbridled lust for existence and delight in existence (Nietzsche 1993: 80)

The Apollonian, then, realising the danger of nature, throws a veil of beauty over that ugliness and threat.

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<sup>1</sup> '*pricipium Individuationalis*: the principle of individuation. This is Schopenhauer's term for the way our experience comes to us parcelled up, especially our awareness of ourselves. It is, therefore, for him, and for Nietzsche in [*The Birth of Tragedy*], illusory, since reality is undifferentiated' (*Birth of Tragedy* 1993: 119)

Denis Nilsen unwittingly reveals his awareness of the Apollonian/Dionysian, individual/collective interplay, when he writes:

I am always surprised and truly amazed that anyone can be attracted to the macabre. The population at large is neither 'ordinary' or 'normal'. They seem to be bound together by a collective ignorance of themselves and what they are. They have, every one of them, got their deep dark thoughts with many a skeleton rattling in their secret cupboards. Their fascination with 'types' (rare types) like myself plagues them with the mystery of why and how a person can actually do things which may be those dark images and acts secretly within them. I believe that they can identify with these 'dark images and acts' and loathe anything which reminds them of this dark side of themselves. The usual reaction is a flood of popular self-righteous condemnation but a willingness to, with friends and acquaintances, talk over and over again the appropriate bits of the case. (Cited in Masters 1993: 19)

Nilsen, in this quotation, forefronts the paradox between the individual and the masses, between the individual and the collective. Those perceived to be 'rare types', like Nilsen himself, are only rare because of the self-unawareness of the 'population at large'. The Dionysian secrets are cast upon the particular, paradoxically Apollonian, figure of Nilsen himself, instantly identifiable on account of his attributed rarity. Nilsen, however, alludes to a idea similar to Seltzer's mass in person when he charges the population with being 'neither "ordinary" or "normal"' in that the actions of rare types like himself serve to remind the populace of their own dark desires and wishes. As such, Nilsen's actions have embodied the hidden Dionysian wishes of the masses: he is an example of Seltzer's mass in person. On this account, the Dionysian principles of boundary-dissolution is embodied in Nilsen, where the otherwise secretive discourses of self-recognition are allowed out of their secret hiding places, to weave around him, and in so doing, the Apollonian ordering principle of law and decency is allowed to crystallise in the discussions

which surround him. To transcribe Seltzer's proposal of the mass in person in terms of the Apollonian/Dionysian *faux*-dichotomy, the mass in person as embodied in the serial killer is an Apollonian aesthetic construct by which the Dionysian 'dark images and acts' of the masses are concretised and made recognisable in the figure of the serial killer.

It is in these discussions and the conflicts arising from them that form many of the themes in *The Lodger*.

### ***The Lodger***

Marie Belloc Lowndes's 1913 novel *The Lodger* is an extended version of a short story published in *McClure's* magazine in January 1911. The popularity of the novel, which sold over one million copies, reflected the interest in Jack the Ripper, upon whom the novel was based.<sup>1</sup> Through its fictionalised account of the crimes of the Ripper, the novel explores urban living spaces, and the conventions of social exclusion/inclusion as well as the creation and dissemination, via the press, of the excluded figure of the late Victorian and Edwardian other. The mythologized crimes of Jack the Ripper circumscribe and inform *The Lodger*, while the marriage between the Apollonian and the Dionysian gives birth, in Nietzschean fashion, to the tragedy of this 'tale of the London fog'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The seeds of the story were sewn when Belloc Lowndes attended a dinner party at which a guest told the story of a butler and a cook who took in lodgers, and believed that Jack the Ripper had been one of their boarders.

<sup>2</sup> The 1927 Hitchcock film-version of *The Lodger* was subtitled 'A Tale of the London Fog'.

Robert and Ellen Bunting, on all outward appearances, ‘presented a pleasant cozy picture of comfortable married life’ (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 7). However, ‘particularly true of average English life is the timeworn English proverb as to appearances being deceitful’ (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 7). On the first page of the novel, then, Belloc Lowndes introduces the theme which will be of great importance in *The Lodger*, that of appearance and underlying reality. The ‘cozy’ room in which they sit, belies that the couple ‘were almost at the end of their tether’ (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 8), near to

the soundless depths which divide those who dwell on the safe tableland of security—those that is, who are sure of making a respectable, if not a happy living—and the submerged multitude who, through some lack in themselves, or owing to the conditions under which our strange civilisation has become organised, struggle rudderless till they die in workhouse, hospital, or prison. (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 9)

Mr Bunting had spent his life as a manservant, was now reduced to borrowing money, and has become isolated and silent in the face of ‘living near that deep pit which divides the secure from the insecure’ (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 10). The threats of the ‘deep pit’ and the ‘submerged multitude’ are the dark threats of social oblivion which loom over the formerly loquacious Mr Bunting. The threat of dire poverty, of social falling and dissolution, is remedied when Mrs Bunting accepts a lodger into the household, who offers the couple financial security. The arrival of Mr Sleuth, the lodger, who the couple slowly and reluctantly come to suspect of being the perpetrator of a series of murders in London, effectively offers a reversal of the position of the Creature in *Frankenstein*. In *The Lodger*, the killer is established within the domestic world from the start, and his presence initially

functions to alleviate the threat of the fall into the Dionysian depths of the 'submerged multitude'. ( Belloc Lowndes 2003: 7). The homely urban space which the Buntings seek to uphold itself becomes an area of uncertainty of the encounter between the rigidly established order which conceals the threat of poverty and violence:

As [Mrs Bunting] came within sight of home, her spirit suddenly lightened. The narrow drab-colored little house, flanked each side by others exactly like it in every single particular, save that their front yards were not so well kept, looked as if it could, aye, and would keep any secret closely hidden (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 194)

The Buntings' house is different in that it is over-ordered in relation to the adjacent properties; the garden, the natural, keeps away any hint of secret disorder within; the order which helps to discriminate the house from the others, thinks Mrs Bunting, is sufficient to disguise the ineffable truths of disorder within.

The novel immediately sets up the opposition between self-identity defined by mere appearance, and the chthonian alternative of the relative social invisibility of poverty. On being told by Sleuth that he is 'a man of science,' Mrs Bunting rationalises Mr Sleuth's idiosyncrasies: 'scholars, as well she knew, are never quite like other people' (Belloc Lowndes 2003 23; 24). Marie Belloc Lowndes creates Mr and Mrs Bunting as socially liminal figures. They are subject to their past (just as the novel itself is subject to the recent past) and the social structures of the society in which they live. The Buntings are provisionally impoverished, teetering on the brink of starvation, the abyss of ruination. Belloc Lowndes's lexical field positions them as on a tightrope, teetering between the world of social acceptability

and the dark underworld of the amorphous poor. Yet, it is their very self-identification that Lowndes cites as a cause of their predicament; in their self-identification with social class they have also excluded themselves from help:

Had the Buntings been in a class lower than their own, had they belonged to the great company of human beings technically known to so many of us as the poor, there would have been friendly neighbours to help them, and the same would have been the case had they belonged to the class of smug, well-meaning, if unimaginative, folk whom they had spent so much of their lives in serving.  
(Belloc Lowndes 2003: 9)

Lowndes locates the Bunting's predicament largely on account of their betwixt and between status, their falling between two distinct socially recognisable groups. They are, in a sense, represented as being outsiders, on account of their indeterminate status.

The Buntings (a surname that ironically connotes with festivity) are therefore positioned in the uncertain area between two communities, and it is the middle ground of the middle class wherein the murderer seeks and finds refuge. The middle space, the neither-one-nor-other space then, is an unsafe area in *The Lodger*, a morally ambiguous Gothic space of domesticated otherness. The Apollonian fixity of place 'of those who dwell on the safe tableland of security' is threatened by the intrusion of the amorphous Dionysian threat of the 'submerged multitude' who 'struggle rudderless till they die' (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 9). Yet through the text the narrator seeks fixity. The monstrous Mr Sleuth's insertion into the homely, if impoverished, Bunting household, is a warning. Yet Belloc Lowndes's text also serves as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the strict and dogmatic fixing of the Apollonian word, be it the word of the press or the Word of God. The individual, at all events, poses *the* threat in Belloc Lowndes's novel. The Apollonian principium

individuationis conceals the reality of life/death, its own Conradian heart of ineffable darkness, and exposes the paradox at the centre of the Apollonian/Dionysian antithesis: there is no antithesis, but rather, interplay.

‘We abnegate something of our responsibility if we refuse to acknowledge Dionysus when we see him,’ writes Brian Masters, ‘for it is a refusal to acknowledge ourselves’ (1993: 19). And the Buntings do, indeed, abnegate their social responsibilities by refusing to acknowledge to each other, and to themselves, the Dionysian in the gentlemanly Mr Sleuth.

Mr Sleuth is provisionally idealised by Mrs Bunting for reasons of financial expediency. That others may be suffering on account of her refusal to acknowledge her own suspicions over Mr Sleuth is a factor she does not address, as the new-found financial security of the household is her main concern, Mrs Bunting refuses to ‘see’ the possible evidence until the evidence impinges upon the well-being of her own home. Only when Mr Bunting’s daughter is perceived to be threatened do Mr and Mrs Bunting break their conspiracy of silence to each other, and in so doing allow the darkness in their own home to become visible. Daisy is Mr Bunting’s daughter from a previous marriage, *not* Mrs Bunting’s; the family household of the Bunting’s is already fractured, even before the entry of Mr Sleuth. Daisy’s entry to the house is underwritten by emotional distance between step-daughter and step-mother, and obtruded by the cries of disordered society, announcing news of a further murder:

As they were exchanging a rather frigid kiss, indeed, t’was a mere peck on Mrs Bunting’s part, there fell, with startling suddenness, loud cries on the still cold air.

Long-drawn and wailing, they sounded strangely sad as they rose and fell across the distant roar of traffic in the Edgeware Road. (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 65)

Mrs Bunting's step-daughter appears in the house as 'pink cheeked, excited, laughing-eyed Daisy—a sight to gladden any father's heart' (Belloc Lowndes 203: 65). Compare, however, the entrance of Daisy to the house with that of Mr Sleuth's first arrival:

On the top of the three steps which led up to the door, there stood the long, lanky figure of a man, clad in an Inverness cape and an old-fashioned top hat. He waited for a few seconds blinking at her, perhaps startled by the light of the gas in the passage. Mrs Bunting's trained perception told her at once that this man, odd as he looked, was a gentleman, belonging to the class whom her former employment had brought her in contact. (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 20)

The static, hesitating appearance of Mr Sleuth, whom Mrs Bunting accepts as a recognisable and acceptable *type*, contrasts with the life-affirming, joyous presence of Daisy, whom Mrs Bunting nonetheless receives with coldness. Mrs Bunting's Apollonian (frigid) response to Daisy's youthful exuberance is countered by Mrs Bunting's overwriting of Sleuth's 'odd' appearance by virtue of her 'trained perception' of him as a member of a 'class' with which Mrs Bunting is familiar. '[L]aughing-eyed' Daisy's gaze is a refutation of the hesitant, blinking eyes of Sleuth—eyes, it seems, more used to the dark. Mr Sleuth is perceived by Mrs Bunting as being a known, self-contained identity, connoting with ideas of nostalgic comfort:

Mrs Bunting spoke in a civil, passionless voice. It seemed too good to be true, this sudden coming of a possible lodger, and a lodger who spoke in the pleasant,

courteous way and voice which recalled to the poor Woman her happy, far-off days of youth and security. (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 20/1)

Mrs Bunting's first experience of Sleuth, then, is marked by feelings of doubt and remembered security; her confrontation with him is encountered in her own self in terms of the absence of youth and security: her memories of youth juxtapose with her lack of passion in the present. That it is Sleuth's voice which initiates this regression is significant, as Sleuth is, for the most part, an invisible presence in the house. But it is ultimately Sleuth's words that mark him out as different.

A certain moral ambivalence towards the crimes of Jack the Ripper is evident in the recalling of the case in *The Lodger*. Only twenty-five years had elapsed between the end of the Ripper's reign of terror and the publication of the novel: less in the case of the preceding short story. But then, in 1888, a police statement issued to the press is equally morally ambiguous. Police chief Charles Warren told the press in October of 1888 that

The police can do nothing as long as the victims unwittingly connive at their own destruction. They take the murderer to some retired spot, and place themselves in such a position that they can be slaughtered without a sound being heard.<sup>1</sup>

Mr Sleuth's dim view of prostitution and drunkenness coincides with the voice of police authority in 1888, in concluding that the victims were largely responsible for their own deaths. It is not only in outwardly conforming to the mores of polite society that Sleuth maintains his outward appearance of decency, but in his specific targeting of drunken women, for the Dionysian is also the province of intoxication.

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<sup>1</sup> From the *Pall Mall Gazette* October 4<sup>th</sup> 1888.

Sleuth, driven by the Apollonian strictures of science and scripture, seeks to banish the Dionysian, embodied in the drunken women he kills. The Apollonian is the realm of the Word, the father, the statuesque: it is the construction of the social which veils the Dionysian—the realm outside the Law and the strictures of time, space and form. The unpalatable, unfixable, ineffable void of the Dionysian is other to the Apollonian, cast into the darkness of the unseen, the hidden, the secret. In *The Lodger*, we never ‘see’ Mr Sleuth’s crimes or experiments: we as readers are denied access to this forbidden realm of otherness. As Jack the Ripper remains unseen, unidentified, a figure of darkness and undefined identity—more fog than substance—so Mr Sleuth is a largely unseen presence of suspicion and fear who denies the word of the law, while at the same time being formed in part by the rationalising Word of his transcendental belief system which is circumscribed by the Word of the ‘Book of Books’ (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 76). Mrs Bunting hears Sleuth reading passages from the Bible aloud to himself, passages that ‘were very uncomplimentary to her sex’ (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 46).

In the revelation that the Avenger may have been an escapee from a local lunatic asylum, Marie Belloc Lowndes reveals a silent intertextual clue to the identity of Sleuth. As Mrs Bunting observes, Sleuth appears to pay any attention to only two books: the Bible and Cruden’s Concordance. It is the latter book in which we can find the clue. Alexander Cruden was born in Aberdeen in 1699, where he graduated from Marischal College with a Master of Arts degree. Around this time, he succumbed to mental illness. Later moving to London, he worked for Watts the printer as a corrector, and Cruden adopted the name ‘Alexander the Corrector’; he

‘thought himself divinely appointed as the public censor’<sup>1</sup>. He also ran his own bookshop, and he was later appointed the post of bookseller to the queen. Shortly after arriving in London, he undertook his monomaniacal task of creating his concordance, at the same time as he was employed as a proof reader for the *Public Advertiser*, neglecting all other considerations to his task, to the extent that he fell deeply into debt; this contributed, it seems, to a further deterioration in his mental health: the introduction to 36<sup>th</sup> edition of Cruden’s Concordance, in a footnote, recalls that ‘throughout his life the author was subject to an intellectual infirmity, to overcrowdings of the mind, which left him little respite!’ (Eadie [Ed.] 1875: vi) Mr Sleuth, it seems, shares something of Cruden’s obsession:

The second evening he had been with them Mr Sleuth had brought in a book of which the queer name was Cruden’s Concordance. That and the Bible—Mrs Bunting had soon discovered there was a relation between the two books—seemed to be the lodger’s only reading. He spent hours each day, generally after he had eaten breakfast which also served for luncheon, pouring over the Old Testament and over that, strange kind of index to the Book. (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 46)

And Sleuth later reveals that the only use that he has for red ink is to ‘mark up passages which happen to be of particular interest in my Concordance’, which, he continues, ‘I should have taken great pleasure in compiling myself had not this—ah—gentleman called Cruden, been before’ (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 100). It seems that Sleuth is, in effect, continuing the work of ‘Alexander the Corrector’, on paper, but also ‘correcting’ the human race. On the third murder, a note written in red ink,

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/encyc/encyc03/htm/ii.11.ii.htm> Accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2010.

proclaims, simply, 'The Avenger'. Both Sleuth and Cruden, then, are self-styled correctors of public error.

Marie Belloc Lowndes's representation of the serial killer in *The Lodger* is based upon the attribution of mental illness which is presented in the form of religious monomania. The lodger himself becomes not so much a person, but a site for the repository of disparate speculations, textual links, possibly synchronistic occurrences, which do however seem strongly to suggest that Sleuth and the Avenger are one and the same: Sleuth explains to Mr Bunting that the substance on his cape was the result of him brushing up 'against a dead animal, a creature to whose misery some thoughtful soul had put an end, lying across a bench on Primrose Hill' (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 209). Later in the text, Joe Chandler, the Buntings' detective friend, describes to Mrs Bunting in confidence the circumstances of another murder, the victim of which 'was found dead on a bench on Primrose Hill' (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 217). However, Mr Bunting is absent on this occasion, and his wife, who is told the news in confidence, does not tell Mr Bunting of the location. Thus the link between Sleuth's comment and Mr Bunting's hearing of that comment, Chandler's knowledge of the crime-scene and Mrs Bunting's transmission of Chandler's story, breaks down. The reader has access to all the information, which can only be contextualised by bringing together the several different pieces of information distributed via different snippets of conversation in different pages of the text, and as such, the sleuthing mind of the reader becomes a living concordance to the available contextualised information.

Sleuth is a product of his textual obsession. He circumscribes his own sins by deferring to his validating scriptures. His vengeance is wreaked upon the unruly female form, from whence, according to Genesis, all sin originated. The twice Dionysian intoxicated feminine is eradicated by Sleuth. And Sleuth's own threatening otherness is abjected by his Apollonian respectability onto the bodies of his victims, by the ultimate act of transgression. As Julia Kristeva writes:

Abjection persists as *exclusion* or taboo (dietary or other) in monotheistic religions, Judaism in particular, but drifts over to more 'secondary' forms such as *transgression* (of the Law) within the same monotheistic economy. It finally encounters, with Christian sin, a dialectic elaboration, as it becomes integrated in the Christian Word as a threatening otherness—but always nameable, always totalizable. (Kristeva 1982: 17)

The other is thus circumscribed by the Word, individuated and identified as threat and therefore, an object to be legitimately obliterated; the sinful Eves of prostitution and Dionysian excess have to be avenged. Alternatively, despite the fears of the Buntings, Daisy was never in any danger from Sleuth, as shown by Sleuth's quotation of Wordsworth when he first sees her from her window:

Side by side they stood, looking out of the window. And, as if aware that someone was standing there, Daisy turned her bright face up towards the window and smiled at her step-mother, and at the lodger, whose face she could only dimly discern.

'A very sweet-looking young girl,' said Mr Sleuth thoughtfully. And he quoted a little bit of poetry, and this took Mrs Bunting very much aback.

'Wordsworth,' he muttered dreamily. 'A poet too little read nowadays, Mrs Bunting; but one with a beautiful feeling for nature, for youth, for innocence.'  
(Belloc Lowndes 2003: 219)

This passage seems somewhat paradoxical in the context of Sleuth's ostensible Apollonian characteristics, but again the sanitised nature of Wordsworthian romanticism is a further attempt to abject the threat of the natural under the Apollonian veil of surface beauty. Daisy exists, even in name, as a symbol of natural, rural beauty. Sleuth's dreamy murmur further evokes the Apollonian idealisation which keeps the Dionysian at bay, for Apollonian imagery is also the province of the dream. The Word, muttered or chanted, acts as a ritual to abject that which is socially unacceptable; the word acts as Sleuth's cover of respectability.

At the waxworks, near the end of *The Lodger*, Sleuth slips past the Chief of Police, unrecognised. His appearance does not tally with the public description of the Avenger, because that description is derived from descriptions given by different witnesses. The individual experiences of Mr Sleuth are ironically pulled together in one fixed<sup>1</sup> image:

'Why on earth didn't the people who saw him try to catch him?' asked Bunting suddenly.

Joe Chandler coughed. 'Well, it's this way,' he said. 'No one person did see all that. The man who's described [in the wanted notice] is just made up from the description from two different folk who think they saw him [...] And then the boss who has charge of that sort of thing looked up what the other people had said—I mean when the other crimes was committed. That's how he made up this "Wanted"'. (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 79)

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<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps interesting in the context of the Apollonian/Dionysian discussion to note that in the original short story, 'The Lodger', Sleuth is found drowned five days after his escape from the Apollonia of the waxworks: his Dionysian fluidity finds an apposite repository in a local canal.

The Avenger, then, is an imagined invention of several minds: witnesses, the press, the police and popular mythology. ‘The Avenger’ is an idea, an invented image. He does not exist, even if Mr Sleuth does. The Avenger is a composite Frankenstein’s Creature, whereas Sleuth is flesh and blood and, therefore, invisible to a crowd looking for *something* else—a constructed, imagined monster.

The wax museum, from where Sleuth makes his escape, is an apposite place of departure for the failing Apollonian disguise of the lodger. The waxworks are the frozen, immobilised forms of the fluid, waxy, borderless Dionysian, offered up for public curiosity and safely concealed within the chamber of horrors—among monstrous horrors, the human form is unnoticed. Herein lies the danger of a process which gives rise to the monsterisation of those who disturb order and individuality. Those who do not appear to differ and who fit in are beyond accusation:

Surely it was inconceivable that this gentle, mild-mannered gentleman could be the monster of cruelty and cunning that Bunting had for the terrible space of four days believed him to be! (Belloc Lowndes 2003: 244)

Bunting’s refusal to conceive that the lodger could also be the murderer is also his refusal to believe that the ‘monster’ and the ‘gentleman’ are capable of being the one and the same. In Bunting’s refusal we can read society’s refusal to look beneath the Apollonian veil.

The serial killer in *The Lodger*, is distributed between two entities, the Lodger and ‘The Avenger’. Mr Sleuth, on outward appearances seems to embody the idea of the gentleman, and as such the Buntings refuse to acknowledge his guilt. The Avenger, however, is an idea, and as such it is unremarkable that he is never caught. In *The Lodger*, Marie Belloc Lowndes describes the same man from a

public mediated perspective, and from the eye-witness accounts of those who live under the same roof as him. From the Bunting's perspective, Sleuth enables them to disbelieve that the he might be the killer, as he provides the financial means for the Buntings to avoid poverty.

## *Ritual in the Dark*

Colin Wilson's first novel, *Ritual in the Dark*, was published four years after the release, in 1956, of his critically acclaimed *The Outsider*. *The Outsider* is a study of the psychological alienation of the creative mind, as exemplified in the work of, among others, Vincent Van Gogh, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. *The Outsider* focuses on people who 'cannot accept life as it is, who cannot consider [their] own existence or anyone else's necessary' (Wilson 2001: 81). The Outsider, then, is a specific type of person who is dissatisfied with everyday life, who feels cheated by it. Albert Camus paints a picture of such a person in *The Myth of Sisyphus* in the following ostensibly quotidian scene:

Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm — this path is easily followed most of the time.  
(Camus 1981: 19)

Yet was ever a day truly like this? As Jonathon Westphal observes in his critique of Camus's 'Absurd Man,' this view of day-to-day existence is inhuman (Westphal 1998: 155). The office worker does not simply rise, he rises from his bed; he does not just eat, he eats a particular something; he does not experience his mode of transportation as merely 'tram', but sees people, trees, bill-boards or his morning paper en route to the office or factory. Camus's description amounts to a species of unwitting propaganda that functions to reduce life to a set of verbs and nouns, signs

without referents. As Westphal writes of Camus's worker, the 'extraordinary thing about him is that we are supposed to recognise ourselves in his bleak situation' (1998: 155). Camus's reduction of life is so absurd that it constitutes a huge understatement. By envisioning people as unfeeling machines, he strips them—and by extension himself—of moral accountability.

While Camus's depiction of the worker's life could be perceived as being deliberately manipulative on the part of the author—in that he misrepresents life in order to pursue and persuade us of his absurdist perspective on life—such *ad hominem* criticism is not my goal here. The author, too, is an individual as potentially susceptible to the *zeitgeist* of pessimism as the criminal. Camus's *Myth of Sisyphus*, originally published in 1942, famously begins with the line: 'There is but one truly serious problem, and that is suicide' (Camus 1981: 11). Against Camus's stripped-down version of 'reality' this may seem a pertinent assertion; life has to be intellectually rationalised and surmounted in order to be lived. Brian Masters comments: 'There are few moments more frightening than the sudden realization that there is no profound reason for living' (Masters 1975: 36). The fear arises from an absence of an answer, and this fear must be overcome by the construction of 'a reason for living', a strategy that enables one to endure the anxiety provoked by contemplating life in stark, mechanical terms (Masters 1975: 37).

For Colin Wilson, Camus's Absurd Man is a victim of 'the passive fallacy', or the 'fallacy of insignificance', which results in a pessimistic monochromatic perception of the world:

When human beings become bored, they lose all sense of reality, and somehow find themselves in the passenger seat. They lose the sense of being in control of their own lives, and slip into an attitude of passivity. Yet any crisis can instantly reawaken them and make them realise that being in control, far from being difficult, is quite normal. When we are 'awake', the 'real you' takes over, and life is transformed. (Wilson 2001: 305)

Colin Wilson's *Ritual in the Dark*, which I will be dealing with here, concerns a young man, Gerard Sorme, and his relationship to Austin Nunne, who, as is suspected from the start, is behind a series of murders in London, which, as in Marie Belloc Lowndes's *The Lodger*, offer a fictionalised replaying of the Jack the Ripper Murders.

Nicholas Tredell writes that *Ritual in the Dark* 'combines a number of modes: the realistic novel of the 1950s; the *Bildungsroman*; the murder story' (Tredell 1982: 48). Unlike *Frankenstein*, however, the *Bildungsroman* aspect of the story does not concern the murderer, but rather tracks the growth of Sorme through his friendship, and partial-identification with, the murderer. As Wilson writes in his introduction to the novel, 'I became aware that the real theme of *Ritual* was not "dream and reality" but dream *versus* reality—the fundamental human craving to find a purpose that can absorb the whole being' (Wilson 1993: 3). Yet the figure of the serial murderer in *Ritual in the Dark* also serves to exemplify Wilson's claim that 'murder is the meaningless of life become dynamic, a dramatization of the hidden futility of life' (Wilson and Pitman 1984: 20).

*Ritual in the Dark* opens with Sorme emerging, symbolically, from ‘the Underground at Hyde Park Corner with his head lowered, ignoring the people who pressed around him and leaving it to them to steer out of his way’ (Wilson 1993: 7). We are immediately alerted to his status as a typically Wilsonian ‘outsider’, and immediately offered a fleeting insight into a major site of conflict that will arise in Sorme’s confrontation with Nunne later in the novel:

He disliked the crowds. They affronted him: Too many people in this bloody city. If he allowed himself to notice them, he found himself thinking: Too many people in this bloody city; we need a massacre to thin their numbers. When he caught himself thinking this, he felt sick. He had no desire to kill anyone, but the hatred of the crowd was uncontrollable. (Wilson 1993: 7)

The internal conflict that Sorme faces evokes his own sense of individuality in relation to the masses, which only exist for him via an act of will; he must direct his awareness towards them in order to notice them; but when he does he is overcome by a Sartrean sense of nausea at the external reality of others outside of himself. He hates the crowd as a mass of indistinguishable numbers, but still recognises that his hatred could never be assuaged by killing any one of them; the crowd stands as an image of that which stands against him in his quest towards individuation. In the same manner that he refuses to observe the crowds, he also refuses to look at the advertisement of ‘half-clothed forms that advertised women’s corsets and stockings’ which ‘brought a burning sensation to his throat, an instantaneous shock, like throwing a match against a petrol-soaked rag’ (Wilson 1993: 7). Sorme’s glimpses around him reveal emotions of hatred and desire commingled, gesturing towards the possibility of a violent conflagration which both repulse and attract him, and the

threat that his smouldering resentment against society could, perhaps, explode.<sup>1</sup>

Sorme is, at the beginning of the novel, basically in the same condition as Camus's Absurd Man; he allows himself to be affronted by them, yet he only notices them if he allows himself to. He had, as he later confesses to Nunne, become passive, purposeless:

I think I'd forgotten how to live. I let myself slip into a state of sloppiness and boredom, that's all. And since I've met you, I've begun to recover the old sense of purpose. Oh it's not anything very clear. It's just a sense of excitement like being on the point of discovering something. But it's genuine all right. And you started it, but it's nothing to do with you personally. (Wilson 1993: 175)

Here, as in the opening paragraph in which Sorme can, if he wishes, 'allow' himself to see the crowd, Wilson alludes to the remedy for the passive fallacy by recourse to the proposition of intentionality. Intentionality underpins much of the oeuvre of Colin Wilson. He explains it as follows:

When we look at something, we *throw* our attention at it, like a stone. If we stare at it passively without this effort, we fail to notice it— like reading the page of a book when our minds are elsewhere and being unable to remember what we have read. We grasp meaning as the hand grasps an object. The important corollary is that if we wish to see more meaning we have to tighten our grip, heighten our intentionality. (1966a: 266)

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<sup>1</sup> This illustrates the link, also, between sex and murder, and the interest in murder which Wilson outlines in *A Casebook of Murder* where he writes that a puritanical morbid interest in sex 'is an inverted form of the recognition that sex can be a man's most vital insight into his secret potentialities. And if a murder case arouses this same sick curiosity, it is because we instinctively recognise it as a denial of these secret potentialities of freedom' (1969: 23).

Camus's worker, then, failed to 'throw' his attention at the world, and so failed to read the world as meaningful. Such a state of low intentionality seems to be the basic problem of many serial killers: killers refuse to or cannot see that there is an alternative vantage point to their passive mode of perception. Similarly, Austin Nunne first appeals to Sorme as an idealised romantic figure. Sorme is awoken from his passive state by the interest that Nunne awakens in him; but that interest, as Sorme alludes, is not in Nunne himself, as an individual, but in the human potential that Nunne has come to symbolise. 'In his mind, Nunne stood for physical existence, a direct sense of physical life' (Wilson 1993: 125). This is a partial reversal of the early Sorme, who felt impinged-on by the brute fact of the crowds in the London street. To feel impinged upon by the world is to imagine ourselves a victim of that world, at its mercy, and somehow inadequate and enfeebled in its presence. Resentment is often a result of this 'one-way traffic flow', and in extreme cases the need for revenge which the resentful feel is meted out to perceived tokens of society; often vulnerable and socially excluded people, such as prostitutes, children or homosexuals: people often as socially isolated and sidelined from mainstream society as the serial killer who kills them is psychologically isolated. Sorme, at the start of the novel, experiences a sense of otherness that is different in intensity from the serial killer, but his resentment is fundamentally the same kind as that experienced by the serial killer. And in these revelations of Sorme's internal state are revealed the basis of his initial partial identification with the killer of *Ritual in the Dark*, Austin Nunne.

Sorme and Nunne meet at an exhibition devoted to Diaghilev where Sorme briefly feels that he recognises Nunne. On viewing a bust of Nijinsky, he remembers that Nunne reminds him of the dancer:

Idly, he wondered whether he might be any relation of Nijinsky, his son perhaps. He could remember no son; only a daughter. Anyway, the bust was not really like him. It was not really like Nijinsky either; it had been idealised. (Wilson 1993: 10)

Sorme is both attracted and repulsed by Nunne; he finds Nunne's face 'ugly, in a pleasant way' (Wilson 1993: 8). Nunne is, to Sorme, a 'magic mirror in which Sorme can see a negative self-image; a dark *Doppelgänger* who deepens Sorme's sense of purpose; a teacher who instructs by his own black example' (Tredell 1982: 51). Nunne is in essence a combination of De Quincey's aesthetic murderer and the romantic violent individual. And Sorme's initial repulsion at the advertisements on the subway is mirrored in Nunne's gaze, for, as he examines a photograph of a scantily clad girl at a cinema, Sorme 'suddenly caught a look of revulsion and absorption' on his face (Wilson 1993: 22).

The major difference between Sorme and Nunne is in their expressions of sexuality. Sorme is heterosexual, and indeed is portrayed in the novel as having two sexual relationships, with women who are acquaintances of Nunne. Nunne himself is, problematically, gay.<sup>1</sup> His overt sexuality remains in the dark, and is only

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<sup>1</sup> In his introduction, Wilson claims (unconvincingly) that to account for the involvement of Nunne with Sorme, he decided to make the former 'a homosexual'. He continues: 'I have since then wondered occasionally whether this was the correct solution, since few sadistic homosexuals select women as their victims. But it enabled me to create an interesting—and I think, convincing—relationship, and to solve the purely logistic problem' (Wilson 1993: 5). The aspect of homophobic representation will arise again in relation to Thomas Harris.

encountered in conversation, just as the murders he commits, as in *The Lodger*, take place off the page. But it is in the meanings attached to sex that the two differ greatly. Sorme finds a source of reconnection with reality through sex: a reconnection that Sorme symbolically locates in Nunne's 'direct sense of physical life', mentioned above. His experience of sex with Caroline—the niece of Nunne's friend Gertrude Quincey, with whom Sorme also has an affair—serves, briefly, to shake Sorme awake from his passive condition; with Caroline, Sorme experiences a sense of immediate reality 'more real than anything except pain: it was an intimation of the reason behind the timeless continuity of life' (Wilson 1993: 240). For Nunne, however, the exception of pain which Sorme acknowledges, takes prominence: the pain of others. Nunne tells Sorme that he does not know what makes him kill, but, pointing to his stomach, claims:

It's something in here. I feel sometimes that I could take an emetic and get rid of it all. It's like periodic malaria. But try to understand, Gerard. *It's not just a disease*. It's an excitement. It's a kind of inverted creative impulse. I feel like I'm serving something greater than myself. It's...it's like a need...to build. (Wilson 1993: 371)

Again, as in the discussion of De Quincey, the unknown motive is given an aesthetic turn. Yet Nunne's confession here, in his admixture of physiological and aesthetic rhetoric, refuses to acknowledge that his impulse—his excitement—have an effect upon the outside world. His own needs and feelings—his own aesthetic rationale—trump the considerations of his victims, who simply become a means for him to achieve ends that are, in the real world, unachievable. Unlike Sorme he cannot, it seems, even momentarily sense reality, but envisions his compulsion as a

spiritual quest which he violently manifests on his victims. Nunne has no conception of facticity; his goal is transcendence itself.

For Sorme (and it seems, Wilson), Nunne's flamboyance and theatricality—his aestheticism—lie at the root of the killings. He explains to the priest, Father Carruthers, the significance of the Diaghilev exhibition for Nunne is that it was 'like a fairy tale. These old costumes, designs, sets, soft music, scent—the same scent that Austin uses, incidentally—just like another world. Well, that's Austin's world, father, the one he *wants* to live in' (Wilson 2003: 307). Sorme continues by explaining that Nunne 'can't accept reality' and that he wants to see the world 'from some beautifully detached standpoint' (Wilson 2003: 307). By constructing his life like a drama, Nunne 'dramatises his own self-disgust. If he committed a murder, he wouldn't be a real murderer. He'd be a tragic actor playing Macbeth' (Wilson 2003: 308). Nunne, on this account, builds his own mental scenery and co-opts his victims as co-actors in his dramas. Nunne's refusal to see the suffering that he causes is a consequence of his aestheticised resistance to reality; his problem is one diagnosed by American lawyer Dan MacDougald as 'faulty blocking'.

As Colin Wilson explains, Dan MacDougald believed that "Attitudes" begin as acts of decision, of choice; they only end as "faulty blocking" (Wilson 1975: 237). 'Faulty blocking' in this sense means the blocking out of alternative perceptions and perspectives. A racist, Wilson explains, *cannot see* anything other than the negative aspects of the object of his hatred: the characteristics that he does not want to see are 'blocked out' by his own prejudicial attitudes (Wilson 1975: 236-7). MacDougald discovered 'faulty blocking' after being called in to deal with a dispute between farmers and the Federal authorities. The authorities insisted on

overloading the Buford Dam, north of Atlanta, Georgia, with the result that over a period of several years, cattle were swept away and crops ruined downriver. The engineers at the dam showed no concern for the farmers, which caused MacDougald to ask the question: 'Why do they not care?' He eventually theorised 'that these engineers were simply "cutting out" the rights of the farmers— wearing dark glasses, so to speak' (Wilson 1975: 234). MacDougald further surmised that as people have only limited time and energy we ignore much of the information we receive from our surroundings, and often treat major decisions casually, as was the case with the Buford dam. Wilson explains further that 'We cut-out what does not interest us, *what we do not care for*. And— this is the important point, *we* decide what we do not care for. We work up prejudices and irritations' (Wilson 1975: 235). This attitude, if allowed to progress unchallenged, may lead to an increasing sense of isolation, a 'greying' of the world around, in which the inhibitory mechanisms take over. This seems to be the condition in which Camus's worker lives, a state of solipsism and negativity, an inability to perceive—never mind enjoy — tastes and smells and views. The Camusian man had originally decided that the world around him irritated him, and therefore in time, he found himself in a world *which he himself had emptied* of positive, meaningful experiences. The link between this emptied world and violence is perhaps best expressed by Hesse's Steppenwolf who complains that a 'wild longing for strong emotions and sensations burns in me, a rage against this toneless...sterilized life. I have a mad impulse to break something to bits...to commit outrageous follies' (cited in Wilson and Pitman 1984: 651). Here, Steppenwolf does not realise that the world he perceives as toneless is a lie unto himself, and the attempt to break out of this lie by recourse to violence is

simply a short-cut enabled by solipsism, falsely blocking out that which is of no use to him.

Like Steppenwolf, Nunne seeks the drama and colour of violent reaction against his own self-constructed view of reality. He is imposing his internal vision upon the world. Nunne effectively functions in terms of an inversion of Mr Sleuth in *The Lodger*: Sleuth's dramatic performance entails that of a murderer acting out the role of a gentleman. In *Ritual in the Dark*, however, Sorme envisions Nunne in terms of a gentleman acting out the role of a murderer.

Sorme is reluctant to give up his friend to the police; his own identification with Nunne has blinded him to the harm that Nunne is causing. Father Carruthers asks Sorme if he does not think he is being over-loyal to Nunne, to which Sorme replies:

No, it's not that. I talked to him this morning. He's not insane. He's like me—he has problems that need all his efforts to solve them. He's a free man, father. And it's only this week that I've come to realise the meaning of freedom. You see, father, I'm certain of one thing: Austin did what he did out of a need for freedom. (Wilson 1993: 393)

Sorme, too, is guilty of faulty blocking. Ultimately, to condemn Nunne would be to undermine Sorme's own metaphysics. Sorme's own drive towards individualism is embodied in Nunne:

I know it's wrong to kill—but it's done now. It's in the past. If he gets out of this, he'll know more about the feeling of freedom. Don't you see? He's fighting a

battle against himself as well as against society. Why should I help society?  
(Wilson 2003: 394)

Sorme's protection of Nunne, then, bears witness to his own—Sorme's—role as outsider. In consolidating his sense of romantic identification and internality, he is, from the moral perspective embodied by Father Carruthers, acting upon freedom as an imperative, at the cost of morality. Sorme's internalised world is coming perilously close to over-riding his early conviction that he had no desire to kill anyone; at any rate, his own particular devotion to the concept of freedom seems to become perilously close to acting as a permission-giving narrative to do anything that will, in his view, promote that freedom. Earlier, Sorme has related to Nunne that he had come to believe that the world is ruled by incomprehensible forces, beyond good and evil, and that what these forces require is continual movement. The human race, in contrast, wants peace, but these forces, in order to avoid stasis, 'sent down certain men whose business it is to keep the world in a turmoil—the Napoleons, Hitlers, Genghis Khans' (Wilson 1993: 374). Sorme places himself among these people, these 'Enemies' as he calls them—'that's why I detest this bloody civilisation' at which point he feels a sense of relief (Wilson 1993: 374). Sorme, in identifying with the Enemies of mankind, refuses to recognise that he could have intentionally chosen not to detest civilisation. Instead he adopts a form of mythical naturalistic fallacy which he finds gives him a satisfactory account of his animosity towards society. Sorme chooses here to over-react against his former passivity by identifying with Hitler, et al, as facilitators of movement; Sorme would prefer chaos to the motionless passivity that he feels has stained his past. Sorme's mythical self-construction parallels the dramatic/aesthetic motive which he attributes to Nunne: both are playing roles in their own imaginary worlds. Both give

themselves permission to act by developing an aesthetic barrier between them and the real world, or rather, the aestheticised roles that they play out allow them to break down the barriers which separate them from society's freedom-restricting rules and morals.

Sorme realises the import of Nunne's actions only when Stein, a pathologist/psychiatrist who is working on the murders, takes him to a mortuary to view one of the victims. Sorme cannot relate to the badly mutilated body: 'It was too dead; it had never been alive' (Wilson 1993: 397). He turns to Stein as he says, unrepentant: 'I know what you want me to say. That there's a tremendous difference between theoretical approval of a crime and the actual commission. I know that, but what's the difference?' (Wilson 1993: 397). However, Sorme uncovers an adjacent corpse, who had burned to death:

The sight of the corpse produced no revulsion or horror; only a recognition of humanity [...] he felt the stirring of a consuming curiosity about her. Why was she dead? Who was she? There was an absurdity to her death [...] if she had have been alive, sleeping, he would have felt the movement of desire: its failure symbolised the absurdity of death. (Wilson 1993: 397)

A discussion ensues between Sorme and Stein, and Sorme discovers that Stein had been a member of the Nazi party. Sorme asks Stein if he had supported Hitler during the war, and Stein replies that he had, 'Like seventy million other Germans' (Wilson 1993: 399). Stein goes on:

It is untrue that I condoned Belsen and Auschwitz. We heard rumours of them—many Germans did. There was nothing we could have done in any case. Nevertheless, Hitler's crimes were different. Hitler was a political idealist. He may

have been wrong, but he was not a sadist. Sexual killers were executed in Nazi Germany as they were in England.

But *why* do you want to catch the Whitechapel killer?

Because I have a responsibility to society. And as a doctor, I have a responsibility to humanity. Remember this: Even Hitler thought he was serving humanity by exterminating the Jews. The Whitechapel murderer kills to gratify a personal lust. He knows he is serving nobody but himself. (Wilson 1993: 399)

Sorme and Stein differ in their views on catching Nunne, but they both cling to their self-justifying belief systems, because both have vested interests in doing so. For Sorme, Nunne's sex crimes are acts of personal freedom; for Stein, Hitler's crimes were services to humanity. Stein, it appears, has internalised his duty towards a concept of collective humanity, while Sorme's romantic ideology elevates the individual as the primary expression of freedom. Stein claims that even if he did condone the concentration camps that would not be a reason for Sorme to condone Nunne's crimes, to which Sorme responds that 'Perhaps I just happen to feel as you did about Hitler's methods—that I just don't want to do anything about it' (Wilson 1993: 400).

As a consequence, however, of his experience at the mortuary, Sorme realises that Nunne's actions cannot be condoned; death by violence, he concludes is 'a complete negation of all our impulses. It means we have no future. But we've got to believe in the future. And it's not just a question of my future, it's the future of the human race' (Wilson 1993: 411). Sanity holds the world together, and Nunne, as a perpetuator of death and violence, has forfeited his sanity. Nunne, Sorme now believes, has 'let himself go rotten' (Wilson 1993: 410). *Ritual in the Dark* ultimately functions as a warning against the anti-evolutionary proposition of

romantic self-definition. Again, the serial killer is represented in terms of the acting-out of an idea which serves to subjugate purposive action to the internal stasis of mechanical absurdity. Nunne is a form of the Camusian man whose only commitment is to emptying out human life of its quiddity—the shared purposive drive towards the future.

## Chapter 4

### Thomas Harris: Lecter and Others

In this chapter, I will examine Thomas Harris's series of novels, *Red Dragon* (1981), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988), *Hannibal* (1999) and *Hannibal Rising* (2006), in relation to the representation of serial killers as mythological figures which confirm or deny cultural narratives of moral conservatism. Perhaps no other serial killer has so captured the public imagination as Harris's Hannibal Lecter. The novels became international bestsellers, translated into dozens of languages, with the global hardback print run of the long anticipated *Hannibal*, published eleven years after the success of *Silence of the Lambs*, being an unprecedented 1.2 million copies. Despite being dismissed by *Entertainment Weekly* as one of the ten worst books of the year, *Hannibal* immediately rose to number one in the best selling charts and became the second bestselling hardback book in the United States in 1999. Five equally popular films have been made from these novels, *Manhunter* (1986), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Hannibal* (2001), *Red Dragon* (2002) and *Hannibal Rising* (2007), and between them these films have grossed \$921,486,656.00 worldwide, with *Hannibal* even taking in \$58,003,121.00 on the

first weekend of its release.<sup>1</sup> The American Film Industry's 2005 list of the top 100 movie quotations in American cinema listed Lecter's notorious 'A census taker once tried to test me. I ate his liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti' at number 21, beating out such well established favourites as Mae West's 'Why don't you come up sometime and see me', Greta Garbo's 'I want to be alone' and Bacall's 'You know how to whistle, don't you...'<sup>2</sup>

It is, of course, the public fascination with the character of Hannibal Lecter himself that accounts for the overwhelming popularity of both books and films, and the popularity of Harris's Hannibal Lecter can be accounted for in terms of his representation as an 'end product', a highly individuated, über-individual who has constructed his own identity against a changing world. The popularity of Lecter is perhaps all the more surprising considering that he indulges in the eating of human flesh. The title of Brian Marriner's true crime study of this phenomenon identifies the reason for this: *Cannibalism: The Last Taboo!* (1992). Marriner writes that

with a little mental effort we can enter the mind of the murderer, rapist, robber or dedicated assassin. Even that most revolting of crimes, cannibalism, can be understood in terms of sheer necessity, or religious observance. Yet no amount of empathy can help one understand the eating of human flesh for sheer pleasure. (Marriner 2001: 125)

However, Lecter's actual status as a serial killer is almost incidental in terms of his other attributes. He is recognised as a psychiatrist of international renown, as

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<sup>1</sup> The Numbers. (2010). Box office history for Hannibal Lecter movies: <http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/series/HannibalLecter.php> Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

<sup>2</sup> American Film Institute, <http://www.afi.com/100Years/quotes.aspx>. Accessed September 20, 2010).

an art expert, artist and musician who is endowed with an extraordinary intellect. The first appearance of Hannibal Lecter, in *Red Dragon*, sees him already incarcerated at the Chesapeake State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. However we soon learn that ‘Since his commitment he’s done some brilliant pieces for the *American Journal of Psychiatry* and the *General Archives*’ (Harris 1981: 59). Despite his presence in a Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Lecter is continuing to contribute to the same field of knowledge that is responsible for diagnosing insanity.

Barriers are of little consequence to Lecter, but they do help to represent him as a fixed presence in *Red Dragon*. Hannibal’s body may be locked up, but his mind, his intellect, can wander freely beyond his physical location; when Will Graham, the ex-F.B.I. agent, leaves Lecter after visiting him in prison, it is significant that he has ‘the absurd feeling that Lecter had walked out with him’ (Harris 1981: 65). Lecter’s access to the human mind allows him to transcend the bounds of physical restraint, and it is in terms of the premise of flying from the bounds of the physical that *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs* proceed. Lecter’s initial incarceration in *Red Dragon* helps to locate him in terms of a fixed physical presence. His status as ‘Hannibal the Cannibal’ (Harris 1981:12), bestowed upon him by the tabloids, envisions him as a physically distinct, clearly delineated physical being, whose most notorious crime is that of incorporating other dismantled, dismembered bodies into his. Indeed it is Lecter’s status as a self-confined being that has been his failing. As Adam Morton writes:

He is the ultimate sociopath, with no sense of what it is like to be another person, but such a well-developed theory of human nature that he can fake it almost perfectly, and often accomplish what ordinary humans with their clumsy and limited theories cannot. (Morton 2004: 97).

Such is Lecter's self-aggrandising sense of self that he believes that the only way that Will Graham had been able to catch him is that Graham and Lecter were very similar. Rather than realising that there is a lack of correspondence between Graham and himself, Lecter

thinks that he and Will Graham are kindred spirits, for he sees that Graham is a very intelligent person who can think like a sociopath. He thinks this means that at some level Graham must *be* a sociopath. He thinks this because he doesn't understand the difference between thinking about someone's mind and understanding it by simulating it in your own. (Morton 2004: 97-8)

This strategy does not entail a sense of loss of self for Lecter, but instead constitutes an attack *on* Graham's sense of identity: "The reason you caught me is that WE'RE JUST ALIKE," was the last thing that Graham heard as the steel door close behind him' (Harris 1981: 65; emphasis in original). The door closing emphasises both the difference between them and the unambiguous and dogmatic sense that Lecter has of his own self. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, Lecter's sense of impenetrable self-definition is evoked in his cannibalistic reaction to the census taker who 'tried to quantify' him (Harris 2002: 27), or to the questionnaire that he is asked to fill in by Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs*, to which he responds: 'do you think you can dissect me with this blunt little tool?' (Harris 2002: 24). Lecter's dissection of other people is an assertion of his wholeness.

In contrast to Lecter's fullness, Brett Easton Ellis's novel *American Psycho* (1991) presents its serial killer in terms of emptiness. In his 2006 book *Death's Dream Kingdom: The American Psyche Since 9-11*, Walter Davies writes that

Belief in the self is *the* American ideology. Next to surplus value the self is our most important product: the thing we constantly proclaim and reassure ourselves in order to cover over the emptiness of that concept and the void it conceals. Nothing is shallower than the inwardness of the average American, a subjectivity composed of little but the mimicking of 'signs' of success and affects that through ceaseless happy talk confer no more than a phantom substantiality. (Davies 2006: 72)

Brett Easton Ellis's Patrick Bateman epitomises Davies's void-concealing diagnosis of the American self. In *Bateman*, a New York businessman, we find a protagonist who ultimately finds only emptiness in his actions and who is unable to escape the ritualised search for self in an identity of conformity, sameness, repetition and cleanliness. Bateman's character is resistant to expectations of the demonic-antihero. Many writers of true crime serial killer books are aware that their subject matter—the serial killers themselves—are rather dull human beings. Only their acts and motivations are interesting. It is therefore expedient to turn these people into monsters, to employ the tropes of monstrosity in order to fill in the mundane and quotidian characteristics of serial killers. *American Psycho*, however, tortuously reveals Bateman in all his tedious consumerism. Bateman and his merchant banker cohorts are so consumed by consumerism that, as characters, they are virtually unreadable in a critical sense as individuals. They *are*, in essence, their clothes, their television programmes, their bank accounts, their exclusive eating-places, their drugs. If Hannibal Lecter refuses to reveal his inner self, it is difficult to conceive of Bateman as having anything to hide. Bateman's world consists of a consumer simulation of life. Everything is on view in *American Psycho*, from the endless brand names and overlong insipid descriptions of insipid music, to the internal organs of Bateman's victims. There are no interiors. One character, Price, complains of the President that

'he presents himself as a harmless old codger. But inside...' He stops. My interest picks up, flickers briefly. 'But inside...'. Price can't finish the sentence, can't add the last two words he needs: *doesn't matter*. I'm both disappointed and relieved at him. (Ellis 1991: 397)

The world of *American Psycho*, being the world of appearances and transient fashion, exposes, too, the surface interpretations and wishes of the reader who buys the novel expecting a 'typical' serial killer genre reading experience. *The Silence of the Lambs* generally obscures the actuality of the squalid, messy, agonising act of murder; much of Harris's violence takes place off the page, or is described by the protagonists. *American Psycho*'s depiction of violence, however, is a direct first person narrative. Mimetic accounts of murderous mayhem are considered transgressive and pornographic, and indeed the hype surrounding Ellis's novel serves to highlight the very points the author sought to explore. Alison Kelly, writing in the *The Guardian*, explains that the novel 'was notoriously withdrawn by Simon & Schuster before being published by Vintage. In some countries it is deemed so potentially disturbing that it can only be sold shrink-wrapped.'<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Harris created Hannibal Lecter as a psychologically and culturally full figure. In many ways, Bateman is the antithesis of Lecter: his culture is low-brow, mass-marketed. For Bateman the 'good' is the 'popular'. As Dani Cavallero notes, the 'lists of commodities that pepper the narrative (garments, dishes, CDs, art works) often come across, paradoxically as more alive than any of Ellis's eminently cardboard characters' (2002: 57). The concern with clothing in the novel also situates Bateman within a continuum of killers, mythic and real. Bateman's pedantic

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/jun/27/imperial-bedrooms-bret-easton-ellis-book-review> .

Accessed 28th September 2010.

fascination takes us from *American Psycho*, via *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jame Gumb's suit of skin), through Robert Bloch's *Psycho* (Norman Bates's wearing of his mother's dress), to the crimes of Ed Gein, the figure whose influence informed these texts. The real Ed Gein's wardrobe extended to 'a real female mask, a vest of skin complete with female breasts, and women's panties filled with vaginas' (Fox and Levin 2005: 4). Serial killer chic has, indeed, a gruesome, but very real, ancestry.

John Douglas, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Investigative Support Unit, writes at the conclusion of *Mindhunter: Inside the FBI Elite Serial Crime Unit*, that writers of fiction, newspeople, and filmmakers who came to him for research purposes were not particularly interested in the 'real story':

...what I quickly realised as I related the details of some of my more interesting and graphic cases was that many people in the audience were turning off and tuning out. They were getting seriously grossed out by hearing the things that my people and I saw every day. I saw that they had no real interest in hearing the details, at the same moment that it must have dawned on them that they didn't want to write about it like it really was. ( Douglas and Olshaker 1996: 375)

Ellis does not seem to share the squeamishness of Douglas's researchers. Indeed, rather than distancing the reader from the acts of torture and murder, the first-person narrative precludes the creation of monsters and forefronts the repetitive nature of not only serial killing but consumerism. By conflating killing and consumerism, Easton Ellis effectively domesticates serial killing, closing down the 'them' and 'us', good versus evil rhetorical possibilities which serve to distance. Exposing the actions of the killer at first hand functions to create an anti-aesthetic, which reveals murder as being too close for comfort. Edward J. Ingebretson writes that

One could argue therefore that that the furor attending the publication of *American Psycho* was aimed not at so much at Ellis or Bateman, as at the not-so-gentle reader, who, Bateman-like, consumes the endlessly reproduced media bodies of Clinton, Smith, Cunanan while reading quietly at home. The violence inherent in this activity is usually tucked away as moral or ethical investment; as ‘news’ and the ‘right to know’; or simply as ‘entertainment’. Bateman’s psychosis—if one is to pathologize him and it that way—is his essential literalism. (Ingebretson 2001: 126-7)

Unmediated, the carnage depicted by Ellis *is* the carnage of Ed Gein, Ted Bundy, Donald Gaskins, and some people do not want to know. Easton Ellis explicitly states this in the ‘Yale Club’ chapter, in a discussion of serial killers:

‘But you *always* bring them up,’ McDermott complains. ‘And always in this casual, educational sort of way. I mean, I don’t want to know anything about Son of Sam or the fucking Hillside Strangler or Ted Bundy or Featherhead, for god’s sake.’

‘Featherhead?’ Van Patten asks. ‘Who’s Featherhead? He sounds exceptionally dangerous to me.’

‘He means Leatherface,’ I say, teeth tightly clenched. ‘Leatherface. He was part of the Texas Chainsaw Massacre.’ (Ellis 1991: 153)

Bateman’s attempted self-creation as serial killer is doomed to failure in an environment that does not distinguish between fact and fiction, where serial killers, and even acquaintances, melt into one another. In Bateman’s world, identities are fluid, unfixed, flowing into one another, dissolute: ‘I think it’s me who says, “I have to return some videotapes”’ (Ellis 1991: 398). Bateman’s narrative is imbued with the stultifying boredom of repetition, or simulacra of experience: the tapes which have to be continually returned to the video store offer a nightmare revision of Nietzschean eternal return (or eternal reruns), which for Bateman would echo with a Greek chorus of the ‘yup, yup, yup, yup, yup, yup’ of meaningless conversation (Ellis 1991: 398). For Bateman, however,

Individuality [is] no longer an issue. What does intelligence signify? Define reason. Desire—meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is the only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface is all that anyone had found meaning in...this was civilisation as I saw it, colossal and jagged...(Ellis 1991: 375).

Bateman's world is the nihilistic void, the world stripped of meaning where only evil survives.

### **Lecter and Ideas of Good and Evil**

Hannibal Lecter is represented in terms of his self-definition; he is monstrous only in that he defies clinical attempts to define him, to reduce him to a typology. As Richard Tithecott explains,

For the mental health community, the serial killer's represents a problem which needs too be solved not only because of his destructive effect on society, but because of his destructive effect on the status of psychiatry's discourse. (Tithecott 1997: 30)

Lecter, as we discover, 'is not crazy, in any common way we think of being crazy [...] They say he's a sociopath because they don't know what else to call him' (Harris 1981: 53). In *The Silence of the Lambs* he tells Starling, who wants to understand the influences that created 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 behaviourism, 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? (Harris 2002: 24-5)

If Starling were to say that Lecter was indeed evil, then she would undermine the major premise upon which the Behavioural Science Unit operates, and by extension her own *raison d'être*. Lecter implies that he might actually be evil, and that his actions cannot be separated from his nature. If this is the case, then the scientific endeavour in relation to evil is futile. Lecter is, in any case, attempting to shift the discourse from a scientific one to a religious one.

However, Harris is also registering here the difference between sociopathy and psychopathy. If we can envisage Lecter's acts of murder as the product of an innate, natural component of his behaviour, as opposed to him being a victim of social circumstances, then an evaluation of psychopathy would be apposite. However, if he is to be evaluated as acting as he does on account of environmental influences and experiences, he would be described as a sociopath. It could perhaps be argued that the Lecter of *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs* could be designated, from the information given, as a psychopath, a product of internal factors; biological, genetic or psychological. However, in *Hannibal* and *Hannibal Rising*, it becomes clear that his childhood experience informs much of his behaviour. Lecter's statement that '*I* happened' suggests that he might prefer to be labelled as a psychopath, rather than giving away the formation of his emphasised '*I*' to social influences. But, as Robert Hare points out 'The same individual

therefore could be diagnosed as a sociopath by one expert and as a psychopath by another' (Hare 1999: 24).

Starling later tells Crawford, in *Hannibal*, that Lecter 'enjoys seeing the destruction of faith, it's his favorite thing. It's like the church collapses he used to collect' (Harris 2000: 55.). And, tellingly, Harris writes that:

Crawford and Starling were like medical missionaries, with little patience for theology, each concentrating hard on the one baby before them, knowing and not saying that God wouldn't do a goddamned thing to help. That for fifty thousand Ibo infant lives, he would not bother to send rain. (Harris 2000: 53-4)

As far as morality is concerned, God offers little semblance of earthly justice to his followers: he simply enjoys the power his position gives him. Nonetheless, Lecter still uses the all-powerful figure of God as something to aspire to. Since the death of his sister,

Hannibal Lecter had not been bothered by any considerations of deity, other than to recognize how his own modest predations paled beside those of God, who is in irony matchless, and in wanton malice beyond measure. (Harris 2000: 300-1)

Mason Verger, now disfigured and disabled by being persuaded by Lecter to cut off his own face, regards the escaped Lecter in Biblical terms: 'Mason knew that somewhere Dr Lecter was going to and fro on the earth and walking up and down on it, and very likely having a good time' (2000: 115). Verger, now wheelchair-bound, has turned to religion, and regards himself as 'cleansed' of his prior paedophilic practices: 'I'm right with Him and it's all okay now. He's the Rizen Jesus, and at camp we call him The Riz' (Harris 2000: 69). The 'camp' was a

Christian camp which Verger's father had financed, and where Verger had abused some 'unfortunates' who 'would do anything for a candy bar' (Harris 2000: 68). Religion then, for Harris, is deployed to function as a rationale or a purgative; for Lecter God's inaction sanctions his own crimes; God functions as a permission giver, given that we are made in his image. And for Verger, accepting Christ offers immunity from moral condemnation. The Law of God, of Apollonian stricture, finds expression in the Dionysian freedom of the all-powerful, and the Dionysian is rendered acceptable by the adoption of the Letter of the Law.

The seeds of Lecter's criminal activity are to be found in the ruins of the legitimate slaughterhouse of World War Two. With the loss of his beloved sister, Mischa, the last of his immediate family, at the hands (and teeth) of a gang of looters in war-torn Lithuania. Hannibal's belief in a benevolent universe also dies. Harris writes of this pivotal event thus:

He prayed so hard that he would see Mischa again, the prayer consumed his six-year old mind, but it did not drown out the sound of the axe. His prayer to see her again did not go entirely unanswered—he did see a few of Mischa's milk teeth in the reeking stool pit his captors used (Harris 2000: 300-1)

It is not only Lecter's sister that is consumed—literally—by the chaos of the Second World War, it is also his lineage. Lecter, dispossessed of his bloodline, but in possession of a potentially great career, loses that too because of his murderous resentment against the world; while we can sympathise with the plight of the child, we cannot excuse the actions of the adult.

Lecter helps the FBI to destroy those of suspect sexuality; he plays to the gallery of heterosexuality by dispatching the policeman who questions his (Lecter's) sexual functionality; he kills the Onanistic Miggs; he eats the brains of Krendler who suspects Lecter of being gay, and is rewarded in the end with the 'splendour' of heterosexual sex with Clarice, at the conclusion of *Hannibal*. If nothing else, Harris has Lecter conform to the overarching western narrative of normative sexuality, even acting largely in accordance with the received will of God.

As the appropriately-named Mason Verger muses in *Hannibal*:

God's choices in inflicting suffering are not satisfactory to us, nor are they understandable, unless innocence offends Him. Clearly He needs some help in directing the blind fury with which He flogs the earth. (Harris 1999: 114)

Harris's locating of killing within a theological context functions as a mirroring of Dolan's belief that he is becoming the Red Dragon. As a symbol of Satan, the Dragon also function as a reassertion of light (Apollo) over the power of darkness, of the resurrection of light against the feminine lunar strictures (Dionysius) to which Dolan has been subjected to in his childhood. As Jane Caputi points out, Dolan

is in thrall to the biblical 'Red Dragon,' who shows up as God's antagonist in Revelation. *The Silence of the Lambs* refers to the same biblical book when Lecter lectures Starling on the significance of Christ as the paschal lamb, the epithet under which he appears in Revelation. Historically, this title explicitly refers to Christ's role as sacrificial victim. (Caputi 2004: 254)

The joy of murder, Lecter tells Graham, is nothing to be concerned about: ‘It must feel good to God—he does it all the time, and are we not made in His image?’ (Harris 1981: 147). Lecter, never examining directly his own motives and desires, tangentially attributes Will Graham’s depression over shooting Garret Hobbs, a serial killer whom Graham had tracked down prior to his engagement in the Lecter case, not to the act itself, but to the enjoyment associated with the killing. And in so doing, Lecter implicitly excuses his own killings on the grounds that his own enjoyment of killing is rooted in his nature, which is also God’s. Furthermore, in *The Silence of the Lambs*, Lecter responds to Starling’s assertion that destructiveness and evil are identical by stating ‘Then *Storms* are evil, if it’s that simple. And then we have *fire*, and then there’s *hail*. Underwriters lump it all under “Acts of God”’ (Harris 2002: 25; emphasis in original). Lecter has underwritten his own acts of murder by reference to the shared narratives, religious and social; if we are indeed made in God’s image, then we are free to act as He does. Lecter’s argument is fallacious, of course, as Starling begins to point out, but he immediately replaces his own *reductio ad absurdum*, with an *ad hominem* attack which silences his would-be interlocutor:

‘If He’s up there, He just loves it, Officer Starling. Typhoid and swans—it all comes from the same place.’

‘I can’t explain you, Doctor, but I know who can.’

He stopped her with his upraised hand. The hand was shapely, she noted, and the middle finger perfectly replicated. It is the rarest form of polydactyly.

When he spoke again, his voice was soft and pleasant.

‘You’d like to quantify me, Officer Starling. You’re so ambitious, aren’t you? Do you know what you look like to me, with your good bag and your cheap shoes? You look like a rube’. (Harris 2002: 25)

Lecter here is aware of the roles that both he and Starling are playing out. He reminds her, twice, of her lowly position as ‘Officer’ Starling. Lecter’s difference is inscribed, rather elegantly, in his ‘shapely’ extra-fingered hand. Even Lecter’s physical otherness is represented by Harris as a refined, even delicate, form of monstrosity. Physical difference as a sign of inner monstrosity is subtler in the case of the refined aesthete Lecter than we encountered in Frankenstein’s Creature, but Thomas Harris still employs the trope in his novel. Unlike Dolanhyde or Gumb, Lecter’s own physical body does not present a problem to be overcome, but it nonetheless still externalises his internal state of being.

Lecter’s excuse that he is merely acting according to his nature conflates with Dolanhyde’s in that both serial killers rationalise their actions in relation to narrative constructs of a higher being, both derived from the Book of Revelation. Whereas Lecter’s status as an individual seems set like concrete, Dolanhyde’s ‘becoming’ is a state of flux and change which contrasts with Lecter’s already found selfhood. Lecter is an end-product, has succeeded in his own process of transformation into an publicly recognised celebrity, which is why Francis Dolanhyde idolises him, and signs a letter to him, ‘Avid Fan’ (Harris 1981: 90).

Lecter’s sense of moral self, it seems—as is Verger’s—is based upon exploiting the faiths of others and this is reflected in the recurrent religious imagery and references throughout Harris’s Lecter novels. This is not to say that Lecter is himself religious, but he employs the rhetoric and atmosphere of religion to disavow critique or inquiry. His theology manifests itself as Manichaeian dualism. Lecter is suggesting that he simply *is* evil, and that all the relativistic causality offered by the Behavioural Science Unit is missing the point. Lecter’s uncomplicated good versus

evil dualism sees him operating at a level of moral simplicity that precludes shades of grey. Lecter is, morally, a much simpler figure than either Jame Gumb or Francis Dolarhyde.

Will Graham's dream sequence, in which he remembers a visit to the battleground of Shiloh, hints at the pantheist equivalence between blind nature and passive God:

He had thought Shiloh haunted, its beauty sinister like flags.

Now, drifting between memory and narcotic sleep, he saw the Shiloh was not sinister; it was indifferent. Beautiful Shiloh could witness anything. Its unforgivable beauty simply underscored the indifference of nature, the Green Machine. The loveliness of Shiloh mocked our plight.

He roused and watched the mindless clock, but he couldn't stop thinking:

In the Green Machine there is no mercy; *we* make mercy, manufacture it in the parts that have overgrown our basic reptile brain.

There is no murder. We make murder, and it matters only to us. (Harris 1991: 319)

Like the God that did not answer Lecter's prayers, or that dropped church buildings on His worshippers, the Green Machine is silent in the face of man's struggle to break free from his natural indifference as he tries to evolve.

## **The Memory Palace**

Lecter's knowledge and memory are extraordinary, but not supernatural. They are, rather, the products of mnemonic practice; his own memory palace is the key to his intelligence. Harris's novels make significant links between architecture and the

internal workings of the human mind, but these cannot be simply put down to a modern, or post-modern interiorisation of Gothic spaces and/or monsters. For Lecter, they are linked to the concept of the Memory Palace:

The memory palace was a mnemonic system well known to ancient scholars and much information was preserved in them through the Dark Ages while Vandals burned the books. Like scholars before him, Dr Lecter stores an enormous amount of information keyed to objects in his thousand rooms (Harris 2000: 296)

The origins of the memory palace, however, form an elision between violent death and memory, body and mind:

Long ago a western poet, the noble Xi-mo-ni-de [Simonides], was gathered with his relatives and friends for a drinking party at the palace, among a dense crowd of guests. When he left the crowd for a moment to step outside, the great hall came rumbling down in a sudden mighty wind. All the other revelers were crushed to death, their bodies were mangled and torn apart, not even their own families could recognize them. Xi-mo-ni-de, however, could remember the exact order in which his relatives and friends had been sitting, and as he recalled them one by one their bodies could be identified. From this we can see the birth of the mnemonic method that was transmitted through the ages. (Cited in Spence 2008: 2-3)

Lecter's monstrous intelligence can be accounted for in terms of his memory palace. Eschewing the modern world, his interior self is rigidly structured 'according to the rules discovered by Simonides of Coes and elaborated by Cicero four hundred years later' (Harris 2000: 296). The palace's foyer is 'severe and beautiful and timeless' and '[b]eyond it, far and complex, light and dark, is the vast structure of Dr Lecter's making' (Harris 2000: 296).

Here, Harris presents a picture of Lecter's mind as a complex interiority, the antithesis of the emptiness of Patrick Bateman. But Lecter has extended the functionality of the memory palace, for

unlike the ancients, Dr Lecter has a second purpose for his palace; sometimes he lives there. He has passed years among its exquisite collections, while his body lay bound on a violent ward with screams buzzing the steel bars like hell's own harp. (Harris 2000: 296)

Lecter's memory palace enables him to take control of his subjective experiences, which in extremis, renders external powers impotent. It also functions as an edifice against that which his guard, Barney, identifies as Lecter's only fear. Barney knows the only way to discipline Lecter is 'to threaten him with boredom: That's all he's afraid of' (2002: 214). In the context of Hannibal the Cannibal, it seems that De Quincey's attribution of murder as 'a condiment for seasoning the insipid monotonies of daily life' is particularly apposite (De Quincey 2006: 117).

However, Lecter's memory palace is not hermetically sealed against the facticity of the outer world, any more than novels themselves are. Harris intriguingly closes down the distance between the reader and Lecter by authorial intervention:

But this we share with the doctor: In the vaults of our hearts and brains, danger waits. All the chambers are not lovely, light and high. There are holes in the floor of the mind, like those in a medieval dungeon floor—the stinking obliettes, named for forgetting, bottle-shaped cells in solid rock with the trapdoor in the top. Nothing escapes quietly to ease us. (Harris 2000: 297)

This passage shares a great similarity with Harris's representation of the basement in which Jame Gumb—Buffalo Bill—processes his victims before skinning them in

*The Silence of the Lambs:*

Room into room, James Gumb's basement rambles like the maze that thwarts us in our dreams. When he was still shy, lives and lives ago, Mr Gumb took his pleasure in the rooms most hidden, far from the stairs. There are rooms in the farthest corners, rooms from other lives, that Gumb hasn't opened in years. Some of them are still occupied, so to speak, though the sounds from behind the doors peaked and trailed off to silence long ago. (Harris 2002: 232)

The architecture of memory is a shared architecture. In simile and metaphor, the basement, furthest from everyday consciousness, contains imprisoned memories that, for the sake of sanity, have to be kept at bay. However, Harris's symbol of the memory palace also reflects the aesthetic experience of *The Silence of the Lambs* as a novel. As Sonia Baelo Allué notes, 'the aesthetic of the novel is designed to offer its readers different sources of pleasure' which function to 'diminish the serious implications of murder, turning serial killing into an aesthetic game that can be enjoyed as simple entertainment' (2002: 8).

## **Consumerism and Culture**

People, at the hands of serial killers, become objects, 'its', to be used then disregarded, put out of sight. While Lecter does not actually take trophies from his victims, his occasional cannibalism certainly constitutes an aesthetic reconfiguration of his victims. But it also recalls a wider social drift towards a disposable

consumerism wherein value, even in luxurious articles such as fine furniture and art, has given way to endless series of disposable objects, ever to be updated, for even when new on the verge of obsolescence. Lecter's taste for durable cultural artefacts, in his appreciation of fine art and opera, juxtaposes with his status as cannibal.

Hannibal Lecter's status as serial killer is largely obscured by his aesthetic interests:

*In The Silence of the Lambs* Hannibal Lecter is not treated as a monster in a classical sense. He is white, probably heterosexual, intelligent, had a liberal profession and is a gentleman. Sure, he is also a cannibal but he is extremely polite and tasteful, after all he used to eat his victims with aromatic herbs. In the book readers learn that in 1975 Lecter killed one of his patients from his psychiatric practice. From the corpse he took only the sweetbreads: part of the heart, thymus and pancreas. These items appeared on the menu of a dinner Lecter gave for the president and conductor of the Baltimore Philharmonic, a man who claimed that Lecter was known for his excellent dinners and his articles in gourmet magazines. (Allué 2002: 14-5)

'The first step in the development of taste is to be willing to credit your own opinion' writes Harris in *Hannibal* (2000: 265). Taste, then, is one of the ways in which Lecter defines himself, and is defined by Harris, especially in relation to Will Graham. For Graham, we discover, 'had a lot of trouble with taste. Often his thoughts were not tasty. There were no effective partitions in his mind. What he saw and learned touched everything else he knew' (Harris 1981: 19). Not for Graham the fine wines and vintage cars: he feeds 'remarkably ugly dogs' instead, an act which emphasises his sympathetic nature (Harris 1981: 9). While Lecter does not actually take trophies from his victims, or use his victims as trophies in themselves, his occasional cannibalism certainly gestures, tritely, towards a self-consuming Bateman society. The contents and form of his memory palace constitute an internal protest against the ephemera of disposable consumerism. Lecter's taste for the past,

for the architecture and paintings of Italy where he excels as an art historian in *Hannibal*, suggests that Lecter perceives that a culture deprived of its past will become alienated from itself by its own fleeting immediacy.

In contradistinction to Lecter, however, Graham is so ill-defined that he often ‘took on the other person’s speech patterns’ during conversations (Harris 1981: 9). Graham’s medium is not, however, speech, but the imaginative reconstruction of the mindset of the killer. Graham’s seemingly uncanny ability to get into the minds of criminals nurtures suspicions of supernatural abilities in his colleagues. Crawford asks Dr Bloom, a visiting lecturer to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s Behavioural Science section, whether he thinks Graham is psychic. Bloom answers, ‘No. He’s an *eideteker*—he has a remarkable visual memory—but I don’t think he’s psychic’ (Harris 1981: 139). Dr Bloom also tells Crawford that one of the consequences of Will’s imagination is that Graham ‘deals with a huge amount of fear’ (Harris 1981: 141).

As Brian Masters, the biographer of Dennis Nilsen, writes of Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*:

Lecter displays all the characteristics we have learned to recognise in this type of psychopathology. He is civilised, articulate, proud of his superiority and teasingly sarcastic [...] whose freedom from moral constraint makes him enticingly glamorous, deliciously attractive. (Masters 1994: 188)

These traits are analogous with the public perception of a real-life figure such as Ted Bundy, who himself was the subject of much media attention. In the tellingly titled *A New Century of Sex Killers*, Brian Marriner’s description of Bundy exemplifies the same rhetoric that Masters identifies in his perception of Lecter:

Ted Bundy was a handsome student, brimming with self-confidence and style. He could have achieved almost anything. But what he chose to do was to pursue a four-year orgy of destruction across the USA which left dozens of young women maimed or dead. (1992: 184)

Bundy is considered a sexually motivated serial killer, and herein lies a clue which perhaps accounts for the popularity of Lecter. Lecter's motivations, whatever else they may be, are not primarily sexual. There is, to be sure, some speculation upon his sexuality: Officer Boyle, shortly before being killed by Lecter, comments: 'Strikes me he's pretty much of a broke-dick' (Harris 2002: 267). Otherwise, Lecter himself is represented as divorced from any sexualised representation. Until that is, the controversial conclusion at the end of *Hannibal*, where we find his union with Starling described thus:

Their relationship has a great deal to do with the penetration of Clarice Starling, which she avidly welcomes and encourages. It has much to do with the envelopment of Hannibal Lecter, far beyond the bounds of his experience. It is possible that Clarice Starling could frighten him. Sex is a splendid structure that they add to every day. (Harris 2000: 561)

Indeed, this ending was considered so controversial that it was not included in the film version of *Hannibal*.

## **Self and Others**

In contradistinction to Lecter's well-differentiated sense of individual self, the other serial killers in *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs*, Francis

Dolarhyde and Jame Gumb, respectively, are amorphous characters who are defined by their drive to become something other than what they are. Francis Dolarhyde, the killer who Will Graham seeks out Lecter's help to track down, works in a film processing laboratory. His legitimate work, then, gestures to his needs as a person; as an individual Dolarhyde is, himself, in the process of developing, of becoming someone, or something, else. Dolarhyde, as Lecter tells Graham, 'is a very shy boy' (Harris 1981:64). Alienated, Dolarhyde is undergoing a process of self-annihilation, in which he is transforming himself into an alternative super-self, 'The Red Dragon', based upon William Blake's painting *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*. In a letter to Lecter, Dolarhyde writes that 'I don't believe you'd tell them who I am, even if you knew. Besides, what particular body I currently occupy is trivia. The important thing is what I am *Becoming*. I know that you alone can understand that' (Harris 1981: 99). Dolarhyde has been targeting families and murdering them, on the night of the full moon. Darkness and light thus inform Dolarhyde's self-image. He is engaged in bodybuilding as he seeks to recreate the strength of the dragon; he has also been tattooed with an image of it on his back. After forming a relationship with a blind woman, Reba, Dolarhyde becomes ever more conflicted with the Dragon part of himself, who objects to Reba: 'From the beginning, he and the Dragon had been one. He was becoming and the Dragon was his higher self. Their bodies, voices, wills were one. Not now, not since Reba' (Harris 1981: 252). Reba's presence deepens Dolarhyde's self-division and threatens to exorcise the Dragon, upon which Dolarhyde, decides to pre-empt the Dragon:

Dolarhyde could hear in his mind the Dragon's powerful voice cursing Reba. He would curse her first, before he bit. He would curse Dolarhyde too—tell her he was nothing. (Harris 1981: 259)

The internal conflict and splitting that Dolarhyde experiences serves as the antithesis to Lecter's crystallised undivided self, as does *The Silence of the Lambs's* Jame Gumb. Gumb, also known as 'Buffalo Bill', is similarly constructing a new self—a new skin—for himself. Whereas Dolarhyde dwelt upon the image of the Red Dragon, Gumb's symbol of metamorphosis is the moth. *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of the Lambs* share similar structures in that both foreground three central characters, Lecter, the agent of law (Graham and Starling), and the 'outsider' serial killer. Jame Gumb's transitional state, bolstered by his fascination with the metamorphosis of the chrysalis into the moths, is expressed by his mistaken belief that he is transsexual. Gumb has been rejected as a suitable candidate for sex-reassignment, and, frustrated in his attempts, has been killing young women in order to procure their skins to make himself a 'girl suit' (Harris 2002: 367).

Harris first monsterises, and then re-humanises Frances Dolarhyde—the 'bad' serial killer of *Red Dragon*. Dolarhyde has suffered abuse during childhood, and this, in combination with the scarring on his face from a cleft-palate, has led him to seek the inspiration of Blake's painting *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun* as his cue towards becoming something greater than his over-sensitive, passive and fearful middle-aged self. Dolarhyde is given a humanising biography by which we can perhaps begin to understand his killing of two families. Through a confrontation with Blake's painting, he lets that art impose itself on him until it literally becomes a part of him: he travels to the Brooklyn

Museum of Art where it is housed and eats it in an attempt to save his relationship with Reba. And Jame Gumb—whose name is a result of an uncorrected birth certificate misspelling—is similarly shown to come from a less than happy background.

Given that the ‘bad’ serial killers in Harris’s novels are in some sense unmonstered by the addition of their prior life histories, it would seem consistent that Harris should perhaps flesh-out Hannibal’s childhood experiences, too: otherwise we are left with a monster without a cause, and even Frankenstein’s creature, killer though he was, had his reasons—revenge. Nevertheless, the back-story to the actions that led up to Hannibal’s killing career run the risk of demystifying Lecter, and indeed play to the concerns that explanation leads to condoning their actions. John Major’s claim, in 1993, that ‘society needs to condemn a bit more and understand a bit less’ exemplifies this attitude.<sup>4</sup> Dolarhyde’s back-story reveals his maltreatment at the hands of his grandmother, whose biting remarks are translated into action by Dolarhyde via his use of his specially constructed false teeth based on a mould taken from hers. The bite-marks that he leaves on his victims lead to his press nickname, ‘The Tooth Fairy’.

In the world outside of the novel, the reality of serial killers breaks through the trapdoor of fiction. Commentators pursue the real-life models upon which Thomas Harris modelled his monster. And, in the manner of Frankenstein’s Creature, he is not built on one real-life killer, but, it seems, on several. The individual solidity of Lecter—at least in comparison with Dolarhyde and Gumb—

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/major-on-crime-condemn-more-understand-less-1474470.html>

Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> September 2010.

within the Harris's narrative(s) begins to melt when we start to speculate upon the possible models upon which Lecter is based. Lecter seems to be a composite of mythical and folkloric figures, however. There are connections more easily made between Jame Gumb and Ted Bundy and Ed Gein in *The Silence of the Lambs* than between any real serial killer and Hannibal Lecter. Like Gumb, Gein fashioned suits from the skins of his female victims; like Bundy, he utilised a fake plaster cast in order to lure his victims into his car. Lecter, however, seems to be more easily equatable with the fairy tales *Bluebeard* and *Beauty and the Beast*, or with the vampiristic elements of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* than any factual serial killer.

As David Sexton writes:

Lecter's true antecedents are not then in the annals of crime. They are to be found elsewhere altogether, in fable and in fiction. He is a compound of evil. He is Satan and he is the serpent. He is the vampire. He is the Beast to Clarice's Beauty. In *Hannibal*, all these identifications are teasingly introduced—as well as a psychological explanation of his make-up, in the form of that unfortunate childhood. (Sexton 2001: 84)

However, *Hannibal Rising* functions as Lecter's biographical back-story in contextualising his actions, in much the same way as Francis Dolarhyde's story is unveiled in *Red Dragon*. As a prequel it historicises rather than mythologises Lecter, and shows that his crimes began as a series of revenge killings on the gang that killed and ate his sister Mischa. Perhaps, like Starling, Harris could not stand to say that Lecter is evil.

## Chapter 5

### Serial Killer Narratives: Creating Authorising Narratives

Self-awareness seems to be a key to understanding how and when cognitive dissonance may play a role in your life. If you find yourself justifying or rationalizing decisions or behaviors that you're not quite clear you firmly believe in, that might be a sign that cognitive dissonance is at work.  
(Grohol 2008)<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I will consider the issue of cognitive dissonance in relation to the creation of righteous narratives in the factual writings of three serial killers: Ian Brady, Carl Panzram, and Donald Gaskins. I argue here that real life criminals in their autobiographical accounts create authorising narratives by which they can not only rationalise their actions but which may also allow them to kill in the first place.

In attempting to analyse these narratives as well as identify some of the psychological processes which enable serial killers to kill and kill again, it is useful to look to theories which offer accounts of how a putatively normal person may,

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<sup>1</sup>'Fighting Cognitive Dissonance & The Lies We Tell Ourselves' at <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2008/10/19/fighting-cognitive-dissonance-the-lies-we-tell-ourselves/> (accessed 17-05-09).

under certain circumstances, act in normatively abnormal and morally repugnant way. A noticeable recurrent pattern of the creation of authorising narrative constructs is often evident in the attempts of serial killers to justify their actions, and these justifying narratives are often amalgams of pre-existing ideologies and worldviews, many of which are twisted by the criminals in order to suit their particular growing fantasies. Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance is a particularly fruitful framework for analysing the self-narratives which serial murderers employ, not only to justify their actions retrospectively, but, it seems, in order to enable the process of self-authorisation in the first place.

Cognitive dissonance is a theory which enables us to take the first steps towards understanding the roles which ideology and narrative may have in enabling people to behave without fully considering or engaging with the moral implications of their behaviour: in other words, in enabling people to create narratives which authorise their actions. With this explanatory idea in mind, I would like to reconsider A.E. Van Vogt's Right Man Theory within the broader context of the ideas of Leon Festinger and Stanley Milgram, so I will begin by outlining the contributions of Festinger and Milgram to this area of social and psychological research.

## Leon Festinger and Cognitive Dissonance

Leon Festinger, a social psychologist, along with fellow researchers Henry Riecken and Stanley Schacter, outlined their theory of cognitive dissonance in the 1956 study *When Prophecy Fails*:

Dissonance and consonance are relations among cognitions—that is, among opinions, beliefs, knowledge of the environment, and knowledge of one’s own actions and feelings. Two opinions, or beliefs, are *dissonant* with each other if they do not fit together—that is if they are inconsistent, or if, considering only the two items, one does not follow from the other [...] Dissonance produces discomfort and, correspondingly, there will arise pressures to reduce or eliminate the dissonance. Attempts to reduce dissonance represent the observable manifestation that dissonance exists. Such attempts may take any or all of three forms. The person may try to change one or more of the beliefs, opinions, or behaviours involved in the dissonance; to acquire new information or beliefs that will increase the existing consonance and thus cause the dissonance to be reduced; or to forget or reduce the importance of these cognitions that are in a dissonant relationship. (Festinger et al. 2008: 28)

Festinger and his colleagues’ first major study into cognitive dissonance concentrated on a cult that grew up around one woman, given the name ‘Marian Keech’<sup>2</sup>, and her prophecy that a catastrophe would befall the planet on December 21<sup>st</sup> 1954. (Tavris and Aaronson 2007). Mrs Keetch had assembled a group of followers whom she had convinced would be saved by a spaceship at midnight on the 20<sup>th</sup> December 1954. Festinger’s researchers infiltrated the group in order to find

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<sup>2</sup> Marian Keech’ was a housewife from Chicago whose real name was Dorothy Martin. She had been involved with Hubbard’s Dianetics movements and had links with what came to be known as Scientology. In 1965 she founded the Association of Sananda and Samat Kumara and under the name of ‘Sister Thedra’ she continued to be active in the UFO contact groups until her death in 1992.

out how Mrs Keech's believers would react when the prophesied deadline passed. Some members of the group, as the deadline grew closer, gave up their jobs and gave away their possessions and homes, while other members awaited the approaching calamity with trepidation, hoping that the day would pass without incident. Festinger's theory predicted that upon the failure of Mrs Keech's prophecy, those members of the group whose investment in the group was limited (that is, those who awaited the date with fear, but who still, at least, had a home to be afraid in) would soon lose their faith in Mrs Keech's prophecies. Those members of the group who had invested heavily in their belief by selling their earthly possessions and giving up their jobs, Festinger reasoned, would paradoxically increase their faith in their leader upon the failure of the prophecy:

At midnight, with no sign of a spaceship in the yard, the group felt a little nervous. By 2 A.M., they were getting slightly worried. At 4:45 A.M., Mrs Keech had a new vision: The world had been spared, she said, because of the impressive faith of her little band [...] The group's mood shifted from despair to exhilaration. Many of the group's members, who had not felt the need to proselytise before December 21, began calling the press to report the miracle, and soon they were out on the streets, buttonholing passersby, trying to convert them. Mrs Keetch's prediction had failed, but not Leon Festinger's. (Tavris and Aaronson 2007: 12-13)

Simply, the members of the group who had given up their possessions, rather than suffering from what would be a great deal of dissonance, chose not to relinquish their beliefs, which would have had the effect of increasing dissonance: 'what a fool I've been; how gullible and stupid I am!' In a situation wherein there could be no turning back for the newly impoverished survivors (even the prospect of getting a new job could be prejudiced by news of their membership of the group), there appears to be only one satisfactory way out. So, although from an outside

perspective, the behaviour of the group members may seem absurd, those of the group who had lost the most, who had suffered the most as a consequence of upholding their belief in Mrs Keech's original prophecy, had the most compelling reasons to believe in her new message: that their faith had been instrumental in saving the world. Thus the failure of the original prophecy, ameliorated by Mrs Keech's claims of a new reassuring vision served to actually strengthen their belief to a degree whereby they began to proselytise.<sup>3</sup> Mrs Keech's failed prophecy, by itself, was sure to cause her followers to abandon the group. But, confronted with the urgent need to find consonance in the face of dire dissonance, those group members who had suffered loss chose to believe her new vision, which could now be seen to justify their prior 'investment' in the project. The motivating factor behind their newly strengthened belief was, ultimately, that it allayed the dissonance-evoking realisation of their own gullibility and foolishness. They had to believe that they were 'right'. The relevance of this scenario to serial killers will become apparent when we examine some of the claims of real-life serial killers later in this chapter. While on a level of truth and accuracy serial killers' claims may be with some justice doubted, it is important to identify what kinds of excuses they offer to justify their actions and to realise that the apparent reluctance serial killers have to offer any sincere regret for their actions may be explained in relation to the heavy 'investment' which their crimes impose upon their maintaining a balance between consonance and dissonance.

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<sup>3</sup> Proselytising is relevant to serial killers, as I will explain later.

## **Stanley Milgram and Obedience to Authority**

The American sociologist Stanley Milgram is perhaps best known for the (in)famous study known as the Milgram experiment, conducted while he was a professor at Yale University in the 1960s, which attempted to prove the relationship between obedience and authority. His experiments, which offered a striking example of the need to diminish cognitive dissonance, are important to the study of serial killer narratives for two main reasons. The first is the extent of the abdication of personal responsibility of some of the volunteers to a figure of authority, which was the purpose of the experiment. The second was the importance and implications of the ‘cover story’ which was given to the volunteers by the figure of authority, a narrative which served to obfuscate the true purpose of the experiment, which revealed a disturbing tendency among the volunteers to disconnect from the normative moral world. Volunteers were selected from those who responded to an advertisement in a local paper. Phillip Zimbardo explains a composite scenario of the many manifestations of Milgram’s authority experiment from the perspective of the volunteer. I will quote Zimbardo’s rendition at some length, in order to forefront the issues of narrative construction and also of situational specificity, which Zimbardo underscores by the use of a second-person narration, an important and pertinent rhetorical device in this context:

A researcher whose serious demeanor and grey laboratory coat convey scientific importance greets you and another applicant as you arrival at a Yale University laboratory in Lindsay-Chittenden Hall. You are here to help scientific psychology find ways to improve people's learning and memory through the use of punishment. He tells you why this new research may have important consequences. The task is straightforward: one of you will be the 'teacher' who gives the 'learner' a set of word pairings to memorize. During the test, the teacher gives each key word, and the learner must respond with the correct association. When right, the teacher gives a verbal reward, such as 'Good' or 'That's right.' When wrong, the teacher is to press a lever on an impressive-looking shock apparatus that delivers an immediate shock to punish the error.

The shock generator had thirty switches, starting from a low level of 15 volts and increasing by 15 volts at each higher level. The experimenter tells you that every time the learner makes a mistake, you have to press the next higher voltage switch. The control panel indicates both the voltage level of each of the switches and a corresponding description of the level. [These incrementally run through such descriptions as 'Strong Shock,' 'Very Strong Shock' up to 'Danger: Severe Shock', until the final switches, stating 435 and 450 volts respectively, are marked with 'XXX.' ]

You and another volunteer draw straws to see who will play each role: you are to be the teacher, and the other volunteer will be the learner. (The drawing is rigged and, the other volunteer is a confederate of the experimenter who always plays the learner.) He is a mild-mannered, middle-aged man whom you help escort to the next chamber. 'Okay, now we are going to set up the learner so he can get some punishment,' the researcher tells you both. The learner's arms are strapped down and an electrode strapped to his right wrist. The shock generator in the next room will deliver the shocks to the learner—if and when he makes any errors. The two of you communicate over the intercom, with the experimenter standing next to you. You get a sample shock of 45 volts, the third level, a slight tingly pain, so now you have a sense of what the shock levels mean. The experimenter then signals the start of the 'memory improvement' study. (Zimbardo 2009: 268-270)

The 'teacher' soon begins to administer shocks, upping the voltage with each successive mistake that the 'learner' makes. Soon the learner starts to voice his objections to the increasing pain, even claiming that he has a heart condition. The learner, under the increasing shocks, begins to shout, and then scream. The experimenter insists that the teacher must continue administering the shocks, as he has entered into an agreement to do so, and has also already been paid his four dollars. There is silence from the other room after the teacher presses the 300 volt switch. The experimenter tells the teacher to continue and says that lack of response from the learner is to be judged as an incorrect response, which necessitates another shock. Although distressed, the teacher keeps administering shocks, the experimenter refusing even to check on the condition of the learner, but insisting that the teacher continue. Throughout various forms and variants of Milgram's obedience to authority experiments, sixty-five percent of volunteers proceeded to administer shocks up to the level of the twenty-ninth and thirtieth switches which are 'simply marked with an ominous XXX (the pornography of ultimate pain and power)'. (Zimbardo 2009: 269)

Before commenting further on the lengthy quotation above, I wish to first consider some observations made by Stanley Milgram regarding a specific observation deriving from his experiments, which he cites in his study *Obedience to Authority*, published in 1974. Milgram observes an effect he calls 'counteranthropomorphism'. Whereas anthropomorphism is the tendency 'to attribute to inanimate objects and forces the attributes of the human species,' counteranthropomorphism is the tendency to attribute 'an impersonal quality to forces that are essentially human in origin and maintenance' (Milgram 2005: 10). A

counteranthropomorphic attribution has the effect of decontextualising a situation from the normative moral human world. Aside from appeals to the ‘teacher’s’ agreement in taking part in the experiment in the first place, the experimenter’s most usual exhortation to the protests of the teacher was simply that ‘the experiment must continue’. The experiment, per se, was rarely challenged by the teachers and, as human responsibility became detached from the immediate context of the teacher-student-shock laboratory situation, the teachers became, in effect, passively remote, distancing themselves from the moral culpability of their actions. In the case of the authority experiments, the teachers seldom asked the experimenter, when told that ‘the experiment must continue,’ the seemingly simple question: ‘Why?’ The experimenter’s authority, based in the idea of his/her being a representative of science itself, seemed to over-ride the teachers’ actions.<sup>4</sup> Even if they still showed moral concern and sympathy for the distress that they believed the learner to be suffering, sixty five percent of the volunteers did not act in a manner consistent with those moral considerations, having, it seems, essentially surrendered moral culpability to not only the experimenter, but to the abstract idea of science itself.

In the specific context of the experiment, in order to reduce the dissonance occurring between the ideas of working towards a higher abstract goal, and the self-conception of being a moral person, the volunteer’s ‘moral concern now shifts to a consideration of how well he is living up to the expectations that the authority has of him’ (Milgram 2005: 10). The teacher’s moral concern over his actions, and the dissonance this creates, are overcome by his/her focussing upon the performance of

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<sup>4</sup> There are parallels here with the (admittedly limited) sympathy of opinion shown to some religious figures, such as the Reverend Fred Phelps, and other ‘Reverends’ whose moral outlook seems, at best, de-contextualised from consensus morality.

the task, of being perceived to be performing in a smooth, efficient and professional manner.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, ‘scientific truth’ is not the only counteranthropomorphic attribution which may cause people to over-ride moral principles by their actions. Concepts such as rightness, freedom, respect, or any other causes thought in some way to be worthy or legitimate may also, under certain circumstances, be experienced as impersonal phenomena divorced from the human world, and which make the actions of a participant allowable to him/herself. In the case of the Milgram experiments, the specific existential experience of the volunteers’ arrival at a specific building and meeting with a particular experimenter are overlaid with the important justificatory ‘cover-story’ presented by the experimenter. This false narrative informs the subsequent experiences of the volunteers by imbuing these experiences with meaning, to wit the meaning of the particular scientific endeavour in which they are about to participate. The cover story blinds the volunteers to the true nature of their task, and focuses their attention upon the job at hand. While the volunteers may experience distress as the experiment unfolds, the scientific goal offered by the narrative presented to them sets up a context in which their actions

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<sup>5</sup> It may be worthwhile to consider whether the ensuing performance-oriented behaviour is not partially a reconsideration of the situation in aesthetic terms, which, under the circumstances, would lead to a mode of absorption based in part on transcending the moral experience, and transposing instead an experience which shields the volunteer teacher from the consequences of his own actions. This would accord with Festinger’s third form of dissonance reduction, mentioned above; the forgetting or reducing of the importance of the cognitions that are in a dissonant relationship, here by a process akin to a Nietzschean aesthetic, wherein the world is only tolerable if considered aesthetically: ‘As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still *bearable* to us, and art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all the good conscience to be *able* to make such a phenomenon of ourselves.’ Nietzsche: *The Gay Science*, 107.

are bent towards a higher, noble goal—the contribution to the learning experience of mankind. Zimbardo’s recreation of the experience of the students cited above appropriately forefronts the particular existential experiences of the volunteers, and through the second-person narrative asks the reader to place themselves as far as possible in the shoes of those taking part. (It should be noted that the volunteers were selected entirely from people outside of the university personnel; students were expressly forbidden from applying to the advertisement for volunteers.) The unfamiliar interior of ‘Yale University laboratory in Lindsay-Chittenden Hall’ seems particularly to gesture to the authoritarian aura of the surrounding experiment. Zimbardo’s evocation of the scene draws upon the unusual and disorienting experiences of the volunteers, as they meet and prepare for the experiment, and in so doing echoes Milgram’s reminder to his readers that ‘[a]n action such as shocking a victim, which in isolation appears evil, acquires a totally different meaning when placed in this setting’ (Milgram 2005: 11). It is the focus on the twofold experience of the teacher/volunteers’ need to diminish cognitive dissonance and in their specific existential experience that is of importance here.

For the serial killer it is necessary to attribute responsibility onto some other source than himself; this strategy requires some kind of attribution to an authority, in most cases an ideology. Ian Brady was obedient to an ideology that in part originated in Sadeian pantheism, in which nature is hostile to humanity, and was further strengthened by Nazi ideology. Far from being the goat which had the courage to strike out against the herd, he merely followed the call of an alternative shepherd, and in so doing evoked the principle of counteranthropomorphism by adhering to a vicious ‘natural order’.

Individual serial killers conduct themselves in much the same manner as the teachers of Milgram's experiment, the major difference being that they are not explicitly 'handed' a specific ideological narrative by which they may justify their actions. There are, of course, many ideologies extant in the day-to-day world in which we all live that may serve the same purposes, by which we can justify our actions, by which our actions may become dominated by the context. The obedience of a serial killer is not to a white-coated laboratory official, but rather is more consonant with the decontextualised authority of The Experiment to which the official defers. Serial killers construct a narrative based upon their own experiences, regardless of the moral implications of that narrative, or may construct an ideology to which they are obedient, which justifies their actions. In other words, they construct a worldview which diminishes dissonance.

Thomas Harris creates a fine metaphor for this construct in Hannibal Lecter's 'memory palace'. Lecter withdraws into the mental architecture of his palace in order to avoid physical pain (Harris 1991: 471), yet it offers a suitable metaphor for the dissonance avoidance, too. Yet Lecter's justifications for his murderous actions are also contained within the narrative construct of his palace. As a six year old, he prayed that he would see his sister once more:

His prayer to see her did not go entirely unanswered—he did see a few of Micha's milk teeth in the reeking stool pit his captors used between the lodge and the barn where they slept [...] Since this partial answer to his prayer, Hannibal Lecter had not been bothered by any considerations of deity, other than to recognise how his own modest predations paled beside those of God, who is in irony matchless, and in wanton malice beyond measure. (Harris 1991: 300-1)

In this context, even existential or moral nihilism is something in which to believe, something which allows the abdication of moral responsibility. Anti-authoritarianism paradoxically authorises the actions of serial killers, becomes an ideology which enables their actions.

Christopher Hyatt<sup>6</sup> alludes to this very paradox in his title of his book *The Psychopath's Bible: For the Extreme Individual* (2006), a book which, incidentally, reads very much like Brady's *Gates of Janus* (2001) in its tendency to explicitly taunt and interrogate the reader. This is a book which, whatever else its purpose—satire, *reductio ad absurdum* or bona fide psychopath's workbook—deliberately provokes dissonance at every turn. Regardless of authorial intent, Hyatt provides an account which descants on the moral relativism evidenced in the accounts offered by Brady, Panzram and Gaskins in that it is based around the fallacy that it is perfectly morally permissible for individuals to act only with regard to themselves on account that the rich and powerful, either as individuals or as members of organisations, are self-regarding: 'the fact of the matter is simple: people are so familiar with abuse and misuse that they are unaware of it' (Hyatt 2006: 96). While this statement is a recapitulation of Colin Wilson's fallacy of insignificance, Hyatt's project is not to encourage people to realise their own mistaken premises, but to encourage the extreme individual to exploit this fallacy: 'while man doesn't seek death per se, he seeks destruction as this provides the opportunity for new and potentially more lively events. Destruction is the great act of control. It is the "no" to in-voluntarism' (Hyatt 2006: 46-7). Hyatt's book functions as a manual for self-permission based on an overwhelmingly pessimistic and passive worldview: 'this is

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<sup>6</sup> Alan Ronald Miller.

a world of in-voluntarism, of Zombies' (Hyatt 2006: 45). He maintains a Nietzsche-based herd-mentality argument throughout, and asserts that those who would rise above the common herd of humanity must see through the illusions that social institutions instil, but only to the selfish benefit of themselves. In short, he utilises an extremely pessimistic Hobbesian reading of the human condition in order to instil a sense of dissonance in order that that dissonance can be then be exploited: 'every act of survival is an act of destruction . Every breath destroys universes. We are all murderers' (Hyatt 2006: 62). Hyatt's worldview ultimately a passive, other-directed account of the human situation which is similar to Seltzer's mass in person in that the individual is challenged to become an unthinking creature, as informed by his environment.

### **A. E. Van Vogt's 'Right Man Theory'**

Alfred Elton Van Vogt, Canadian born writer of science fiction, sets out his ideas about the 'Right Man' in his 1962 novel, set in Communist China, *The Violent Man*. However, as Colin Wilson explains his introduction to his own novel, *The Killer* (1970), as Van Vogt believed that the central thesis of *The Violent Man* would be misunderstood, he also wrote a pamphlet outlining its basic ideas (Wilson 1970: 6). 'A Report on The Violent Male' was eventually published in 1992. Van Vogt recounts in this report that he had, by 1956, outlined his theory of a violent type of man, whom he also designates the Right Man, who employs an extreme strategy of dissonance reduction. The Right Man, confronted with the cognition that he may be wrong, finds this situation so dissonant that, in the face of evidence to the contrary,

he convinces himself that he is right and everyone else is wrong. Empathy and sympathy are subjected completely to his notion of his own Rightness, for he embodies, in his own mind, goodness and rightness. That consonance engendered by his belief system is maintained in practice by exploiting the weaknesses and erroneous thinking that he perceives in others, regardless of the consequences to those others, for if the Right Man is always right, he can do no wrong to others. Others, however, can do wrong to him, which, cyclically, increases his need for further consonance, by which he increases his own opinion of his infallibility. This cycle, however, cannot continue indefinitely, and there may well come a point at which the cycle is broken, by, for example, his partner leaving him. Having believed that this would never happen, such is his level of belief in his own greatness, the consequence of this can be catastrophic for the Right Man, for here he is confronted with an incontrovertible scenario which contradicts his own righteous narrative. Furthermore, the main source of his consonance—his partner—is now unavailable for him to exploit, and he is thrown into a chaos of dissonance that may trigger a murderous and/or suicidal rage of despair. His breakdown, if suicidal, will take the form of a protest of his Rightness, as will any violent acts against others he may take. If it occurs, the suicide of the Right Man is a form of proselytising, a final statement that he is willing to die for his convictions, by which he seeks to prove his own conviction of his belief in his own narrative by recourse to extreme proof.

However, as Van Vogt makes clear, the Right, or Violent, Man has another strategy which he employs:

he unconsciously turns his death impulse away from himself. He puts it outside his own skin. By striking, by maiming, by killing, he holds his death from his own body. In psychological terms, this could be called projection. (Van Vogt 2002: 19)

The connection between suicide and killing is made by Dennis Nilsen, who claimed that he was ‘engaged primarily in self-destruction ... I was killing myself only but it was always the bystander who died.’ Although Brian Masters, Nilsen’s biographer, accepts that there was an element in the series of murders committed by Nilsen which was precipitated by Nilsen’s need to relieve himself of tension, he adds that ‘[s]omewhat less clear is Nilsen’s insistence upon the illusion of self-destruction’ ( Masters 1995: 264). The idea of the Right Man perhaps adds some clarity to that insistence.

Examining three examples of the writings of real-life serial murderers, it becomes apparent that a process of rationalisation equivalent to the ‘cover story’ used in studies such as the Milgram authority experiments are in operation in the worldview represented by the killers. The question of whether these ideologies were conceived in order that the killer could progress with his murders is a valid one, but I will argue that there seems to be some evidence that the basic elements of the ideologies were present prior to the killers’ embarkation on murder. I will consider here examples from three texts which offer examples of the worldviews of the killers, all three written by serial killers: Donald Gaskins, Carl Panzram and Ian Brady. All three present considerable evidence of a ‘permission giving’ ideology which effectively enabled the killer to break down the barriers which separate their own particular acts of murder and those of normative ideas of permissible behaviour.

The main instigating factor in the process of serial killing is the awakening of an anti-authoritarian, retaliatory ideology, which enables the killer subsequently, and gradually, to divest himself of more and more responsibility for his action.

While we may easily dismiss the claims of serial killers as being self-serving and unreliable, I believe that as self-representations they are valid; I am primarily interested in examining what their self-authorising narratives are constructed of; what narratives they weave into their own accounts of society and their place in, or beyond, society.

Furthermore, the kinds of explanations and narrative justifications offered by serial killers, I will show, resonate with the theories of Van Vogt, Gilligan et al.

## **Donald Gaskins**

Donald Henry ‘Pee-Wee’ Gaskins – the nickname arising from his slight build – was born in South Carolina in March 1933. A petty criminal in his youth, he was sent to reform school after a vicious assault on a woman during a burglary. After being released from reform school at age eighteen, he was convicted of attempted murder for attacking a girl he believed was insulting him with a hammer and received a five year sentence. His first murder was committed while serving this sentence in 1953. In 1961 he was imprisoned for the statutory rape of a twelve-year-old girl and sentenced to six years. He was released in 1969, and rationalised to himself that the simplest way for him not to be imprisoned for rape again was to kill his victims. In September 1969 he began killing a series of hitchhikers picked up on the coastal roads of the American south, first torturing, mutilating, and, he claimed, even cannibalising some of them. These he called his ‘coastal murders’, which he distinguished from what he called his ‘Serious Murders—the ones where I actually

knowed the people that I killed' (Gaskins and Earle 2002: 9). Gaskins was re-imprisoned in 1976 after an associate confessed to the police that he had seen Gaskins kill two young men. Gaskins was sentenced on eight counts of murder in 1976. In 1982, Gaskins killed a fellow inmate and was sentenced to death. He was electrocuted in September 1991.

An extreme level of dissonance may be exemplified in Donald Gaskins's explanation of the discomfort he labelled his 'bothersomeness'. Wilton Earle, the journalist who transcribed Gaskins's *Final Truth: The Autobiography of a Serial Killer* (1992), observes the following:

In that space where usually dwell the traits of conscience and compassion that make us human, Gaskins had only a lacuna— a void of darkness— a vacuum where morality, probity and virtue do not exist— with the result that within Pee Wee Gaskins there existed no barrier to his sadistic and horrifying treatment of his victims in an effort to get rid of his own pain.

The only suffering Gaskins was forced to endure was his *bothersomeness*. And once he learned that torturing and killing alleviated the pain, he was like a man who discovers the relief afforded by opium and becomes addicted not only to the respite from pain that it offers but also to the pleasure it gives. (Gaskins and Earle 2002: 241)

Gaskins's perhaps attractively mysterious 'void of darkness' is rendered less Gothic by cognitive dissonance theory. Rather than being conceived of as a 'lacuna', this type of apparent moral 'vacuum' occurs as a consequence of the process whereby Gaskins reconfigures his opinions in order that consonance replaces dissonance. In order, however, to more fully explain Gaskins's predicament in terms of cognitive dissonance theory, it is necessary to determine which particular contradictory opinions he held. Notwithstanding reasonable doubt over Gaskins's reliability as the

narrator of his own life-narrative, it is possible to isolate his opinions and to assess any contradictions arising from them. While Wilton Earle transcribed the tapes he recorded in prison with Gaskins, and set them down in chronological order, he also admits confronting Gaskins with discrepancies and contradictions relating to the Gaskins's narrative. Earle writes that he himself 'made no attempt to independently verify everything he said during our conversations— it being generally accepted that *all* autobiographical narration...is inherently biased and therefore subject to close scrutiny and a measure of scepticism.' (Gaskins and Earle 2002: 237) It is Gaskins's biased opinions that are the subject of a cognitive dissonance approach, and through which his general attitudes to himself, others and society will be uncovered.

In his introduction to *Final Truth*, Colin Wilson identifies an instance where Gaskins employs a strategy that reveals the possibility of the dissonance/consonance negotiation at play:

The serial killer tries to insulate himself from [...] empathy by dividing himself in two<sup>7</sup>, and behaving as if he is at the same time a decent human being and an anti-social predator.

Often, as Gaskins did, he tells himself that all society is corrupt. To Winton Earle, he said, 'Guards and Lawmen ain't really men— they're tools of a corrupt system that gets away with everything, including murder.' The implication of his

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<sup>7</sup> However, Milgram's observation of the tendency of his volunteers to switch the moral focus of their experience to their own performance could be construed in terms of someone dividing themselves in two. Certainly, aspects of Gaskin's autobiography focus on his performance, his need to be seen as a 'somebody'. His killing of a fellow prisoner was motivated by the need to improve his standing among the convicts, and by focussing on his self-image, the moral and legal implications of killing were certainly subjugated to his own sense of proving himself to the convicts who were above him in the prison power-hierarchy.

words is that Gaskins disapproves of corruption and murder, like any other decent citizen. (Gaskins and Earle 2002: ix)

This is consistent with A.E. Van Vogt's observations in his 'Report on the Violent Male' in which Van Vogt notes that:

The first thing we hear after a man has committed an act of violence [against his wife] is his explanation. He tells her, or us, why he did it.

She is an unfit mother. She is a monster who is trying to break up the family he loves, etc. (Van Vogt 1991: 22)

The same kind of thought process is evident here as with Gaskins. Despite acting in a manner which contradicts the rationalisation offered (respectively, traditional family values and a society free from corruption), both Van Vogt's violent husband and Gaskins are professing their beliefs in causes which they consider decent. Van Vogt explains that

it is difficult to justify violence mainly on the principle that you intend to have your own way. But it is easy to work oneself up to the rage necessary to strike, choke, maim or kill for a cause...[t]his man takes on a goal or a so-called idealistic cause in order to justify an already existent, unstable feeling. (Van Vogt 1991: 22)

This is an important point when considering cognitive dissonance theory as applied to serial killers, for the theory as originally described by Festinger et al. relates to the relationship between individuals and groups, and so the lone-acting serial killer, it could reasonably be argued, does not fit into the theory, which is based upon the studies of self-reinforcing religious cults. But here we can observe that even acting as an individual, outwith a group, it is possible to gesture towards consensually held *ideals* of decency and morality, ideals which in turn justify the maltreatment of

those who can then be judged to have infringed these ideals. The lone actor is behaving *as if* he were the member of a group, and appealing to the values which are held by the majority of members of society. He is acting *as if* he is a protector of these values, and this ultimately is his cause. This is how the actor may convince himself that, despite his actions, he is still a decent person, and that it is the violated party who was in error and who deserved punishment.

The messages of the media may help strengthen a justificatory narrative to a degree that internal narratives may become strong enough to cross over into the realm of action.<sup>8</sup> If any doubt remains of the ability of the media to impact directly on human behaviour, one merely has to look at the rise in attacks on racial ‘others’ in the aftermath of the attacks on the U.S.A. in 2001, or in racially-motivated attacks following the attack on Glasgow airport in June 2007.<sup>9</sup> Such incidents, and the resultant—often speculative—media responses may serve as ‘permission givers’ to people who already harbour either vague prejudices, or more fully developed fantasies of a violent type, but who feel the need to avoid the dissonance of feeling to be ‘a bad guy,’ of being the first to strike out. Now they can morally justify their actions by recourse to incorporating a narrative of righteous vengeance into their previously existing hatred of racial otherness: ‘They deserved it’. For Gaskins, a

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<sup>8</sup> The sociologist David Phillips has noted a correlation between media reports of suicides and rise in suicide rates, and concluded that the suicide victim of the original media story—usually a celebrity—is perceived as a ‘permission giver’ by vulnerable others. The Daniel Gonzalez case suggests (see Introduction) that fictional serial killers also act as permission giving narratives to actual killers. See: Gladwell, Malcolm 2000. *The Tipping Point*, London: Abacus. pp. 222-7 for an account of Phillips’s findings. See also Westphal : ‘Richard Hare describes how a young Swiss guest in his house in Oxford came, as a result of reading Camus’ novel [*The Outsider*], actually to *believe* that nothing matters’ (pp.156-7).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Racist attacks up 12 per cent in a year’ at

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article2753846.ece> (accessed 18-05-09)

similar principle, based on the strict unwritten codes of prison life, enabled him to carry out acts which allowed him to perceive himself in a better light, at the cost of jettisoning notions of moral culpability. Gaskins recalls his emotional state both shortly after committing his first murder, and then again the next morning (Gaskins and Earle 2002: 98-99). His remorse and fear is precipitated by an assessment of his own performance: 'I was so awful upset because I knew I had done something bad wrong: I had committed a murder without any proper planning and preparing' (Gaskins and Earle 2002: 90). Gaskins's account here is rather similar to an experience recounted by Ian Brady in a letter to Colin Wilson, dated 12<sup>th</sup> December 1992. Brady recalls an incident in a bar when he challenged a group of men, one of whom had been staring at Brady and Myra Hindley.<sup>10</sup> The men apologised, according to Brady, but 'afterwards I castigated myself for making such a stupid move—stupid not from a moral viewpoint, but because of the certainty of being caught' (Brady 2001: 22). Like the volunteers of Milgram's experiments, Gaskins, like Brady, has turned his attention away from moral considerations, and directed it towards his own performance as a killer. What he had done wrong was that he had failed, and failed drastically, the authority of his own justificatory, permission-giving narrative. Later in *Final Truth*, Gaskins states the following:

I was born special and fortunate, I am one of the few that truly understands what death and pain are all about. I have a special kind of mind that allows *me to give myself permission to kill*. (Gaskins and Earle 2002, emphasis added)

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<sup>10</sup> This incident is also briefly mentioned in Harrison 1987, p. 60.

## **Ian Brady**

Ian Brady was convicted in 1966 of the murder of ten-year-old Lesley Ann Downey, twelve-year-old John Kilbride and seventeen-year-old Edward Evans. His accomplice, Myra Hindley, was found guilty on two counts of murder and for harbouring Brady after the murder of John Kilbride. In 1985, Brady confessed to the murders of two more victims; the body of sixteen-year old Pauline Reade was found on Saddleworth moor, where the bodies of John Kilbride and Lesley Ann Downey had also been buried by Brady and Hindley in the 1960s. The body of twelve-year-old Keith Bennett, the third victim of the Moors Murderers, as they came to be known, has, to date, never been found. In 2001, Brady published a book *The Gates of Janus*, his analysis of serial killing and of a selected number of serial killers.

The underlying theme of Brady's *The Gates of Janus* is its concern with justice, and the book manifests that concern by mounting a sustained attack on the press, politicians, big business, the mindless bovine herd of the public, who are all, Brady claims, manifestly corrupt. Therefore his actions, he thinks, should be seen against a cultural background of state-sanctioned depravity which defuses the possibility of any legitimate moral judgement. However, Brady's attempt at creating a righteous narrative has similarities with the strategy which Thomas Harris employs in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Harris aims to ensure a level of identification between the reader and Hannibal Lecter by having him kill authority figures, or other people who show less-than-wholesome characteristics. Harris is complicit in creating a justificatory narrative for Lecter, having him kill, or being instrumental in the deaths of, census-takers, policemen, 'deviant' serial killers, the rich and the

rude, all of which play to popular middle-class narratives of resentment against the authoritarian elite and cultural otherness. In this respect, Lecter conforms to a form of middle-class version of the mass in person. As such, *The Silence of the Lambs* has much in common with populist tabloids. *The Gates of Janus* proceeds to offer a similar ideological appeal against social authority, arguing that such is the corruption and greed and hypocrisy of the social system, that normative moral ideas are invalidated. The title of Brady's book itself refers to the situation by which 'both the serial killer and government-sanctioned killers emerge from the same "Janusfaced" legal code' (Metvier 2009: 3). It also seems to suggest that Brady's past investment in a mistaken belief system by which he essentially authorised himself to kill five innocent victims is an inherent component in his refusal to bear responsibility for his actions. Dissonance is a major factor in this; Brady, it seems, such is the huge risk of cognitive dissonance, still clings to his own rationalisations, perhaps because of the knowledge that he must, such have been the costs to him personally.

Leon Festinger's correct prediction that the followers of Mrs Keech's prophecy who had invested greatly in their belief would consolidate their faith in the face of the failure of the prophecy, showed that he had not overestimated the power of cognitive dissonance to enable the creation of absurd belief systems and self-justifying narratives (Tavris and Aronson 2008; 12). Serial killers face an even greater level of 'investment' than even Mrs Keech's staunchest followers: such is the irreversibility of their primary act of murder. And, furthermore, the personal struggle involved in the decision to murder thus resonates with Festinger's observations that the more difficulty a member of a would-be club experienced in

joining that club, the greater his regard toward that club would be. Again, there are dissimilarities between a given serial killer's decision to act, and the scenarios studied by Festinger et al., but it is obvious from reading the true-life writing of serial killers that a similar process seems to be operating. Ian Brady's *The Gates of Janus* sees the author position himself as an insider-commentator whose credentials to comment on other serial killers are considerably more credible than those of academics, psychologists and journalists. The cost of his entry into such an elite group, that being lifetime incarceration, is manifest in the opening half of the book, which is nothing less than a lengthy attempt to persuade the reader of the rightness of his ideology. He is, in effect, proselytising. 'People become more certain they are right about something they just did if they can't undo it', observe Travis and Aronson (2008: 18). And such is the extent of Brady's crimes that he is still proclaiming his 'rightness' decades after his imprisonment. However, Brady's brief account of his early years is informative in that in it we can perceive the influence of a type of deterministic reasoning. He describes his behaviour in terms of a backdrop of naturalness and instinct, quite opposed to conscious thought:

In childhood years I was not the stereotypical 'loner' so beloved by the popular media. Friends formed around me eagerly in the school playground, listening to me talk, and I took it as natural. Apparently I had a descriptive talent and contagious enthusiasm. All harmless, adventurous stuff, no devious intent. No sense of superiority.

Later, in my early teens at senior school, matters changed imperceptibly. Gangs formed around me. Similarly I had no conscious sense as to why, only that again I took it as a natural process. I was not consciously aware of being out to gain followers but follow they did, obviously predisposed to go where I led.

That our activities became criminal was also accepted as natural. The more money we stole the more fun we had. Only when we were caught by the police did a minority drift away, mainly at the behest of their restrictive parents. I hardly

noticed, nor did the remaining others; replacements joined us, and we continued to enjoy the fruits of our activities.

Gradually I began to adopt a more studious, professional attitude towards crime. My instinctive form of relativism developed into a pragmatic philosophy. I began to choose my followers. (Brady 2001: 92-3)

Brady evokes his younger self in terms of a disinterested natural leader, whose criminality the older Brady views in terms of the acceptance of it being a natural process: ‘that our activities became criminal was also accepted as natural’; the passivity of this sentence is notable. He mentions his ‘instinctive form of relativism’ and how it ‘developed’ into a pragmatic philosophy, as if a natural gradual progression. Criminality, in this view, is presented as natural, only designated ‘criminal’ because of the order imposed by ‘restrictive parents’. Children are freer, natural beings whose behaviour is curbed by the adult hierarchy, who, on this account must be unnatural. Parents, on this account, are mere killjoys of that which is natural and undifferentiated by societal stratification, embodied by a childhood untroubled by ideas such as superiority. Brady continues:

This book is not an autobiography, but these passages form a brief personal introduction before tackling the main subject.

The purpose is to explain why, on those occasions when I returned to childhood haunts as an adult, I couldn’t get enough of people, roaming the old bars and cafes, soaking up the atmosphere and delighting in overheard conversations.

Each face I then observed seemed to radiate unique character, I felt truly *alive*, all criminal inclinations and ambitions forgotten, erased by temporarily regaining the vitality of seeing the world through the eyes of a child. That microscopic form of vision where nothing is unimportant and almost everything is fascinating.

Does this seem rather foolish to you? Somehow, I don’t think so. Too much time is wasted in pretending we are something we are not—that we know everything instead of relatively nothing. Are invulnerable and in total control of all

we survey, and capital at caring for nothing. Are beyond good and evil and proud of it. (Brady 2001: 93)

That Brady sought out the places of his youth in order to recapture the perceptions of childhood and to forget, briefly, the vicissitudes of adult endeavour (in his case criminal ones) is an explanation which, although undoubtedly open to question in terms of authenticity, resonates uncomfortably when we remember that Brady has killed children. The Romantic poets, troubled by their brief glimpses of what G.K. Chesterton called ‘absurd good news’<sup>11</sup>, or rather by their incapability of recalling at will those experiences of the eternal, did not seek to destroy that which triggered their melancholy regret. Wordsworth did not take a scythe to his field of daffodils, in a fit of resentment upon the evaporation of his vision, for he used his art to keep that vision ablaze. We might not be able to say the same of Ian Brady based on this account of the meanings he attaches to childhood. In any case, the meanings behind Brady’s view of childhood may evidence a deliberate intellectualising which frees him from guilt, which moves him to a position ‘beyond good and evil’ by evoking an ability to revisit the ‘child within’ and the non-moral universe which that child inhabits:

We are what we believe at given times.

But we are always reluctant to admit that the child is still there deep in each of us, occasionally peeping out to laugh at what we have become. And we take no offence at it, but joy from being reminded. It helps us recognise that, without knowing it at the time, we created a barren role as we travelled the years, have inexorably *become* that role and stuck with it. The past our future. Vainly play-

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<sup>11</sup> An experience of epiphany, as exemplified in W.B. Yeats’s lines from ‘Vacillation’:

While on the shop and street I gazed  
My body of a sudden blazed;  
And twenty minutes more or less  
It seemed, so great my happiness,  
That I was blessed and could bless.

acting our lives away for the benefit of other people, even total strangers. (Brady 2001: 93)

The passivity of Brady's world view is again evidenced here in the inexorable determined role that he alleges 'we' create for ourselves. This is a world view conveniently bereft of responsibility, locked into a role determined by our past. The unfulfilled potentialities of childhood have been taken from us, but are still there buried deep under our adult role: 'the child is still there deep in each of us'; another chilling resonance with the bodies he buried on Saddleworth Moor. Brady's brief rationalising account of his childhood seems to encode some of the actions of his crimes. One statement, however, seems somewhat inconsistent with the others: 'And we take no offence at it, but joy from being reminded'. If we have, as Brady claims, 'created a barren role' and 'inexorably *become* that role and stuck with it' how can the child within us which makes us aware of how life was much better *then*, produce joy in reminding us of how so much less we are *now*? Has he diverted the offence that he does not take at the appearance of *his own* inner child towards the actual children who comprised his victims? The meaning of childhood, as represented here, for Brady is authenticity vis-à-vis the inevitable role assumed by the adult in society.

The shift in personal pronoun in the 'inner child' passage cited above, the move from 'I' to 'we', is an attempt to connect with the reader, and perhaps an unwitting reminder of the theory, as expounded by several commentators (see, for example, Ramsey Campbell, below) that the fascination with serial killers is based on some level of recognition between the killer and the beholder, between the text and the reader. Brady's concept of childhood alludes to a sense of an existence free

from morality, a natural state, which is betrayed by the processes of growing up, and taking one's position in a role bounded by moral and legal codes. Yet the child is also weak. Brady's assertion that 'the child is still there deep in each of us' is particularly unsettling given that his own sense of committing the perfect crime, his own *raison d'être*, is indelibly linked with that of the 'Lost Boy' Keith Bennett, whose grave still remains a mystery. Brady's own lost child enables him to track back in memory to a place where he is free of his crimes, a place where crime is natural. But the child that 'peeps out' and smiles at Brady is conflated with the memory of his victims, particularly the memory of Keith Bennett. And *that* child would certainly look upon Brady's role, barren as it is, with dissatisfaction. The conflation makes sense if we imagine that the Brady of the 1990s realises that the lost children and he himself are all victims of the younger Brady (that is, of the twenty-something Ian Brady). Brady's brief sojourn into autobiography is as close to an admission of wrongness as *The Gates of Janus* provides. But we can perhaps read traces of an inner strategy of conflation, of de-individualisation, running throughout this passage. Reader and writer, murderer and victim, past and present, all coalesce in a wholeness in which Brady can lessen his idea of himself as an individual, and by doing so dissipate the guilty dissonance that comes with remembrance. Brady's shift here is towards the mass in person, away from the Romantic individual rebel. This passage is unusual, as it evokes a process of incorporation, whereas the main thematic strands of *The Gates of Janus* are concerned with maintaining Brady's position outside of society and the common herd. Detective Chief Inspector Peter Topping, who was in charge of the search for the bodies of Pauline Reid and Keith Bennett in 1987, offers some further evidence into Brady's reluctance to dwell on his past:

In a quiet moment he told me he was ashamed, and why he couldn't go though [the details of the killings] with me. He knew he would be describing horrendous details and he was concerned how others, including me, would feel about him...He is always very worried that he will be held up to ridicule. After his first visit to the Moor [to try to locate the bodies] he was concerned that I would criticize him to the media for not coming up with anything...Yet despite this craving for approval, perhaps the most significant aspect of his personality is his craving to be in control, his need to feel that he knows something that others do not know, that he is at all times one up on whoever he is dealing with. (Topping 1989: 242-3)

There is, in any case, evidence to link Brady's account of his childhood to ideas procured from literature before he began to carry out the murders to suggest that elements of his worldview are not merely a retrospective construction. Fred Harrison, whose book *Brady and Hindley* was partly the result of information gleaned from interviews with Brady, writes that Brady was, in 1957,

not yet ready to go into top-gear in his chosen profession. Brady had a restless mind that needed educating. He needed a philosophy that would give direction to his life. It was while he was in this suggestive frame of mind that he visited the public library...There, he borrowed the alluringly titled *Crime and Punishment*. (Harrison 1987: 26-7)

Harrison continues:

For Ian Brady, the warped logic that Raskolnikov employed to justify murder was a perfect fit for his crippled personality. Here, in black and white, articulated by one of the greatest authors of all time, was the creed that washed away the lingering doubts about the morality of murder. Evocatively presented by the Russian master, the Napoleonic thesis was one of the last pieces to be fitted into the fatal jigsaw of experiences that shaped Ian Brady's behaviour. (Harrison 1987: 28)

*The Gates of Janus* confirms the importance of the author to Brady, who describes himself as ‘an ardent admirer of all Dostoevsky’s works and their unique psychological depths’ and who observes that ‘The Napoleons are exceptions, as Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov belatedly discovered to his cost’ (Brady 2001: 53; 85). On Harrison’s account, it is the Napoleonic thesis that lay behind the actions of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* that acted as a permission-giver to Brady. Peter Topping relates that Brady had ‘said that everything he had done was in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. “That’s me, that’s what I am all about,” he said’ (Topping 1989: 245). Ultimately, Brady is utilising Dostoevsky’s novel as a permission-giver which authorises his actions, just as the teachers of Milgram’s experiment morally capitulated to the authority of the overseer of the experiment. And, just as some of Milgram’s ‘teachers’ shifted their moral focus onto the performance of their task, Brady’s focus was diverted to the meticulous planning and execution of his crimes. Topping’s remarks regarding Brady’s shame and concern for how others perceived him are telling, in that he notes that these concerns and emotions are dominated by Brady’s ‘craving for control’ which Topping perceived as ‘the most significant part of his personality’.

With regards to Brady’s planning, there is evidence that he utilised another source-text. Duncan Staff, in *The Lost Boy*, cites another textual turning point for Brady: ‘A key moment in the development of Ian Brady’s fantasies was his discovery of the book *Compulsion* by Meyer Levin’ (Staff 2007: 128). *Compulsion* (1956) is a non-fiction novelistic account of the Leopold and Loeb murder, and, after reading it,

Ian told Myra that he couldn't believe the mistakes Leopold and Loeb had made. They bungled the pick-up and were seen by people who knew them; they beat Franks to death in the car so there was blood everywhere; they hid him in a drainage pipe but left a foot sticking out. Finally—silly buggers—they rang the victim's father to try to extract a ransom. The way to commit a perfect murder was to plan it properly. You had to make sure that the body was never discovered. Ian laid it all out for her. She would help him pick up a child, wearing a disguise; they would then drive to the moor where he would rape, kill and bury it. Everything would be carefully prepared. Nothing would be left to chance. There was no way they would be caught. He was going to commit the perfect murder and she was going to help him. (Staff 2007: 128-9)

The idea of a 'perfect murder' is, ultimately, an example of a counteranthropomorphic goal, a goal by which the greater transcendental narrative overwrites any residual moral dissonance. The aesthetic-performative component of Brady's counteranthromorphic goal is evidenced by his notes and planning which was to provide evidence against him and Hindley at their trial (see Goodman 1986: 190-200); the 'perfect murder' in this sense is not simply a murder which is committed with impunity. The care Brady had taken over the murder of John Kilbride showed an extensive attention to detail and to the removal of evidence, and was a part of the entire performance.

Within the text of *The Gates of Janus*, we can witness, in Brady's use of cherry-picked quotations and epigrams and in his name-dropping of canonical authors and philosophers, his apparent need to be in the good company of those writers and thinkers, to see his own words and ideas intermingle with theirs. Despite

his wish to be seen as outside the herd, as an individual rebelling against society and the 'System', the construction of *The Gates of Janus* as a text gestures to his need of incorporation, of the his willingness to be assimilated into a textual equivalent of the mass in person. By taking his literary cues from Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Shaw, and other respected members of the literary and philosophical worlds, and by assimilating their ideas into his own manifesto, Brady seeks to conceal his own intellectual and moral culpability as an existentially free individual self, while simultaneously implicating society's idols by their very presence in a book authored by 'The Moor's Murderer, Ian Brady'. His Dionysian retreat into the mass ranks of thinkers and writers whose ideas helped to inform the society and culture against which he rails illustrates the ongoing interchanges and fluctuations between the Apollonian self and the Dionysian collective. If *The Gates of Janus* was intended to function as a creative act of self-definition, it mostly succeeds in illuminating the complexities of the constant interchanges and interplays between the Apollonian drive to individuation and the Dionysian tendency towards amorphous assimilation.

## Carl Panzram

In my lifetime I have murdered 21 human beings, I have committed thousands of burglaries, robberies, larcenies, arsons and last but not least I have committed sodomy on more than 1,000 male human beings. For all these things I am not in the least bit sorry. I have no conscience so that does not worry me. I don't believe in man, God, nor Devil. I hate the whole damned human race including myself.

Carl Panzram (Cited in Gaddis and Long 2002: 6)

Carl Panzram was born in Minnesota in 1891. During his adolescence, Panzram was repeatedly incarcerated, mainly for burglary and robbery. By 1928, imprisoned again, he was befriended by a prison guard, Henry Lesser. Panzram persuaded Lesser to obtain for him some writing materials, in order that Panzram could write a journal of his life-story. The resultant autobiography which contained his confession of killing twenty-one people—‘an attempt to justify himself to one other human being’ (Wilson 1985: 82)—was deemed unfit for publication until 1970. Lesser sent the manuscript to the critic H. L. Mencken, who responded that it was ‘one of the most amazing documents I have ever read’ in a letter to Lesser dated 25<sup>th</sup> May 1929. (Gaddis and Long 2002: 136). Less than a month later, Panzram murdered the foreman of the Leavenworth prison laundry, Robert G. Warnke, and was subsequently sentenced to death. He steadfastly refused to appeal against his sentence and was hanged in September 1930.

While Carl Panzram is regarded by such commentators as Colin Wilson (2005: 77) and Elliott Leyton (1992: 359) as a multiple killer, his status as such hinges on his own claims, both verbal and as described in his journal. Karl Menninger, the renowned psychiatrist, may also have had a little to do with this

acceptance. Menninger interviewed Panzram, and reviewed the journal, and indeed Gaddis and Long's edition of the journal includes a letter written by Menninger to James Long as part of the prefatory material. In his book, *Man Against Himself*, Menninger recounts Panzram's journal (he calls Panzram 'John Smith'). Menninger states that the

manuscript ... proceeds to an unflinching self-analysis in which the prisoner spares neither himself nor society. He frankly confesses that he has murdered twenty-three men [sic] and has no regrets about it. (Most of these murders were substantiated by investigation.) He does not pretend to have immediate justification for these murders but says that he killed because he enjoyed killing, that it gratified his hate and his wish for revenge, although the revenge was displaced from the original object of his hatred. (Menninger 1938: 205)

Menninger was also the author of *The Crime of Punishment* (1978) and his views on punishment were, in part, influenced by Panzram's experiences: 'I have always carried him in my mind as the logical product of our prison service' he explained in a letter to James Long (Gaddis and Long 2002: 8). Contrary to Menninger's claims, however, there is little or no evidence to account for most of these murders. At the time, as evidenced by the explanatory segments which intersperse the text of Panzram's journal in Gaddis and Long's 2002 edition, there was much scepticism about Panzram's claims. While there is evidence to back some of his claims, there is little evidence other than his own testimony for the vast majority of the murders:

Halfheartedly...authorities began to investigate the truth of several of Panzram's asserted murders. They discovered that witnesses had recognised Panzram as a man walking away from the murder of Henry McMahon in Salem, Massachusetts. Extradition proceedings had been requested. But when authorities were unable to pinpoint the veracity of many of Panzram's claims, due to lack of time and resources, the entire matter became less conclusive. (Gaddis and Long 2002: 160-1)

It is on the strength of Panzram's autobiographical narrative that he can be considered a serial killer. As such, Panzram occupies a space somewhere between author and bona fide serial killer. Regardless of the actual numbers that Panzram murdered, his journal still constitutes, to all intents, a 'serial killer narrative' in that it is a representation of a man who claims to have killed over twenty people. While we may doubt some of the facts of the journal, in common with Ian Brady's accounts, it is his attempts at self-justification that concern us here. As Elliott Leyton writes, himself quoting sociologist Phillip Abrams:

'becoming a deviant is not a matter of personal or social pathology, social disorganisation, deprivation, broken homes, viciousness, bad company or chance, but of a negotiated passage to a possible identity' which can only be understood as 'creatively seizing opportunities for possible self definition.' (Leyton 1992: 332)

Panzram's journal, like *The Gates of Janus*, is an example of an instance of creative self-definition, and regardless of the factual doubts over the numbers of victims, which, in any case, reduces people to mere numbers, its value lies in its ability to reveal that which I have been calling a righteous narrative.

Panzram's journal, the essence of which is captured by the quotation cited above at the opening of this section, can at first seem to refute this model of ideological permission giving. As can be seen, Panzram explicitly refuses to offer any excuses; he seems at first to refuse any attempt at creating a righteous narrative. Yet even here there is a clear indication that behind his claims lies an ideological edifice which did indeed enable him to justify his behaviour. The passage, which

serves as prologue to Gaddis and Long's edition of Panzram's journal, *Panzram: A Journal of Murder*, continues thus:

If you or anyone else will take the trouble and have the intelligence or patience to follow and examine every one of my crimes, you will find that I have consistently followed one idea through all of my life. I preyed upon the weak, the harmless and the unsuspecting.

This lesson I was taught by others: might makes right.

(Gaddis and Long 2002: 6)

Panzram's autobiographical journal is, as well as an account of his life story, a treatise on prison and social reform, written by a convict whose ultimate goal it is difficult to comprehend as anything other than to have 'the system' execute him (Wilson 1985: 83). While it is irrefutable that Panzram killed a laundry foreman while in Leavenworth prison, thus virtually assuring that he was sentenced to death, his claims of the murder of over twenty people are perhaps best treated with a degree of scepticism. Panzram's accounts of many of these murders are conspicuously vague. He claims that he killed several men in Africa, or on a yacht that he had procured during a period when he had escaped from prison:

Then I went to town, bought a ticket on the Belgian steamer to Lobito Bay down the coast. There I hired a canoe and six niggers and went out hunting in the bay and backwaters. I was looking for crocodiles. I found them, plenty. They were all hungry. I fed them. I shot all six of them niggers and dumped 'em in. The crocks did the rest. I stole their canoe and went back to town, tied the canoe to the dock and that night someone stole the canoe from me. (Gaddis and Long 2002: 87)

These deaths were, unsurprisingly, never verified. However, this claim highlights a discrepancy between the number of murders that Panzram claimed, and the number

of which he was convicted. Ian Brady is known to have been involved with five murders, and though there has been speculation regarding others, that is the ‘canonical’ number of victims associated with him. Panzram, however, occasionally reveals a rather manically creative imagination. Among his many schemes was one to start a war

between England and the U.S.A. Sounds fantastic, all right, but I am positive I could have done it. The way I figured on doing this was to work through numerous brokers on Wall Street, playing the stock market ahead of time with the knowledge that I alone would know that England and the U.S.A. would still be at war. (Gaddis and Long 2002: 100)

Panzram then goes on to describe in detail how he would ‘quietly sneak up and sink some great British battleship while in America on a peaceful mission’ (Gaddis and Long 2002: 100). It is noticeable how Panzram’s plan is informed by the social values and goals of his day. His ‘fantastic’ idea is linked directly to a stock-market that would crash in 1929. As documentary-maker Adam Curtis writes:

What was beginning to emerge in the 1920s was a new idea of how to run mass democracy. At its heart was the consuming self which not only made the economy work but was also happy and docile and so created a stable society.<sup>12</sup>

This idea of the consuming self has the consequence of creating ideal expectations for individuals of living up to that role. The ‘consuming self’, if it finds itself in a position where it is not able to consume, experiences a sense of failure, creating a sense of dissonance between the idea of self as a capable and rational being, and the

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<sup>12</sup> Adam Curtis in the documentary *The Century of the Self*. Available at <http://hareloco.spaces.live.com/blog/cns!E7089CD7CF32AA20!239.entry?sa=341458098> Accessed 25<sup>th</sup> June 2009.

realisation that one is failing in the eyes of society. Carl Panzram's ideal self still, then, mirrored the ideals of 1920s American society, and as such, his fantasies are impelled by the ideals of careerism, of becoming a self-made man.

Corey Robin describes how the idea of careerism also informs Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963) and this description could serve equally well of Panzram's frustrated entrepreneurial ambitions:

The careerist, according to Arendt, was no passive spectator. He actively sought more for himself. And it was this quest for more that led him to participate in terror. Terror, in other words, did not constrain its wielders' desires or limit the self. Like all hierarchies, regimes of terror relied upon the enterprising spirit of the hustler, who found in their promise of power and status a ticket out of the humdrum world into which he had been born, even if the price of that ticket was to manage a genocide or two. (Corey 2004: 116)

Panzram's careerist ambitions necessitated an initial financial outlay which he tried to supply from burglary: Panzram, it should be noted, never entered prison for anything other than charges of theft and robbery. But, like a palimpsest, the traces of the idea of the consuming self re-emerge in his journal in his rhetoric of finance. It is worth reiterating Panzram's zero-sum worldview:

I have done as I was taught to do. I am no different from any other. You taught me how to live my life, and I have lived as you have taught me. If you continue teaching others, then you as well as they must pay the price, and the price is very expensive. You lose your all, even life. (Gaddis and Long 2002: 5)

Ironically, at the time of the Wall Street Crash of 1929, Panzram was, although in jail, experiencing one of the most satisfying periods of his life. Awaiting

trial for the murder of Robert G. Warnke, the laundry foreman, Panzram wrote to Henry Lesser on October 31<sup>st</sup> 1929, two days after the stock market crash, saying

In fact, I feel pretty near human. For several different reasons—here are a few. Its so long since I have been beaten and kicked around, chained up or knocked down, that I have almost forgotten how it feels. Another reason is that I have just finished my supper and man, what a feed...This sure is a queer old world. Here I am getting old after roaming all over the world, after serving over 20 years in jails and in some of 'em I got plenty abuse for very little, in one of which, that's the last one in New York, I was sloughed up in isolation for over 2 years and there treated worse than you and many other people would treat a mad dog. That treatment I received, not for what I had done, but for what other people thought I might do. There I done nothing to deserve all of the abuse I got.

Now notice the contrast. I come here expecting to get more of the same kind of treatment but determined that this time I won't get it for nothing. This time I am hostile and don't care what the consequences may be. This time I figure I'll beat 'em to it...so to forestall all that, I grab myself a 10-pound bar and go on the warpath. Before I have finished, I kill one man and try to kill a dozen more. After doing all these things I walk into a cell fully expecting to be chained up and beaten to death. But what happens. The exact opposite of that.

No one lays a hand on me. No one abuses me in any way. This is how things have been for the past 3 or 4 months. (Gaddis and Long 2002: 174)

Panzram's expectations were confounded: Panzram's letter concludes thus: 'maybe I am wrong tho'. I am too dumb to know what might have been, but I am not so dumb that I can't see a little way into the future. Not very far but far enough to see the end of Carl Panzram, 31614' (Gaddis and Long 2002: 174). On the 20<sup>th</sup> June, 1930, a year to the day after killing Warnke, and awaiting his execution date, set for September 5<sup>th</sup>, Panzram made a 'singularly clumsy' suicide bid (Gaddis and Long 2002: 229). He explained his reasons in a letter to Lesser:

I had no choice about coming into this world and nearly all my 38 years in it I have had very little to say about how I should live my life. People have driven me into

doing everything I have done. Now the time has come when I refuse to be driven any further. (Gaddis and Long 2002: 228)

What had happened to Panzram in the intervening weeks is unknown, but there seems to be evidence of some kind of interference by prison guards, one of whom spoke in a loud voice outside Panzram's cell about suicide methods. Panzram had kept a portion of beans in his cell which had rotted, which he then ate. He also cut his leg with a sharpened button. Whatever had happened, in Panzram's last letter to Henry Lesser, the guard who had befriended him, he addressed Lesser for the first and only time, as 'H.P. Lesser, SCREW' (Gaddis and Long 2002: 234). This, perhaps, was to remind Lesser that he would be better suited to some other role than that of a prisoner officer (Gaddis and Long 2002: 280-3). For Panzram had earlier given advice to Lesser about teaching in a boys' training school, which implies Panzram's tacit approval in Lesser's potential career change. What he had suggested to Lesser was remarkably similar to the ideas that Dan MacDougald would use in the 1960s:

The Golden Rule is religion enough to teach any boy. Teach them the meaning of such things as truth, lie; honest, thief; honor, dishonour; bravery, cowardice; clean, dirty; love, hate.

For each lesson just take one word. For instance, take the word truth. Teach them the full meaning of that one word in all its tenses. Then teach them how to spell it, pronounce it, and speak and write it in every day usage. Teach it what it means to be truthful, how they will be respected by all others and how they respect themselves by being truthful. Teach them by example, word and deed until they thoroughly [sic] know that one word Truth. (Gaddis and Long 2002: 281-2)

Again, as in the case of Brady, who begins *The Gates of Janus* by defining terms, and as with Gaskins's discussions of prison words and ways of talking, Panzram too expresses his belief in the need for precise definitions, evoking a search for 'full

meaning', of a chance to achieve what he felt he had been denied. Yet Panzram's letter to Lesser informing him of his ideas on teaching honour also implies that Panzram had realised that his own course of action had been wrong, his own rationalisations had been wrong. Panzram had come to the same conclusion that Jeffrey Dahmer did, when Dahmer stated from prison, 'I couldn't find any meaning in my life when I was out there. I'm sure as hell not going to find it in here' (cited in Masters 1993: 23).

Forensic psychiatrist and psychotherapist James Gilligan's arguments also help us to reconsider the leap from thought to action, from fiction to fact, that serial killers and their narratives force us to consider. The 'special mind' that Gaskins mentions, and the justifications of Brady and Panzram, all connote with a shared and particular logic. As Gilligan asks,

How can we go about learning what that logic is? I will start with Freud's insight that thoughts and fantasies are symbolic representations of actions, so that they can precede actions and serve as substitutes for them as well. And then I will add that the opposite is also true: *Actions are symbolic representations of thoughts*. That is, actions can precede and serve as substitutes for conscious thoughts. They can take the place of thinking in words, if the behaviour is never interpreted or translated into words. The philosopher and literary critic Kenneth Burke wrote that in order to understand literature, we must learn to interpret *language as symbolic action*. I am suggesting that in order to understand violence we must reverse that procedure and learn to *action as symbolic language*—with a 'symbolic logic' of its own...All behaviour is the embodiment of or enactment of a purpose or wish—that is, a wishful fantasy or myth, a plot or narrative, and sometimes a nightmare or delusion—that can also be expressed, by means of language, as a thought. Actions also serve as a means of expressing the feelings associated with the thought, such as love, hate, sadness, or fear, though again the symbolic medium is physical action rather than words. (Gilligan 2000: 61)

The distinctions between fact and fiction in serial killer narratives are not bound by impermeable barriers. As the result of a criminal trial is determined by the jury's interpretation of the narratives presented to them (Bruner 2002: 37), so the narratives of factual killers are processed through the interpretations of the authors, film-makers, and the journalistic imperatives engendered by the editorial policies of individual newspapers.

Gilligan recalls that the one overwhelming motive that violent prisoners had given in response to being asked 'why they had been violent' was that their violence had been in response to disrespect (Gilligan 2000: 105-109). Gilligan describes one inmate, Chester T., who had previously eluded any attempts to understand his aggressive behaviour. Gilligan

finally asked him 'What do you want so badly that you would sacrifice everything else to get it?' And he, who was usually so inarticulate, disorganized, and agitated that it was difficult to get a clear answer to any question, stood up to his full height and replied with quiet assurance, with perfect coherence and even a kind of eloquence: 'Pride. Dignity. Self-esteem.' And then he went on to say, again more clearly than before: 'And I'll kill every mother-fucker in that cell block if I have to in order to get it! My life ain't worth nothin' if I take somebody disrespecting me and callin' me punk asshole faggot and goin' "Ha! Ha!" at me. Life ain't worth living if there ain't nothin' worth dyin' for. If you ain't got pride, you got nothin'. That's all you got! I've already got my pride.' (Gilligan 2000: 106)

Chester T's answer perhaps allows us to understand why Panzram's behaviour and confessions effectively constituted a project that would ensure his own death. Panzram, like Chester T, had entered into an 'endlessly self-defeating power struggle with everyone around him, which inevitably resulted in his being punished more and more severely' (Gilligan 2000: 106). Another prisoner who Gilligan

interviewed, Billy A., decided to “declare war on the whole world” until he was able to restore his self-respect’ (Gilligan 2000: 109).

If we recall that the basic recognition of cognitive dissonance theory is that any dissonance that occurs between two ideas will tend to be resolved in terms of the idea which causes a loss of self-esteem, then the importance of the self in relation to beliefs and actions becomes apparent. The ‘inner core’ of selfhood tends to take precedence over all other considerations, even considerations of bodily survival. As existential psychologist Rollo May writes,

I for one believe we vastly overemphasize the human being’s concern with security and survival satisfactions because they so neatly fit our cause-and-effect way of thinking. I believe Nietzsche and Kierkegaard were more accurate when they described man as the organism who makes certain values—prestige, power, tenderness—more important than pleasure and even more important than survival itself. (May 1983: 17)

The ideas of ‘self respect’ and ‘pride’ and the narratives which they provide can, and do, provide self-justification for many actions: the ‘loss of self-esteem is experienced subjectively as death of the self. People will sacrifice anything to prevent the death and disintegration of their individual or group identity’ (Gilligan 2000: 97).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Adam Curtis introduces the concluding part of his documentary series *The Century of the Self* with the following words: ‘This is the story of the use of an idea that has come to dominate our society: it is the belief that the satisfaction of individual beliefs and dreams is our highest priority.’ This evaluation of the self as perhaps the dominant social narrative only reveals that satisfaction is more illusive than mere commodity.

For Panzram, forcing the justice system to execute him, even to the extent of excoriating the anti-death penalty lobbyists for their unwanted attentions (Gaddis and Long 2002: 221), assured that society took full responsibility for creating the Carl Panzram he had become. However, that self was one that Panzram still felt he had to preserve. Panzram's journal is, after all, itself a clear narrative description of who Carl Panzram was as an individual. It, too, is a declaration of war against the world, a war that he preferred to lose rather than undergo the gradual disintegration of self. The journal that he gave to the prison guard, Henry Lesser, was at its core, a preservation of that self; regardless of how Panzram presented himself in his journal, he still had a sense of self which he considered worthy of committing to paper, and worth dying to preserve. It is easy to become overwhelmed with the *content* of Panzram's narrative, and concomitantly to ignore the meaning of the existence of his journal *as* a journal.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly writes in *Flow*,

when an activity is thoroughly engrossing, there is not enough attention left over to allow a person to consider either the past or the future, or any other temporarily irrelevant stimuli. One item that disappears from awareness deserves special mention, because in normal life we spend so much time thinking about it: our own self. (2002: 62)

For Panzram, however, the activity of writing his journal may have given him space in which the threat of non-self disappeared. And it seems that the same short-term forgetfulness of the threat of non-self is also apparent in the murderous actions of serial killers. In these most anti-creative actions, attention to one's sense of non-self is also temporarily suspended; thus the short-term relief that Gaskins felt after the

murders and the need to repeat the act of murder. Former death-row inmate Wilbert Rideau writes that ‘Man’s greatest pain, whether in life or in prison, is the sense of personal insignificance, of being helpless and of no real value as a person, an individual—a man’ (cited in Gilligan 2000: 181). And here is perhaps the fallacy in the consideration of the De Quinceyan ‘art’ of murder: engrossing creativity—art—enables the artist to become unaware of himself, whereas repetitive violence entails the hedonistic adsorption of self-remembering, of replaying the need to dominate and maim or kill over and over until the mere recollection is not enough, and the excitement of the kill must be repeated..

And this brings us back to Colin Wilson’s fallacy of insignificance and the need to help people to reassert a sense of self. A culture that simultaneously raises the consuming individual to the level of deity while condemning certain outsiders as incompatible with the values of ‘civilisation’ is bound to present opportunities, in the form of permission-giving narratives, to certain individuals to enable themselves to undertake projects of self-empowerment, utilising violence as the means to overwrite their sense of insignificant non-being. But such is the dominance of individualism, such is the ability of capitalist consumerism to incorporate ideas of individuality into its own schema and to persuade people that this is ‘the good’, that the alternatives are seldom obvious, and when they are revealed are often repressed or marginalised, as in the case of Dan MacDougald’s prison reforms mentioned above.

## **The Self-Gothicisation of the Violent Man: Some final thoughts**

Gilligan writes, of the violent prisoners that he had spoken to over a period of 35 years, that

Many described committing the most horrific atrocities in order to see if they could feel anything, and were surprised and disappointed to see that even that did not restore a capacity to have feelings and feel alive. Once in prison, they would mutilate themselves as viciously as they mutilated their victims, which means very viciously indeed, not because they felt guilty for their crimes and wanted to punish themselves, but because they found the feeling of deadness and numbness more intolerable than anything, even pain, and they wanted to see if they could make themselves feel anything. And then they would be surprised to find that they could commit even the most terrible self-mutilations—tearing out their toenails, blinding themselves, swallowing razor blades, inserting screws into their urethra—without experiencing physical pain at the time. They would cut themselves because only when they saw blood could they be reassured that they were still alive. Many referred to themselves by one of the many synonyms for the living dead--zombie, vampire, robot.<sup>14</sup>

A process of self-narrativisation is evident here, and zombies, vampires, and so forth, provide the closest culturally recognisable analogy by which these people can explain their own experiences. This is not to say that they have taken examples from culture and modelled themselves upon particular figures; it rather suggests that these fictional entities embody their particular experience of the ‘death of self’ more adequately than any other discourses that come to hand. The need to feel alive, the shame inherent in not feeling fully human, is the ‘bothersomeness’ of Donald Gaskins which is only briefly assuaged by Gaskins’s episodes of rape and killing.

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<sup>14</sup> [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2267/is\\_4\\_70/ai\\_112943739/pg\\_2/?tag=content:coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2267/is_4_70/ai_112943739/pg_2/?tag=content:coll)

Accessed 26<sup>th</sup> June 2009.

The fear of the death-of-self enabled Carl Panzram to undergo the prolonged and brutal physical punishments by others, both in and out of prison. The same feeling of inner emptiness explains Ian Brady's remark that 'I felt old at twenty-six. Everything was ashes. I felt there was nothing of interest—nothing to hook myself onto. I had experienced everything' (Brady 2000: 12). The phrase 'nothing to hook myself onto' effectively encapsulates the problem of serial killing, and illuminates the fascination that is accorded them. To hook onto something, to be interested in something, takes away attention from one's feeling of self, and concomitantly, the sense of one being at the mercy of the discriminating gaze of others. The lack of self-esteem that is evidenced by serial killers is a product of a sense of inwardness born of frustration, of being disbarred from creative and self-creative outlets. As Gallagher and Zahavi write,

our self-making stories are not made up from scratch; they pattern themselves on conventional genres. When talking about myself, my selfhood becomes part of the public domain, and its shape is guided by cultural models of what self and selfhood should and shouldn't be. (2008: 201)

A perception of a dulling of emotions, a 'death of self,' and the attendant sense of personal shame which this entails—as evidenced by the prisoners regarding themselves as zombies, vampires or robots, descriptions which serve to distance their lack of feeling from their idea of a baseline of normal humanity—is an idea drawn from cultural ideas of selves as being identical to desires, as envisioned with such statements as 'you are what you eat' or ideas of personal identity being tied up with jobs—'I am a mechanic or doctor or gardener'; careers, status; ideas which are, in turn, more contemporarily connected to the notion of the individual-as-consumer. And these jobs, careers, social statuses are but means, in turn, of obtaining physical

objects: houses, cars, iPods, books. Thus the idea of the social, visible self is conflated with the idea of the self as an object as ideas of the valid self are constructed at the level of desire satisfaction vis-à-vis physical objects. If my desires are directed at the level of the object, and I am my desires, then I must in some way be an object; this seems to be the meaning behind Gilligan's interviewees' expressions of non-being. When the ability to *feel* is diminished then the most apparent way to rationalise this is through an attempted process of reconnection at the level of the object, the non human, of shocking the deadening self back into being. The lack of feeling is evidenced by the doubling of attempts to feel by some serial killers, at the level of sexual assault and at the level of torturing and killing others; the level of stimulation attempted show the extent at which the feeling of the death of the self is experienced. Cultural narratives of individuality are so closely tied with tastes, with likes and dislikes, and with social roles, that an individual who feels that they are not successfully competing may become ridden with shame, the dissonance of which can, briefly, be overridden by violence. Popular representations of serial killers as (anti-)heroic figures too often celebrate them, when in truth they are pathetic figures trying desperately to hide their own shame from the environment in which they exist by adopting the often aggressive tropes of social success. There is nothing forcing anyone into accepting the narratives which saturate their environments, but we need to be aware, as a society, of their insidious presence *as* narratives, and not as inevitable truths. And so too with narratives of the self: as Gallagher and Zahavi write, '[i]n effect one might consider the extended narrative self as simply a fiction, albeit a useful one because it lends a practical sense of continuity to life, but a fiction nonetheless' (2008: 202).

Arthur Miller wrote: ‘I think the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of his own personal dignity’ (quoted in Gilligan 2000: 103). I would only add to this that the tragic feeling is evoked in its most powerful sense in the presence of a character who is willing to lay down the lives of *others* to secure his own personal dignity. If we are to see ourselves reflected in the narratives of serial killers, then we should perhaps try to reassess how we ourselves are constructed by the consensually held premises of cultural narratives.

In concluding, I wish to quote Ramsey Campbell. Here he presents an illustration of the way in which on-going cultural narratives may continue unquestioned, and how representations may unnoticeably degenerate into a narrative of continuity:

A horror writer I otherwise admire argued recently that ‘it has been a time-honoured tradition in literature and film that you have to have a weak or helpless heroine’—implying, I assume, that we should go on doing so. Well, tradition is a pretty poor excuse for perpetrating stereotypes... time-honoured it may be, but that certainly doesn’t make it honourable. In fact, these days, so many horror stories (and especially films) gloat over the suffering of women that it seems clear the authors are getting their own back, consciously or not, on aspects of real life that they can’t cope with. Of course, that isn’t new in horror fiction, nor is using horror fiction to define as evil or diabolical whatever threatens the writer or the writer’s lifestyle. But at the very least, one should be aware, as soon as possible, that this is what one is doing, so as to be able to move on. I have my suspicions, too, about the argument that defines what is normal by showing us what isn’t. I think it’s time for more in the field to acknowledge that, when we came face to face with the monsters, we may find ourselves looking not at a mask, but at a mirror. (cited in Castle [ed.] 2007: 25)

The monstrous serial killer in the mirror is a reflection of the social pressures and self-creating narratives to which we all respond, and all evoke. As Daniel Dennett writes, ‘Our tales are spun, but for the most part we don’t spin them, they spin us’ (1991: 418). And this type of tale spinning is not creative, not artistic, but part of the passive acceptance of our place in the world as being fixed, incapable of expression. Jerome Bruner writes in *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* that

[n]arrative requires buffers that guard the hearer or reader against the terrors of unlimited possibility—buffers like Perseus’s mirroring shield that keeps him being turned to stone should he look at Medusa directly...literature’s tropes are Perseus’s mirroring shield: they save us from the full terror of the possible. (2002: 52)

Dismissing the justificatory claims, the self-authorising narratives, of serial killers such as Panzram, Brady or Gaskins is, at the very least, to dismiss the tropes of their representation of self, and in doing so we run the risk of refusing to identify in ourselves, or in those around us, the thematic gestures of people who, fearing to see an empty room when they stare into the mirror, may prefer to don killing masks or recreate themselves as murderous monsters instead.

## Conclusion.

In an article in *The St Petersburg Times* of July 13<sup>th</sup> 1993, criminologist and sociologist Jack Levin recounts his experiences of the previous decade researching serial killers and mass murderers. He writes:

During this entire period, my ideas about murder were generally well received. In fact, many people apparently found them fascinating: so fascinating that the book I co-authored a few years ago, *Mass Murder: America's Growing Menace*, sold more than 50, 000 copies and got me on national television talk shows from *Geraldo* to *Oprah*, from *48 Hours* to *Unsolved Mysteries* [...] In all candor, I began to feel like a celebrity. (Levin and Fox 2001: 55)

Things began to change for Levin, however, when he began to notice a rise in the number of hate crimes in America, motivated by the victims' religion, race, sexuality and/or national origin. In his lectures to students he pointed out that only relatively few of these crimes were committed by organised groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan; actually the vast majority of such crimes were committed by otherwise normal members of the community, and neither were these hate crimes limited to verbal abuse. African-Americans were the most commonly victimised group, while gay men were the most likely to be the victims of severe physical attacks.

Levin noticed that the tide of opinion had turned against him:

All of a sudden, I was no longer regarded as fascinating. On the contrary, people seemed uncomfortable, upset, even angered by what I had to say. I got the strong feeling that I was perceived as a personal threat, as someone who stirs up trouble and delves into matters best left unsaid. (Levin and Fox 2001: 56)

The reason for the change of the reaction of his audiences was that he had shifted his focus from serial killers towards hate crime; ‘I had turned away from *them* and toward *us*. Serial murder is so extraordinary that, for the average American, it might as well be fiction’ (Levin and Fox 2001: 56).

The distance between serial killing and the average member of society, of any country, is often widened because of the ways in which the phenomenon of the serial killer is represented. De Quincey, as I note in Chapter 1, through his conceit of the murderer/artist, created a linkage, a memplex, between the higher values and aspirations of humanity, considered in terms of fine art, and its universally-acknowledged ultimate taboo—murder. Yet by his consideration of murder as fine art, De Quincey’s murder-art thesis proceeds in distinguishing fine art from another, more quotidian variety:

The idea of the artist-genius is bound up with the emergence of the category of ‘fine art’ as an activity quite distinct from everyday life (in previous ages, ‘art’ had not been clearly differentiated from humble, workaday ‘craft’). The new emphasis on the creative genius, a solitary figure free from all rules, can be understood as a kind of reaction to the loss of any precise social function for art and the resulting marginalisation of artists (Barker et al 1999: 9).

Fine art then, breaks from the everyday, mundane expressions of the more utilitarian forms of art, which are defined by usage; fine art is determined by its aesthetic function. As such, fine art exists for its own sake, in the manner of art for art's sake. In the context of serial murder, this resonates with the concept of apparently motiveless murder, which has no immediately obvious motive. The common denominator of the artist and the murderer is that their actions both issue from their own minds, and are, therefore, highly individualistic reactionary acts. However, in representing the serial killer in terms of art, we are confronted with the proposition of murder as a creative act, and this in itself serves to reduce any dissonance that may arise in the idea of murder. If, as Joel Black suggests, 'Violent acts compel an aesthetic response in the beholder of awe, admiration, or bafflement, then it is logical to assume that this action—even if it is murder—must have been the work of an artist' (Black 1991: 39). Notably, in *Red Dragon*, Francis Dolarhyde tells the captive journalist, Freddie Lounds, that 'Fear is not what you owe Me, Lounds, you and the other pismires. *You owe Me Awe*' (Harris 1981: 160, emphasis in original). And of course, Dolarhyde is, in essence trying to become William Blake's painting, *The Great Red Dragon and the Woman Clothed with the Sun*. Dolarhyde's transformation is self-validated on account of its aesthetic nature.

Dolarhyde's rejection by his mother is an aesthetic judgment on her behalf; he is, like Frankenstein's Creature, an aesthetic failure. And both seek solace in different artistic representations of the same figure, Satan. The Miltonic Satan serves the Creature as a figure of identification, while Blake's Satan forms a template of empowerment for Dolarhyde, who through bodybuilding and tattooing, attempts to assimilate the Dragon, to ignite a sense of self. Both killers, lacking a

suitable educational background, are informed and created by art, yet both alight upon the same figure of Satan.

The type of narrative to which people are drawn is likely to be influenced by the culture in which they live. A pessimistic culture, which dwells upon negative portrayals of society and the individual members of that society, will tend to produce misanthropic or life-devaluating narratives. Camus's Absurd man is an example of such a view and he creates for himself, without realising that he is doing so, a world drained of significance. In so doing he becomes, in his own eyes, insignificant and disempowered himself. Ultimately, as Gallagher and Zahavi say, our sense of who we are 'depends upon the story that we (and others) tell about ourselves' (2008: 201). As the criminologist David Canter writes:

It seems very likely that violent offenders' narratives are distorted from their earliest years in a number of ways. They may simply not have models of empathy from which to learn because the people around them never illustrate the relevant processes. Or they may be told conflicting things about themselves; a mother who dotes on them and for whom they can do no wrong and a father who demeans them. But there are many other ways in which the growing boy can be unsure about his identity and unclear as to which of the available life stories is appropriate for him. He will turn to the possibilities offered by the narratives around him which often include violence, aggression and the exploitation of others. (Canter 1994: 243-4)

If someone has a self image which is unclear or divided, one way to revivify or clarify that sense of self is by recourse to fantasy. In this way it is possible to imagine oneself in a more focussed way, to create a clearer image of oneself in the mirror, as it were. However, the key factor here is the role of the imagination, and in the idea of self creation.

Denis Nilsen wrote of the murders he had committed: 'I did it all for me. Purely selfishly...I worshipped the art and the act of death, over and over. It's as simple as that' (cited in Masters 1995: 277). Here Nilsen establishes connections between art, death and religion. As the 'maker' of death, he is 'honouring himself', and, he claims, enjoys 'the extremity of death. If I did it to myself I could only experience it once. If I did it to others, I could experience death over and over again' (Masters 1995: 277). Nilsen also wrote a short story called 'The Monochrome Man', in which he tells of 'the ineffectiveness of non-personality' and of the 'uses which fantasy can make on an unresisting model of life' (Masters 1995: 276). The colourless Camusian experience of the passive unresisting self to whom things just happen, can be imaginatively remodelled, transformed into something of beauty.

By focussing on his deeds in artistic terms, Nilsen is seeking to create a distance between his own created self as artistic director, and the dissonance-inducing moral world. The idea of artistic imagination itself is utilised by him as a narrative of self validation, to keep his sense of clarity in which he has invested so much, and for whose development so many others had lost their lives. As such, the conceit of the art/murder complex serves to distance the murderer from his acts and to claim a higher aesthetic value which encompasses life and death and all things. The aesthetic processing of the serial killer maintains distance, between the consumers of serial killer narratives and the acts of serial killers by evoking an idealised presence rather than alerting us to the facticity of a phenomenon which is, on the contrary, uncomfortable and threatening.

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