The Theory and Interpretation of Narrative Series
BLEEDSSCRIPTS
WRITING THE VIOLENT SUBJECT

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This book is dedicated to my grandmother, Ethel Starominski, who has outlived the twentieth century and survived five wars, two revolutions, state terror, and genocide.
We all look to fathom the mind of a mass-murderer and to understand what makes him commit such heinous crimes.

Yet which of us can honestly say that in his Hobbesian heart of hearts, he does not already have the answer?

– PHILIP KERR, A Philosophical Investigation
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A world at war. . . . I wish I could make you see the whole thing, the amazing scale of it. The bombs falling. . . . Parades and music, crowds cheering, whole cities falling down. . . . It was sublime.
- Carol O'Connell, Shell Game

Introduction:
Stories to Die For

I. SUBLIME SUBJECTS

Contemporary culture is permeated by violence, not only visually but narratively as well. So many popular fictions revolve around the physical act of inflicting damage on the human body. The same is true of narratives of history, which increasingly abandon the rhetoric of power, statehood, or global trends to focus on violence. Genocide becomes a key concept of political discourse. As Michael Ignatieff points out in his discussion of ethnic wars, we “have lost our narrative” and what is left is the “simple” story of violence (98).

But the story of violence is far from simple. The best proof of its complexity is the fact that we find it so difficult to describe its protagonist. The violent subject, as a murderer, a mercenary, a terrorist, a soldier, or a martyr, has become one of the main foci of postmodern culture’s fears and desires. And yet, the vocabulary of cultural studies offers little in the way of understanding the trajectory of his—or occasionally her—self-narrative. There are many questions. How do they do it? Why do they kill? How does it feel, being a murderer? But there are few answers.

A new strategy of reading confidently promises to illuminate violence’s heart of darkness. Sociobiology reads the body of the violent criminal as a palimpsest of heredity and environment. Poring over brain scans and DNA charts, it looks for the textual flaws in the composition of the subject. But
unwittingly it replicates the failed fin de siècle project of Lombroso's criminal anthropology. Better technological tools do not guarantee better results.

The main insight of contemporary cultural theory is precisely that: the subjectivity located outside the individual, outside a specific body, with its irreducibly individual entanglement of genes and memories. Language, discourse, and narrative are the sites in which the self is—precariously—woven together out of the disparate strands of other people's stories. And it is in the field of narrativity that the enigma of the violent subject may be approached as a cultural phenomenon and not a supposedly biological deviation.

The human subject is constructed by a life story. Such stories project different modalities of the violent self. These modalities, these genres of subjectivity, hold the key to the way violators are perceived by others and by themselves. The generic prototypes of the murderer's life-story are to be found in horror fiction and film, in detective stories, in thrillers, in “true crime” apocalyptic fantasies, and all the other narrative genres dealing with violence. Literary murderers are not pale reflections of some essential violent psyche. On the contrary, actual murderers are stories of violence made flesh.

This is not to lay the blame for war and crime at the doorstep of the media. My goal is not to castigate narrative representation for supposedly inciting violence. Rather, it is to look at the diverse ways in which narrative representation makes us into subjects capable both of violence and of resistance to it. Just as being a man or a woman is the end result of the process of social construction, so is being a killer. Like gender identity, a violent identity is a narrative of the self that has to conform to certain cultural, political, and generic expectations.

Bloodscripts explores incorporation of violence in narratives of identity. My focus is on genres of subjectivity rather than on more conventional generic divisions of the narrative field. In the chapters that follow I discuss genres of violence, both in their contemporary incarnations and with reference to their nineteenth-century roots, as illustrative of the specific violent subjects that are the focus of this study. In other words, my aim is neither to provide a complete guidebook to the culture of violence—a task daunted by the sheer size of the field—nor to write a history of the narrative representation of murder. Rather, it is to analyze how violence interacts with narrative to generate identity.

Several limiting definitions are in order. By violence I mean physical violence, murder or serious bodily harm inflicted in a face-to-face interaction. This, of course, excludes much of modern warfare, but recent events have shown that Baudrillard's “virtual war” has not supplanted old-fashioned slaughter. Nor, I believe, can it. As the stories that I will discuss show, it is precisely the personal, even intimate, contact between the victim and the
perpetrator that shapes the aesthetic, narrative, and ultimately ideological impact of violence.

There are two sides to each violent interaction: the dimension of instrumentality and the dimension of excess. The latter is clear in so-called motiveless violence, such as the private torture and serial killing that constitute the subject of the first two chapters in the book. But instrumental violence seems far more pervasive: soldiers, terrorists, professional criminals, all would claim that their violence is a means to an end, whether collective or personal. However, I will argue that instrumentality does not exclude violent excess. Whatever its pragmatic purpose, experience of violence involves ecstasy or intoxication, sometimes paradoxically coupled with revulsion and horror, in which doing harm to another’s body becomes an end in itself. I call this non-instrumental aspect of violence “the violent sublime.” The book analyzes how narratives of identity acknowledge the violent sublime and how they represent its impact upon the coherence of the self.

By “narratives of identity” I do not mean memoirs or autobiographies. My focus is on the narrative molds of selfhood provided by culture and available to the subject in order to make sense of his or her experiences. Identities are stories. This is an argument familiar both from cultural studies and from psychology. Narratologists claim that, as Mark Currie puts it in Postmodern Narrative Theory, “the only way to explain who we are, is to tell our own story . . . we learn how to self-narrate from the outside, from other stories” (17). Psychologists, following the lead of Donald Spence in Narrative Truth and Historical Truth, emphasize the significance of narrative coherence for mental health. A subject incapable of telling his or her story is a flawed, incomplete, or pathological subject.

The narrative approach to subjectivity is quite common in the practical discipline of criminology, including the much touted “profiling.” Criminologist David Canter frames his discussion of serial murderers in the general claim that “human life unfolds through a series of episodes” (221) and that subjectivity is constituted through a process of perpetual internal storytelling. “The stories we tell each other and ourselves about ourselves do have great power in giving shape and meaning to our lives. It is the narrative form of these accounts, not their elegance or veracity, that is crucial to understand” (Canter 227).

Canter profiles serial killers through formal analysis of their self-narratives. Similarly, Richard Rhodes argues in his recent book Why They Kill, based on the theories of criminologist Lonnie Athens, that subjectivity is a narrative construct, elaborated and transformed over time: “Selves are not given. They are constructed. They are built, modified, altered, refurbished, even replaced over time” (Rhodes 55). Even the most violent criminal possesses what Athens
called the “beautiful narrative” of the self (Rhodes 62). This “beautiful narrative” is created through the process of inner conversation with the “phantom community,” which consists of the internalized significant others in the person’s life. The crux of violent behavior is that the phantom community of perpetrators encourages and supports their violence, offering “different, violent meanings to their social experiences” (Rhodes 84). In other words, if the self is a story told to an internalized audience, the violent subject adapts to his interlocutors’ expectations by casting himself in the role of the “bad guy.” Within the subject’s phantom community, cultural narratives of selfhood become internalized as scripts of behavior.

Athens’s choice of the term “beautiful narrative” suggests coherence, measure, and harmony. But in fact, his and Canter’s analyses of specific murderers’ stories indicate that this is not the case. Rather, the narratives both of them adduce are marked by a struggle between the protagonist’s search for a perfect form and the ineluctable disturbance created in this form by the act of violence. Another aesthetic term seems to suggest itself for the narratives of the violent self: sublime. Juxtaposed to the beautiful in the aesthetic theories of Kant, Burke, Lyotard, and others, the sublime is a modality of representing the unrepresentable. The beautiful is an aesthetic effect created by harmony, measure, and proportion. The sublime, on the contrary, is that which exceeds representation, that “which can’t be shown, or presented” (Lyotard 1991, 89). It is my contention that the self-narratives or violent subjects are not beautiful but rather sublime, shattered and (imperfectly) reconfigured by the impact of an experience, for which ordinary means of representation are inadequate. Violent subject-stories constitute a very special subset of narratives: narratives structured by their own impossibility.

The Trope of Murder

In Tony Parker’s book The Violence of Our Lives: Interviews with American Murderers, murderers tell the stories of their lives. Their narratives are shaped by instantly recognizable generic patterns—the melodrama of victimization, the boastful memoir of the unrepentant social enemy, the romance of erotic obsession. But there is a snag every time the killer struggles to articulate the pivotal event in his or her life, the murder itself. The typical responses: “I know what I did was wrong, and I don’t know why I did it” (117; the husband who shot his wife); “I’ve lost count of how many psychiatrists have interviewed me before the trial and time and time again after it for the first few years. But when they did, it always came down to the same question: ‘Why did you do it?’ That was always the bottom line. My answer to it too was always the same; ‘I don’t know why I did it, I thought you were supposed
to tell me.’ I don’t have any insight into it, and I don’t have much remorse or regret for it either’ (171; the man who raped and killed an old woman during an aimless break-in). ‘The price I’d paid for being stopped for a minor traffic violation was the thing no one could understand, and least of all me’ (197; the successful young lawyer who ran over the cop who stopped him for speeding).

Criminals’ confessions illustrate one way in which an act of violence disturbs a narrative of subjectivity: by undermining causality. Many murderers cannot answer the most basic question we ask ourselves about our own and other people’s actions, “Why?” It is also the first question the public asks when a particularly horrific crime is committed. Even when the murderer is insane, our hunger for causal explanation is not assuaged; we still want to know the etiology of his murderous psychosis. But none of Parker’s subjects is diagnosed as mentally ill; they are articulate and alert. They are also aware of their own narrative deficiency. One of them, Jeff Hessler, a Vietnam veteran and a drug dealer, finds a perfect model for his life story in e. e. cummings’s gnomic poem “LISN bud LISN.” When asked to explain, he replies: “I guess it’s the incoherence of it that sums me up” (186).

This “incoherence” is endemic to the first-person narratives of violent criminals. The notorious Boston Strangler, describing the ghastly details of his murders to the police detectives (who had to be convinced that this smarmy, apologetic housepainter killed thirteen women), can answer any question except the question “why?” “There was no need for it to happen... There was no reason for being there, period. There was no reason for her to die. Nothing was taken away from her, no money, no nothing... How can I explain it to you?” (Frank 331).

He cannot explain it either to his investigators, or to himself. Later on he even pleads with the police to find the reason for him: “Why? Why? Why does it have to be me?... when my children grow older, I want them to get an understanding of me... There’s got to be a reason. I don’t think you’re born like this. Why did I start? Why did I stop?” (Frank 386).

We may feel skeptical about anything a mass murderer says; perhaps all these cries of confusion are self-serving lies. But the pattern is too ubiquitous to be easily dismissed. Even when nothing tangible, such as an insanity plea, can be gotten out of it, criminals stubbornly insist on the contingency of their crime. And if a rational reason is advanced, it often seems to be insufficient even to the perpetrator himself.

A break in causality characterizes criminal subjects. But another kind of incoherence mars narratives of ideological killers. They find no difficulty in explaining the “why” of their actions. But they stumble, stutter, and often fall silent when it comes to the “how.”
Rudolf Hoess, the commandant of Auschwitz, wrote his autobiography while awaiting execution in a Polish prison. It has been pointed out that Hoess is often less than truthful, but the question that interests me is not his veracity but his narrative competence. As he states at the beginning, his aim is “to reconstruct from memory a true account of all the important events and occurrences in my life and of the psychological heights and depths through which I have passed” (Hoess 20). Such an account adheres to what Hoess sees as the narrative truth of his life rather than to the historical truth.

The main narrative model that Hoess adopts is the soldier’s story, endlessly reproduced in the writings of the Freikorps, to which Hoess belonged in his youth. Such writings typically exhibit the pattern of initial loneliness, trial by fire, male bonding, and martyrdom in the name of an Idea, all of which Hoess faithfully applies to himself, finding in his “service” in Auschwitz the highest expression of the soldierly virtues: fidelity, purity, dedication. But when he finally gets down to describing the actual running of the camp, something cracks. The writing becomes disjointed and the narrative flow is dammed, eddying into repetitions, evasions, inconsistencies.

It is not that Hoess tries to minimize the magnitude of his crime: he provides the exact figures, speaks about the “processing capacity” of the gas chambers, and seems to glory in the unimaginable scale of the slaughter, even to the point of exaggerating the number of his victims. But he cannot tell how he felt when looking at the piles of corpses, despite his professed intention to focus on his own psychological states. Hoess knows exactly why he killed more than a million people. Nazi ideology provides a convincing explanation, to which he steadfastly adheres even after the collapse of the Reich. He does indeed believe, up to his execution day, that Jews are vermin and not really human beings. Coupled with his enormous emotional investment in the image of himself as a loyal soldier, the ideology holds together his depleted self.

He knows what and why, but he cannot tell how: “During this first experience of gassing people I did not fully realize what was happening, perhaps because I was too impressed by the whole procedure” (137). This grotesque combination of bureaucratese and emotional somnambulism characterizes the autobiography as a whole, making it one of the most chilling texts ever written. There is a void at the core of the Nazi killer’s subjectivity, generating a narrative in perpetual flight from its own horror.

Jorge Luis Borges’s short parable “Deutsches Requiem” draws upon such narratives to make clear their underlying pattern: justified and explained—or explained away—violence still creates a gap in the subject’s self-perception. The story is the first-person apologia of an unrepentant torturer and murderer. Otto Dietrich zur Linde, opening his statement of self-justification with a barrage of illustrious names of Western culture, represents the madness of
civilization that produces its own nemesis in the Nazi "faith of the sword." But even more strikingly, he represents a new kind of killer, whose elaborately defended violence seems at the opposite pole to the random brutality of tough-luck criminals. And yet, his self-narrative, like theirs, is marked by "incoherence," only of a different kind. If one of Parker's criminals, despairing of self-explanation, talks of "a hole . . . where there used to be a human mind" (Parker 186), the urbane and articulate Linde has a hole where there used to be a human heart.

Linde claims to have no natural predilection for violence. This is a constant feature of Nazi self-narratives: Eichmann indignantly denied he ever took any pleasure in killing, and Höss's only spark of emotion comes when he describes his reaction to the flogging of a prisoner in Dachau. He claims to have gone "hot and cold all over" and yet being "compelled" to watch this unbearable spectacle. For both Höss and Linde, murder is a self-sacrifice that they bring to the altar of their "faith." Both pride themselves on their "toughening" that comes at the cost of psychological anguish. They are not naturally violent men. They are men who use violence to remake themselves in the image of their ideal. According to Jean Amery, an Auschwitz survivor, men like Linde "were not sadists in the narrow sexual-pathological sense. In general, I don't believe that I encountered a single genuine sadist of this sort during my two years of imprisonment in Gestapo and in concentration camps" (Amery 34). They were, according to him, "philosophical" sadists, torturing and killing out of ideological conviction.

Both Linde and Höss are such "philosophical" sadists. For Linde, the violence of Nazism is "an act of morality, a purging of corrupted humanity, to dress him anew" (Borges 144). Dreaming of a purifying apocalypse, Linde sees himself as a New Man in a world about to be born: "this era, comparable to the initial epochs of Islam and Christianity, demanded a new kind of man" (Borges 143). Linde is Höss's narrative truth that can never be matched by the messy historical truth of any actual human being. Linde's murderous self-righteousness is Höss's unattainable ideal. But at the same time the ruptures in Höss's autobiography are magnified by a gaping hole in Linde's story.

Linde sets out to torture and kill the Jewish poet David Jerusalem, whose work he tremendously admires. Jerusalem's ordeal in Linde's "laboratory" is supposed to put a seal on the killer's transformation into a Nazi Übermensch: "if I destroyed him, it was to destroy my compassion. In my eyes he was not a man, not even a Jew; he had been transformed into a detested zone of my soul" (Borges 145). But just as he is about to describe what he has done to the poet, there is a line of dots. A note, purportedly by the story's fictional "editor," enigmatically states: "It has been necessary to omit a few lines here" (ibid).
Is Linde's description unreadable? Or is it, perhaps, unwritable? Any reader familiar with what came to light during the Nuremberg Trials is capable of filling the gap with words: torture, starvation, brutality. But these are only words. Linde's narrative, like Höess's, is interrupted not by squeamishness or shame but by its own impossibility. It stops at the point in which language fails to convey the experience of extreme violence. The shocking row of dots in the text is a typographical equivalent of the trope that marks—or mars—all self-narratives of killers. This trope is ellipsis.

Ellipsis is a narrative technique defined by Gerard Genette as an omission from the discourse of some time elapsing in the story. Genette distinguishes between story, which is the sequence of the narrative events in a chronological order abstracted from the text, and discourse, which is the events as actually represented. An ellipsis occurs when there is an event that we know must have happened, since we can infer it from the overall shape of the story, but which is omitted from representation.

As Fredric Jameson convincingly argued in *The Political Unconscious*, formal narrative conventions are meaningful in themselves. The narrative form, apart (and sometimes in opposition to) the ostensible content, is a "frozen" ideology, the result of "sedimentation" that inscribes relations of power and systems of belief through structural devices and techniques. The ellipses that mar killers' individual stories indicate something general about the relation of violence and narrativity: an aspect of violence that cannot be incorporated into discourse. Necessary, even pivotal, to the story, the violence remains outside discourse, indicated but not shown; spoken about but not described; hinted at but not explicitly named. And this aspect has a disturbing impact on the coherence of the narrative and, consequently, on the coherence of the self created through this narrative.

This narrative disturbance is expressed differently in different violent subjects. For the criminals who wonder why they killed, the impact of violence amounts to an annihilation of personality. A subject with no inner logic is a subject in ruins. The Nazis, on the other hand, preserve the continuity of the self but at the price of its richness and depth. The subjectivity that emerges from their narratives is a hollowed-out ideological construct, hiding the secret that it cannot articulate. This ideological self appears as a defense against the corrosion of violence, the defense that is both necessary and inherently unstable. And when it crumbles, the consequences can be similar to the narrative collapse experienced by the criminal. This is illustrated by a remarkable episode in Martin Gilbert's *Nuremberg Diary*. When, in the course of the trial, the prosecution showed a film taken by the American soldiers in the newly liberated death camps, the reaction of the accused was quite unexpected. Gilbert was astounded to observe the elite of the Third Reich sweat, tremble,
grow pale, and even cry. Later Ribbentrop tearfully told him: “Hitler couldn’t even have looked at such a film himself” (Gilbert 49). Of course, next morning they staunchly denied responsibility for anything, but it seems that for a moment they were confronted with a sight for which the lingua tertii imperii provided no words.

For both criminals and ideological killers violence is formative of identity. Jeff Hessler’s defining himself as a “bad and violent and dangerous man” (Parker 174) and Rudolf Hoess’s defining himself as a soldier of the Fuhrer claim genres of violence as their genres of subjectivity. But these genres are structured around a gap that language can gesture at but cannot suture.

For the criminals, this gap all but devours identity (“the incoherence of it sums me up”); for the Nazis, it is masked—but not obliterated—by a new kind of subjectivity, the ideological self, that is supposed to incorporate violence in its system of values. But whatever form the ellipsis of murder takes, it indicates that physical violence cannot be part of a “beautiful narrative” of the self. The narrative it produces is indelibly marked by the impact of the victim’s violated body. For this is ultimately what the two kinds of killers have in common. Whether outcasts or pillars of their communities, whether repentant or smug, whether behind bars or in positions of power, murderers share one thing: the physical relation with another human being that results in his or her pain, suffering, and death.

Books and Bodies

Setting side by side criminological texts and cultural studies of violence, it is difficult to shake off the feeling that they relate to entirely different activities. Following Derrida’s famous reference to the “violence of the letter,” cultural scholars insist that violence is inherent in the very nature of discourse. In their Introduction to the appositely named collection The Violence of Representation, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse summarize this view: “writing is not so much about violence as a form of violence in its own right” (2).

Criminologists, on the other hand, are well aware that real violence is very much a matter of bodies coming into close and intimate contact with other bodies. Coroners, forensic scientists, police, and FBI investigators, feeding the public’s insatiable appetite for the grisly details of their work, vie with each other in providing testimony to the physicality of violation. William R. Maples, a forensic anthropologist, opens his book with a precise catalog of the “everyday things I see on the job: crushed and perforated skulls, lopped-off limbs and severed heads, roasted and dissolving corpses, hanks of human hair and heaps of white bones” (1–2).
As opposed to cultural scholars, criminologists see language not as a tool of violence but as a shield against it. Maples explains how his daily encounter with horror has not managed to inflict any appreciable psychological damage. It is precisely the “letter”—science, knowledge, and ratiocination—that allows him to endure the sight, smell, and touch of the violated body. He describes an autopsy as “reach[ing] with both hands into the rotting remnants of some dreadful crime, rummag[ing] through the bones and grasp[ing] the pure gleaming nugget of truth that lies at the centre of it all” (2–3). Ronald Markman, a forensic psychologist, also claims that his function is to defuse the horror of violence by providing a rational and coherent explanation of the killer’s motivations: “Of course, all my years of training and experience had prepared me to answer such questions, to evaluate and describe the event [of violence] in more elaborate terms, in words that sounded scientific—words that made it sound predictable and even part of some kind of order” (13). Dis- course, language, reason are a protection against the impact of the violated body. This protection may be inadequate but it is necessary. Even if “the pure gleaming nugget of truth” turns out to be simply another sliver of bone, even if the testing of the man who stabbed his newborn son generates so much psychobabble, it is still necessary to try to make sense of the senseless materiality of violence.

In adjudicating a clash between two disciplines, it is worthwhile to ask whether they really study the same object. And it seems that criminologists and cultural scholars are, in fact, looking at different aspects of violence. The concept of the “violence of the letter” centers on the “violent meanings” that perpetrators attach to their acts. The “everyday things” of the forensic anatomist, on the other hand, are the material traces of the act itself. Where the cultural scholar reads the text of violence, the criminologist looks at its spectacle.

Text and spectacle affect us in different ways. In the spectacle of violence its physicality comes to the fore: we are seeing bodies like our own being cut open, pulled apart, bleeding, suffering, in pain. The spectacle of violence reminds us of our own mortality; reminds on a basic, visceral level that circumvents all the justifications and explanations of discourse. The body appears in the lacunae of language.

Aristotle’s classical definition of tragedy employs three terms: reversal (peripeteia), recognition (anagnorisis), and pathos. The last one is often translated as “suffering,” but it actually means the spectacle of violence: “the destructive or painful action, such as death on the stage, bodily agony, wounds and the like” (25). Reversal and recognition are moral and psychological transformations, while pathos is a physical action, which is not only perpetrated on the body of a character but actively engages the bodies of the
audience. In the implicit physicality of catharsis, the purging of excessive emotions, Aristotle recognizes the irreducible corporeality of violence.

Pathos is what people react to when they throw up at the sight of blood. It is arguable that nausea is the true foundation of morality. Despite the clichés concerning “the beast in man,” most animals are much less violent than human beings because almost every species has a built-in biological brake on intraspecies aggression. Anthony Storr in Human Destructiveness argues that if “all human disputes were confined to fistfights, there would not only be fewer deaths but fewer instances of cruelty” (113). He quotes Konrad Lorenz’s On Aggression to the effect that human beings are defective animals whose “inhibitory mechanisms against injuring and killing one’s own kind are poorly developed . . . and easily overcome because man is not armed with dangerous natural weapons like tusks and claws” (ibid). Despite the dangers of sociobiological arguments, this one makes sense, if only because it indeed corresponds to the well-known fact, also pointed out by Storr, that many people abstain from violence simply because they have no stomach for it and that a man who drops incendiary bombs on cities and villages might very well balk if ordered to pour gasoline over a child and ignite it.

In his book On Killing psychologist Dave Grossman claims that most soldiers throughout history were unwilling to kill and found ingenious ways to avoid doing it. While basing his conclusions on the extraordinarily poor firing rates during the Civil War and World War II, explicable only by the silent “conspiracy to miss,” Grossman also adduces psychological and psychiatric evidence to prove the “existence of a powerful, innate human resistance toward killing one’s own species and the psychological mechanisms that have been developed by armies over the centuries to overcome this resistance” (Grossman xxix). In other words, people have to be taught to kill. There is no violent beast chained inside each of us; on the contrary, such distinctly human institutions as language, narrative, and ideology generate violence by weakening the residue of animal inhibitions against attacking members of one’s own species. Insofar as violent meanings are used to overcome the wordless reluctance of the body to be engaged in a close and violent interaction with another body, “the violence of the letter” is indeed responsible for the tide of blood that is the history of civilization.

But Grossman’s thesis begs a simple question. If we are all physiological pacifists, where does the pleasure of violence come from? We know that some people become addicted to killing. Before we brand such people as genetic freaks (as Grossman himself does), we should remember the overwhelming evidence for the psychological “ordinariness” of some of the worst mass murderers in history. If there is no “instinct” of aggression and violence is a by-product of civilization, why is it so persistently coupled with sexuality, which
does rest on the irrefutable bedrock of the body's innate capacity for pleasure?

Grossman seems to undermine his own case when he quotes a comment by a
Vietnam veteran who scorns the academic research on violence because the
scholars are "like a world of virgins studying sex, and they got nothing to go
on but porno movies. And it is just like sex, 'cause the people who really do it
just don't talk about it" (Grossman 2). If the experience of killing were sim-
ply revolting, there would hardly be a need for this titillating silence.

The comparison between violence and sex is both right and wrong. It is
wrong because the act of violence is not physically pleasurable in the same
way in which the act of sex is. Grossman's interlocutor describes the nausea
and shock following the loss of one's "virginity" in violence. Except for some
truly pathological cases, violence is not orgasmic. But if orgasm is seen not as
a physiological reflex but as a state of self-eclipse or self-shattering, sex and
violence do appear to have common features. Leo Bersani's essay "Is the Rect-
tum a Grave?" argues that sex is a "radical disintegration and humiliation of
the self" (217). In sex the body temporarily obscures the mind, taking away
the participants' ability to conceive of their bodies as mere extensions of their
conscious wills. And in this sense violence is "like sex," only more so.

Jean Amery speaks of torture as the total eclipse of language by the body:
"Whoever is overcome by pain through torture experiences his body as never
before. In self-negation his flesh becomes a total reality. . . . [O]nly in torture
does the transformation of the person into flesh become complete. Frail in the
face of violence, yelling out in pain, awaiting no help, capable of no resistance,
the tortured person is only a body and nothing else besides that" (33).

In her important book The Body in Pain, Elaine Scarry analyzes the "inex-
pressibility" of pain, the way in which "in serious pain the claims of the body
utterly nullify the claims of the world" (33). Pain destroys language. And
through this destruction the body in pain emerges as absolutely, uncompro-
misingly real, real beyond the construction of language and discourse. Here is
Amery again on the giant factory of pain that was Auschwitz: "nowhere else
in the world did reality have as much effective power as in the camp, nowhere
else was reality so real" (19).

In the Lacanian notion of the Real, one can recognize the unarguable reality
of the body stripped of its linguistic defenses, the body in pain. Slavoj
Zizek glosses this notion as follows:

The Real is therefore simultaneously both the hard, impenetrable kernel resisting
symbolization and a pure chimerical entity which has in itself no ontological con-
sistency. . . . The Real is the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles, the hard core which remains the same in all possible worlds (symbolic
universes) but at the same time its status is thoroughly precarious; it is something
that persists only as failed, missed, a shadow, and dissolves itself as soon as we try to grasp it in its positive nature. . . . All its effectiveness lies in the distortions it produces in the symbolic universe of the subject: the traumatic event is ultimately just a fantasy-construct filling out a certain void in a symbolic structure. (169)

The Real, in other words, adumbrates the violated body in both of its aspects: as the story and the spectacle, the narrative elaboration and the silence of trauma, the representation and the ellipsis. But if the victim of violence actually experiences the utter reality of pain, the perpetrator vicariously tastes the Real through another person's suffering.  

Can one become addicted to the Real? If the spectacle of the violated flesh does indeed convey what language cannot express, "the radical humiliation and disintegration of the self" in pain, this explains the nausea of the audience and the trauma of the perpetrators. As Georges Bataille points out, rational prohibition of violence would not work unless there were some irrational emotion involved as well: "if some violent negative emotion did not make violence horrible for everyone, reason alone could not define those shifting limits [between legitimate and illegitimate violence] authoritatively enough" (Bataille 56). But this "negative emotion" can flip over into an addictive state of self-transcendence. The visceral impact of violence, which occasionally sends frontline soldiers into combat shock, may also create willing assassins, serial killers, and genocide junkies. All of them crave the self-transcendence of violence, vicariously tasted through the suffering of their victims.

Amery lucidly analyzes the psychology of torturers and killers. He points out that they are not immune to the wordless power of the violated body. Second-hand, they experience the disintegration of the self and the silencing of language in the total reality of pain. But for them, as opposed to the victim, this experience becomes a source of pleasure because they are in control of it:

[T he torturer] wants to nullify this world, and by negating his fellow man, who also in an entirely specific sense is "hell" for him, he wants to realize his own total sovereignty. The fellow man is transformed into flesh, and in this transformation he is already brought to the edge of death; if worst comes to worst, he is driven beyond the border of death into Nothingness. With this the torturer and murderer realizes his own destructive being, without having to lose himself in it entirely, like his martyred victim. He can, after all, cease the torture when it suits him. He has control of the other's scream of pain and death; he is master over flesh and spirit, life and death. (Amery 35)

The violator erects his power on the bedrock of the Real. He transforms the indisputable physicality of violence into the indisputable nature of his own
mastery. He steals the reality of suffering and appropriates it to make himself more Real than any human being has the right to be. He vanquishes the doubts, ambiguities, and evasions of language by positioning himself in the gap opened by violence in discourse. In torture "the vision of suffering [is converted] into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power. The physical pain is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of 'incontestable reality' on that power that has brought it into being" (Scarry 27). Even the victim himself is convinced: "I also have not forgotten that there were moments when I felt a kind of wretched admiration for the agonizing sovereignty they exercised over me. For is not the one who can reduce a person so entirely to a body and a whimpering prey of death a god, or at least, a demigod?" (Amery 36).

In his 1921 essay "Critique of Violence," Walter Benjamin extols "divine" violence, the violence of excess, the irresistible, awesome, purifying sweep of annihilation: "Divine violence, which is the sign and seal, but never the means of sacred dispatch, may be called 'sovereign' violence" (Benjamin 1921, 252). Benjamin's "sovereign" violence is Amery's "agonizing sovereignty." The torturer is divine. Punishing the prisoner or obtaining information is only a pretext for the "radical disintegration of the self," which allows him to touch the bedrock of the Real and to experience the intoxicating rush of absolute power. In the furnace of excess, the murderers are remade as gods.

The true power of a torturer is negligible compared to the power of political movers and shakers, but it is power of a different kind. When in 1984 O'Brien explains to Winston Smith that he can change reality, he is right: by reducing Smith to a pain-racked thing, he makes an irrefutable argument in favor of his own ontologically superior being. Richard Rhodes describes how Vietnam veterans simultaneously mourn atrocities they have committed and betray their nostalgia for the godlike power of killing: "To be like a god is to escape, at least momentarily, human contingency; no wonder berserk, malefic violence feels ecstatic" (Rhodes 308). Contingency is experienced through the shifts and treacheries of language. The material body is solid and real, and the power over the body is the only real power there is.

But this power still has to be narrativized through language if it is to enter the social circulation of meanings. No subject can remain in the wordless ecstatic realm forever. And once violence returns to self-representation, it needs an aesthetic modality that can capture its irreducible ambiguity, both as a story and as a spectacle, both as "violence of the letter" and the violation of the body. In considering, as De Quincey has done, murder as fine art, we find its aesthetic idiom in the language of the sublime.
The Violent Sublime

In his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke states: "the idea of bodily pain, in all the modes and degrees of labour, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of the sublime; and nothing else in this sense can produce it" (79). In his *The Inhuman* (1988), a manifesto of postmodernity, Jean-François Lyotard makes exactly the same connection between the sublime and physical pain and privation: "The aesthetics of the sublime is still more indeterminate: a pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure that comes from pain" (98).

The sublime is one of the most contested terms in cultural theory today, trailing a long and complicated history. Originating in the Hellenistic treatise of Dionysius Longinus, the notion of the sublime became central to eighteenth-century aesthetics. The influential theories of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant developed the philosophy and psychology of the sublime, based on the distinction between the pleasurable and the terrifying modalities of aesthetic experience. Greatly oversimplifying, it is possible to say that the sublime opposes the beautiful in the same way as the awe occasioned by a volcanic eruption opposes the quiet enjoyment of a flowering meadow. The Romantic sublime was often found in the contemplation of mountain vistas or infinite stretches of the starry skies.

From the beginning of its history, the sublime has been linked both to transcendence and to violence. Dionysius talks about the “irresistible strength” with which the sublime strikes the observer (Ashfield and De Bolla 22). Kant, despite his insistence on the “disinterestedness” of aesthetic judgment, describes what he calls “the dynamic sublime,” that is, the sublime of Nature’s power, in terms of “a might,” which is perceived as “an object of fear” (119). And Burke derives the sublime from “the ideas of pain, sickness, and death” (36).

Whether confined to stray metaphors or elaborated into a philosophy, the nexus of transcendence and violence persists in the discourses of the sublime. It is not accidental that the revival of the sublime occurred in the twentieth century, shadowed by wars, revolutions, and genocide. The paradoxes of the sublime are central to Lyotard’s diagnosis of the “postmodern condition” (Lyotard 1984) and to Zizek’s analysis of totalitarian ideologies. According to many cultural critics, the oversaturation of popular culture and the visual media with violence generates an aesthetic universe in which the sublime is the reigning principle. “If any human act evokes the aesthetic experience of the sublime, certainly it is the act of murder,” claims Joel Black (14).

In the response to a sublime experience, two stages are to be distinguished. The first is the sense of the unspeakable and unrepresentable, an interruption...
of language, a suspension of thought. For Kant, the sublime is produced “by the feeling of the momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger” (98). The sublime is a lacuna in the symbolic order: “what [the sublime] leads to is a failure in representation through a massive disturbance as the texts, in trying to present the unpresentable, veer toward collapse” (Mishra 20).

This stage of collapse, however, is succeeded by an “outpouring”—of emotions, words, images. If the sublime is a wound in discourse, it is a wound that immediately stimulates a healing process. Even though language fails to encompass the sublime, it persists in trying. In the reaction to the sublime the mind asserts its power by coming against its own limits: “Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense” (Kant 106).

The sublime is the unrepresentable that clamors for representation; it is that which exceeds language but provokes speech. Lyotard describes the dynamics of pleasurable impotence, whereby the paradoxical aesthetics of the sublime becomes more seductive than the sensible aesthetics of the beautiful:

the faculty of presentation, the imagination, fails to provide a representation corresponding to this idea. This failure of expression gives rise to a pain, a kind of cleavage within the subject between what can be conceived and what can be imagined or presented. But this pain, in turn, engenders a pleasure, in fact a double pleasure: the impotence of the imagination attests a contrario to an imagination striving to figure even that which cannot be figured, and that imagination thus aims to harmonize its object with that of reason—and that furthermore the inadequacy of the images is a negative sign of the immense power of ideas. (98)

Lyotard brings together the two kinds of the sublime that Kant distinguishes from each other: the mathematically and the dynamically sublime. The first relates to “the cognitive power,” the second, to the “power of desire” (Kant 101). The mathematical sublime is evoked by the vastness of the universe and the regularity of natural laws. The dynamic sublime, on the other hand, is produced when we regard Nature as “might” and as “object of fear” (Kant 119). For Burke, the dynamic sublime is a by-product of power: “I know of nothing sublime which is not some modification of power” (Burke 59). Specifically, it is the power to inflict pain: “But pain is always inflicted by a power in some way superior, because we never submit to pain willingly. So that strength, violence, pain and terror, are ideas that rush in upon the mind together” (60).
In Lyotard, the two seemingly incomparable kinds of sublime objects are yoked together: infinity and pain, eternity and power, abstraction and the body. The failure of the imagination in the face of an Idea of infinite magnitude mirrors the imagination’s incapacity to come to grips with the Real of pain. The inability to represent divinity is shadowed by the inability to represent violence—not to indicate, name, describe, or show—but to convey the phenomenological experience of killing and being killed.

The ellipsis of the violent subject’s life-story is a scar of the sublime. Violence both wounds the narrative and stimulates its recovery. In parallel with the aesthetic trajectory of the sublime, the narrative dynamics of violence is twofold: the fragmentation of the subject, followed by recovery and renewed sense of power. The initial trauma shatters the plot of the self, producing gaps, lacunae, silences, and inconsistencies; but the sublime sense of power generates a narrative reconstruction, which, nevertheless, bears the traces of the initial fragmentation. This is the source of the critical paradox, in which violence is simultaneously claimed to be overrepresented (as in many discussions of media violence) and unrepresentable (as, for example, in Elaine Scarry’s study of torture and war). It is precisely the profusion of violent stories that testifies to the rupture produced by violence in the fabric of discourse.

The murderer’s self-narrative is shaped by the poetics of the sublime. Slavoj Zizek describes the subject of totalitarian ideologies as possessing a “sublime body” composed of “the sublime material . . . that other ‘indestructible and immutable’ body which persists beyond the corruption of the body physical . . . exempted from the effects of wear and tear . . . always sustained by the guarantee of some symbolic authority” (Zizek 18–19). All murderers aspire, at least momentarily, to this “sublime body,” or rather sublime self, which is created through identification with the power of violence. In order to avoid recognizing himself in the pain of the victim, the violator misrecognizes himself in the sublimity of the “experience that does open violence to the human image” (Des Pres 163). One masters terror by becoming its source: “the mind sheds its fear and exults in a strength it gained by internalizing, or identifying with, terror’s own power” (169). Murderers are sublime subjects.

But the sublime appears in many guises, from the dark chaos of the Gothic novel to the blinding clarity of the visionary apocalypse. Similarly, the sublime subject has many forms, depending on the way in which violence is incorporated into the overall shape of his life-story. These forms are socially, culturally, and textually overdetermined, producing the different genres of the violent self. In the second part of the introduction, I will look at these genres in more detail.
II. FACES OF MURDER

I would also like to mention that as a result of the considerable psychological pressures, there were numerous men who were no longer capable of conducting executions and who thus had to be replaced by other men. On the other hand, there were others who could not get enough of them and often reported to these executions voluntarily.

—Gustave Fix, member of Sonderkommando 6

In every narrative interaction of violence, there are three participants: the perpetrator, the victim, and the regulator, the regulator being the police or other investigative agencies in case of unlawful killing and the state or a political organization in case of genocide, terror, ethnic cleansing, or war. The victim's body represents the intractability of the material Real. The regulator represents the law of discourse. The violent subject's story is plotted between these two poles.

The genres of violence prevalent in contemporary culture project several distinct modalities of the violent subject. First, there is a subject whose opposition to the law is so extreme that he is presented not just as a social but as a narrative outcast, defying all conventional stories of the self. Such a subject paradoxically merges with the mutilated body of the victim, which marks the area outside the Symbolic, the realm of language and representation. The monsters of horror fiction, vampires, werewolves, and zombies; some serial killers in thrillers and true-crime biographies; and even such rogue soldiers as Kurtz in Coppola's Apocalypse Now (though not necessarily the ideologically motivated Kurtz of Heart of Darkness) are instances of the violent subject who has positioned himself outside the law, in the realm of the corporeal sublime.

Another modality of the violent subject, while still opposing the social regulation of violence, acknowledges the law and distances itself from the excess of wanton cruelty. The rational killers of the classic detective story, trying to outwit the detective or the police, share liberal society's view of violence as limited, instrumental, and disciplined. The symbiosis between the perpetrator and the regulator is farther developed in the hard-boiled thriller, in which the detective often resorts to physical violence in order to uphold the law. But it is precisely this complicity that discloses the paradox at the heart of the disciplinary appropriation of violence: the law becomes entwined with its opposite, failing either to confine or to eliminate it. A narrative "spillage" of the sublime marks stories of rational murderers, whether in Agatha Christie's who-dunits or in courtroom and spy thrillers, in which the ostensibly instrumental application of violence always exceeds its pragmatic determinants.

Finally, there is the subject of violence who becomes the law. In science fiction and dystopia there are numerous representations of societies in which
wholesale violence is not only endorsed but positively required, and in which the violent subject is elevated into the Superman. But such societies belong in the realm of historical memory as much as that of the imagination. The Holocaust, the most shocking example of genocide in Western history, was perpetrated by people who sought the self-transcendence of violence as part of their ideological program and wrote it into their normative narratives of selfhood. Nor is Nazism the only such ideology; communism, especially in its Stalinist incarnation, is another. And the post–Cold War world is swarming with ideologies and regimes that attempt to utilize the power of the violent sublime in order to restructure their subjects in the mold of a New Man. Lyotard’s putative death of the “grand narratives” or Jameson’s death of the utopia only mark the mutation of the giant state-ideological Leviathans into a multitude of pesky little monsters. Terrorist organizations everywhere promulgate their own recipes of the millennium through tribulations. In every utopia of blood, the regulator and the perpetrator of violence become one, and every trace of the victim’s material body is purged from discourse.

Bloodscripts explores three main types of the violent subject, three genres of the murderous self. Superimposed upon the bewildering variety of violent texts in postmodern culture, these types, I will argue, provide a heuristic grid for mapping out the narrative kingdom of violence. Any such map will necessarily partial and incomplete, and the choice of specific texts will often be the result of personal taste. However, the overall design of the book reflects what I see as both formal and ideological structuring of the narrative field of violence. Below I will introduce the three violent genres of subjectivity through three well-known literary characters, then briefly discuss their cultural genealogies, and end with an overview of the book’s individual chapters.

**Three Killers**

Bill Sikes, a thug and a criminal, is totally shattered by the murder of his lover Nancy in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837), losing his status in the underworld, his name, his sanity, and his life. Judge Lawrence Wargrave in Agatha Christie’s *Ten Little Indians* (1939), having privately executed nine people he deems guilty of murder, writes a meticulous account of his activities and then neatly disposes of himself with a bullet through his head. Rodion Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoevskii’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866) is redeemed and reborn into a new life after the brutal butchery of two helpless women.

Each novel frames the subjectivity of the murderer in a specific narrative structure proper to its genre. *Oliver Twist* is a melodrama, a loose string of tear-jerking episodes. But even this little coherence is lost when murder intrudes. Dickens, always a writer of prodigious visual imagination, transforms his
scenes of violence into striking tableaux, lurid set pieces, whose intensity defies the exigencies of the plot. Neither Sikes's sickening brutality nor his subsequent hallucinatory flight is given any psychological explanation. Whatever crawls out from the blood-splattered room is no longer Bill Sikes but a nameless Thing, a monster and an outcast, shunned even by his criminal accomplices and haunted not by remorse but by self-directed horror and nausea. Spilling of blood robs him of his individuality and makes him an exemplum of violence at its deepest ontological level, as a rebellion against the human commonality of the flesh. And it is as such an exemplum that he dies in front of the avidly watching crowd, closing the circle of violence: a body for a body.

The twentieth century rediscovered the “dark” Dickens, the Dickens of murder, execution, and mob rampage. And the aesthetics of this Dickens is uncannily similar to the aesthetics of horror fiction and film. The Technicolor bloodshed of the twentieth-century cinema is prefigured by the hallucinatory vividness of Dickens's murders. The scene of Nancy’s killing in *Oliver Twist* is a prime example of violence's assault on the eye. The ghastly sight of the mangled body—“mere flesh and blood, no more—but such flesh, and so much blood!”—is so horrifying the murderer himself cannot bear to look at it (Dickens 1837, 423). But look he must all the same, irresistibly drawn to it. And so must we, the readers, a captive audience, fascinated and sickened by the quivering reflections of sunlight in the pool of blood.

On the one hand, the body in pain is an object of irresistible curiosity, strange fascination. The probing eye of the audience aligns itself with the murder weapon, laying open the defenseless flesh. On the other hand, the eye can become a wound, a channel through which our own vulnerability is forcefully brought home to us when we suddenly recognize ourselves not in the violator but in the helpless and suffering victim. If the eye is an instrument of aggression, it also becomes a site of punishment. The murderer is caught in the shifting dynamics of visibility. Sikes is haunted by a vision of Nancy’s eyes. In his botched attempt to escape from the lynching crowd, he slips and hangs himself because he hallucinates that she is looking at him. The murderer’s horror of being seen, which also torments other Dickens's criminals, such as Jonas in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, is more than a fear of discovery. It is a symptom of the ever-present danger of exchanging places with the victim.

The reason for such a reversal in Dickens is the shared corporeality of both victim and murderer. The murderer disavows his own body by inflicting pain on the body of the Other. The murderer is a person who, to adapt Sartre's famous words about the anti-Semite, wishes to be “pitiless stone, a furious torrent, a devastating thunderbolt—anything except a man,” a human being whose body is potentially as soft and vulnerable as the body of the victim.
(Sartre 54). In the murder scene Nancy tries to escape the blow by embracing Sikes, but this reminder of their physical intimacy only enrages him. The polluted body of the streetwalker sets off the purity of Sikes's inexorable will. But after her death it is Sikes who becomes a leper and an outcast. Her revenge is his reembodiment.

Perpetrated on the body, punished through the body: for Dickens, murder is not a moral but an ontological crime. Dickens's murderers cannot change, cannot repent, cannot atone for their crime. Once blood is spilled, the murderer becomes a creature apart, "hunted down," as in the title of one of Dickens's detective stories, and his destruction is inevitable. Even an occasional fallen woman can be redeemed, but a murderer is beyond forgiveness. Dickens was in favor of prison reform, energetically campaigned against public executions, and was aware of the excessive strictness of the law. But for him, as for the legal reformers of the 1830s and 1840s, violent crime, especially murder, was a category apart, distinct from crimes against property. A murderer separates himself from the human community, defined by the common vulnerability of the flesh.

In Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864) Riderhood, a despicable little crook, almost drowns and is pulled out of the water by the hostile crowd. His rescuers do their best to resuscitate him but promptly kick him out when he regains consciousness. As an anonymous body, poised on the brink between life and death, he is the subject of tender solicitude. As Riderhood, he is a pariah. "Not one has the least regard for the man; with them all, he has been an object of avoidance, suspicion, and aversion; but the spark of life within him is curiously separable from himself now, and they have a deep interest in it, probably because it is life, and they are living and must die" (503). It is this "spark of life," the impersonal vitality of the body, that constitutes for Dickens the essence of humanity. Murder is a crime against the body, and the body of the criminal fails him by undergoing a change that sets him apart from ordinary human beings. The retribution suffered by Dickens's murderers—Bill Sikes, Jonas Chuzzlewit, Bradley Headstone—is strangely akin to a disease: they are plagued by hallucinations, lapses of memory, bouts of fainting. A grotesque corporeal transformation becomes their mark of Cain. The instant metamorphosis undergone by Bradley Headstone is typical: "Rigid before the fire, as if it were a charmed flame that was turning him old, he sat, with the dark lines deepening in his face, its stare becoming more and more haggard, its surface turning whiter and whiter as if it were being overspread with ashes, and the very texture and colour of his hair degenerating" (872). The revulsion other characters experience towards Dickens's murderers is visceral and instinctive. They are treated as if they, indeed, were lepers or plague carriers, or better still, monsters.
Agatha Christie, the undisputed queen of the classic detective story, squeezes violence into the straitjacket of logic. Like the rest of her oeuvre, *Ten Little Indians* is a brainteaser with an exquisitely worked-out plot, but it stands out by virtue of focusing on the personality of the criminal. In most classic detective stories the murderer is dramatically revealed by the know-all detective and hustled away to the unseen trial and execution. In *Ten Little Indians*, however, there is no detective: Judge Wargrave’s first-person account that closes the novel provides the solution to the series of seemingly inexplicable murders on isolated Indian Island. The judge is both the murderer and the executioner, exposing the ineluctable violence of the law itself. The opposite of the brutishly inarticulate Bill Sikes, the judge is lucid and eloquent. His polished narrative minimizes the corporeal aspect of violence. He has killed nine people, some of them in close physical contact, but he describes these murders in the impersonal voice of a technician. Preoccupied with murder’s know-how, he is oblivious to the grossness of the violated body. And the text collaborates: in the third-person narrative of the crimes, there are no blood splatters, no oozing brains, no incontinent agony. When people die, figures are removed from the game board. It seems that the judge’s impeccable logic and self-control tame the horror of murder that destroys Dickens’s killers.

Not only is the execution rational but so is the motivation. The victims are all murderers who, for various reasons, cannot be punished by the legal system. Since the death penalty is legal at the time, Judge Wargrave merely corrects an annoying hitch in society’s handling of criminality.

But the judge’s account of himself, so smooth, rational, and reassuring, is built on a gaping contradiction, a shocking paradox, which he himself candidly exposes: “From my earliest youth I realized that my nature was a mass of contradictions. . . . I have a definite sadistic delight in seeing or causing death. . . . From an early age I knew very well the lust to kill. But side by side with this went a contradictory trend—a strong sense of justice. It is abhorrent to me that an innocent person or creature should suffer or die by an act of mine” (Christie 1939, 164).

Violence and the law are tied in a Gordian knot: slaughter requires the underpinning of justice, for only the guilty must suffer, and yet at the same time the initial impetus of the judge’s pursuit of justice is the inborn love of bloodshed. His narrative reveals a rational and orderly personality, which is structured around the dark nucleus of sadism, crucial to the plot and yet inexplicable in terms of its logic.

Unlike the monstrous killers of Dickens, confined in the category of the Other, Judge Wargrave, a solid, useful, upper-class citizen, is Everyman. And so are the other inhabitants of Indian Island: a prim governess, a fashionable doctor, a retired general, a respectable spinster. And each one of them is a
murderer. The question that the text implicitly asks is “Who is incapable of violence?” The answer is “Nobody.”

But if the monster’s subjectivity, by definition, is beyond the reach of human apprehension, the subjectivity of Everyman should be instantly accessible to all. So how are we to relate to the judge’s self-confessed madness? The position of the implied reader in Christie’s novel is an uncomfortable one, for while we are gently beguiled by a mind game (rather than grossed out by a violent spectacle), we eventually find ourselves caught in the web of the judge’s twisted logic. A monster may be seductive, but a disciplined killer is compelling. If the strategies of exorcism and expulsion can rid society of Bill Sikes’s delirious violence, what can work against the rational slaughter of Indian Island? Judging by the denouement of the novel (which was also published under the title *And Then There Were None*), only total annihilation.

The judge’s suicide results from the paradox of violence as both necessary and inimical to social discipline. His death resolves the aporia of the genre he represents, the genre of the classic detective story, in which a rational subject rationally commits the most irrational act of all, murder. Throughout the text, the horror of violence is both emphasized by the creepy atmosphere of the island and minimized by the careful exclusion of the physical aspect of the killings. But it breaks out in the last pages, in which the judge, foreseeing the condition of his own corpse, describes the future gun wound in the middle of his forehead as the “brand of Cain” (173). Like Bill Sikes, branded by violence, the normative, disciplined, lawful subject is eventually transformed into an object of horror and disgust. And the medium of this transformation is physical corporeality. Judge Wargrave is not troubled by qualms of conscience, but the corpses with which he litters Indian Island (including his own) speak louder than words.

*Ten Little Indians* presents both the subjectivity of the murderer and the act of physical violence in a manner diametrically opposite to the dark Gothic of Dickens. Where the latter emphasizes irrationality, the former is reasonable; where the latter revels in gore, the former represses bodily pain and suffering. Showcased in Dickens, the corpse in Christie becomes little more than a plastic prop. But it is precisely the complexity of narrative strategies involved in the repression of the corporeal that testify to its centrality. Eventually, the rational subject of violence is revealed as a smooth-talking madman, and the violated body is restored to its macabre glory. All the strategies of ratiocination collapse when the urbane judge suffers the same fate as the brutal criminal. While different in so many respects, Dickens’s and Christie’s novels converge on one crucial point: there is no place in society for a subject of violence.

But amazingly, such a place is found in what is often considered the most morally elevated novel about violence ever written. Dostoevskii, a fervent
Christian, does what Dickens, with his superficial yuletide sentimentality, and Christie, with her healthy metaphysical indifference, are unwilling to do: he not only forgives a murderer but allows him to emerge from butchery spiritually purified and morally reborn.

Dostoevskii's most important novels, Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov, and The Possessed, deal with murder. But this is a different murder from that of Dickens or Christie: its motivation is essentially ideological, even when (as in The Brothers Karamazov) there is personal malice involved as well. In Crime and Punishment Raskolnikov is motivated by a "Napoleonic" idea, which he explains in his article as a "permission to kill" for exceptional individuals, the "law-givers and builders of new humanity" (282; trans. mine). Seeing himself in the august company of the Solons, the Mohammeds, and the Napoleons, Raskolnikov is a prescient image of what Nietzsche's Zarathustra would call later the "higher man" (Nietzsche 323). And just like the Nietzschean Superman, Raskolnikov needs violence to recreate himself: "The evildest is necessary the Superman's best" (Nietzsche 322).

Raskolnikov is not a "natural-born killer," like so many of Dickens's monsters. He is a delicate and sensitive man, a true intellectual, marked by an inborn empathy with the oppressed and the downtrodden. A vivid dream about the torture of a helpless horse makes him cry. But he commits two ax murders, which, in their sheer brutality, top Bill Sikes at his worst. What makes him capable of this revolting bloodshed is his "Idea." And when, after the murder, his body reacts in the same involuntary way as the bodies of Dickens's unenlightened butchers, with nausea, illness, and eventually a physical collapse, Raskolnikov perceives this as a humiliating defeat. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. He has failed his idea by not being strong enough to become a "lawgiver," to transcend the mob's prejudices against violence, which he despises: not because he is enamored of violence for its own sake but because he is sick of what Nietzsche was to call "human, all too human." 

Dostoevskii, of course, is adamantly opposed to Raskolnikov's worldview, which is essentially the same revolutionary utopianism he savages in The Possessed. But he has his own ideological ax to grind. And ironically, the novel that is supposed to illustrate the failure of utopian violence unwittingly demonstrates its triumph. Raskolnikov killed the old moneylender and her pathetic sister in order to restructure his own subjectivity, to emerge from the violent ordeal as a Superman, free of weakness and fear. And this is what eventually happens, only the ideal he uses as a model for his nascent self has changed. He wanted to be Napoleon; instead, he becomes Christ.

Raskolnikov's violent bildungsroman eventually leads him to a spiritual rebirth. The fractured personality of a murderer is glued together by repentance and atonement and emerges in a strikingly different, purified, transcendent
The longed-for transformation is achieved by assimilating Raskolnikov's story into the master-narrative of Christianity. The "Napoleonic" script he attempted to write for himself has proven to be too fragile to absorb the visceral shock of killing two human beings. But the Christian narrative, promising rebirth and regeneration, is far sturdier; not only does it allow the murderer to live with himself, but it actually establishes his crime as the basis for a new utopian subjectivity. The last sentences of the novel promise a new story, the story (or history) of "man's renewal" (558; trans. mine). Was it not what Raskolnikov wanted from the beginning?

Crime and Punishment is a political novel in the guise of a psychological one, analyzing the dynamics of the ideological self-fashioning through violence. Its interpretation of the Christian narrative aligns it with utopian ideologies of Dostoevskii's own social and cultural milieu. The novel is a story of political violence and its success—not in achieving its purported social goals but in changing the personality of the perpetrator. As opposed to Sikes's visceral aggression, Raskolnikov's violence is ideologically motivated—but so is his salvation. He sees murder as a tool of self-fashioning, a means of recreating himself in the image of his superhuman ideal. And he succeeds: all that is necessary is to exchange the wrong ideology for the right one. Rodion Raskolnikov, meant as the opposite of the "possessed," ideological assassins and pure-minded terrorists, becomes their mirror-reflection.

Three faces of murder: the inarticulate monster, the man next door, and the true believer. The three novels written within a hundred-year span illustrate the types of violent subjectivity that have largely—though not exclusively—defined (post)modernity's attitudes to murder. And now the three killers have taken over popular culture. Bill Sikes, blood-splattered and flesh-rending, lumbers through horror films and orchestrates the serial killer scares. The urbane judge, the least likely suspect in the rational game of murder, presides over the empire of the detective stories and still rules the beleaguered liberal jurisprudence that refuses to accept that murderers are genetic freaks. And Rodion Raskolnikov, the killer on behalf of an Idea, has wrought more havoc in recent history than many an advance in military technology.

The generic conventions of their stories are shaped by the divergent ways in which they incorporate the violent sublime. Bill Sikes is a Gothic monster, whose engagement in torture killing annihilates him as a human subject. He is reduced to the purely corporeal existence and excluded from the Symbolic. His violence is doubly unlawful: illegal but also disavowed by the narrative itself.
Judge Wargrave is his opposite, the law made flesh. The choking exactitude of his narrative is the means of disciplining violence. But in a paradoxical inversion, which the novel itself cannot fully grasp, the disciplined subject produced by such a well-trained plot is a killer. Christie’s novel is a classic detective story, which D. A. Miller in his *The Novel and the Police* sees as a genre of discipline, participating “in a general economy of policing power” (Miller 2). If the monstrous Sikes lives out the violence at its most nakedly physical, violence as torture, Judge Wargrave represents the disciplinary subject of the violence hidden, disguised, kept out of sight, but still indispensable to the workings of the modern state.

Finally, Raskolnikov is an ideological New Man, consciously using violence as a means of remaking himself in the image of his political ideal. Unlike Wargrave’s law of discipline, Raskolnikov’s ideology does not hide its dependence on bloodshed; it revels in it. And he is the only one who actually succeeds in pursuing his own narrative trajectory as it leads him into a better and brighter futurity. Raskolnikov is a killer on behalf of utopia.

What all these narratives have in common is a disturbance created by the violent sublime. But each is affected by it in a specific way. Violence may shatter the subject’s life-story, creating a mute, incoherent, and threatening Other. It may transform him into a New Man. And when it does neither, it generates a paradoxical and uncanny double self, outwardly indistinguishable from anybody else but harboring a deep and ominous secret. These three narrative patterns exemplified by the three killers provide the structural skeleton of *Bloodscripts*. I will call these patterns the subject of torture, the subject of discipline, and the subject of ideology. The rationale for these names lies in a modern history of violence, as sketched out by Michel Foucault and his followers.

**From the Scaffold to the Death Camp**

Public torture was, of course, a common event in the premodern age. Despite the often voiced contention that the present era is more violent that its predecessors, the spectacle of physical violence, legally sanctioned and socially accepted, was an inseparable part of people’s everyday experience for hundreds of years. Rhodes pointedly notes that not so long ago “children attended public displays of real violence for moral uplift” (Rhodes 319). Whatever the ostensible purposes of such displays, there is no doubt that they had a profound emotional impact. On the one hand, as Leon Sheeff points out, torture had a pragmatic aspect in its linkage to the “law of proof” (299). On the other hand, as Foucault vividly describes in the opening chapter of *Discipline and Punish*, such a proof resided not so much in the information extracted under duress as in the shocking visibility of the violated body itself. Bill Sikes, who
stages his own public hanging, epitomizes the violent subject at his most corporeal and, therefore, most visible. He is still directly linked to the spectacle of the scaffold.

In a rather short historical period, according to Foucault, public torture gives way to discipline, which marks a decisive divorce between power and physical violence, commented upon by Hannah Arendt in On Violence. Physical violence, while of course still indispensable to power, is kept out of sight, and the soul rather than the body becomes an object of disciplinary techniques. While torture collapses crime and punishment into a spectacle of suffering (for the torture of the criminal often reproduced the damage done to the body of the victim), discipline separates them by a long period of psychological anguish, whose stages—guilt, remorse, rehabilitation—constitute a narrative of the subject’s transformation. Whereas torture shocks the rebellious subject into obedience, discipline produces obedient subjects. The first rests on the naked visual display of the body in pain, the second, on the narrative “translation” of the scene of violence into a plot. Excluded from the daily experience of the vast majority of the population, raw violence becomes an invisible yet indispensable foundation of power. Judge Wargrave, enmeshed in complex, elaborate, and rigid narrative frameworks—both of classic jurisprudence and of classic detection—exemplifies the invisible but pervasive violence of discipline.

However, Foucault’s scheme only goes so far. It does not account for the most visible and frightening subject of violence today: the ideological killer. The seemingly never-ending fascination of the Holocaust may owe more to the hideous enigma of its perpetrators than to the wrenching suffering of its victims. The debate on the nature of the ideological killer clamors on, swinging between the poles indicated by Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil” on the one hand and Kant’s “radical evil” on the other. In this debate the Nazi often appears to be a metonymy for the army of murderers too vast to comprehend: from Stalin’s henchmen to the perpetrators of the genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda; from the soldiers of a would-be millennial empire to terrorist freelancers. In the wake of 9/11, the terrorist has assumed the dominant place in the popular imagination, somewhat displacing the Nazi Übermensch. But his cultural genealogy is rooted in the same search for utopia, so that there are surprising and yet real connections between bin Laden and Raskolnikov, Mohammed Atta and Otto Dietrich zur Linde. For despite the inflated rhetoric of the “clash of civilizations,” the perpetrators of today’s terrorist atrocities are no evil aliens from some faraway Muslim galaxy: they are a product of the cultural convergence and ideological globalization that have disseminated the lure of the sublime utopian subject worldwide. The ideology that justifies killing is different in each case, filtered through the indigenous tradition and
local grievances. But whether it is religious fundamentalism, radical nationalism, social justice, or racial purification, the terrorist’s political agenda is only half of his narrative. The second half, far more important, is the implicit quest for self-transformation through the divinity of bloodshed. And it is precisely because this quest unifies seemingly disparate movements with contrary political aspirations that I decided against inclusion of a separate chapter on terrorism in this book.

The fear of being instantly outdated, as terror is being redefined on a daily basis in presidential speeches and political summits, is only part of this decision. More important is the desire to stand back from the current political turmoil in order to discern the common narrative pattern that unites disparate historical outbreaks of ideological violence. There is not a single terrorist movement today that does not have its defenders who point out the “justice” of the movement’s ostensible goals. But precisely because one person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter, the overt agenda of mass violence cannot fully explain its modus operandi—not only because ethically the ends do not justify the means but also because ideologically and psychologically the means are the ends.

My subject in this book is this “deep” level of ideological murder that restructures the perpetrator’s subjectivity. To reach it, one has to cut through the verbiage of reasonable and perhaps even sympathetic rhetoric of social or national rights, to probe the “surplus” violence that is channeled into the self-fASHioning of the violator. For Nazism and Stalinism the existence of this surplus violence has been convincingly demonstrated by the disclosure of the tremendous scope of the genocide, far exceeding any pragmatic goal. While both are by no means dead as ideologies, their immediate political contexts are remote enough for us to see that the rights and wrongs of the Versailles treaty or the precarious geopolitical situation of the Soviet Union cannot account for the Holocaust and the Terror. But discussions of contemporary terrorism are often hijacked by politics, as if murder and suicide were rational means to achieve rational ends.

Lingering on the political dimension of ideological violence can obscure its true motivation. The suicide bomber and the perpetrator of genocide, cultural differences notwithstanding, share a taste for transcendence through violence. Their sublime selves are bought at the price of physical annihilation, of others and even themselves, if necessary. The sublime self is fashioned through a narrative dynamics of a utopian transformation, which is encouraged and supported by the group of fellow believers, whose mutually reinforcing convictions protect them from horror or remorse. The core narrative structure of the violent subject of ideology remains the same, no matter what ideology he adopts. The Nazi camp guard, the Gulag functionary, the thug in
Bosnia, the genocidal butcher in Rwanda, the radical Islamic terrorist, all attempt to shatter the old law through violence in order to inaugurate the new law that will justify their metamorphosis into sublime New Men.

Bloodscripts attempts to portray this violent subject of ideology through specific examples of the Holocaust and its perception in popular culture, with some references to Stalin’s Terror as well. While not engaging directly with bin Laden, I will look at his narrative predecessors who still haunt the popular imagination, with their incomprehensible cruelty, their glory in bloodshed, and their symbiosis between law and violence. It is not accidental that the handiest insult in the current terrorist controversies is “Nazi,” each side flinging it at the other with scant regard for historical accuracy. Purists may roll their eyes but the vox populi has a point: the Nazi is in fact the paradigm of terror as a means of self-transformation.

And not only the individual perpetrator but also the community infected with ideological violence exhibits the same features, regardless of the political justification of it. Violence is not hidden as in the disciplinary state; on the contrary, it is proudly flaunted. But at the same time something is omitted from representation. Citizens of Hitler’s and Stalin’s empires knew about the concentration camps; they even knew what was done there, but they preferred not to know how it was done. And while the terrorist times his strike to coincide with the prime time news, his own self-representation substitutes dedication, sacrifice, or despair for the atrocity that is so plainly visible on the screen. The visibility of ideological violence is not the same thing as the Foucauldian spectacle of the scaffold, for it refuses to name what it has done in order to preserve its own discursive coherence. Ideology engenders the rhetoric of the open secret, something which is known to everybody but spoken of only in an oblique, indirect, euphemistic way. If discipline has to repress the sight of violence, ideology thrives on it but in strictly controlled doses, regulated by the authority, which derives its power from the monopoly on the violent sublime. While the ideological state possesses this monopoly by definition, the terrorist has to rely on the in-group of fellow believers and sympathizers, whose willful blindness may be more effective than imposed censorship.

The subject of torture, the subject of discipline, and the subject of ideology are the modalities of the violent self that I will explore in this book. They are not to be seen in terms of historical progression but of narrative classification. Genres are “sedimented” ideologies, to use Jameson’s term, bearing inscriptions from different historical periods in their formal strategies. Moreover, contrary to
Foucault’s assertion, torture, discipline, and ideology have coexisted throughout much of the modern and postmodern periods. The disappearance of the scaffold has not eliminated the spectacle of violence, and ideology has not supplanted discipline but rather intertwined with it. In the universe of stories, which we inhabit, all kinds of violence coexist and interact, just as they coexist and interact in the global political and social landscape. The diverse narrative texts analyzed in the book reflect—and construct—the diverse self-narratives of violent subjects.

In the next section I will describe in detail the order and composition of the book’s chapters, providing the reader with a guide to the maze of stories in which the horror of violence meets the pleasure of the text, the maze of bloodscripts.

Mapping Hell

The progression of the chapters follows the diminution of the sublime incoherence of violence in relation to the regulatory power of narrative. I begin with the texts in which the sublime is unleashed, resulting in a fragmented or incomprehensible identity, and end with those in which the sublime is harnessed to an ideological master-narrative, producing a collective script of subjectivity. To put it differently, I follow the path—structural if not historical—from the subject of torture to the subject of ideology.

In all generic classifications mixtures are probably more common than pure specimens. It is the same with genres of subjectivity, where each type is surrounded by a fuzzy border of intermediate forms. The book is structured in such a way as to allow for both heuristic precision and for appreciation of the richness and scope of the narrative field it explores. Each of the six chapters that follow describes the intersection of violence and identity in a specific narrative genre. Each chapter setting out a “pure” paradigm is followed by a chapter on the transitional type. While somewhat artificial, this scheme provides a roadmap for the reader to navigate among a variety of texts that are discussed in the book.

The texts are many because murder has so many faces. And yet, as I hope to show, these faces are like pictures in a family album, linked together by resemblance, descent, and wandering genes. Leafing through such an album, certain regularities soon begin to appear: Ted Bundy has the eyes of Dracula, and Dr. Hannibal Lecter the forehead of Holmes and the smile of Moriarty. The narratives of violent subjects are indeed a family in Wittgenstein’s sense of the word: a set of verbal objects held together by multiple connections and shared traits, even though not every member of the set necessarily has all or any of these traits.
I begin with the genre whose explicitness in representing the physical side of violence has placed it in the same situation as the spectacle of the scaffold in the early modern period: abhorred by many and shamefacedly patronized by many more. Surely few public hangings drew a crowd the size of Stephen King’s readership. Descending from the Gothic, horror fiction and film explore the violent excess of torture and mutilation. Chapter 1, “The Visible Man,” discusses the subject of torture as incarnated in horror’s monster. The monster is a walking oxymoron, an impossible subject, hovering on the fault line between language and silence. Like the ideal Victorian child, it is often seen but seldom heard. The chapter focuses on the imbalance between spectacle and story in horror fiction and argues that the genre’s visual emphasis is linked to the violent sublime. Like its ancestor, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic novel, horror fuses violence and transcendence. But in this fusion the human identity of the perpetrator melts in the ecstasy of the unspeakable. The tension between vision and word in horror expresses the clash between the violent sublime and narrativity. The chapter links the conventions of modern horror with the paradigmatic Gothic texts of the fin de siècle, such as Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, H. G. Wells’s *The Invisible Man*, and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. It traces the postmodern resurgence of the monster in the fiction and films of Clive Barker, a contemporary British writer and director.

The popularity of horror is contested today by several hybrid genres of violence that attempt to fit the monstrous subject into a psychological, medical, or legal explanatory framework. By doing so, they generate a correspondingly hybrid violent subject, who combines the Gothic opacity of the monster with the transparency of the disciplined self. The most important of these genres is what is known as “true crime,” largely dedicated to serial killers. The serial killer, whose violence is both mysterious, horrifying, and yet at least potentially explicable, provides a transition from the subject of torture to the subject of discipline.

In chapter 2, “Serial Killing and the Dismemberment of Identity,” I discuss the narratives of serial killing. The subject of intense curiosity and no less intense fear, the serial killer has become a postmodern cultural hero. This chapter argues that the importance of the serial killer in contemporary culture stems from the paradox of his subjectivity. Seemingly random, the serial killer’s actions are nevertheless supposed to correspond to some plot of psychological causality. There are two groups of such plots, the killer as monster and the killer as victim, whose historical and cultural genealogies the chapter traces in some detail. But both types of plots manifestly fail to account for the violence that exceeds any determinants, thus leaving the killer’s selfhood in the state of flux and confusion that is misperceived as freedom. The chapter
is panoramic, surveying a number of texts: nineteenth-century treatises on criminal anthropology by Cesare Lombroso and his followers; textbooks of criminal psychology; best selling true-crime books by John Douglas; and equally best selling novels by Thomas Harris (The Silence of the Lambs), Patricia Cornwell (Postmortem), Caleb Carr (The Alienist), and others.

The genre that exemplifies the cultural construction of the subject of discipline is the classic detective story. A cerebral and rationalistic genre, the classic detective story is a disciplinary narrative par excellence. It trims the plot down to a rigid formula, eliminating not only graphic descriptions of violence but desire, contingency, and accident. And yet at the heart of even the most bloodless detective story lies a corpse. The ultrarational detective story is a testimony to the disturbing power of violence, as it labors to produce a violent subject who is simultaneously totally rational and totally Other. The uncanny underside of the classic detective story, with its doubling, paradox, and inconsistency, reveals both the limitations of discipline and its covert reliance on the excluded and rigidly policed physical violence. In chapter 3, “The Library of the Body,” I discuss the way in which narrative attempts to discipline violence by binding it to the plot of ratiocination. The chapter traces the rise of the disciplinary subject of violence in the classic detective story of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, focusing on the works of the four defining writers of the genre: Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton, and Agatha Christie.

The formulaic detective story that I discuss reaches its peak in the period between the two world wars, its own golden age. Today, while having a flourishing offspring that more or less conforms to its original rules, the detective story has also developed in new directions under the influence of its rival, the hard-boiled thriller of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. The classic Golden Age texts inscribed the disciplinary paradigm of the violent subject with unmatched clarity. The hard-boiled thriller and the film noir originally registered the crumbling of this paradigm in the unsettled social environment of mid-twentieth-century America. Precisely because the hard-boiled conventions respond to social violence, I have chosen to relate to them through an unusual generic offshoot that combines features of the hard-boiled thriller and utopia. I will call this offshoot the investigative dystopia and use it to chart the transition from the subject of discipline to the subject of ideology.

In chapter 4, “Utopia Noir,” the sublime “I” clashes with the private eye; Sam Spade takes on the SS Ubermenschen. Following the traditional plot structure of the thriller and featuring a private detective as the protagonist, such dystopias investigate not an ordinary crime but state-sponsored genocide. Through the narrative of discipline, they attempt to confront the bloody havoc wrought by the New Man in pursuit of his sublime self. But the secret
that they pursue is the open secret of atrocity, the knowledge of the crime that is available to all and acceptable to none. And the subjectivity of the perpetrator that emerges from such texts is very different from the detective story's criminal, who accepts his punishment as part of his own disciplinary narrative. Rather, it is the detective who ultimately becomes the sacrificial victim, acting out the temporary defeat of discipline by ideology. I consider several recent investigative dystopias and situate them in the context of the classic utopian/dystopian tradition, from Wells to Orwell.

In chapter 5, "Doctor Death," we encounter the New Man face to face. And as we enter utopia, we find ourselves back in the horror country. If the subject of horror fiction is a monster, the subject of utopia is a creator of monsters. The monster unleashes violence and is destroyed by it; the creator of monsters controls violence and makes others bear the brunt of his sublime self-fashioning. The pain, ugliness, and mutilation of his victims are the necessary counterpart to his glorious rebirth in the image of his ideal.

The New Man was born from the spirit of science. Dr. Mengele, the notorious Nazi torturer-physician, has become an emblem of Nazism. His story is retold in the literary texts I analyze: Rolph Hochhuth's The Deputy, Ira Levin's Boys from Brazil, Lucius Shepard's "Mengele," and others. Rather than reflecting Mengele's actual biography, however, these works look for inspiration in H. G. Wells's science fiction novel The Island of Dr. Moreau (1896). This rewriting of the representative New Man as a monster-maker through dystopian science fiction reveals both the historical genealogy and the narrative composition of the Nazi subject of ideology. The intertextual continuity between twentieth-century atrocity and nineteenth-century fantasy of self-transcendence accurately reflects the ideological link between Nazism and the bio-ideologies of Social Darwinism and eugenics. Such ideologies hollow out the positivism of science to make room for the "biological sublime" predicated on the scientific superman's identification with the ruthlessness of post-Darwinian nature. The violence unleashed by the "applied biology" of Nazism is what happens when a search for knowledge is transformed into a search for identity. The figure of Mengele/Moreau, the remote and horrifying Doctor Death, is an eidolon of the Nazi New Man who finds purity in massacre and sublimity in torture.

Doctor Death is only a specter today, but a specter stalking postmodernity. The aftermath of his reign has been marked by what is aptly named "the memory wars." In chapter 6, "The Singularity of History," I analyze the memory wasteland left in the wake of violence. Returning to the issue of representability or unrepresentability of violence, I focus on the current controversy regarding the trauma of the Holocaust. Raging with particular ferocity in the last two decades and generating such scandalous highlights as the Paul
De Man and Benjamin Wilkomirski affairs, the memory wars have moved back and forth over the no-man’s-land of historical trauma. What is the proper response to the Holocaust: silence, incoherent stuttering of the traumatized survivor, or imaginative storytelling? In this chapter I analyze the clash of traumatic memory and narrative imagination in the light of its dominant trope, the metaphor of “the black hole.”

The black hole is the breakdown of the space-time continuum that represents the breakdown of historical narratives under the weight of an intolerable trauma. While such a breakdown is perceived by many as the only authentic response to the Holocaust, I argue it mirrors the central narrative device of the perpetrators’ self-narratives, ellipsis. The “memory wars” are essentially a battle of the ellipsis. Should this hole in the discourse be reverently preserved—and, if possible, enlarged—or should it be filled with a restored narrative, even if this narrative can never aspire to the status of the absolute truth? I argue that in presenting genocide as ineffable and sublime, the critical discourse of trauma creates parity between victims and perpetrators and obscures the ideological nature of violent self-transcendence.

As opposed to the critical glorification of silence, popular culture appropriates the Holocaust as a proper subject for storytelling. This storytelling increasingly fits into what many see as scandalously incongruous generic molds: fantasy, science fiction, and the fairy tale. Holocaust fantasies literalize the metaphor of the black hole, using it as a narrative device or part of the projected fictional world. In doing so, they confront the issue of action and choice that “trauma studies” disavow. In opting for imagination over memory, popular culture reconstructs history as a field of conflicting subject positions rather than a blank space of victimization. It combats the dangerous seduction of the violent sublime by resorting to “strong” narrative patterns and restoring the traditional narrative division into protagonists and antagonists, heroes and villains. And yet, in doing so, it courts the inevitable falsification of memory.

The last chapter offers a parallel analysis of the critical discourse of trauma (by Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Kali Tal, and others) and of Holocaust fantasies (J. R. Dunn’s Days of Cain, Jane Yolen’s The Briar Rose, Lisa Goldstein’s “Breadcrumbs and Stones,” and the film Life Is Beautiful). It closes the circle by returning to the issues of chapter 1, but situates the problematic of speech and silence in a political and historical context.

Each chapter in the book highlights a specific form of violent identity and looks at a different selection of narratives. But there are common threads that link them together. First is the notion of the sublime. Whether emphasized as in horror, repressed as in the detective story, or utilized as in utopia, the violent sublime is central to the narrative construction of the violent subject.
Even when the golden age detective story attempts to deny the sublimity of violence by squeezing it into the procrustean bed of instrumental rationality, all its conventions are shaped by this denial, creating ineluctable rifts and strains in the textual fabric.

The second general concern that runs through all the chapters in the book is the relation between body and narrative. Linked to the first one (for the sublimity of violence is the result of its corporeal nature), my understanding of this issue differs from the extreme “constructionism” of such theoreticians as Judith Butler. While the body is indeed constructed in discourse, it also constructs discourse. Pain, suffering, violence, and death can only be apprehended through socially and ideologically contingent narratives. But the violated body speaks in the language of silence. In particular, as I argue in chapter 1, it manifests itself in the visual impact of physical violence.

The concept of corporeality leads to the conundrum of individuality. Among the “solutions” to violence an important place is occupied by the biological discourse of differentiation that purports to explain aggression by locating it in individual and collective deviance. I see biology as an ideology rather than as an irrefutable science of the corporeal human subject. It is not a solution to the enigma of violence but part of the problem. This issue is spotlighted in chapter 2 (on serial killers) and chapter 5 (on the Nazi New Man). In both cases, I emphasize free agency and argue that biological explanations of violence actually contribute to its spread by offering highly problematic scripts of individual behavior. It is particularly true in the case of Nazism, where biology becomes a foundation for the utopian ideology of a murderously sublime subject.

Finally, an important issue—indirectly raised throughout the book and brought to the fore in the last chapter—is the ethical dimension of the nexus of violence and narrativity. If narrative provides the templates of violent identities, contains the visceral horror of killing, and allows murderers to function as social subjects, would it not be better to do without it altogether? The answer, also implicit in the project itself and elaborated in the conclusion, is “no.” There is no return to storyless innocence. Human beings are narrative animals, finding themselves only through the lineaments of a tale. The attraction of violence lies precisely in the phantasmagoric escape from the strictures of narrative coherence, into the timeless realm of the sublime. If violence enters culture through narrative, it is also through narrative that it is apprehended and resisted.