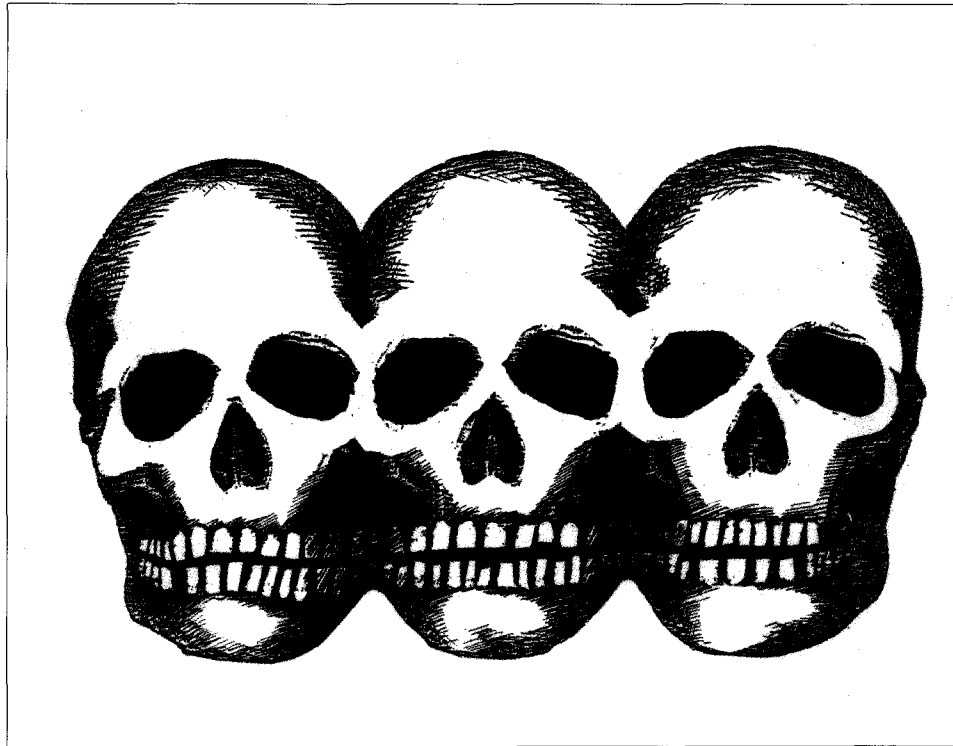


The Inner Darkness

Serial Murder and the Nature of Evil

by Philip Jenkins



Igor Kopelnitsky

Every society has its mythology, its particular set of heroes and monsters. In North America over the last decade, the figure of the demon or monster has come to be represented by the serial killer, an image that is now quite ubiquitous in popular culture. In a typical chain bookstore, a B. Dalton or Waldenbooks, it is easy to find 50 to 60 titles dealing with the serial killer in fact or fiction, and the number of new novels on the theme is approaching two a month. In the "true crime" section, figures like Ted Bundy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Joel Rifkin are celebrated in countless red-on-black-covered paperbacks with repetitive titles, each suggesting themes of death, blood, hunting, and mutilation.

Popular fascination with serial killers is often denounced as prurient or condemned as sexist wish-fulfillment, but these approaches are simplistic, or at least do not fully reflect the quite complex mythological foundations of the genre: the monstrous, inhuman killers and the heroic mind-hunters who venture into the psychic borderlands where they can encounter and entrap their prey, even at considerable risk to their own souls. The serial murder theme presents, albeit in the contemporary

language of social and behavioral science, a mythology of the conflict between good and evil, and the massive appeal of this imagery indicates a widespread need to place current problems in a context that is moralistic and heroic and that accepts the absolute verity of the concepts of virtue and sin: in short, a religious context. Popular culture is therefore succeeding in providing interpretations of objective moral evil of the sort that is lacking elsewhere in public discourse—in politics, in criminal justice, in education, and, perhaps most conspicuously, in the vast majority of churches and synagogues. The power and influence of this imagery go far toward explaining popular attitudes toward crime and justice, attitudes that legislators and social theorists neglect at their peril. And however sensationalized and packaged for tawdry crime books, the serial killer does tell us something about the limits of moral relativism.

Serial murder is an extremely rare offense. At any given time, there are probably between 50 and 80 active serial killers in the United States, "active" in the sense of having killed repeatedly before and intending to kill again, and these killers probably account for about 400 victims each year. The number may sound horrendous, but it is no more than one percent of all homicides, or 0.01 percent of all deaths that occur in any given year. Nor is this, as is sometimes stated, solely a contemporary phenomenon. *Per capita*, there were probably

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almost as many active serial killers in the United States in the first three or four decades of the present century as there are today. However, the number fell sharply in mid-century before rising again from the late 1960's on, and this increase has caused contemporary perceptions of a "murder wave," the modern "epidemic" of serial murder that has proved so profitable for the thriller novelists and true-crime writers. Nor is it self-evident that serial killers are the "worst" criminals in terms of the number of their victims; we might point to various corporate or governmental decisions that have resulted in the spilling of more blood than has been shed by the most savage street predator. Serial killers are important not because of the quantitative scale of the mayhem they cause, but for what they suggest about the causation of other less publicized forms of crime and about the incredible destructive potential of the human animal.

It is unnecessary to expound upon the activities of multiple killers and the rape, torture, and mutilation that they often inflict upon their victims. Perhaps more horrifying than any individual atrocity is the collective nature of many of the crimes, which popular stereotypes often ignore. Many serial murders, perhaps a fifth or more, are committed by groups of offenders. Such cases include the "Trash Bag Killings" of dozens of young men carried out on the California freeways in the 1970's by Patrick Kearney, David Hill, and possibly others, and the "cannibal killings" that occurred in Chicago during the early 1980's, when a group of four young men murdered and mutilated up to 18 women, preserving parts of their bodies in what was said to be a "Satanic chapel." England witnessed one of the most remarkable of such cases, when a pedophile ring based in London undertook the abduction, rape, and murder of several boys during the 1980's, including some as young as five years old. The ring might have included up to seven or eight people.

That one person might be sufficiently deranged to attack strangers can be understood, but far less comprehensible is the decision of three or four (or more) distinct individuals to combine their efforts in such a bloody enterprise. This fact alone goes far toward discrediting the conventional psychological explanations for extreme violent crime, the endless litanies of causal factors based on physical abuse or maternal neglect. Such explanations might apply in one case, but how do several such aberrant individuals chance to find each other? The phenomenon of group serial homicide seems rather to suggest that these are "normal" individuals, free from obvious psychiatric disturbances, who find themselves in a social situation in which they can fulfill urges and desires that would otherwise remain suppressed.

There is no shortage of explanations for the nature of these urges, and social and political activists of all stripes have attempted to use the serial murder theme as a vehicle for their own pet analysis of the wrongs of the world. Recently, feminist militants have portrayed serial murders as a manifestation of "femicide," a form of misogynist terrorism that prevails in sexist and patriarchal societies that permit discrimination and pornographic literature. Of course, such a view depends on the assertion that serial murder is usually motivated by sexual urges, a stereotype whose accuracy is far from certain. The theory is belied by numerous cases in which nurses and other medical personnel of both genders kill patients out of motivations that have far more to do with the assertion of power and control than with any overtly sexual impetus. The feminist

view also depends on serial killing being a male prerogative, a dubious notion given that about a fifth of recorded offenders are female. Women also tend to kill by means that are less likely to be detected by doctors or police, so the actual proportion of women serial killers is likely to be even higher than it appears. It has been amusing to observe the intellectual contortions of feminist theorists and media people desperate to prove that seven-time Florida killer Aileen Wuornos is somehow not a blatant example of a female serial murderer.

It is hardly surprising that in seeking to describe such individuals, modern writers have had to resort to a terminology that is so out of fashion as to be almost humorous, so that Nilsen, Bundy, Gacy, and Dahmer become 'monsters,' 'ghouls,' 'demons,' 'wolves in human form.' They are, in short, evil.

Some serial killers undoubtedly act because of perverted sexual desires, and some because of atrocities committed against them in their early years. In virtually no case, however, should we accept at first hearing the explanations they offer for their own motivations, as these are often intended to con or manipulate a researcher. Ted Bundy was superb at presenting accounts of his career that would mesh with the expectations of an interviewer, and his final interview on the evils of pornography was a masterpiece of the genre. But having said this, interviewed killers repeatedly return to the same themes in analyzing their acts, and their statements gain a certain credibility because they can achieve no gain or profit.

What do serial killers have in common? One trait that recurs is an absolute self-absorption, a failure to acknowledge the reality of outside phenomena except as sources of sensory pleasure. Ted Bundy, for example, once remarked that "the past is like a mist—who can touch a mist?" and clearly in his mind his victims never possessed more than a wraithlike quality. Victims thus cease to have reality as human beings and become bizarre toys for the violent fantasies of groups like the London pedophile ring. This sense of god-like power over victims can be manifested in bizarre and even childlike ways, as with the two nurses who murdered several elderly patients chosen so that their surnames would spell the acronym MURDER.

English multiple killer Dennis Nilsen has produced some of the more telling self-analyses, and his articulate views have been recorded by journalist Brian Masters. Nilsen remarked, "I made another world, and real men would enter it and they

would never really get hurt at all in the vivid unreal laws of the dream . . . the pure primitive man of the dream world killed these men." Masters has noted how often killers see themselves as a battleground between forces of good and evil, with the homicidal behavior being the work of an "inner me," an "inner darkness," a "darkness within." In some instances, this language might be a legal ruse, an attempt to create a plausible insanity defense based on a claim of multiple personality disorder, but the terminology is not exclusive to such efforts. Depending on the religious background and upbringing of the particular offender, this inner darkness might be personified as an objective reality, identified with Satan or some demon figure, or even with a twisted image of God. Some offenders even claim to be acting as servants of Satan or of some imagined Satanic cult.

Knowingly or not, serial killers often speak the language of possession, of living in a dark reality that wholly separates them from the world of ordinary humanity. Almost instinctively, they have perfectly formulated the Jungian concept of the "shadow," the sinister and dangerous product of forces and experiences that have been driven deep into the unconscious. It is hardly surprising that in seeking to describe such individuals, modern writers have had to resort to a terminology that is so out of fashion as to be almost humorous, so that Nilsen, Bundy, Gacy, and Dahmer become "monsters," "ghouls," "demons," "wolves in human form." They are, in short, evil.

A great gulf lies between such an interpretation and virtually all academic writing on the subject by sociologists, criminologists, and psychologists. It is simply not acceptable in scholarly quarters to use the rhetoric of supernatural evil, however tempting such rhetoric might be. One of the seminal discoveries of 19th-century psychology was that some individuals can act in a bizarre or uncontrolled way without demonstrating any conventional signs of insanity. Originally termed *manie sans délire*, or "moral insanity," the condition is today termed "psychopathy," and the language used to describe a psychopath often verges on the religious. Though intelligent, they are "paper men" lacking remorse or affect, having no sense of the harm caused by their actions and failing to recognize the reality of their victims. In more traditional language, they are "monsters" without soul or conscience, but that terminology cannot be safely employed. In Thomas Harris's novel *The Silence of the Lambs*, the killer Hannibal Lecter taunts FBI agent Clarice Starling, rejecting her psychological attempts to find what made him a killer: "Nothing happened to me Officer Starling. I happened. You can't reduce me to a set of influences. You've given up good and evil for behaviorism, Officer Starling. You've got everybody in moral dignity pants—nothing is ever anybody's fault. Look at me, Officer Starling. Can you stand to say I'm evil? Am I evil?" In real life, the FBI's leading serial murder expert was Robert Ressler, who applied to the study of these offenders a sophisticated behavioral science analysis that has exercised worldwide influence. His fine autobiography, however, bears the title *Whoever Fights Monsters*.

Neither social nor behavioral science offers a vocabulary adequate to describe actions like those of the London pedophile ring or of individuals like Randy Kraft, the California computer programmer who killed perhaps 50 or 60 boys and young men between about 1975 and 1983. The true-crime books on such cases regularly draw on religious imagery, and the studies of the pedophile ring and the Kraft case are respectively entitled *Lambs to the Slaughter* and *Angel of*

Darkness.

Where current science fails is in explaining what exactly the killers are doing wrong. If a man kidnaps a five-year-old boy off the streets for the purpose of gang rape and strangulation, in what sense is his conduct wrong? Obviously words like "dysfunctional" or "antisocial" are so weak as to be meaningless, but by what standards is it wrong or evil, if religious or moral sanctions are not accepted? Conversely, the killer may well believe that he is acting out of his proper interests, the interests of the predator following his natural destiny by destroying a life that few will miss. By what criteria is he wrong?

Two centuries ago, these questions were addressed by a novelist, political philosopher, and pornographer named the Marquis de Sade, who tore through the spurious complexities of contemporary wisdom to arrive at a great and simple truth: without God, or without something very like traditional religion, there really were no obstacles to prevent an individual from doing whatever he or she wished. Nobody, not Paul, Augustine, Calvin, or Hobbes, had a better sense of the harm that could be wrought by the unchecked forces of the human will, and perhaps none of these writers understood quite as well how inadequate were mere social or legal sanctions in preventing the depredations of the human beast. The processes of nature were based on continuous destruction, and any creature that acted according to principles of sensuous egotism was simply following "nature's fundamental commandment." Sade writes in *Justine*, "The wolf who devours the lamb accomplishes what this common mother designs, just as does the malefactor who destroys the object of his revenge or his lubricity."

For Sade, like Ted Bundy or Dennis Nilsen, the victims were insignificant and their deaths illusory: "Man has not been accorded the power to destroy; he has at best the capacity to alter forms, but lacks that required to annihilate them." Pangs of conscience resulting from such acts were simply the socially instilled products of "an easily subjugated spirit," and they were easily purged by repeated indulgence. What could be more obvious than the relativistic lessons of comparative anthropology, that "what is called crime in France ceases to be crime two hundred leagues away . . . that it is all a matter of opinion and of geography." If one obeyed the promptings of nature without restraint, how could it be wrong to spend one's life devising ever more sophisticated and excruciating ways to cause pain and death, provided that this activity enhanced the pleasure of the strong and enlightened? How, in fact, could anything be wrong or evil?

Like Sade in his day, serial murderers pose difficult questions for contemporary secular society. We know, we feel intuitively, that their conduct is so far removed from the moral norm that they are certainly evil, or what most societies would call evil. And yet it would invite mockery to publish an analysis placing the crimes in this context.

Such questions are all the more pressing now, because in the last year or two political and social debate in the United States has so often been concerned with the issue of violence and its causation. This debate has covered numerous cases, including the notorious kidnapping and murder of Polly Klaas in California and the spate of mass murder sprees in public places, from subway cars and law offices to malls and post offices, as well as traumatic overseas incidents like the kidnapping of a British toddler by two older boys. Each incident produces a predictable range of responses and calls for solutions, for stiffer

sentences and the abolition of parole, for gun control and the involuntary confinement of the mentally disturbed. However, these events also reinforce a lesson from the study of serial killers, that at least a few individuals are not simply dysfunctional or improperly socialized, that their crimes may result from a profound schism with the ordinary run of humanity: perhaps from a form of "inner darkness."

We may not wish to speak of evil and might find it useful to return to a pseudoscientific concept like Jung's "shadow," but it is imperative to recognize the reality and force of the phenomenon, and perhaps even its presence in all of us. In the horrifying news footage of the Los Angeles rioting, and specifically of the attack on Reginald Denny, it became glaringly apparent how very close to the surface of civilized behavior lie the most primitive and animalistic instincts to kill and destroy once the restraints of government and law are removed. And as in the case of serial killers, the Denny attack involved a complete dehumanization of the victim and a reduction of violence to a form of symbolic game or sport. Lest it be thought that these savage qualities have any racial dimension, the Denny example only recapitulated the lessons so often taught by the collective sadism involved in racially motivated lynchings in the

early decades of this century.

Very rarely is the language of sin or evil invoked in the context of crime by any "official" source—whether politicians, administrators, academics, or the mass media—and yet the flourishing mythology of serial murder shows the thirst for such interpretations in popular discourse. Elite and popular responses to crime and violence are divided by an intellectual and cultural chasm of perhaps insuperable proportions. Consequently, policies toward crime and justice will continue to be made in a thoroughly unsystematic and unplanned way, with the richest rewards falling to the most crowd-pleasing measures that legislative demagogues can devise.

When the 20th century began, it was obvious to all educated people that this would be a great age of science and enlightenment. As this bleak age slouches towards its conclusion, it is clear that science has failed either to understand or to subdue the beast within humanity and that the highest form of enlightenment might be to admit this fact. At the very least, let us agree on the failure of language to offer an acceptable terminology for the beast, the darkness, for whatever metaphor we choose to employ for that intuitively obvious reality. If not "evil," what? ◁

CORCYRA MEMORANDA

"Words changed their ordinary meanings and were construed in new senses. Reckless daring passed for the courage of a loyal partisan, far-sighted hesitation was the excuse of a coward, moderation was the pretext of the unmanly, the power to see all sides of a question was complete inability to act. Impulsive rashness was held the mark of a man, caution in conspiracy was a specious excuse for avoiding action."

—Thucydides

If a Cold War corrupts, its cessation corrupts absolutely. The Cold War imposed at least a fear-induced self-restraint, a salutary modesty that there may be no victors. Its ending, however, has led to boastful arrogance in both protagonists. In Russia, there is Zhirinovsky, and the phenomenon may spawn other mini-demagogues. On this side of the ocean, there are the Janet Renos, the gay brigades, and a Queens community school board that wanted to pass a resolution last year proclaiming that "American culture is clearly and unquestionably superior to all foreign or historical cultures." According to a tale in my homeland, only the village idiot asks for official certification that he is a genius. Lake County in Florida has passed a similar resolution.

True, there are no reports yet of a new amendment to the Constitution proclaiming Richard Rorty's superiority over Plato, but something equivalent has appeared in the pages of the French press. The cathedral of Laon, coeval with the ones of Paris, Chartres, Amiens, Reims, etc., is in need of restoration. Euro-Disney, located near Paris, has offered partial financing—provided one of the stained-glass windows will include Mickey and Minnie among the children rushing to be embraced by Christ. Disneyland insists that the window in question should be done by its own designer. The local media speak of "profanation"; they have obviously not read the Queens and Lake County statement of America's cultural superiority.

—Thomas Molnar