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***Body Language:
Reading the Corpse in Forensic Crime Fiction***

“You don’t put your hands inside their ruined bodies and touch and measure their wounds,” I said. “You don’t hear them speak after they’re dead... You spend more time with the killers than with those they ripped from life.”

Patricia Cornwell, *Point of Origin*¹

“Matrices of discomfort, pain, death, and social prohibition separate us, in the twentieth century, from our bodily interiors. A paradox becomes apparent. Modern surgical techniques, the skilled technology of penetrative surgery allied to the apparatus of reproduction on film and photographic plate, have made it possible for us to gain an unparalleled access to scenes of our own interiority. But in similar measure, the taboo still exists and we violate it at some risk...”

Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned*²

Dr Kay Scarpetta, Chief Medical Examiner in Patricia Cornwell’s hugely successful crime series (1990-), sharply distinguishes herself from the conventional homicide investigator. She claims that what her role gives her is privileged access to ‘the real’ as it is embodied in the torn and open body. Although she admits a degree of unfairness in the tirade against Benton Wesley quoted above, there is some force (felt throughout the Scarpetta series) behind her assertion that, whereas she immerses herself in the horrifying reality of the victim’s death, an investigator like Wesley need only look at ‘clean case files and glossy photos and cold crime scenes’ (PO 14). By using a forensic pathologist as her protagonist, Cornwell makes possible a more ‘corporeally sophisticated’ reading of the corpse-as-text, using the body as the evidentiary basis for readings of the crime.³ But more than that, she creates a central intelligence which is empowered to speak directly

¹ Patricia Cornwell, *Point of Origin* ([1998] Time Warner Paperbacks, 2000), 14; hereafter *PO*.

² Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned* (Routledge, 1996), 15.

³ Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*. (Edinburgh University Press, 2001) 31-2.

about the body as witness to truth. Scarpetta's unmediated access to the traumatised corpse endows her with the almost unchallengeable authority that comes with intimate knowledge of the unbearable and unthinkable; she gives voice to what would otherwise remain simply 'unspeakable'.⁴

There are drawbacks to using a forensic pathologist as the protagonist of a crime series. Most obviously hampering is the fact that such a figure has no reason to be directly involved in the pursuit and apprehension of the criminal (although, as Cornwell's novels demonstrate, a writer can find numerous plot contrivances for avoiding this constraint). The advantage, however, is that the forensic pathologist can speak so forcefully for the suffering of the victim, and that she in this respect occupies a role more potent than that of the forensic psychologist, the 'psychological profiler' with his speculative accounts of the mind of the serial killer. The traditional investigative figure may manifest a highly developed ability to enter the mind of the killer. Within the serial killer subgenre, Thomas Harris's Will Graham, for example, possesses a capacity for 'pure empathy' so strong that he can assume any point of view, even those that 'scare and sicken him'. Victims sometimes seem to cry out to Graham ('The very air had screams smeared on it'), but even he cannot pretend to the authority of the medical examiner who has communed with the dead by putting her hands inside the ruined bodies.⁵

Our purpose in this article is to explore the fascination, over the last decade, with crime narratives that centre on the figure of the forensic pathologist. Principally this involves a reading of Cornwell's Scarpetta series. However, there is a growing number of other novels that confront readers with the 'reality' of the dead body. In some cases (for example, Kathy Reichs and Priscilla Masters) writers use, as Cornwell does, the figure of the forensic pathologist; in other instances, such as Nicci French's *The Red Room* (2001) and Jan Burke's *Bones* (1999), the female protagonist's reading of the crime is determined by alternative forms of first-hand access to the 'underworld' of the

⁴ See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (MIT Press, 1996) 166-68: 'for one cannot challenge the trauma of another.'

⁵ Thomas Harris, *Red Dragon* ([1981] Arrow, 1993) 154-5; 12; hereafter *RD*.

grave or autopsy room, such as that of the crime journalist or criminal psychologist.⁶ In contrast to the kind of police procedural novel that gives centre-stage to the psyche of the serial killer, the forensic pathology novel aims instead to evoke the ‘appalling human messiness’ of actual crime⁷ through a perspective nearer to that of the victim. By providing readers with not only a body of experts but an expert on the body the novelist allows them to listen to the voices of the dead.

This form of investigative empowerment, however, can also be a source of danger to the investigator’s own sense of self. One of our aims is to explore the ways in which several of these texts cross generic boundaries, moving from investigative crime fiction into the more ambiguous territory of the gothic. Cornwell is often praised for her ‘nail-biting realism’, the ‘accuracy and expertise’ that she herself attributes to working for the Virginia Chief Medical Examiner’s Office. The dark flavour of her novels emerges from the fact that these descriptive powers are used to catalogue so unremittingly the details of the autopsy room, producing the text’s sense of obsessive and intimate contact with the unspeakable ‘real’. While the gruesome *objets d’arts* left behind by each killer cannot talk, they are inherently denotative in ways that no living human is. Each body provides an individual pathway to the abyss of violence and death, and with every *mise en abîme* there is an inevitable communion. The dead body inspires in the living protagonist nightmares of self-division, of gothic doubling and boundaries violated.

Analysis of attitudes that have, historically, prevailed towards the act of anatomising helps to explain the ways in which, in contemporary crime fiction, the body becomes the site of alternative readings and competing discourses. As Jonathan Sawday

⁶ It is also increasingly the case that, even where there is no direct access to such scenes, the narrative of a female protagonist will be interspersed (as it is, say, in some earlier Nicci French or in some of Minette Walters’ novels) with reports on forensics and crime scenes. Priscilla L. Walton and Manina Jones, in *Detective Agency: Women Re-Writing the Hard-Boiled Tradition* (University of California Press, 1999) 268-9, briefly consider the broader, Cornwell-inspired, development of a distinctively 90s subgenre in which there is a female investigator involved in a serial killer murder mystery. With the exception of Kathy Reichs’ heroine, however, the protagonists in the novels of the various Cornwell imitators touched on by Walton and Jones are in fact generally not themselves forensic pathologists, but rather, say, District Attorneys or Assistant DAs (in the novels of Christine McGuire, Nancy Taylor Rosenberg and Linda Fairstein), members of law firms (Lisa Scottoline’s novels) and so on.

⁷ Patricia Cornwell, *The Last Precinct* ([2000] Time Warner Paperbacks, 2001) 60-2; hereafter *LP*.

suggests, the role of those involved in dissection and anatomization has always been a complex and contradictory one. ‘Dissection’ doesn’t just suggest an act of delicately separating the body’s structures; it also refers to a violent act of partition, to a brutal reduction or dismemberment. ‘Anatomy’, similarly, carries destructive suggestions. In literature, both terms are associated with the methods of the satirist; both contain ‘a constant potential for violence’. Anatomizing and autopsy require of the surgeon that he (the figure has historically been male) engage in the transgressive act of looking into the bodily interior, and ‘the human body - especially the dead human body – is an object still surrounded by taboos and prohibitions’. During rise of the modern medicine prohibitions that have persisted from earlier cultures have been invoked by the reverent or evaded by the scientific and they are apparent even under our own ‘technological regime of the body.’⁸

Kay Scarpetta’s heated defence of her investigative methodology is echoed near the end of *Point of Order* when she thinks of how she has heard screams of rage and pain and blame ‘because I had dared to touch the wounds’ (*PO* 234). Whereas the first Scarpetta books are more thriller than noir, Cornwell builds her later, darker narratives around a series of ‘offences’ of which the forensic pathologist can be accused. These include scientific arrogance, official insensitivity, voyeuristic fascination, and even violent proclivities. During the course of the first few novels of the series, an accumulation of dead friends and violent experiences shapes Scarpetta as a hardened veteran. But she also, in less predictable ways, comes to be on ever more intimate terms with the transgressions she professionally investigates, and the later fiction has less to do with the impartial observation of homicide than with the disquiet provoked by what remains. Dissolution of identity is, it seems, the price the pathologist pays for trespassing in the realm of the dead.

⁸ See Sawday 1, 182ff and 269. Menippean or Varronian satire, represented by Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, uses the idea of anatomy in this way.

The Wound Culture and the Serial Killer Narrative

Trends in crime fiction are, of course, only one indication of a pervasive fascination with the spectacle of the traumatised body. The idea of the late 20th century as a ‘wound culture’ has gained wide currency. In the 90s in particular, physical wounding and psychological trauma have been chief amongst our cultural preoccupations and the ‘cult of abjection’ has been a defining feature of the decade’s artistic and literary theory.⁹ There is, Hal Foster argues in *The Return of the Real*, a sense of ‘a symbolic order in crisis’ and a tendency to see the truth of contemporary culture as residing in the traumatic or abject subject. Anxiety about invasive disease and death, particularly the AIDS crisis, recession, systemic poverty and rapid technological advance alongside violent crime have all played a part: ‘the articulation of these different forces is difficult, yet together they drive the contemporary concern with trauma and abjection.’ In art, theory, and popular culture, he argues, there has been a tendency to redefine both individual and historical experience in terms of trauma, and to see ‘the real’ as ‘a thing of trauma.’¹⁰ Foster’s analysis is focused on abject art, which, like surrealism before it, can be seen as working over the shocks of an anxiety-ridden society. The concept of abjection as a central theoretical impulse has been abundantly apparent in literary studies as well, evident, for example, in studies of gothic fiction and horror films, and in the currency of the ideas of Bataille and Kristeva (in particular, her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*).

The relevance of such ideas to the crime fiction of any period is apparent, given that most crime novels are likely to involve violation of boundaries, threats to established structures of meaning and the centrality of the corpse – the corpse given over to objecthood being amongst the main images of abjection.¹¹ The extreme conditions present in scenes of dead bodies or damaged body parts are the sine qua non of the

⁹ See, e.g., Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-feminine* (Routledge, 1993), 10-15; Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (Routledge, 1998) 109-10; and Foster 166

¹⁰ Foster, 152-66. Amongst the ‘abject art’ discussed by Foster is the work of Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Robert Gober, John Miller, Mike Kelley; and an exhibition such as *Abject Art. Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, at the Whitney Museum in 1993. Foster (152) points out that on several fronts in contemporary art there has been a battle waged to evoke the real.

¹¹ Foster 149. Other ‘abject materials’ that the taboo-violating artist can incorporate include, for example, dirt, dead animals, rotting food and such bodily wastes as blood, vomit and excrement.

murder story. The body can, of course, in classic detective fiction, be sanitised, ‘sacrificial’, possessing a reassuring corporeal integrity that is ‘a talisman against death’s fragmentation and dissolution’; but the scenes of late twentieth-century crime fiction are more likely to be strewn with ‘semiotic’ bodies, fragmented, grotesque, gruesome – the body as the ‘uncontainable excess’ of the abject, turned inside out, ‘the subject literally abjected, thrown out.’ Physical violation images the fragility of all our boundaries, and this breaking down of borders (of the body, the law, social orderings) is part of the very structure of the transgressive crime novel. Death infects life; we experience both repulsion and fascination, an unnerving dissolution of meaning but at the same time a sense that trauma guarantees the subject and gives it a kind of absolute authority. In crime fiction as in trauma discourse more generally, ‘the subject is evacuated and elevated at once.’¹²

The subgenre of crime fiction that has most obviously reflected late twentieth century ‘trauma culture’ is the serial killer novel,¹³ which opens to our gaze the wounded psyche of the killer whose aberrations are expressed in the wounds he inflicts on others. In its most common form, this is a narrative in which the reader’s attention is primarily fixed on the horrifyingly exposed mind of a killer who ‘redistributes’ his own pain by refashioning the bodies of his victims in the image of his own psychic wounds, or (in narrative terms) makes the body of his victim speak the language of his own psychosis: for example, the dark parodies of family life constructed by the homicidal couple in Ellroy’s *LA Confidential*, who act out their obsessions by ‘killing and building hybrid children’¹⁴; or Francis Dolarhyde in *Red Dragon*, furthering ‘the majesty of [his] Becoming’ by filming his murder scenes, and sure that Lecter would also understand ‘the unreality of the people who die to help you in these things’ (*RD* 96). Some of the most effectively disturbing serial killer novels stay within the mind of the killer – Bret Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho* (1991), for example, Joyce Carol Oates’ *Zombie* (1995), or Poppy Z. Brite’s *Exquisite Corpse* (1996). More commonly (and more likely to be

¹² Plain 33ff; Foster 148-9 and 168.

¹³ Novels in the serial killer subgenre have proliferated since the late 70s or early 80s. The best discussion of the fascination with serial killers in relation to American culture is Seltzer’s *Wound Culture*, in which he argues that the public fascination with the wound extends to torn and opened psyches as well as bodies.

¹⁴ James Ellroy, *L.A. Confidential* ([1990] Arrow, 1994) 466-7.

shelved with crime fiction), there is the serial killer narrative that is either wholly investigative in structure or that is set up as a dual narrative: on the one hand, the script of the serial killer himself, with its larger-than-life elements of gothic romance; on the other, the script of the profiler, explicatory ‘fact’ set against the killer’s own fantasies, often a fairly reductive script in which childhood abuse and neglect are almost the sole explanations of the adult killer.

Profilers of real-life serial killers, like Ressler and Shachtman, argue that the ‘typical’ motivational structure of the serial killer is founded on two basic themes, ‘the dominance of a fantasy life and a history of personal abuse.’¹⁵ Within the serial killer novel, this received wisdom corresponds to the gothic tendency to obscure the boundary between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’. The implied duality stands behind a concept of the figure of the killer as a hybrid, part damaged human being, part monster – the latter a descendant of the supernatural and vampiric characters of gothic fiction, and sometimes, like Francis Dolarhyde, constructing his self-image around a romantic linkage of criminal acts with art and divinity.¹⁶ This pattern is particularly prominent, of course, in Harris’s more famous creation, Hannibal Lecter, humanised by innumerable small details and by the account in *Hannibal* of his childhood traumas, but at the same time defiantly resistant to the commonplaces of the profiler. Lecter adds to the professional discourse about the typical patterns of the serial killer, but is himself adamantly ‘untypical’ and unquantifiable - a mythic monster and an artist, the Grand Guignol of his crimes combining with an aesthetics of murder so darkly humorous that we find it hard to resist the force of the satirist’s art that produces the elaborate, precisely crafted tableau of the hunter and deer or recreates in Pazzi’s death the image of his ancestor, having first carefully traced the linkage in art ‘since antiquity’ of avarice and hanging.¹⁷

¹⁵ Philip L. Simpson, *Psycho paths : tracking the serial killer through contemporary American film and fiction* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2000) 128; Robert K. Ressler with Tom Shachtman, *I Have Lived in the Monster* (Mass Market Paperback, St. Martin’s Press, 1998) 4.

¹⁶ This is well-discussed in Simpson’s chapter (13-25), ‘The Serial Killer Subgenre and Its Conventions’.

¹⁷ Thomas Harris, *Hannibal* ([1999] Arrow, 2000) 356ff and 229-33.

Lecter's gallery of victims is a high art form of one of the defining traits (profilers and crime writers agree) of serial killers, the objectification of the victim. As Dolanhyde reflects, he can bear the screams of his victims 'as a sculptor bears dust from the beaten stone' (*RD* 96). Like 'John Doe' in David Fincher's *Se7en*, Lecter differs from the run of serial killers in his close attention to the appropriateness of particular fates to individual victims. The more usual pattern, in texts and films as in life, would seem to involve a killer for whom the victim has no independent individual existence. As Oates' Quentin P. says of his ill-fated efforts to refashion his victims, 'A true ZOMBIE would be mine forever...His eyes would be open & clear but there would be nothing inside them *seeing* & nothing behind them *thinking*'.¹⁸ Mark Seltzer, in *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture*, notes that the 'normal' image would be of the killer's compulsive expulsion of his own interior state in the act of violence he inflicts on the victim – an 'emptying' of himself on to the mutilated body which entails a perception of all victims as essentially the same. The victim is given a 'symbolic value' that requires 'anonymity and abstractness'.¹⁹ For readers of the crime novel, our sense of narrative resolution depends on our gaining knowledge of this compulsive mind: 'Implicating the viewer into the criminal mind-set occupies an ascendant position in the serial killer narrative...'²⁰

The forensic crime novel must also, of course, establish by the end the mind-set of the killer, just as the psychological profiler who is the solving intelligence in other forms of serial killer novel must, generally speaking, establish the identity of the killer's victims. In forensic crime fiction, however, this line of enquiry is brought to the fore, and the emphasis changes from the fantasies or the 'art' of the killer to the 'real' of the victim - to the unanswerable authority of 'the traumatic subject'.²¹ We are brought closer to the horrifying 'thingness' of the gothic body than to the monstrous aberrations of the deranged mind, and it is the implications of this shift that we are examining in this paper. In our final section, as we move towards a fuller analysis of recent Patricia Cornwell

¹⁸ Joyce Carol Oates, *Zombie* (Plume Books, 1995) 169.

¹⁹ Seltzer 186.

²⁰ Simpson 74.

²¹ Foster 168.

novels, we will look in more detail at the involvement of her protagonist in the taboo-violating work of anatomical investigation, the increasingly gothic nature of her narratives, the attendant shifts in narrative structure and the growing sense that narrative resolutions are thrown into question by the fact that some bodies (of Scarpetta herself and of those close to her) are ultimately unreadable. First, however, we want to look briefly at other ways in which female agency and subjectivity are destabilised in the novels of some of the 90s forensic crime writers whose work has been influenced by Cornwell.

Reading the Corpse in a Male-Scripted World

Much recent criticism has analysed the ways in which, in feminist rewritings of crime fiction, female agency and subjectivity are both brought to the fore and problematized. Priscilla L. Watson and Marina Jones, for example, in *Detective Agency*, think in terms of what they call (borrowing from Foucault) ‘reverse discourse’, that is, the female-authored crime novel as a critique that works by reproducing the male formula with strategic differences, exploring ‘positions of resistance and agency’ that have traditionally been unavailable to women.²² This female empowerment, however, can be undermined by male killer and male establishment alike. Although a female series protagonist is not *really* likely to end up as a victim, death and dismemberment are routinely threatened (the investigator as ‘the next victim’ being standard plot element in female-protagonist crime fiction), and her independence as a narrator/interpreter of events is repeatedly called into question, either because she is patently being manipulated by the killer or because she is ultimately complicit with the male power structure. Indeed, a woman’s greater vulnerability and her efforts to avoid the acquiescence ‘naturally’ expected of her come to be amongst the most predictable elements in the narrative structure.

The novels considered in this section – by Kathy Reichs, Priscilla Masters and Jan Burke – all centre on the compromising of female agency and on female resistance to

²² Walton and Jones 92-9.

male-scripted narratives. The most frequently discussed of these narrative tensions has probably been that between a feminist perspective and the ‘hard masculine edge of old-fashioned policing’ – the female investigator charged with ultimately acting in subservience to a male-dominated system of retributive justice.²³ It is clear that ‘reverse discourse’ in itself is not necessarily subversive, and one of the things that most obviously alters what Foucault calls ‘the field of force relations’ is the tendency in many such narratives to move towards a resolution in which the achievement of the female protagonist is, ultimately, to re-establish and secure male authority. In spite of the scope there is for engendering female agency, the protagonist does not ultimately deconstruct phallogocentric ideologies.²⁴

A standard argument with respect to feminist detective novel generally is to do with the question of whether an investigator’s search for knowledge, the interpretation of signs and clues, is inherently masculine, or whether a feminist crime writer can undo this gender binary by privileging women’s voices and by positing a ‘subjective, involved, empathic kind of knowing (different from the objective, distanced knowledge which is the masculine epistemological ideal).’²⁵ As in the police procedural generally, there is a convention by which any protagonist, male or female, can be a ‘maverick’, and in the feminist novel the different kinds of knowing can obviously be a key element in defining – or distinguishing – the protagonist. In Kathy Reich’s first novel, *Déjà Dead*, for example, the protagonist, Tempe Brennan, perceives herself throughout as mocked and hindered by the male policemen with whom she has to work – until her theories about the crime are vindicated, when she receives a letter not registering the formal complaint she expects but acknowledging that ‘You are right. No one should die in anonymity. Thanks to you, these women did not.’²⁶

²³ Plain 224-5.

²⁴ Walton and Jones 92-9, quoting Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (Vintage, 1990) 100-01 and Alison Littler, ‘Marele Day’s “Cold Hard Bitch”: The Masculinist Imperatives of the Private-Eye Genre,’ *Journal of Narrative Technique* 21 (1991) 133.

²⁵ Sabine Vanacker, ‘V. I. Warshawski, Kinsey Millhone and Kay Scarpetta: Creating a Feminist Detective Hero,’ in *Criminal Proceedings: The Contemporary American Crime Novel*, ed. Peter Messent (Pluto Press, 1997) 78-9. Vanacker cites feminist epistemologists who in examining gender polarities have insisted on the ‘masculinity’ of the search for knowledge as part of phallogocentric Western culture.

²⁶ Kathy Reichs, *Deja Dead* (Arrow, 1998) 509; hereafter *DD*.

A more intricate variation on the gender conflict is to be found in a recent British forensic pathology novel, Priscilla Masters' *A Fatal Cut* (2000), the protagonist of which is a pathologist whose 'female narrative capability' has been undermined by the male medical establishment. Not only has she accepted her place in a male-dominated hierarchy of power, but in deploying her medical skills she has sought to model herself on 'male' ideals of objectivity and detachment. In her work as a forensic pathologist, Karys Harper has trained herself to act in conformity to her image of the rational masculine intellect, eschewing the intuitive, empathic approach associated with the feminine.²⁷ *A Fatal Cut* is a feminist crime novel that ends by removing the protagonist from the forensic pathology subgenre. It leaves her resolving to pursue more life-enhancing work as a GP, after an early career blighted by the false narratives of male doctors or sham doctors: the error (the 'fatal cut') of an older surgeon has been covered up in the official story of the patient's death; an arrogant young medical student (Lewisham), now a forensic psychiatrist, fills the role of profiler and claims superior power by virtue of the fact that he alone is able to enter the mind of the killer; the killer himself, the most dangerous of Karys' antagonists, acts out a macabre imitation of the medical profession, wreaking revenge for the death of his father in the botched operation. Karys is haunted by the 'fatal cut' not only because she was involved in a cover-up but because she was led by Lewisham to think herself responsible. In consequence, she has turned to pathology, not trusting herself to work with the living. Even in this she feels that Lewisham, with his 'pathologically dominant personality' (*FC* 42-3), has been watching her, influencing her, penetrating her secret thoughts, stopping her from feeling secure in her own independent competence and judgement. Her habit of masochistically punishing herself for male lies and errors is paralleled by the movement of the narrative towards a climactic scene in which she herself becomes the near-victim of the surgeon-killer.

The meeting of criminal and pathologist over the outstretched corpse and the employment by the forensic pathologist of the techniques of the surgeon on an already-

²⁷ Priscilla Masters, *A Fatal Cut* (Pan, 2001) 75; hereafter *FC*.

dead body generate many of the recurrent plot complexities in the forensic pathology novel. In Masters' novel, her protagonist's decision to stop doing post-mortems speaks of the unease associated with the whole activity of working on dead bodies: even the novel's surgeon-killer would find it shaming to associate himself with the work of someone cutting up corpses ('Cold corpses felt wrong' because he associated them with the post-mortem rather than surgery). From the pathologist's point of view, the most radically disturbing fact is that she and the killer have 'shared the corpses, handled the same body' (*FC* 207 and 157). Vis-à-vis the corpse, both enter into a relationship of domination and surrender; in seeking narrative closure, the pathologist can only fully reclaim the victim by re-imagining the last moments of her life, which only the serial killer has done before. Like the killer himself, the pathologist can only construct the identity of the corpse through her own interpretive mechanism. There can in addition be, for the pathologist, an alarming sense of being manipulated by the killer - 'He was controlling her' and, as the case develops, her own mind is invaded with 'awful clarity' by the image of the killer's relationship with the corpses they share (*FC* 158). This has obvious affinities with the profiler's worrying entry into the mind of the psychopath, but here there is a quite different focus – first cutting into and then scripting the body of the victim, the acts which are, in narrative terms as well, the chief acts of opening and closure.

The killer's and pathologist's angles of vision can, of course, be combined to create parallel narratives, as in Jan Burke's *Bones*, a variant on the forensic pathology novel. Combining a female journalist (Irene Kelly, her series protagonist) and male forensic anthropologists, *Bones* is structured by the interaction of the killer and the investigative reporter around the site of the dead body. Irene's only contact with the body is that she is part of the expedition that sets out to locate the victims of a known killer (already under arrest, but accompanying them with a view to controlling the way in which his acts will be publicised: 'He allowed himself to be caught so that the world would know what a genius he is'.²⁸ The novel keeps our attention focused on competing interpretations of

²⁸ Jan Burke, *Bones* ([1999] Signet, 2001) 270-1.

the corpse and on the continuing, often effective efforts of the killer to contain the investigators within his own narrative constructs.

Burke's novel brings to the fore female resistance to the narrative of the serial killer. She is trying to construct a metanarrative which, to be comprehensible, must also constitute a reading of the script produced by the killer. Shifting between the perspective of killer and heroine, *Bones* provides a particularly explicit example of the preoccupation in the female-centred pathology novel with countering the myth-making of the male serial killer novel. Irene defies her newspaper editor, throwing a computer through his office window (*Bones* 253-4) when asked to pander to the voyeuristic fascination of visitors who are romanticising the killer and casting her in the role of heroine who grappled with larger-than-life charming serial killer. Against the killer-centred narrative of psychological profiling and pop journalism, *Bones* sets decayed bodies, a bomb blast and nightmare images of total disintegration – a dream of 'standing in a field of pieces of men', trying to reassemble the body parts and being assailed by 'the stench of the real meadow, the death smell, growing stronger and stronger...' (*Bones* 229). Narrative closure is achieved when a final showdown leaves the killer paralysed, alive but totally silenced and immobilised, saved 'on behalf of [his] victims' (*Bones* 414) and no longer able to impose his narrative on their lives and deaths.

Here, then, as in numerous other forensic pathology narratives, the sources of instability and contradiction are to do with the simultaneously official and taboo nature of forensic pathology itself. The narrative tensions created are to do both with the pathologist's intimate contact with the corpse and with the restoration of narrative order, each of which generates its own characteristic narrative pattern. The interpretations put forward by a forensic pathologist can, as we have seen, suggest comparisons with the coercive narratives of the official machinery of law and order: a female protagonist, whatever resistance she shows to a male establishment, might be accused of ultimate subservience: when she contributes to the restoration of order, she is speaking in a voice that is conditioned and contained by the patriarchal structures within which the forensic pathologist must operate. Looked at in another

way, however, scripting someone else's pain and death (as the pathologist does when she provides her version of the crime) might be seen as alarmingly close to what the killer himself does in forcing his own meanings on the dead: pathologist and killer both dissect the body and impose a narrative on it. When Kathy Reich's Tempe Brennan confronts a body that has been 'dumped, naked and mutilated, stripped of everything that linked it to life', she is uncomfortably aware that in order to construct her narrative she must 'plunder' a once-living person's dignity, that her investigations will add 'to the list of violations that he or she will suffer' and that the unspeaking and unspeakable corpse has no status and no way of influencing the final narrative except as 'part of the evidence' (*DD* 18-20).

Theatres of Blood

As a crime narrative moves towards the gothic, these unwelcome affinities between investigator and killer tend to develop into much more extended and unsettling narratives of doubling. The intimate contact the forensic pathologist has with the corpse means that her 'othering' can even be more extreme than that of the detective/profiler, carrying her beyond the bounds of normal society towards the taboo-violation and voyeuristic display that have, historically, brought infamy to the transgressive probing of the human interior. Within crime fiction, this is a crossing over into shadowy territory, a land of the dead that has the potential for undermining both identity and resolution.

The increased component of body horror in contemporary crime fiction has brought the genre much closer into contact with its gothic roots. With the emergence of crime fiction as a separate genre in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century, gothic excess tended to recede in the interests of realism. If one looks, for example, at earlier transgressor-protagonist fiction, like the mid-century novels of Jim Thompson, there is an admixture of the surreal and the grotesque, but these tend to be elements belonging to climactic scenes of violent confrontation or self-destruction – the dismemberment that takes place in the final pages of *Savage Night*, or the castration that ends *A Hell of a*

Woman. In 90s crime fiction, on the other hand, one more often encounters a wholly gothic form of serial killer novel, in which body horror is the substance of much of the narrative rather than just the culmination of an action that is spiralling out of control. An extreme example of this tendency is Poppy Z Brite's AIDS-infested horror story *Exquisite Corpse*, in which the multiple murderers are distinctly vampiric, particularly in the first-person narrative of a serial killer who has escaped from prison by slowing down all of his bodily functions to such an extent that he is able to pass for dead (the Penguin editor complained of Brite's tendency to see her killers as 'admirable, almost vampire-like' characters). *Exquisite Corpse* culminates in a scene presented from the perspective of Tran, a victim of evisceration who is conscious as the cold blade twists inside him and his blood pools warmly beneath him. But this is not just a climactic spectacle of the traumatised body. Throughout the novel, the extremity of body horror is so great that Brite only with difficulty found a publisher.²⁹

Within more mainstream (more readily publishable and more widely popular) serial killer fiction, the gothicizing of the crime narrative is generally handled a little more cautiously. The novels of Thomas Harris, particularly *Hannibal*, have marked gothic tendencies, but they are held in check in various ways. So, for example, for Clarice Starling to be drawn into Hannibal Lecter's gothic world is a very different kind of affair from the relationship that leads Tran to his grisly death in *Exquisite Corpse*. In keeping with his habit of transforming the bodies of his victims into works of art, Lecter surrounds Clarice's entry into his life with a protective shell of high culture: when he initiates her into his perverse tastes, the act of cannibalism is disguised as *haute cuisine*; their escape together is into an exile of fine restaurants and opera. In his self-appointed role as her therapist, Lecter makes Clarice literally confront her father - by presenting her with his disinterred corpse - but this is no 'semiotic corpse.' It is instead an entirely clean and orderly skeleton, carefully arranged, clear in its significance - the bones 'composed on a twin bed...in low relief beneath the white cover, like a child's snow angel' (*Hannibal* 526). In a female-authored serial killer novel like Jan Burke's *Bones*

²⁹ See Brite's web site (<http://www.poppyzbrite.com/bio.html>): Neither her US publisher, Dell, nor her UK publisher, Penguin, would accept the manuscript, due to its 'extreme' content.

some of the distancing techniques are not dissimilar to those used by Harris to maintain a more comfortable distance from gothic horror. In spite of an abundance of gruesome detail, Burke's tone is lightened, for example, by the comic macabre scenes in which we share the perspective of a killer created as a parody of the anatomist, singing 'Dem Bones' to himself as he wields his circular saw (*Bones* 259-60). Because she is a journalist, Burke's heroine comes into far less intimate contact with the novel's corpses than would a pathologist: she stands at the edge of the burial pit, but the body itself remains in its body bag. In contrast to narratives centring on a protagonist who must herself 'touch the wounds', there is no unsettling descent into unmediated horror.

In the autopsy theatre of a protagonist who is herself a forensic pathologist, scenes of body horror bear much closer comparison to the grotesquery of *Brite*, rendered more 'acceptable' only by virtue of the shift in perspective (clinician rather than cannibal). As Sawday suggests, however, the sanitising of anatomy in the modern autopsy facility does little to remove the taboo. Autoptic procedures and autopsy reports on the causes of death are still in their own way violations of the privacy of the dead body, producing it in the public arena – an 'invitation to voyeurism'. There has always been, as Sawday demonstrates, this side to anatomical investigations. The sheer violence of the procedures link them with the criminal act – the autoptic dismemberment a further, brutal reduction of the body into constituent parts. What's more, such work has an inescapable public dimension. Even if the work of the Chief Medical Examiner does not take place in front of an audience (though it sometimes does), it is a fully documented record of the mutilation of the corpse, and hence a recreation of the spectacle of bodily violence. In the time of early modern anatomical investigation, the 'economy of domination and surrender, flowing between corpse and dissector' was also a public activity, an act 'of peering and prying which [took] place before an audience,' and there was intense suspicion of what could be seen as 'the voyeuristic manipulation of dead bodies' (it was probably, Sawday speculates, the presence of a taboo that made it possible to demand an entry fee to this kind of display).³⁰ The more graphic the representation of anatomical

³⁰ Sawday 80-4. What we are seeing here are the contradictions of a role that in some ways replicates that of the criminal executioner: as Sawday says (80), apropos anatomy and vivisection, there was very little

investigation, the closer the anatomist's reduction of wholeness and his intrusion into 'essential interior secrecy' comes to pornographic representation. Indeed, much stronger taboos have surrounded anatomical investigations than have surrounded 'indecent' or 'obscene' material: 'Once the body has been represented and feminized, it is "consumed" in a way which is directly comparable to the reproduction and consumption of sexualised images of the female by men.'³¹

The aspect of anatomy that has historically served to distinguish it from merely violent or sensational intimacy with the corpse has been ritual. For the pathologist, the ritual element is something that functions to achieve distance, 'a symbolic attempt to stand aside from the corpse,'³² a form of propitiation, even a way of transforming the privileged gaze of the anatomist into the vision of the hierophant. Within the crime novel, this aspect of forensic pathology is often present: in *Final Cut*, for example, Masters' protagonist, struggling to retain her sense of being 'a scientific observer, detached, impartial', readies herself for the post-mortem she is about to perform on a murdered body by standing 'with her gloved hands clasped together, as though praying' (*FC* 17). The effect, however, is not simply propitiatory. There are sinister echoes of this ritual in the 'grotesque masquerade' (*FC* 165) of *Final Cut*'s surgeon-killer. The ceremonies of the serial killer, solemnising the grisly fantasies of the deviant artist, find uncomfortable parallels in the medical figure who mediates between exterior and interior worlds and seems, in Sawday's phrase, to enjoy 'the iconic status of the artist (or the visionary).'³³ The pathologist's ritualised approach to the body is mirrored by the serial killer's use of ritual to transform the violence inflicted on the body into an inscription of his own symbolic order, and by his tendency to leave the body displayed, carefully arranged for viewing in his own 'theatre of blood'.

The forensic pathology novel can use these disconcerting connections to build narrative tension, and, by ultimately restoring a binary opposition, can bring about

distance 'between the ritual of execution and the opening of the body to knowledge', and anatomists 'were very much aware of the conjunction between their science and the executioner's skill...'

³¹ Sawday 11-13ff.

³² Sawday 82-3.

³³ Sawday 269.

narrative resolution. The fictional forensic pathologist, like the objective historical anatomist, presents herself as engaged in an effort to restore human dignity, but the juxtaposition of the art of the pathologist with the art of the serial killer rarely produces simple contrasts. So, for example, Kathy Reichs' *Déjà Dead* returns repeatedly to the rituals of death. Brennan is disturbingly aware of the violations involved in her occupation: in her autopsy room the victim is reduced to evidence and subjected to the intrusive gaze of the investigator, 'handled, scrutinized, and photographed,' put 'on display for police, pathologists, forensic specialists, lawyers, and, eventually, jurors' (*DD* 20). The unvaryingly methodical way in which this is done - 'Right wrist. Left wrist. Right knee. Left knee...I emptied each bag and arranged the contents in anatomical order.' (*DD* 153) - means that the 'offence' of intimacy with the corpse is, in Reich's hugely detailed autoptic scenes, brought within the ordered rituals of scientific investigation. Reichs also, however, makes Brennan grimly aware that her work involves the inevitable reduction of the victim's humanity. The grotesqueness of the abject corpse and of the surgical procedures in themselves adds to the monstrous, dehumanising effect of the autopsy scene. The pathologist is unable to reassemble a truly ordered human form, instead achieving an effect reminiscent of Hans Bellmer's abject doll figures³⁴ - 'The six bloody pieces had been placed in correct anatomical order, but the angles were slightly off, turning her into a life-sized version of one of those plastic dolls designed to be twisted into distorted positions' (*DD* 45). The tension in the autopsy scenes between scientific control and macabre suggestion gives them a strongly gothic flavour, increased by the fact that the rituals of the autopsy table are shadowed by the rituals of the killer himself, which come increasingly to the fore as the novel nears its conclusion.³⁵

In the recent novels of Patricia Cornwell, the relationship between the pathologist and the corpse can come to be amongst the most intimate, even maternal of encounters. By applying medical science to the description of the body, the forensic pathologist in a sense produces the body - both as a specific human being and as an embodiment of larger cultural anxieties - and this arguably relates to a

³⁴For online images of Bellmer's dolls, see, e.g., http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/bellmer_hans.html.

³⁵The killer's rituals include, for example, the torture of a victim by the raping of her with a statuette of the Virgin Mary (*DD* 76).

gendered contrast in the investigative serial killer novel, that is, between male (mind-centred) and female (body-centred) versions of the subgenre. In the one case, what is sought is knowledge of the traumatised human psyche under the monstrous self-projection of the serial killer; in the other, the human identity of the victim, which must be produced by an act of recreation that begins with the body in its a decayed or fragmented state. It is a contrast that's very evident in the metaphoric structure of each type of investigation. So, for example, the pattern in which the investigator seeks to explicate the structures of the killer's mind is well illustrated in the Thomas Harris series both by Will Graham and by the in many ways 'masculine'³⁶ Clarice Starling. The images associated with Starling's investigations in *Silence of the Lambs* are characteristic. When she has her sudden realisation that Buffalo Bill has been seriously trained to sew the revelation is couched in very male terms: 'Problem-solving is hunting; it is savage pleasure...'³⁷

The opposing model is much more often associated with maternal images. So, for example, Scarpetta's niece Lucy, with her tough-guy ethos, is shown as lacking the readiness or ability to understand the human emotions and lives of those viewed as 'naked, opened-up' bodies on the autopsy table.³⁸ Scarpetta herself, on the other hand, is frequently imaged in maternal ways (nurturing Lucy, though she has no children of her own), in her autopsy theatre a figure who makes possible the rebirth of the victim - a new life story and identity for the 'abhuman' corpse. She often devotes her efforts to recovering the identity and the narratives of female victims - in *From Potter's Field* (1995), for example, finding the actual identity of Jane Doe is the key to the plot - 'reconstructing a life from a tin whistle and rags'; or, with a known victim, like Beryl Madison in *Body of Evidence*, moving beyond her official sphere to retrieve the victim's autobiographical manuscript.³⁹ Scenes in the autopsy

³⁶ Starling is only 'penetrated' by Lecter at the very end of *Hannibal*.

³⁷ Thomas Harris, *Silence of the Lambs* ([1988] Arrow, 1990) 307; hereafter *SL*.

³⁸ Patricia Cornwell, *Black Notice* ([1999] Time Warner Paperbacks, 2000) 71-2; hereafter *BN*.

³⁹ Patricia Cornwell, *From Potter's Field* ([1995] Time Warner Paperbacks, 2000) 113. In instances such as these, Scarpetta is giving voice to the silenced female victim, but the imagery is much the same when her task involves a male corpse - the abject corpse, whatever its biological sex, having strong feminine

suite often resemble events in a kind of macabre delivery room. In *Black Notice*, for example, the first quarter of the novel is dominated by Scarpetta's efforts to rescue 'Container Man' from the non-being of the state in which he is first found, 'slop[ping] around in dead juice' (BN 32). Taken to Scarpetta's examination rooms, he awaits rebirth into his former self: she doesn't 'have room to keep anyone forever', but will 'hold him' until she can confer an identity on him – wishing 'the heaviness inside me would lift' (BN 85-6; 94). Whereas the profiler risks immersion in the mind of a killer, Scarpetta feels that her most important connexion is to a 'defenceless' body that is 'hardly recognizable as human' (BN 99); assisted by Marino, a kind of grotesque mid-wife figure, she will labour over him until she can produce something recognizably human from his 'autolyzed and putrefied' corpse.

Illegible Interiors

The forensic pathologist engaged in reconstructing the victim's suffering and identity must (for the narrative to move towards closure) bring the abject back within the symbolic order. The resolution of the crime novel most often makes instrumental and admonitory use of its grim material, evoking disgust with the crime committed, registering breakdowns of order which might be remediable – that require action, if only condemnation. To this end, the forensic pathologist has in effect to reconstitute a narrative by reassembling the fragmented body parts – recontaining the horror, reconstructing the abject body, negotiating amongst different possible scriptings of the victim's fate, reincorporating the body within a narrative structure that will rescue it from abjection. The work of the forensic pathologist (like that of the anatomist historically) can be presented as 'a reinscription of order', a stay against the chaos and misrule that brought the body to the autopsy table. The pathologist is constantly having to negotiate the border between the unspeakable corpse and that which is articulable. The confrontation with decomposition must be followed by an act of composition: the

associations, and the anatomised body (escaping its boundary and allowing its 'tokens of interiority' to emerge) having generally been constructed as female. See Seltzer 8-9 and Sawday 182.

pathologist is charged with bringing the narrative back from the horror of non-being and non-meaning to stability and reasonable form.⁴⁰

In the more recent fiction of Patricia Cornwell, this restorative movement, the pathologist's reinscription of order, seems increasingly difficult. As in Reichs, involvement with the protagonist's inner struggles is intensified by first-person narration, but Cornwell darkens the macabre atmosphere of the autopsy room, and builds more on the taboo nature of anatomical investigation, sliding towards nightmarish images of violating the deeply rooted prohibition against looking into our own bodies. This is particularly true of her last four novels to date - *Unnatural Exposure* (1997), *Point of Origin* (1998), *Black Notice* (1999) and *The Last Precinct* (2000) - which are given their disturbingly gothic quality by the large number of scenes and plot developments constructed around the boundary-violating nature of the pathologist's role. These include Scarpetta's visions of self-dissection, the repeated intrusions into her 'inner space', the extremity of her knowledge and the constant sense that her work makes her a transgressor, a violator of nature.

Critical discussion of the role of Scarpetta conventionally notes the balance in the Cornwell novels between the prototypically male activity of gathering information and the more 'feminine' recognition of the limitations of objective, unemotional knowledge: Vanacker, for example, argues that Scarpetta's imaginative and empathic reconstruction of the emotions of the victim and of the scene of the murder exposes the masculine reliance on rational detachment as illusory. As we have seen to be the case in other fiction in this subgenre, such a simple binary is complicated by the protagonist's commitment to a masculine machinery of law enforcement. In Cornwell's later work what is much more apparent is the extent to which the pull in the direction of gothic excess destabilises Scarpetta's role. With female subjectivity there goes a heightening of visual and auditory senses, touch and smell, intensifying the experience of immersion in a realm of fragmentation and dissolution. Scarpetta's very sensitivity threatens to disable

⁴⁰ See Sawday 82-3; and Plain, 34 & 42-3. The restorative, therapeutic function of the pathologist requires, by the end of the narrative, the transformation of the corpse into a 'grievable' body, the rescue of the corpse from the site of abjection.

her in her role as a restorer of lost wholeness and as a defender of an ostensibly liberal, enlightened agenda.

In crime fiction generally, generic mutations (and our categorisation of texts) depend very much on the ways in which characters shift, especially within a single text, between the roles of victim, murderer and investigator – the traditional and fixed character triangle of classic detective fiction.⁴¹ Cornwell's protagonist, an investigator who is perceived by others, and often perceives herself, in the roles of intended victim and actual or potential malefactor suffers from uncertainties that interfere with the main element in her role, her ability to read bodies. Her difficulties do not simply arise because *public* conflict leads to the (standard) fears of the loss of an official position but because private immersion in trauma and Scarpetta's encounters with unreadable interiors (including her own) ultimately destabilise her own identity.

Cornwell's Scarpetta novels, then, have come to be increasingly focused on the insecure nature of the protagonist's identity, with plots involving her in constant efforts to clear her name and to defend her right to the 'privileged gaze' of the forensic pathologist. Cornwell often structures her narratives around a series of contrasts which in part are there to clarify and delimit the protagonist's 'powerful woman' role. She provides a range of figures whose transgressions are intended to separate Scarpetta from unacceptable versions of the role she occupies – women who are, she suggests, motivated by "Power. To steal my fire." (BN 152) These are novels in which the separation of protagonist and killer does sometimes involve constructing the killer as monstrous, but is also accomplished by creating other selves for Scarpetta, other versions of the ambitious, powerful woman. The presence of such women (and Scarpetta's destruction of them) is meant to qualify her own role, expelling examples of misdirected female power and locating herself as a justly strong woman who protects society from her parodic doubles. They also, however, function to suggest a series of worrying parallels.

⁴¹ Possibly expand with *NT* p 10.

Thus, in *Unnatural Exposure*, Scarpetta's antagonist is 'deadoc', whom she assumes to be male until the killer is finally revealed as someone who is in fact not unlike Scarpetta herself - clever, meticulous and thrusting. Scarpetta's early sense of herself as working her way 'deeper into the labyrinth of my profession, until I could not find a way out'⁴² is echoed at the end by the image of a killer who has more damagingly immersed herself in her profession, and who makes sinister e-mail claims to identity with the Chief Medical Examiner: 'I am what you do...you are me' (*UE* 224-5). The reading of the bodies of the victims also seems to support the suggestion that the dismemberments are Scarpetta's own work. The forensic details reveal, for example, that both ends of a bone have been cut by a Stryker (autopsy) saw – one end by Scarpetta in the process of carrying out an autopsy, the other by the killer. As the narrative develops, 'deadoc' electronically stalks and impersonates Scarpetta, even appropriating Scarpetta's own details for the user profile in the AOL Member Directory: "'It's like deadoc's saying he's you,'" Lucy tells her"' – equivalent, in short, to putting Scarpetta's "'fingerprints...on the murder weapon"' (*UE* 117-18). The plot involves the dissemination of a smallpox virus, and Scarpetta's feared contamination images her role as both victim and criminal (she is even isolated in a facility called 'the Slammer' after her exposure to the virus). Resolution is reached when deadoc ironically dies of the disease she has been disseminating, but in a novel in which crime is figured as disease (as Scarpetta says to a hospital pathologist, "'the killers you deal with are just harder to see"' - *UE* 180) and in which the killer's first victim is her own mother, the metaphoric contamination of Scarpetta threatens to linger in the following novels, in which her closeness to dead bodies recurrently seems to be a curse that she carries with her wherever she goes: 'She stepped away from my stinking presence...' (*BN* 43).

In *Black Notice*, the female doubling is more complicated, with Scarpetta and Lucy shadowed by another mentor/protégé duo, the powerful Deputy Chief Diane Bray and the forcefully butch Detective Rene Anderson, both of whom are women guilty of abusing their positions arrogantly and corruptly. They are "'Power gluttons"' who act as foils to the legitimate and 'real' power of Scarpetta herself: as Marino says, "'You're a hell of a

⁴² Patricia Cornwell, *Unnatural Exposure* ([1997] Time Warner Paperbacks, 2000) 14; hereafter *UE*;

lot more powerful than them or anybody I ever met, including most men, and you aren't like that'" (BN 82). It is particularly noticeable – here and in *The Last Precinct* – that anatomical imagery is reworked to figure the assaults on the authority and inner self of Scarpetta. In confrontations with Bray, Scarpetta herself seems to be the body under examination, Bray's eyes boring into her inner self, penetrating her 'many walls' (BN 41-3). The hostile gaze Bray inflicts on Scarpetta is reversed when Bray herself lies under the medical gaze of Scarpetta, who must autopsy her brutalised body. A central turn in the plot of *Black Notice*, a heavily ironised reversal, comes with this sudden shift in the role of Scarpetta's police force double, from investigator-villain and arch rival to victim; the woman who has previously insisted that "'the crime scene belongs to us, Kay'" (BN 234) has now unequivocally taken her place at the centre of the crime scene. It is a shift that affects not only the role of Bray but also that of Scarpetta, whose gaze at the crime scene and in the autopsy room is, of course, far from objective and detached. Bray's unrestrained hostility towards Scarpetta and Scarpetta's intense dislike of Bray mean that, even if suspicion of committing the murder doesn't come to rest on her, she can be suspected of taking some pleasure in it. The transgressive and voyeuristic possibilities of the privileged gaze ('For a long time we stared' – BN 400) has an impact both on her self-conception and on the way she is constructed by others. In *Unnatural Exposure*, by sending Scarpetta scanned pictures of a 'staged' crime scene, deadoc, securing the gaze of her antagonist, involves her in the crime ("The photographs are yours and you sent them to yourself. It was easy," Lucy tells her, speculating on the killer's methods of implicating Scarpetta); in *Black Notice*, she stares in fascinated horror at a corpse she might have wished to see.

'The way people look' is an increasingly significant motif in these novels. Scarpetta is an ambiguous witness to horrors situated in narratives which are often to do with illicit 'looks' and with the stealing of the looks of others. So, for example, in the novel that preceded *Black Notice*, *Point of Origin*, the main strand of the plot involves the literal 'stealing of looks' by excising the faces of the killer's victims. A killer, because of his own appearance, fears the looks (gaze) of others and has a voyeuristic fascination with the looks (appearance) of others, who are 'sentenced to a terrible death in the split

second it took for a monster to notice them with evil eyes burning with envy' (*PO* 330). The (male) killer, Newton Joyce, is in league with another of the female villains who abuse their not inconsiderable powers. Carrie Grethan, a figure whose influence over Scarpetta's daughter surrogate, Lucy, makes her the dark double of 'Aunt Kay' is, in *Point of Origin*, aiming to end the too perceptive investigation of the other most important person in Scarpetta's life, her lover Benton Wesley – destroying his enquiring gaze by literally taking his face.

The destabilising of Scarpetta's identity is most intense in *Black Notice* and *The Last Precinct*. In the former, her professional identity is again stolen in cyberspace, this time by someone sending e-mails in her name and impersonating her in internet chat sessions with the intention of altering the perception of Scarpetta's identity, making her appear cold and callous, making her seem less accessible to families of victims and removing the 'human dimension' that separates her from malefactors.

It is in *The Last Precinct*, however, that the process of doubling is carried furthest, with Scarpetta hovering on the brink of prosecution, questioned by Jaime Berger (described by Scarpetta as the country's most famous female prosecutor) in a tone 'no different from the one she was using with Chandonne, a terrible monster' (*LP* 256). Scarpetta finds her own life scrutinised in minute detail. '*Identity and intent*. Those words roar through my mind like a train' (*LP* 257): identity and intent are what Berger hopes to establish with respect to Chandonne, but the resonance of these words for Scarpetta is to do with the assault on her own self and her own motivation, both of which are being broken down during the course of the narrative. In part, this is simply a way of tackling the question (at issue throughout the Scarpetta series) of retributive justice: though Scarpetta ostensibly takes a stand against capital punishment, increased pressure on her own life pushes her towards a modification of this position – towards the admission that she does have a sufficient capacity for violence to find satisfaction in taking revenge into her own hands. As we have seen in discussing *Point of Origin*, there is the implication there that Scarpetta herself 'approved' of or indeed willed the revenge taken on Bray; just as (*PO* 49) she can be suspected of having wished for Lucy to kill 'the

monster' Chandonne. Her friend Anna, furthering the dissection of Scarpetta by probing her psychoanalytically, asks, "What about homicide?...Wrong? Immoral? Is it always wrong to kill? You have killed...You killed Carrie's partner and then she killed yours. A connection, perhaps?" (LP 114-15).

Scarpetta's response – "Because I killed him, he will forever be part of me" (LP 115) is one of the central themes of *The Last Precinct*, a dissolution of the boundaries between investigators, killers and victims that is again and again picked up in the metaphoric structure of the novel. Scarpetta herself, as the narrative progresses, is 'othered' by the community, and her response to this ostracism is repeatedly conveyed in images of internal invasion: "...fear and bewilderment gather like an army of fiery ants, teaming over my interior world, stinging my very psyche" (LP 97). Even Marino's dark jokes – "It's just a damn good thing people are dead when you do shit like this to them" (LP 311) – reinforce the confusion of boundaries that has its most disturbing image in the autopsy room itself.

The further stage of this dissolution of identities is to be seen in the way that Scarpetta herself is metaphorically put on the autopsy table. This is much more than the conventional move of casting the protagonist as the next possible victim. The familiar narrative pattern which has a female investigator doubling as retributive agent and eroticised victim of male violence⁴³ here becomes an intense inner struggle, with a more radical permeability of roles. For all of Scarpetta's efforts to stay within the confines of her 'clinical, fact-only' lawyer's and physician's mind, she increasingly gives way to what she earlier describes as her 'weird feelings' (BN 137), which include, it seems, a growing tendency to see herself in the place of the victim, her interior self exposed and open to inspection by hostile eyes. This tendency is greatly exacerbated by the physical and psychic wounds that Scarpetta acquires.

In one of Cornwell's earlier novels, *The Body Farm* (1994), Cornwell represents Scarpetta as attending to her own wounds in looking at the victim: Scarpetta's business

⁴³ See Plain 224-5.

of interpreting wounds can readily be seen (as Vanacker argues) to be part of a ‘feminine’ dimension that includes a kind of co-victimisation.⁴⁴ Cornwell also, however, uses Scarpetta’s role as a forensic pathologist to develop this theme considerably beyond its use in conventional crime fiction. Increasingly in the later books of the series she elaborates the theme in relation to one of the most deep-seated taboos to be found in anatomical investigation, the prohibition against looking into our *own* bodies.⁴⁵ This impossible self-inspection emerges as a central metaphor in the later Scarpetta novels, both in nightmarish imaginings of herself on an autopsy table and in the actual events of plots that subject her to the trauma of looking into the deaths of the men she loved, Mark James and Benton Wesley. These appalling deaths, which involve the reduction of both men to the extreme of abjection – Mark in a bomb blast, Benton by means of horrific torture and fire – leave Scarpetta with two corpses that she can neither inspect nor interpret, either literally (in autopsy) or psychologically, by confronting the full knowledge of their deaths. They fundamentally alter the way in which others look at her: “‘it’s terrible enough to suffer loss, but to compound that with everyone looking askance at you and doubting your abilities to function any more is to be kicked and degraded...’” (*BN* 151).

The more terrible truth, however, is that these are, for Scarpetta, bodies that are unreadable and that cannot be given meaning. They remain repressed because she cannot bring them within the compass of her interpretive skills. She must short-circuit her process of knowing Benton’s death, which will remain illegible to her because she has to stop (*NB* 306) her own ability to imagine what his body will be like in an autopsy room with which she is all too familiar: ‘I tried not to imagine Benton’s remains...It was awful to know all that I did. Death was not an abstraction, and I could envision every procedure, every sound and smell in a place where there was no loving touch...’ (*PO* 306). The personal loss of Benton for Scarpetta means that she is perceived as on the run from pain, in hiding from herself. In *The Last Precinct* Anna asks Scarpetta how she would have felt if she had been able to watch on film murder of Bray – or of Benton: if

⁴⁴ Vanacker 76.

⁴⁵ See Sawday 7ff: one marked feature of our sense of interiority is that it can never be experienced other than at second-hand; we cannot, generally speaking, inspect our own bodily interiors.

she used her imagination as she has done before professionally, she could “reconstruct in detail the last minutes of Diane Bray’s life...if you went through that looking glass...where might it end?...Ah. Maybe it would not end, and you would be forced to watch the footage of Benton’s murder” (*LP* 78-9).

The Last Precinct is a novel that begins by unravelling the ending of *Black Notice*, and the sense of not knowing ‘where things will end’ is strong in both of these novels. As Scarpetta’s personal and professional life come increasingly under scrutiny, the narrative turns progressively more inward, towards her own interior, imaged both in her house and her body: Berger, with ‘the sharp edge of a prosecutor’, drives home the comparisons: “I’m sure your patients wouldn’t enjoy being naked on your table and under your knife, to have their pockets and orifices explored, if they knew...you aren’t going to like my probing” (*LP* 259). One of the novel’s most persistent images is of Scarpetta’s own body inspected and violated. At the very beginning, (*LP* 2), she presents her inability to subject herself to ‘anatomically correct images of [her] own mauled dead body’, and she is preoccupied with thoughts of resistance to the image that Chandonne tried to “project onto me”. Even had he succeeded in killing her, she reflects, “I would just be dead. Not changed...Just dead” (*LP* 31). But the state of her potential ‘deadness’ and its possible meaning resurfaces throughout the narrative: her life, Anna tells her, “reads like one of your more complicated death certificates” (*LP* 44); she feels “as dehumanized as [her] dead patients” (*LP* 76); she ‘had sex with Jay’ (ultimately revealed as a killer) when she ‘felt dead’ after the death of Benton (*LP* 117). Thinking back to Bray’s murder, Scarpetta reflects that to see someone dead is to see them ‘completely degraded’ (*LP* 157), and Scarpetta cannot shake the sense that she herself is inescapably trapped by this kind of degradation, ‘the dismantling, the humiliation of me for all the world to see’ (*LP* 262).

This, then, is a novel in which both the conventional investigative structure and the protagonist’s own sense of identity and agency are eroded by the gothicizing of the narrative, most importantly by the ‘matrices of discomfort, pain, death, and social

prohibition' that accompany the violation of 'our bodily interiors'.⁴⁶ The figure of the forensic pathologist is empowered by her access to torn, opened bodies and the realities they reveal, but this access only comes at a price. Towards the end of the *The Last Precinct*, Scarpetta has what she describes as 'an out-of-body experience, looking down on myself after something terrible and final has happened...I am dead like other people whose brown paper bags end up in that evidence room' (LP 436-7). The sense of a protagonist who has not quite returned from the realm of the dead remains overwhelmingly dark, in a novel whose very title suggests death: 'The Last Precinct was death...' The novel does, of course, have a solving conclusion, but by no means all questions are reassuringly answered: the 'Y' of the forensic pathologist's incision is no longer followed by the kind of conventional closure in which the 'uncontainable excess' of bodily interiors can simply be recontained at the end of the autoptic investigation.

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