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## Serial Killers, Literary Critics, and Süskind's *Das Parfum*

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*The pleasure of perfume [is] among the most elegant and also most honourable enjoyments in life.*

(Pliny, *Natural History*)

Reminiscent of a true nineteenth-century thriller, *Das Parfum* arrived for subscribers of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in serial form<sup>1</sup> in 1984 (Gray 489; Willems 223), by mail or at the newsstands, and subsequently enjoyed meteoric success in Germany and abroad that was unparalleled for a postwar German novel. The serial was revised and published in book form in 1985,<sup>2</sup> selling over a million copies in Germany alone, and, translated into more than twenty-five languages, sold in excess of two million copies globally in just five years (Gray 489). Remaining on *Der Spiegel's* bestseller list for over a decade (Willems 223), the novel sold ten million copies by century's end (Stolz 19) across thirty-nine languages, including three million copies in German (Barbetta 23), to become one of the bestselling German-language novels in history. Its blend of horror, history, science, and suspense continues to ensure wide readership in popular fiction, while Tom Tykwer's filmic adaptation premiered in 2006 as one of Europe's most anticipated films. The story of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille had clearly struck a chord in Europe and abroad. Its most intriguing impact is that which registered among literary critics. There the novel has generated widely differing responses and interpretations, ranging from the derisive to the deifying. The critical reception of the novel, even more than the novel itself, tells us much about the (European) literary landscape in the final decades of the twentieth century. A Rosetta Stone writ in blood, the critical response to the novel maps the status of art and violence while tracing their inter-relation in the modern imagination. In an attempt to make sense of why such a troubling and troubled novel became such a popular and critical phenomenon, examining the various critical responses will engage existing interpretations to delve not into Süskind's novel in particular, but murderous art more generally.

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Looking back at the critical reception of the novel, it seems almost that critics colluded to reduce its murderous narrative to literary vignette, perhaps taken in by its rich allusions and promising aesthetic mechanisms. Continental critics initially luxuriated in the text's subtle references to works by Flaubert, Balzac, Baudelaire (Michael Fischer, *Der Spiegel*), Thomas Mann (Joachim Kaiser, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*), E.T.A. Hoffmann (Marcel Reich-Raniski, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*), and other literary giants in world literature,<sup>3</sup> an exercise that would be repeated with great acumen in countless peer-reviewed articles. The rich literary allusions of the novel became, in some ways, sources of the literary critic's display of the critic's own acumen. Indeed, a cursory scan of the critical literature reveals a frenzy of allusion-finding and precedent-identifying that, when read *in toto*, becomes almost parodic and self-conscious. It is as if by identifying literary progenitors and by dissecting the novel's wit, critics are providing the *sine qua non* of their fascination with the text. No longer "mere" popular fiction, more than pulp fiction or titillating horror, the novel becomes instead an inheritor of nearly all of Western literary traditions and a display of the very best energy of postmodern pastiche.

Needless to say, *Das Parfum* also received its share of mixed or negative reviews even from continental reviewers. Yet again, though, the critique is an opportunity to display one's familiarity with literary history. Some critics, for example, seemed to heckle Süskind precisely for the novel's rich landscape of literary allusions: *Die Zeit's* Gerhard Stadelmaier commented in an early review of the novel that Süskind wrote like "Fontane-Keller-Mann-Lenz-Grass-Böll-Hebel-Musil-Grimmelshausen-Dickens-usw." (55), and that "Grenouille plündert tote Häute, Süskind tote Dichter" ["Grenouille plunders dead skins, Süskind plunders dead poets"] (55); Manfred R. Jacobson felt that some of the novel's "wealth of observations on the nature of creative genius, its genetics, sociology and psychology, or psycho-pathology ... are parodies or simply intended to twit the reader" (203). For Jacobson, "all of [the observations] ... are part of an elaborate game" (203). For Nikolaus Förster, *Das Parfum* revealed itself to be a "Spiel" ["game"] on several levels: "Initiiert wird ein Spiel mit Formen und Inhalten, ein Spiel mit Realität und Fiktion, ein Spiel mit dem Leser" [*Das Parfum* "initiates a game of forms and contents, a game of reality and fiction, a game with the reader"] (148). More than one early reviewer in Europe dismissed the novel as trivial gallimaufry.<sup>4</sup> Noted *Spiegel* critic Volker Hage, for example, dismissed the novel because he felt it was not the kind of book, "das man in der Hoffnung ein zweites Mal lesen würde, ihm noch tiefere Geheimnisse entlocken zu können" ["that one would read a second time in hopes of being able to root out even deeper secrets"] (10).

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All together, though, *Das Parfum* received more positive reviews from continental critics than their Anglo-American counterparts, who expressed considerable frustration with the novel (Fleming 72). In his “meditations” on the subject, Joseph Natoli determined that a mass-market novelist such as Süskind suffered “no pressure to ‘elevate’ his or her literary world to standards recognizable within a high critical ordering” (236) and did “not rush to preserve a high critical code if his own marketing code show[ed] no sign of being threatened” (237). While the novel’s very commercial success disqualified it from consideration as a subject for serious critical inquiry for some critics, others such as Robert M. Adams (*New York Review of Books*) dismissed the entire storyline as both “a good deal of stuffing” and “a ridiculously improbable piece of verbal claptrap” (26). For Michael Gorra of the *Hudson Review*, *Das Parfum* was “the sort of book that must be either a great triumph or a great failure,” concluding that the novel constituted a “bestseller blend of historical reconstruction, trash Gothic fantasy, and political allegory” (136). In these responses, readers dismiss the novel as ridiculous and even offensive trash. Almost as if prompted by the dismissive tone of many early reviews published in the *New York Review of Books*, the *Hudson Review*, the *New Yorker* and elsewhere, Judith Ryan and other scholars responded by underscoring how the novel could shed its seemingly pedestrian guise *if* the reader were informed by certain German cultural, historical, philosophical, existential, political, epistemological, social, dramatic, modernist, postmodernist, historiographical, aesthetic, and literary traditions. In other words, American reviewers, at best, clearly lacked the *vade mecum* of all things German that would permit a precise appreciation of the novel and, at worst, American critics were simply inferior to the novel’s many demands.

Some French critics, on the other hand, described this novel as typically German (Markham, *International Herald Tribune*). True, Süskind has said that the Third Reich is always in the back of the German artist’s mind, but the notoriously difficult to trust author seems capable of lobbying that particular historical bomb specifically to force an historiographic, German-centered interpretation of the text that is, oddly, about a French murderer. In other words, German reviewers embraced the novel, French reviewers called it German, American reviewers dismissed it, while continental critics competed with one another to locate the myriad literary allusions the text offered. For a character defined by his lack of identity, desperate to distill the essence of young women in an attempt to supplement his own lack, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille certainly generates quite a bit of interpretive accretions. Whether Freudian or postmodern, pastiche or porn, the novel seems to incite passions based mostly in readers’ own literary acumen.

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These questions of readerly qualifications became, eventually, the center of many critical discussions of the novel; the text and the occasion to interpret it became a debate about the implied reader. In her comprehensive treatment “The Problem of Pastiche: Patrick Süskind’s *Das Parfum*,” Judith Ryan explores the novel’s “double coding” which appealed to both the “cultural elite and the ordinary person” (396). As “pastiche ... is often regarded as an inferior form or at best as a ‘neutral’ or ‘blank’ version of parody” (Ryan 396-397), the debate often evoked indelicate insinuations about the qualities a given reviewer must bring to bear in order to properly evaluate the novel. Whereas some readers/critics considered certain episodes to be “naïve” (Jacobson 203), “others appreciated the literary allusiveness, which made them feel cultivated and somehow ‘in the know’” (Ryan 397). Jutta Arend argues much the same, when she writes that “Der Autor konfrontiert uns im *Parfum* mit der Entwicklung eines olfaktorischen Unikums und dessen Suche nach Identität, eingebettet in parodierende Anspielungen auf literarische Vorbilder und Bewegungen, die nur für den Kenner deutlich werden, da sie keineswegs als solche im Text von Süskind abgehoben werden” [“The author confronts us in *Perfume* with the development of a unique olfactory character and his search for identity; the story is embedded with parodic allusions to literary precursors and movements which are apparent only to the aficionado, as they are not demarcated as such by Süskind”] (241). Dieter Stolz illuminated the intellectual debate in no uncertain terms: “In brief, it is clear that readers who approach the text with the most varied expectations and bring to it the most varied knowledge and competence are not disappointed in the enjoyment they experience with the biography of the French eighteenth-century murderer of maidens” (21). In other words, the most educated and widely read readers (like literary scholars) can be forgiven their enjoyment of the descriptions of the murders of young women, or at least their enjoyment is easy to understand.

It may well be that the critical justification and legitimization of the barbarity of the text, coupled with material and humanistic positivism derived from Enlightenment thought and its cultural manifestations, actually heralds renewed scrutiny of a long-standing problem in the aesthetic reception of violence in narrative. For while Stolz concludes that the murderous occurrences featured in the novel also appeal to the modern reader and afford him (and the pronoun is specifically gendered here) satisfaction, such a formulation remains problematic, to say the least, for this implies that the murderous plot of this story-complex does not merely “entertain” an audience, nor “intrigue” it, but rather that it makes the modern reader feel comfortable, as if it broaches an inner realm in which such

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violence rings familiar and satisfying. Indeed, as Jonathan Woolley notes, “one realizes that one has been made to will the progress of a killer” (242).

Despite such nagging suspicions about the complicity of the reader, *Das Parfum* has elicited a surprisingly limited number of responses to the pleasure engendered by the violent narrative, the commensurability of art and murder, and even the displaced logic of representing murder as art.<sup>5</sup> Though the novel creates from the outset a formal and rhetorical expectation not only of violence but also of the prominence of the killer and his discontent, as emphasized by the novel’s subtitle *Die Geschichte eines Mörders* [*The Story of a Murderer*], few critics anticipate the novel’s reception as an examination of crime and misogyny, of a violent dissection of society’s confrontation with the Other, and as a study of crime fiction. Jacobsen does briefly touch upon Süskind’s treatment of the artist as murderer, noting the “striking similarities” to E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Das Fräulein von Scuderi* and Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kröger* (202), then proceeds to sidestep the study of the relationship of artist as criminal by concentrating on “examples of where and how Süskind engages [these novels] in his parodic dialogue” (202). In an early newspaper review of *Das Parfum*, Wolfram Knorr but cursorily mentions Thomas Mann’s *Tonio Kröger* as a source for Süskind’s artist as criminal but engages more animatedly with its aesthetic moment (Knorr 1985). In his otherwise comprehensive treatment of Süskind’s work, including *Das Parfum*, Frank Degler spends little time exploring the facets of criminality, serial murder, and art evident in the text. Few commentators give specific examples of how violence and barbarity is used in the text as a narrative or poetological device, preferring instead to draw conclusions on the richness of the literary appropriations which inform the “conversation” between the text and the modern reader/audience or uncover its veiled critiques of modern phenomena.

The reticence to engage with the text’s creative appropriation of the artist-criminal, particularly in its affinity to ritual violence, arguably stems from a traditional dis-ease in conflating aesthetics and violence. For while murder as a vehicle for acquiring or destroying art is a common discourse not only in crime fiction but in reality, it is clearly not so ubiquitous when understood as a medium for creating art itself. Indeed, in such well-known examples as E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Das Fräulein von Scuderi* and Thomas Harris’ *The Silence of the Lambs*, the *objet d’art* is encoded as synecdoche by which the jewels and the skin are mapped as objects of obsession, desire and compulsion precisely for what they represent. In these two examples, Cardillac’s and Jame Gumb’s murder sprees constitute a “process that turns life into art, the human being into an object” (Borchardt 130), which, as Edith Borchardt wryly notes, ultimately is “a reversal of the function

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of art as perceived in classical aesthetics” (130). The notion of a discernible “aesthetic power” in such a re-mapping is much more difficult to make without the representation of the violent experience as a “liturgy” or as a “ritual.” Yet while the ritualistic sacrifices demanded by our three murderers, Cardillac, Gumb, and Grenouille, arguably constitute an artistic supplement to the psychological and pathological needs of each killer, only the former two murderers appear animated by a compulsive perfectionism which culminates in a collector’s mindset. The driving fascination for Cardillac and Gumb is the *objet d’art* (the victim’s jewelry and skin respectively) and what it represents: forfeited beauty in an age of commoditization. The murders themselves are portrayed as a process by which the sublime object of desire, once retrieved, quickly reveals its intrinsic and terminal threshold:

Whereas the objet d’art used to represent a spiritual reality and contemplation of the work of art [leads] to greater perfection in the mind and perception of the artist and thus to greater perfection in successive representations, art as murder deprives the subject of *pneuma* or soul. Instead of delimiting the object to release life, life is destroyed for the sake of art. (Borchardt 130)

Grenouille’s ritualistic collection of *pneuma*, which Grenouille understands to be the *essence absolue* of the victim, “der Engelduft” or the “angel scent” of his victims, proceeds differently; while life is still destroyed for the sake of art, the “art” itself is revealed to be an aesthetic supplement to an always-absent object of desire located not in what the victim represents but in what the killer himself lacks—smell. The liminal factor which arrests the signification of Cardillac’s jewelry and Gumb’s skin swaths becomes for Grenouille a porous boundary: the *objet d’art* (the victim’s smell) retains utility for the killer in his quest to build the perfect perfume. The process by which Grenouille attempts to engender smell and assign himself meaning (and belonging) reveals the creative principle of the novel; the more convincing the aesthetic moment of the narrative, the more engaged the reader becomes in the solipsism of the murderer at the expense of the now clichéd victim.

Yet there is another obvious difference in the counternarrative posed by the murder victim in each story. In *Das Fräulein von Scuderi*, the victim’s selection rests primarily in her recent acquisition of Cardillac’s jewelry. Her murder serves less to create art than to retrieve it. In *The Silence of the Lambs*, the victim’s selection rests primarily in the similarity of her physical attributes to the person/object of Gumb’s obsession, his first victim. The victim now serves as a delimited substitute for the lost work of art, and her skin stands as a representative trophy. For Grenouille, however, the victims are actually “instrumentalized” in the

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manufacture of his olfactory masterpiece, the perfume. Grenouille's attempt to create the perfect smell follows closely the guidelines set forth in Enlightenment thought, in its appreciation of technological progress in service of *ratio*, and in its ultimate potential for undermining humanist ideals.

In addition to—or perhaps because of—its exploration of the dark side of Enlightenment ideals and their embodiment in modern man, *Das Parfum* also belongs squarely in the realm of serial killer fiction, albeit without the very generic and formulaic permutations we have come to identify with crime and detective novels.<sup>6</sup> As a manifest narrative situated in eighteenth-century France, however, the novel quickly betrays the normative models of crime fiction by introducing the modalities of twentieth-century crime into a “period piece” with historical and cultural anxieties more specific to post-1970s society than pre-revolutionary France. For Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is no mere murderer, not even a mass murderer; he is a serial killer at the “crucial site” in the public sphere where, as Mark Seltzer notes in his handy “Introduction: Serial Killing for Beginners,” “private desire and public fantasy cross” (1). And, as Philip L. Simpson points out in *Psycho Paths*, his study of the serial killer in American film and fiction, “in our attempt to understand serial killers, we inevitably create myths about them—works of fiction that may superficially portray the serial killer as the ultimate alien or enemy of society but which simultaneously reflect back upon society its own perversions, fears, and murderous desires” (1-2).<sup>7</sup> His intimation that an impulse for evil—and spectacle—spontaneously interposes itself on the psyche of the audience/reader/critic is intriguing for its apotheosis: the story is constituted as an artistic supplement to psychological needs. For both Seltzer and Simpson, it is clear that the formula that has made both real-life and literary serial killer narratives so captivating to a diverse audience of scholars, film makers, journalists, cultural commentators, literary critics, and curious readers involves quite simply the narrative of violent occurrences and the thereby inspired titillation of the (reading) voyeur. It is not incidental that discussions of the text often engage the notion of its intrinsic violence and barbarity only in cursory fashion, allowing for the separation of the form and function of violence to the detriment of the latter.

The phenomenon of serial killing, which had become a widely publicized and much debated issue in Germany during the late 1970s and early 1980s, had also drawn attention to the role and influence of the media in promoting and escalating violence. German media outlets were particularly mesmerized with accounts of American serial killers, including those of John Wayne Gacy, Ted Bundy, David Berkowitz, and Henry Lee Lucas, who together claimed to have killed hundreds of people in the United States. As Klaus Bartels points out, Süskind would have most

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certainly come into contact with the prominent intellectual currents and public debates that stoked a form of serial killer hysteria in Germany (and which the main German broadcasters ARD and ZDF supposedly pandered to by showing a series of horror movies). Henry Lee Lucas may have even provided Süsskind with his novel's olfactory "hook," as the notorious serial killer reportedly had no sense of smell (Norris 173).

The charge that the media, and by extension novelists, had sensationalized serial killing to increase circulation and profit figures can have merit only if the public actually supports such a strategy by purchasing newspapers, viewing movies, and reading novels concerning fictional and real serial killers in increased numbers. In her article on "The Aesthetics of Serial Killing: Working Against Ethics in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1988) and *American Psycho* (1991)," Sonia Baelo Allué argues that fictional and non-fictional accounts of serial killers maintain a symbiotic relationship: "Nowadays, we witness how, on the one hand, real-life serial killers are 'narrativised' by the media by turning their killings into coherent patterns, or how they copy the murders of fictional serial killers; on the other hand, we see how 'serious' literature writers of great prestige write true-crime literature, or how fictional serial killers copy the deeds of real killers or try to resemble them" (7-8). Mark Seltzer describes such narratives as part of a "wound culture" marked by "the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (1). It is the combination of mutilation and spectacle that provides the necessary titillation for the first purchase; it is repetition that keeps the consumer transfixed on the unfolding serial killer narrative:

The seriality of serial killers, or at least, the seriality of the myth-like serial killer created through the arts and the media, has similar effects to those produced by different forms of serialized mass culture such as the television serials and series, the film serials, the novels in instalments, or even the newspapers. Repetition makes us understand patterns and know what to expect the next time. Thus, after each new instalment the audience is left wanting more, enjoying a mix of repetition and anticipation. In the case of serial killing each new murder becomes a new instalment, a new chapter in the news. People keep "buying" the chapters, craving for a conclusion that may disclose a pattern or may impose an interpretation on the random material. (Allué 9)

This explanation of the attractive and addictive powers of seriality may help explain how and why the novel has reached "mythic" proportions in Europe but not in America: it was there that the novel first appeared, quite specifically, as a *serial*. The installment pattern of serial murders that arouses our anticipation of the next

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“chapter” each new murder represents is made visible in the serialized form of Süskind’s fictional world, in which murders are serialized along with chapters. The reader of the serialized form is made even more complicit in its violence than a reader of the novelized form.

Yet while linking aesthetic serialization with serial murders offers some helpful theoretical paradigms and corollaries, “real” murder is always more than an opportunity for literary and critical ruminations. Murder is murder, always with a victim, always brutal, always final. The only “chapters” that come after the act are those offered in attempts to “make sense” and thereby narrativize violence. This collision of actual death and torture with the stories and metaphors we use to render them containable is similar to the collision between the serial killer as a unique individual and the serial killer as a social construct. Karen Halttunen traces the origin of this debate to the quandary posed by murder itself:

The act rends the community in which it takes place, calling all relationships into question—mother and infant, husband and wife, lovers, friends, strangers and mere acquaintances—and posing troubling questions about the moral nature of mankind. Murder thus demands that a community come to terms with the crime—confront what has happened and endeavor to explain it, in an effort to restore order to the world. (1-2)

While this position recalls Victor Turner’s diction of how creating and destroying order takes place in society through breach, crisis, redress and resolution,<sup>8</sup> Halttunen places the onus of “coming to terms with this violent transgression” on “the crafting and reading of written narratives of the murder, the chief purpose of which is to assign meaning to the incident” (2). In her study of murder in American culture since the late 1600s, “printed responses to the crime tended to take the form of the execution sermon, preached shortly before the convicted criminal was put to death for his or her offense” and “focused not on the bloody deed or the judicial process which had brought the murderer to the scaffold, but on the spiritual condition of the condemned criminal” (Halttunen 2). As a “sacred narrative,” the execution sermon focused on questions such as “What course of smaller sins had brought this sinner to the terrible transgression for which she or he was about to be hanged?” and “What was her spiritual state now, and where would she spend eternity?” (Halttunen 2). At the turn of the nineteenth century, however, “salvation history was losing cultural power” (3) at a time when secular accounts of murders were becoming more prominent, including “criminal biographies and autobiographies, journalistic narratives, and, most important, printed transcripts of murder trials” (2). As a consequence, questions now focused on “What was the nature of the violence;

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when and where had the crime taken place; what were the murderer's motives; and just how had he or she been brought to worldly justice?" (2). This transition effectively replaced "salvation history" with new forms of "secular literature," such as procedural, crime, detective, and Gothic novels, that continue to influence modern responses to murder in both popular and high literature to this day (Halttunen 3). Whereas the procedural and detective novels focused on using interviews and evidence to recreate the crime and identify the murderer, classic examples in the Gothic tradition employed a combination of two distinct "narrative conventions" to address not the crime but the reader: "*horror*, which employed inflated language and graphic treatments of violence and its aftermath in order to shock the reader into an emotional state that mingled fear with hatred and disgust[; and] *mystery*, which used incomplete, fragmented, and chronologically confused narratives (influenced by murder trial reports) to impress upon readers the impossibility of achieving a full knowledge and understanding of the crime" (Halttunen 3). Novels and even literature in general tend, or seem to afford, readers this "full knowledge" that satisfies the desire to know and make sense while appealing to the more base desire to be titillated or thrilled or even scared into (religious, social, cultural, normative) submission. The surrogate victimization of the reader, oddly, dovetails with identification with the killer-writer, leaving the reader in a liminal state of both power and weakness.

In Süskind's novel, this apparent paradox surrounding the use of violence in narrative encourages fatalistic inferences about the state of civilization and the mechanics of violence—in both its specific function in the text and in its evocation in the public sphere. For while the narrative tracks the four phases of serial killing admirably, from fantasy to control to disassociation and ultimately reenactment (Picart 60), the anachronistic "murderline" constitutes a deliberate reinvention of mythological traditions which correspond closely to the underlying ritual mechanisms that operate regularly in Greco-Roman mythology, and as such, are employed quite capably to animate Süskind's monstrous creation as an inherent evil of Horkheimer and Adorno's "dialectic of enlightenment."

While narrative conventions for understanding and distancing "evil" from society are so commonplace as to be axiomatic to most theories of societal transformation, from the mechanism of the scapegoat to the interchangeability of victim and perpetrator, *Das Parfum* contains built-in expectations and underlying ritual mechanisms that are readily understandable in both modernist and postmodernist modes of reading, and as such, are employed quite capably to render art and the aesthetic genius as violent and vampiric. But while the novel's

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sullen protagonist Jean-Baptiste Grenouille indulges in his vision of olfactory mastery at the expense of twenty-six young women, the specific psychological and social concerns of the novel become transformed into a compelling invocation and domestication of monstrosity updated for an audience weaned on the spectacle of violence in print and on television.

Of course, human sacrifice makes for particularly captivating dramatic material and often demonstrates a given society's attempt to expunge guilt and rehabilitate its societal structure at the expense of a scapegoat. In his 1972 study *Violence and the Sacred*, René Girard submits a deceptively simplistic statement on the origin of the sacrifice ritual: "When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim" (2). His statement attests to an inescapability of violence, leaving only the mystery of how it selects its target for discussion. Süskind illustrates this principle *in extremis* when the people of Grasse employ the most modern of investigative techniques to explain Grenouille's handiwork and identify the culprit:

Man verdächtigte die Zigeuner. Den Zigeunern war alles zuzutrauen. Zigeuner woben bekanntlich Teppiche aus alten Kleidern und stopften Menschenhaar in ihre Kissen und fertigten aus Haut und Zähnen von Gehenkten kleine Puppen. Für ein so perverses Verbrechen kamen nur Zigeuner in Frage. Es waren aber zu der Zeit keine Zigeuner da, weit und breit nicht.... In Ermangelung von Zigeunern verdächtigte man daraufhin italienische Wanderarbeiter [aber] Italiener waren auch keine da.... Schließlich gingen die Perückenmacher in Verdacht.... Dann sollten es die Juden gewesen sein, dann die angeblich geilen Mönche des Benediktinerklosters—die freilich alle schon weit über siebzig waren—, dann die Zisterzienser, dann die Freimaurer, dann die Geisteskranken aus der Charité, dann die Köhler, dann die Bettler und zu guter Letzt der sittenlose Adel, insbesondere der Marquis von Cabris, denn der war schon zum dritten Mal verheiratet, veranstaltete, wie es hieß, in seinen Kellern orgiastische Messen und trank dabei Jungfrauenblut, um seine Potenz zu steigern. (*Das Parfum* 247-248)

[People suspected the gypsies. Gypsies were capable of anything. Gypsies were known to weave carpets out of old clothes and to stuff their pillows with human hair and to make dolls out of the skin and teeth of the hanged. Only gypsies could be involved in such a perverse crime. There were, however, no gypsies around at the time, not a one near or far.... For lack of gypsies, people decided to suspect the Italian migrant workers [but] there weren't any Italians around either.... Finally the wig-makers came under suspicion.... Then it was the Jews who were suspect, then the monks of the Benedictine cloister, reputedly a lecherous lot—although all of them were well over seventy—then the Cistercians, then the Freemasons, then the lunatics from the Charité, then the charcoal burners, then the beggars, and last but not least the nobility, in particular the marquis of Cabris, for he had

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already been married three times and organized—so it was said—orgiastic black masses in his cellars, where he drank the blood of virgins to increase his potency. (*Perfume* 194-195)]

As Süsskind's summary of the scapegoating mechanism illustrates, it is possible to formulate, in a preliminary way, the fundamental dilemma posed by the serial killer as a displacement of a given society's persistent and violent impulse onto a surrogate victim. Yet nowhere in his study does Girard conclude that violence is unnatural or immoral for humankind; on the contrary, Girard's critical evaluation of the nature and function of violence stipulates that it is pervasive and thus removes it from the moral coordinate system of good and evil. Without such a fundamental adjustment, Girard maintains, the critic must be snared by the dual nature of the sacrificial act—as "sacred" and "criminal," "legitimate" and "illegitimate," "public and the all but covert" (1). Not the act itself so much as how it is perceived intrigues the critic, for on the one hand, the sacrificial ritual appears as a "sacred obligation," while on the other, nothing more than a "criminal activity" (1). The answer for this duality, Girard argues, cannot be wrested from the fascinating but ultimately circular logic of Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, who argue in their study on the nature and function of sacrifice that the status of the victim determines this binary. For Hubert and Mauss, the very designation "to be sacrificed" lends the victim sacredness—he, she or it has been selected for sacrifice and therefore is hallowed; yet, the subsequent act of sacrifice, criminal in any other context, becomes ultimate sacrilege, as the hallowed victim is eliminated.

The validity of Girard's position on scapegoating and sacrifice in contemporary society over Hubert and Mauss' becomes quickly apparent when one considers that serial killers "provide a means for society to project its worst nightmares and fantasies, images that in other eras or other regions might well be fastened onto supernatural or imaginary folk-devils—vampires, werewolves, witches, evil sorcerers, conspiratorial Jews" (Jenkins 112-113). The choice of a serial killer as a contemporary version of the folk-devil is ideal and corresponds to what Girard has worked out as the heterogeneity of human sacrifice; the choice of sacrifice, he argues, depends above all on the "degree of integration" of the potential victim in society—the less important the victim, the better the candidate for sacrifice. Yet what sets the ideal sacrifice apart from the folkloric serial killer is that a victim found on the fringes of society (foreigners, children, the handicapped) can be "exposed to violence without fear of reprisal" (Girard 13). The complexity introduced by the serial killer as scapegoat must then necessarily inform the transformative power of the ritual sacrifice; how the killer-as-scapegoat mediates a society's social

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and psychological tensions becomes intrinsically linked not only to an aesthetic moment but also to public spectacle.

For the eighteenth century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), who would have been a contemporary to Süskind's murderous protagonist had he existed, scapegoating finds its fictional equivalent in the "poetic monsters" engendered "from a necessity of [human nature's] inability to abstract forms and properties from subjects" (131). Citing Roman jurisprudence, Vico determined for example that "children born of prostitutes are called monsters because they have the nature of men together with the bestial characteristic of having been born of vagabond or uncertain unions" (132). Massimo Riva thus identifies the dual requirement of the Vichian "civil monsters," who must be both "*refugees*, by definition (or lack thereof, because of their half-bestial and nomadic or wandering nature), and the *offspring of unwed mothers*" (285). While Grenouille satisfies Vico's prerequisites for the imagined archetype of the monster by virtue of his birth, times have changed. The primogeniture of a "poetic monster" in an age haunted by the ubiquity of the extreme and of the pervasiveness of broadcast violence requires much more than the birth of an illegitimate offspring. It is no wonder that Süskind is on record as saying that he originally wanted to fix the novel in the twentieth century but ultimately decided to place it into the eighteenth; not only was the earlier period one in which "this kind of man" was created, but it was one in which spectacularized violence was still isolated to "on location" and "live" witness.

Süskind's prologue quickly betrays the folkloric tenor of what will follow while establishing Grenouille's credentials as both genius and monster: "Im achtzehnten Jahrhundert lebte in Frankreich ein Mann, der zu den genialsten und abscheulichsten Gestalten dieser an genialen und abscheulichen Gestalten nicht armen Epoche gehörte" (5) ["In eighteenth-century France there lived a man who was one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era that knew no lack of gifted and abominable personages"(3)]. Admitted by Süskind to the pantheon of mythic villainy, alongside "de Sade, Saint-Just, Fouché, Bonapartes, usw." (5), Grenouille supposedly has been forgotten not for his lack of "Selbstüberhebung, Menschenverachtung, Immoralität [und] Gottlosigkeit" ["arrogance, misanthropy, immorality and wickedness"], but because "sein Genie und einziger Ehrgeiz" ["his gifts and his sole ambition"] concentrated solely on the ephemeral "Reich der Gerüche" (5) ["realm of scent" (3)]. In rhetorically positioning Grenouille from the outset as one of the most abominable figures in human history, while simultaneously emphasizing his superior genius, Süskind underscores the extraordinary and grotesque nature of the killer under profile. By

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so flagrantly promising the reader the story of a most villainous, if still infamous murderer, Süskind proffers his allusive text as public spectacle. And again, the original serialized form of the story's first appearance is not coincidental but rather quite specific, as it makes the novel quite explicitly public. Not read in isolation as a novel but consumed by the thousands in the public pages of a newspaper, the story form reiterates and reifies the story content—the serial stalking, murder, and distilling of innocence.

I indicated that rather than offer a new interpretation of the novel this article would instead offer an investigation of the ways critics responded to Süskind's work and what these responses could help illuminate about the ways in which murder and art are linked in the modern imagination. By no means do I maintain that *Das Parfum* offers something particularly new in the realm of the crime, serial killer, or historical novel. Rather, what makes it such a fascinating and intriguing object of study is the ways in which these styles merge into one, and even more importantly, the ways in which this mergence creates a literary work that elicits such varied responses from critics, reviewers, and readers. It is in these responses, which almost unanimously avoid the moral implications of readerly pleasure in serialized murder and concentrate instead on the display of aesthetic genius (or lack thereof), that we can begin to locate and explore the ways in which murder, art, and public spectacle serve a societal function that the modern imagination both relies upon and turns from. More than literary hybrid or aesthetic anomaly, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is a perverse and corrupt John the Baptist, precursor not of a savior but of a modern era when private and public desires collide in the display of aesthetic genius turned murderous art.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The serialized version appeared in 52 parts from October 16, 1984 to December 15, 1984 in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Degler 102).

<sup>2</sup>Degler has identified at least 150 variations between the original newspaper serial and the first edition of the novel published by the Diogenes Verlag in Zurich in 1985 (102).

<sup>3</sup>See Judith Ryan, "The Problem of Pastiche: Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum*"; Neil H. Donahue, "Scents and Insensibility: Patrick Süskind's New Historical Critique of 'Die neue Sensibilität' in *Das Parfum* (1985)"; Richard T. Gray, "The Dialectic of 'Enscenment': Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum* as Critical History of Enlightenment Culture"; María Cecilia Barbeta, *Poetik des Neo-Phantastischen. Patrick Süskinds Roman Das Parfum*; Frank Degler, *Asthetische Reduktionen: Analysen zu Patrick Süskinds Der Kontrabaß, Das Parfum und Rossini*; Manfred R. Jacobson, "Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum*: A Postmodern Künstlerroman"; Gottfried Willems, "Die postmoderne Rekonstruktion des Erzählens und der Kriminalroman. Über den Darstellungsstil von Patrick Süskinds *Das Parfum*"; R.G. Whiting and M. Herzog, "Hoffmann's *Das Fräulein*

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von Scuderi und Süskind's *Das Parfum*: Elements of Homage in a Postmodernist Parody of a Romantic Artist Story"; and Jonathan Woolley, "Home Truths: The Importance of the Uncanny for Patrick Süskind's Critique of the Enlightenment in *Das Parfum*."

<sup>4</sup> For a thorough overview of the reception history of the novel, see Degler and Barbetta.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Woolley considers the question of the pleasure principle in his study of the uncanny in Süskind's novel.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Düsing differentiates between the *Kriminalroman* and the *Detektivroman* by noting that the former is focused on a given crime and its perpetrator, while the latter highlights the detective in his (ultimately successful) struggle to solve the crime and find its perpetrator (11). Though the final victim's father Richis might occupy an amateur detective role, the forensic work central to the detective genre is actually mapped here to Grenouille's professed introspections. Barbetta notes that while Richis briefly embodies the role of the narrating detective, his agency is suspect for two reasons: Richis is introduced in the third and final part, i.e. much too late to interact with the criminal mindset and enlighten the reader with his detective acumen, and functions as a "tragikomische Figur, die die eigene Intelligenz überschätzt und die Fähigkeiten des Mädchenmörders Grenouille weit unterschätzt" (111).

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that in an interview about his filmic adaptation of the novel, German director Tom Tykwer explains the status of the novel in Europe: "The funny thing is that I feel like in America, the response I'm getting so far, is so much not influenced of course by any predisposition because the novel is not like a myth here, it's just known, it's like a book that people know but it's not like this—in Europe, it has this kind of Lord of the Rings status" (Guillen).

<sup>8</sup> An eminent cultural anthropologist and ethnographer, Turner refined his theories on ritual, symbols, and rites of passage in several studies, including *The Forest of Symbols* (1967), *The Ritual Process* (1969), and *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors* (1974).

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