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416] in the history of music ascribed to one Edward—not Charles—Burney). There are, however, few such slips. Levine's "story" of the battle of the books is essentially sound, and he manages to avoid the soul-killing sin of summarizing and deadening the often lively documents at hand. He emphasizes again and again that one of the challenges for scholars in the early eighteenth century was the task of reconciling "the well-told tale with the armory of ponderous scholarship, the flow of narrative with the intrusions of learned commentary" (p. 287); taking his cue from the most elegant and persuasive of the combatants in the Battle of the Books, Levine has managed to do just that.

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THE AESTHETICS OF MURDER: A STUDY IN ROMANTIC LITERATURE AND CONTEMPORARY CULTURE. By Joel Black. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991. x, 276 p.

There is an argument to be made, one not sufficiently made, that analysis, whether physical or mental, is a dangerous endeavor. In the physical world, one of the commonest of all rock-forming minerals is quartz—an innocuous enough constituent of the earth's surface. One of the primary constituents of quartz is pitchblende. If pitchblende is analyzed, it will be found to yield from fifty to eighty per cent of uranium: we can discontinue this particular analysis here inasmuch as modern history has sufficiently familiarized us with the consequences of further analyzing uranium.

The academic mind thrives on its own analyses: limiting speculation in the academy would be a sin greater than any moral or social infringement. To talk about a given subject removes its stigma, however warranted, legitimizes it, confers upon it letters of credence. The subject of Black's analysis is murder, once thought of as an anti-social and repulsive act—but only because it is so regarded by sociologists, criminologists, or pathologists (p. 5). However, since "it is a recurring, obsessive theme in a wide variety of artistic fictions . . . murder can be studied in a relatively disinterested mode as a morally neutral phenomenon, in contrast to the approach taken by the sociologist, the criminologist, and the pathologist" (p. 6). At first sight, this would appear to invert our pitchblende argument: here, murder is dangerous *only until* the analyzer removes it for scrutiny—it then becomes part of the legitimate and dispassionate stuff of academic debate. The question is whether that conclusion is warranted in Black's book.

Black sees the philosophical thrust of a Dante or an Auden as attempts to set up ordered systems "rooted less in an artistic than in a moralizing impulse." But, he asks, "What of dispassionate crimes that are . . . disinterested deeds? What about *actes gratuits*, murders . . . that are not so much absurd as aesthetic?" (p. 8). In the process, he reviews notions of the sublime, draws abundantly and repeatedly on De Quincey's "Murder" essays, returns to the usual suspects (Gide for the *acte gratuit*, Genet for the poetizing of crime, Sade for its philosophical aspects, Mishima for its ritual grandeur, etc.) in order to weave into his argument the notion of the literary text as a script for actual assassins, inasmuch as "being and appearance, ethics and aesthetics, are no longer distinguishable, but have become virtual simulacra of each other" (p. 16; one might note at this point that if we accept Black's statement, the aesthetic analysis of this topic will no longer be confined to the mediation of literature but will in fact aestheticize crime itself: ultimately, Hitler can be contemplated with relative equanimity as an *artiste*

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*manqué*, p. 38).

Radical analysis—the separation of a whole into its constituents for the sake of isolating only one of those constituents—cannot account for the fact that this kind of dismembering alters the very nature of what has been previously part of a whole—a classical Planckian instance of the measuring instrument distorting what it measures. Yet much of criticism as it is now practiced delights in the presentation of that alien object—an object which it reports as a discovery within the whole when it is in fact merely the product of the analyst's excision.

Certain contemplative religions (Zen in particular) start with this kind of insistent and narrow focus in an effort at transcendentalism: for those practitioners, knowledge of the world being intuitive rather than objective, the concentration on a limited part of reality detaches the percipient from its superficial and distracting totality in order to turn concentration inward for the sake of a more acute percipience. This reverses the fetishistic analysis that separates the totality in order to privilege one of its parts. But both processes have similar causes: the desire to experience a higher or previously unrevealed truth.

Aestheticism is probably an aspect of transcendentalism and Black thus starts with Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in his discussion of the sublime. It will be recalled that for Kant, the impossibility of absolute noumenal knowledge is compensated for by an intuition of grandeur—grandeur of such magnitude that the percipient is unsettled though not unhinged. Kant therefore distinguishes the grandiose landscape that powerfully moves the one who can be moved from the monstrous in which de-measure merely dements ("Die *Verwunderung*, die an Schreck grenzt": astonishment borders on terror, it does not cause it). Black sees this distinction rooted in Kant's restrictive desire to locate "the source of the sublime in humanity's moral-rational nature" (p. 14): Black thus invites us to find the sublime in what Kant (and others) would have merely considered to be monstrous.

Eighteenth-century aestheticians like Burke or Kant chose nature as examples of what occasions the sublime because the aesthetic unsettling of the percipient was more likely to occur in the presence of something that had not evolved from the control of the craftsman: "rohen Natur" (nature in the raw) was created by a force greater than any artist's and was therefore more likely to affect the onlooker with comparably greater force. Black finds himself forced to reject this hypothesis as well, because he wants to aestheticize the *act* of murder, and because he intends to move from the realm of literature to the reality of the actual deed.

As Black considers literature, he faces an overflowing cornucopia: murder indeed enters into art at nearly every turn; the artist's transcendental quest becomes an exacerbation: art is a transgression and murder is the ultimate transgression. But the artist's transgression is circumscribed: "modernist representations of murder typically reinforce the sense of a clear-cut difference between art and life" (p. 93). Present criticism that seems able to view itself only in contradistinction to previous movements labels itself postmodernist (by now post-postmodernist?) as opposed to "modernist" (pre-World War II?—here "Gide, Musil, Eliot"): in the writing of a "postmodernist" like Robbe-Grillet, given as a representative author of our time ("The Secret Room"), Black sees "reality . . . so thoroughly interpenetrated by art and vice versa . . . that actual murder in all its brutality [is] now free to flare up on an unprecedented scale" (p. 93).

This otherwise incomprehensible paragraph is presumably what allows Black to move out of literature and consider those who used art only as their "text"—people like Mark Chapman, who killed John Lennon, or John Hinckley, who tried to assassinate Ronald Reagan. Like the text of Robbe-Grillet, Chapman and

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Hinckley “became caught up in an ongoing interplay between art and real life whereby literary and cinematic fictions repeatedly mediated actual events (p. 160).

If Lennon and Reagan were either divine idols or mere images, there could be no harm in shooting (at) them; alternatively, if they were real flesh-and-blood people then they were not worthy of people’s worship, and ought to be exposed for the false gods they were. Instead of dismissing Chapman and Hinckley as criminal lunatics, or diagnosing them as sociopaths in search of fame and stardom, we need to consider them in the context of a hyperaestheticized culture where they appear in an altogether different light; as disenchanted secular idolaters, self-proclaimed iconoclasts in a media-saturated world. (p. 154)

Cut adrift in the postmodernist world where fantasy and fact are not clearly distinguishable, Black’s arguments tend to leap beyond their bounds and contradict each other. The *acte gratuit* (Freud’s presence being sorely missed at that point) is drowned within the elaborate purpose that Black assigns Chapman and Hinckley. The “morally neutral” phenomenon Black had envisaged gets entangled with his politics (“As president, Reagan’s answer to Kennedy’s Cuba and Johnson’s Vietnam was Grenada . . . a piece of cosmetic violence” [pp. 23-24] whose actual blood-letting he condemns, even though he finds Kant wanting for having blinked at the fact: “Even war must be purified of violence and become gentlemanly—it must be ‘carried on with order and with a sacred respect for the rights of citizens’ before it can be considered sublime” [pp. 15-16]).

Once Black has assumed that “being and appearance, ethics and aesthetics, are no longer distinguishable” (p. 16), it becomes difficult to talk about art; and if the subject is murder, that transgression becomes undifferentiated. For Black, murder in art (murder mediated by art) becomes no more than an evidential list whose depressing length makes us forget that in each case, mediation was intended to be more important than the act. When the artist draws (on) a murderer, he may be intensifying a necessary transgression, but the *style* in which he does it becomes an equally important part of his transgression (one realizes that Black’s dreary list is dreary precisely because it is a list from which the style that intended to distinguish each of its parts is missing). Murder as art (actual murder aestheticized) is a different kind of transgression—it is a break with the world so final and radical that the aesthetic link itself is broken and Kant’s tenuous balance is subverted: terror in which the mind is lost submerges the astonishment aesthetics require.

Black’s essay grows out of the same romantic exacerbation that pushes a kind of artist towards a certain kind of transgression: it is a situational transgression rather than the transgression of penetration. While sociologists, pathologists, and criminologists try to gain *insight into* murder *within* the world that conditions it, Black’s analysis separates murder from its own context (and their insights) in order to create a new understanding of murder: unfortunately that understanding remains limited to the phenomenon newly created through such separation and fetishism. But postmodern analysts seem to feel the need of what is known in advertising as a “hook”—that unexpected bend of the mind upon which to suspend an argument. And evidently, so do publishers.

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