ON SUICIDE BOMBING

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ON
SUICIDE BOMBING

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EDITORIAL NOTE

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THE CRITICAL THEORY INSTITUTE
John H. Smith, *Director*

CONTENTS

ON SUICIDE BOMBING

3

HORROR AT SUICIDE TERRORISM

IN THIS FINAL CHAPTER, I want to move away from the preoccupation with the meaning of suicide bombing and with the question of what motivates the bombers to kill innocent civilians by dying—of why people choose death rather than life. I want to reframe the question. I want to ask: Why do people in the West react to verbal and visual representations of suicide bombing with professions of horror? Unimaginable cruelties perpetrated in secret or openly, by dictatorships and democracies, criminals and prison systems, racially oriented immigration policies and ethnic cleansing, torture and imperial wars are all evident in the world today. What leads liberal moralists to react to suicide bombings with such horror? Why are there so many articles, books, TV documentaries, and films on the topic?[1] Why are people—myself included—so fascinated and disturbed by it? In what follows, I offer a tentative answer by looking at some modern conceptions of killing and dying that have emerged out of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In a review of two books on Palestinian suicide bombers, the British psychoanalyst Jacqueline Rose notes that suicide operations do not kill as many civilians as conventional warfare does, and yet people react to them with exceptional horror. "The horror," she writes,

"would appear to be associated with the fact that the attacker also dies. Dropping cluster bombs from the air is not only less repugnant: it is somehow deemed, by Western leaders at least, to be morally superior. Why dying with your victim should be seen as a greater sin than saving yourself is unclear. Perhaps, then, the revulsion stems partly from the unbearable intimacy shared in their final moments by the suicide bomber and her or his victims. Suicide bombing is an act of passionate identification—you take the enemy with you in a deadly embrace."[2]

Rose is right to contrast reactions to the massive killing of civilians in World War II—the saturation bombing of Japanese and Germany cities—with Western reactions to suicide bombers. (How does one compare the suffering of those who survive in the two cases?) Her question about horror is important, but she doesn't quite answer it. "The horror would appear to be associated with the fact that the attacker dies," she observes acutely but then moves—too quickly—from the reaction of horror on the part of those who confront it as an image to a puzzlement about the perpetrator's moral status ("Why dying with your victim should be seen as a greater sin than saving yourself is unclear.") The latter shifts our attention again to the question of what motivates the suicide bomber to take his own life. Although Rose is a sophisticated commentator, her account leads the reader to lose sight of the matter of the observer's sense of horror.

So: Why the horror? Is it because death and dismemberment happen suddenly in the midst of ordinary life? Aerial bombing does give at least some warning (sirens, searchlights, the drone of airplanes, the distant explosions), however ineffective the immediate possibilities of shelter may be. (Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on the other hand, were atom-bombed without any warning and with no opportunity for civilian escape.) There is no warning—so it is often said—when the suicide bomber strikes her victims out of the routine of everyday living. There is something to this, but as an explanation it seems to me inadequate to account for the more muted reactions to the continuing death or maiming of adults and children by land mines

in the third world. True, for the Western media, the sudden death of Europeans is more shocking than that of non-Europeans, and there are historical reasons for focusing on non-European militants who kill Europeans. Western reports of Tamil suicide bombers in Sri Lanka and even of the many suicide bombers in occupied Iraq attacking fellow Iraqis do not display the same horror—or evoke it in a Western audience. All of this may be true, but it still doesn't tell us why *horror* is expressed, when it *is* genuinely expressed, and what it consists in.

There is certainly something distinctive about a suicide attack, and part of it is this: The bomber appears as it were in disguise; he appears anonymously, like any member of the public going about his normal business. An object of great danger, he is unrecognized until it is too late. Signs taken innocently are other than they appear. There is also something else, however, something that Rose identifies but does not go on to address: "The horror would appear to be associated with the fact that the attacker dies." Why is that significant? Every death of human beings that is witnessed, every sudden death of someone spatially or socially near, may evoke violent emotions: anguish, fear, rage. What is special about suicide?

In the Abrahamic religions, suicide is intimately connected with sin because God denies the individual the right to terminate his own earthly identity. In the matter of his/her life, the individual creature has no sovereignty. Suicide is a sin because it is a unique act of freedom, a right that neither the religious authorities nor the nation-state allows. Today, the law requires that a prisoner condemned to death be prevented from committing suicide to escape execution; it is not death but authorized death that is called for. So, too, all other convicts in prison, all soldiers in battle, and the terminally ill cannot kill themselves, however good they think their reasons for doing so may be. The power over life and death can be held legitimately only by the one God, creator and destroyer, and so by his earthly delegates. But although individuals have no right to kill themselves, God (and the state) gives them the right to be punished and to atone.[3]

In antiquity, by contrast, suicide was neither a sin nor a crime, although it was typically the elites, to whom that freedom was a personal entitlement, who could legitimately take their own lives. Political authorities could offer suicide to members of the elite as a legal option to being judicially executed (Socrates is perhaps the most famous example). Nietzsche insisted that this suicide not only foreshadowed the Crucifixion but was also, like the latter, despicable because both were "undefiant deaths" (thought there is an important difference here to which I'll return: Socrates' death was a private suicide, carried out in the small company of friends;[4] the Crucifixion a public demonstration of punishment and redemption). Nevertheless, it is not the fact that the subject has chosen suicide that critics like Nietzsche object to but its manner and meaning. They are asserting the secular humanist principle that *fighting* against the demands of external power is a sign of nobility. There is nothing horrible, so they seem to say, in violent death itself, only in the motive that defines it.[5]

But first: What *is* horror? Horror is not a motive but a state of being. Unlike terror, outrage, or the spontaneous desire for vengeance, horror has no object. It is intransitive. I find Stanley Cavell helpful here. "Horror," he writes, "is the title I am giving to the perception of the precariousness of human identity, to the perception that it may be lost or invaded, that we may be, or may become, something other than we are, or take ourselves for; that our origins as human beings need accounting for, and are unaccountable."[6] Horror, Cavell observes, is quite different from fear; it is not the extreme form of fear that we call "terror." If fearlessness is a possible alternative to terror, there is no parallel alternative to horror. I want to stress that in this sense horror applies not only to the perception that *our own* identities are precarious but also those of other humans—and not only the identity of individual humans but also that of human ways of life. As understood here, horror is not essentially a genre—the horror film or novel—that articulates a plot: sudden discovery of evil, fear of disaster. Horror is a state of being that is *felt*. Horror explodes

the imaginary, the space within which the flexible persona demonstrates to itself its identity.

Let me concretize the idea of horror by reference to published accounts of suicide operations. The accounts typically refer to the sudden shattering and mingling of physical objects and human bodies. Here is a long description of such an event in Jerusalem:

> With my back turned to the door as I sat at the counter of a pizza parlor waiting for my order, I didn't see a man try to enter with a backpack slung over his shoulder. The pack contained a bomb. When a suspicious guard turned him away, the man ran to the door of the coffeehouse 20 feet away and blew himself up as two guards rushed him, shouting, "Duck, everybody!" I saw a flash out of the corner of my eye and an instant later heard the crack of an explosion. I knew instantly a suicide bomber had struck. "Damn, they've hit Jerusalem," I thought as I ran toward the door. The eerie silence in the immediate aftermath was broken first by the sound of a woman's whimper blossoming into a full-blown scream. As I hit the five or six steps down to the street, a woman in shock swept past me with her arm extended, looking at her bloody hand as though it were a foreign object. The first thing I saw was the severed, bloody head of the suicide bomber, sitting upright in the middle of the street like a Halloween fright mask. The sight was confirmation of an ugly truth I had learned from Israeli police spokesman Gil Kleiman at the day's first bombing. "The weakest part of your body is your neck," Kleiman told me after a worker had climbed a 20-foot ladder to retrieve the bomber's head, which the blast had torn from his body. The acrid smell of dynamite and burned hair was in the air. In the coffeehouse, the walls were charred and the floor was littered with shattered furniture. There was no movement. A fluorescent light glowed behind the counter. "Stop looking around. Do something. Help," I told myself. Two feet away on the asphalt was a woman, her skin ghostly pale. Later, from newspaper photos, I learned the woman's name was Nava Applebaum. Her father was the emergency room director of a hospital and a specialist in treating

> suicide bombing victims. He had met Nava there to have a father-daughter talk on the eve of her wedding. For her wedding, the 50-year-old Cleveland-born doctor had prepared a book with sayings from family members and himself, biblical passages and marital advice. Twisted bodies. Applebaum, 20, was curled on her side gasping for breath, her father's body eight feet away, his back and head smoldering. I wasn't sure what the force of the blast had done to her internal organs, but either the concussion of the blast or her collision with the pavement had twisted her left arm at the shoulder and elbow in a direction a limb is not intended to go. The heat of the blast had singed her hair gray. I huddled next to her and pressed my fingers against two dime-sized holes that shrapnel had torn in her neck. . . . As ambulances arrived and Israeli police and rescue workers responded, I yelled to catch their attention. One worker, then two, joined me. One felt for a pulse. His shoulders sagged. Nava was dead, along with six others. They placed her body on a gurney and rushed it away.[7]

The account I have just quoted reflects feelings of anger, distress, and compassion. But one gets a glimpse of something else, too, a sense of something distinct from sympathy for the suffering of victims and survivors or from outrage at the destruction of human life: the woman's bloody hand is described as an alien thing; the bomber's head in the street as a fright mask; a man's back and head burn like coal; his daughter's arm is not a natural limb. One is presented here not just with a scene of death and wounding but with a confounding of the body's shapes. It is as though the familiar, reassuring face of a friend had disintegrated before one's eyes. All this is interwoven with touching details (names and personal histories of some of the victims) based on information that could only have been acquired long after the event described so dramatically—by which I don't mean to imply that it is untrue but that it is a construction. The narrative is intended as a way of making readers *feel* the horror of a suicide bombing, to feel helpless in the face of a sudden attack against everyday life and, above all, the loss of that

ordinariness in which human identity resides. There are two crucial things here: the writer's visceral sense of horror (which might have been felt witnessing a terrible accident) and his reconstruction of it specifically as the work of a suicide bomber.

In fact, horror is more often encountered in recitations of war, most acutely in retrospect by those who have experienced it. Theodore Nadelson, a psychiatrist who treated Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, has written about their experiences of war, its terrors and enchantments. He has also written briefly (too briefly) of the aesthetics and pornography of killing,[8] the sense that many soldiers in war have of affirming life through the very destruction of other human beings (regardless of whether they are noncombatants), their erotic involvement with death (including their own), and the intoxication with killing that Marines call "eye-fucking."[9] I reproduce at length one of the many accounts given to him by anguished patients:

> I got a photograph. I'm holding two heads—standing there holding two heads by their hair. Can you believe it? Well, there were other guys walking around with heads on poles—like savages, like long ago . . . and nothing un-normal about it, that's the un-normal part—it was normal, real, it was accepted. They took a picture of me. That's how I remember it because of the photo. That's why I still have it—reminds me of those times—without the picture I won't believe it in peacetime. . . . In 'Nam you always got something to do, ambush, clean out a VC [Vietcong] tunnel . . . you do it so you can get out, get food, get water, and maybe, but you don't want to think of it, you [will] get back home, back to the "real world." But now you are in hell and you act it. You don't dare think of home, no way. If you try to get home, you worry about trying to save yourself, you get dead. So nothing matters. The VC I killed . . . Jesus! Well, you had to do it. You had to do it to get out of there. I didn't care about the VC—they would have killed me. But the women and kids? First I was picking them [children] up after the gunships shot up a ville. Then I capped them

> too. They'd grow up to kill you—maybe that was the story. But that's crazy—but like I said crazy was normal there. Unless you accepted that as normal, you could not live through it. They would do things, then it's over, and you go on. Hell, they [the VC] would do it to you, you have to do it to them a hundred times harder and worse. . . . So these guys found these women in a village and they started to rape them. Yeh, and they are banging away, and then they take out their K-bars, for God's sake! And they are stabbing them, crazy, out of control, and banging away—crazy—and still doing it when the women are dead. You understand? Maybe you understand . . . but it isn't possible to get people to understand who were not there. It was terrible what I—we did—but we all did it, those good guys I knew. All good, do anything for you. I can say it, I loved them. . . . But the worst thing I can say about myself is that while I was there I was so alive. I loved it the way you can like an adrenaline high, the way you can love your friends, your tight buddies. So unreal and the realest thing that ever happened. Un-fucking-imaginable. And maybe the worst thing for me now is living in peacetime without a possibility of that high again. I hate what the high was about, but I loved the high.[10]

Nadelson's patients, all deliberately trained by the state to become determined killers, were not unusual as troubled veterans go—and neither were their reported experiences, their painful sense of confusion that the experiences gave rise to.[11] They not only try—with evident difficulty—to narrate what they have done to others (and themselves) in war, to articulate and separate entangled feelings of tenderness and cruelty; they are in the end unable to give a coherent account of themselves as human beings. The narrator is at once perpetrator and victim. The inability to recount that experience, to grasp it verbally, is essential to its horror. Dave Grossman writing of the "sea of horror that surrounds the soldier and assails his every sense" in battle, quotes from a World War II soldier's memoir: "You tripped over strings of viscera fifteen feet long, over bodies which had been cut in half at the waist. Legs and arms, and heads

bearing only necks, lay fifty feet from the closest torsos. As night fell the beachhead reeked with the stench of burning flesh."[12] But in this narrative there is no specific perpetrator, only an attempt to depict the horrific experience of war. Horror itself requires no culprit, although it can be discursively fed into the nation-state's claim to find one through the law. (The law is nothing if it does not define culprits.)

In eighteenth-century Europe, aesthetic and religious reflection turned directly to the idea of horror. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke argued that pain and pleasure were incompatible (such that more of one meant less of the other) but that pain always evoked greater passions than pleasure. Pleasure, however, was not to be confused with what he called "delight": precisely because the latter can be attached to pain and danger, it draws us in horrified fascination to catastrophes. The power that excites this mixture of delight and pain is Burke's "Sublime," a power that cannot be clearly defined (delimited). Hence infinite emptiness, darkness, and silence were inhuman, manifestations of a timeless absence of form—and therefore not only a source of fear of the unknown but also of awe experienced as horror. Burke does not mention the Crucifixion, but the catastrophic and brutal death it represents is at once an object of horror and of love—and thus sublime. (For Freud, the Sublime was a survival from the forgotten psychic condition of childhood in which the earliest horrors of an unformed self were encountered, but as a quasi-religious experience it was also to be understood as the return of the primitive in an apparently modern and secular context.)

There is, of course, a well-known theological response to the horror of formlessness that early modern Christians were more than familiar with: In the Bible, it is the power of the deity that gives form and identity to something without it ("And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep").

According to Genesis, the creation of the world consisted in giving form and identifying each form by name ("And God called the dry *land* Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called he Seas: and God saw that it was good"). The culmination of this work, of course, is man—who named and thus identified every living creature—and then woman. Only the shaping, naming, and maintaining work of the deity keeps horror at bay for humans; that is one reason every step in the formation of the world, as represented in Genesis, is repeatedly pronounced "good." Yet the deity himself, to the extent that he is limitless and indescribable, remains a source of horror, the only power capable of destroying all form, of absorbing all identities. From horror, refuge may be taken in reverence.

The Bible is full of destructive as well as creative acts in which identities are undermined or claimed. The most famous example in the Old Testament of autodestruction that is also a creation is recorded in chapter 16 of Judges. Samson, scourge of the Philistines, is eventually taken captive by them through the treachery of his foreign wife, Delilah, depilated, and blinded.[13] But in prison his hair (and with it his strength) grows again, and in the temple of the idol Dagon, where the Philistines are gathered in large number, he carries out his terrible deed of ritual destruction. The Bible recounts this story—the killing of a large number of unsuspecting innocents, including the boy who had led Samson in his blindness—as an act of triumph. It is a religious suicide through which God's enemies are killed with God's assistance and a new political world is initiated. Samson's final act redeems not only his own heroic status but also his people's freedom. The Bible doesn't linger over his motives; instead, it describes the ceremonial nature of his burial and hints at a new collective beginning—at what we would now say is the making of history.

As a narrative of struggle, betrayal, and suffering, the Samson myth has lent itself to various modern projects, secular and religious. It has been used in numerous works—operas, poems, paintings, novels, and movies—in the history of Western art. Perhaps this is because the spectacular final act of suicide and destruction

is art—or, at any rate, the aesthetic performance of an idea.[14] In the celebrated seventeenth-century poem *Samson Agonistes*, John Milton identified himself in his blind days with the captive hero and prophesied the ultimate victory of his side (faithful to the God of Abraham) over the royalist worshippers of the false god Dagon. The horror of a mass killing is translated into a story of redemption. But there is something more than an allegorical reading here. Frank Prince, poet and Milton scholar—and editor of the Oxford edition of *Samson*—speaks of the "beauty of moral severity" displayed by this great work: "Intransigence of judgement, firmness of faith, the acceptance of both action and suffering, are themselves moving and beautiful," he writes.[15] Whatever one may think of this critic's suggestion, it is evident that the aesthetic sensibility in Milton's *Samson* is multiple and not reducible to the singularity of mere pathology.

Interestingly, the story is also told as a national myth of *secular* redemption through the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. In 1927 the revisionist Zionist Ze'ev Jabotinsky rewrote it as a simple, romantic novel, in which motives are fleshed out and realist detail added. Even the Philistine guards (invented by Jabotinsky) are given a dignified end in the destruction of the temple. They are representatives of a nation who, with typical fatalism, must accept their own defeat in the face of a new power—a new truth—in the land.[16] Here, as in all recountings of the story, Samson is not the destroyer of identity but the creator of one that is heroic—although the heroism of Jabotinsky's nationalist tale is quite different from the one Milton depicted. Jabotinsky has no sense of the tragic, merely an eye for the exotic in the public theater of violence.

Today, in Israel, Jewish children are taught to revere Samson the hero as the archetypal "tough Jew." According to a recent book by the Israeli writer David Grossman, the story of Samson articulates the problematic quality of Israel's use of power. Grossman thinks that, like the biblical hero, Israel has not yet developed a proper awareness of its immense strength. Grossman explains this in psychoanalytic terms: in the case of Samson, via a speculative history

of an emotionally deprived childhood; in the case of the Jews, with reference to a long history of victimization. The contemporary Jewish state, unaware of its own strength, tends to resort too quickly to force—and to use it excessively without being fully conscious of what it is doing. The myth of Samson, Grossman suggests, accounts for the mythic, uncontrolled quality of Israeli power; that power is reflected in and performed through a tragic story.[17]

Clearly, when aggressive suicide is read as the initiation and affirmation of collective identity, it does not invite an immediate response of helpless horror. Sometimes, however, the possibility of unimaginable horror is deliberately and publicly hinted at, as in the name Israel has chosen for its nuclear arsenal: "the Samson option." That option is the readiness to undertake a nuclear strike that, in a very narrow geographical space, will certainly result in the joint destruction of Israel together with its enemies. The horror that is deliberately displayed here as a chosen possibility is embedded in the state's narrative of virtue: of its duty to use *any* means to defend its way of life. But, of course, horror conveyed discursively is not horror directly experienced.

I turn now specifically to the dissolution of the human body and the horror this generates.

In *Purity and Danger*,[18] Mary Douglas famously argued that in every culture, whether primitive or modern, things are categorized according to distinctive criteria whose confusion is viewed as an outrage. When boundaries are breached—when form is endangered—they must be restored: rituals of avoidance, punishment, and purification are ways of doing just that. It is the absence of rituals for dealing with transgression, not the fact of "matter out of place," that generates horror.

Purity and Danger was a seminal anthropological work that inspired much scholarship in several disciplines on the subject of taboo. One

wishes, however, that Douglas had had more to say about power, as an earlier anthropologist to whom she is indebted had done. In his posthumous book *Taboo*,[19] Franz Steiner pointed out that in its original Polynesian context the word indicated danger, and since the idea of danger is at once political and metaphysical (even the word "danger" once signified "being in the power of, under the dominion of"), it is linked to a range of practices by which attempts are made to protect valued identities, beliefs, and forms of life. Put another way, the anxiety that what is valued is being menaced can be dealt with by systematic distancing, expulsion, and punishment.

Steiner's tracing of a genealogy of the concept "taboo" (which had found its way from anthropology into psychoanalysis) problematizes the way in which the concept of "the sacred" was deployed in anthropological theology. At the same time, he also rejects Freud's assumption that primitives were like neurotics in confusing veneration with horror, the former being an attitude that was rationally justifiable and the latter not. The confusion, according to Freud, consisted in an inability to distinguish what was really dangerous to the self from what was merely imagined to be so. (Steiner could have pointed out, but does not, that the two are not equivalent: veneration is an action within a relationship; horror is a frozen state of being.) Against Freud's elision of the primitive and the infant, Steiner insisted that religion was concerned in different ways with powers that threatened or defended the integrity of being human. But it is particularly his discussion of the chiefly political organization in Polynesia—the context in which the word "taboo" was first identified by Europeans in the eighteenth century and then later generalized to a range of different phenomena—that opens up another avenue for understanding horror in relation to power's ability to impose limits (taboos) where these have been transgressed. These include the familiar religious sins of heresy, blasphemy, and sacrilege or, in a secular world dominated by the modern nation-state, the crimes of treason and terrorism. The horror that these acts may produce is

the result of their deliberate transgression of boundaries that separate the human from the inhuman, the creature from the Creator. Horror is the total loss of practical and mental control.

Thus, while dominion—divine or worldly—is typically concerned to deal with the crossing of limits that variously constitute the human and to require restorative work when transgressions occur, it does not forbid the killing of human life itself. On the contrary, power dissolves living bodies as punishment for outrages committed or as sacrifice in "just" wars. But it also regulates the transformation of all dying bodies—the transition from life to death—by way of mortuary and mourning rites, cemeteries and war memorials. The body of the deceased is central to these rituals of transition from the world of the living to the world inhabited by the dead, and mourners may experience horror if the rituals of transition are ignored and profaned. Relatives of the deceased may experience considerable disquiet if the corpse is irretrievable in its entirety—whether this be the result of drowning at sea or to an explosion—so that it can be properly dealt with, honored, or appeased. That is one reason why the modern state ("representative of the nation") seeks to obtain the dead bodies of its soldiers both during and after hostilities. For those who believe in another world as well as those who don't, the indeterminate status of the recently dead is a source of great anxiety because death threatens the identity of the living to whom the deceased was bound. Proper words and gestures—even angry ones—are a means of responding appropriately to this threat. They serve—in the funerary rites and later—to incorporate death into the predictable continuity of a form of life and thereby to suppress the thought that it is life that is contingent.[20] Thus it is not the occurrence of death as such in which horror resides but the manner in which it occurs and how the dead body is dealt with by the living.

The transition from life to death by social reincorporation can also take the form of public punishment, including ritualized torture.

In *Les larmes d'Éros* (1961), Georges Bataille refers to a photograph—one of several—of a young Chinese man being subjected to

the ritual punishment of "the hundred pieces," in which he is slowly cut up alive. The photograph was taken in 1905 and reproduced in 1923 by Georges Dumas in his *Traité de psychologie*. Bataille writes:

> I have been told that in order to prolong the torture, opium is administered to the condemned man. Dumas insists upon the ecstatic appearance of the victim's expression. There is, of course, something undeniable in his expression, no doubt due at least in part to the opium, which augments what is most anguishing about this photograph. Since 1925 I have owned one of these pictures. . . . I have never stopped being obsessed by this image of pain, at once ecstatic and intolerable. . . . What I suddenly saw, and what imprisoned me in anguish—but which at the same time delivered me from it—was the identity of these perfect contraries, divine ecstasy and its opposite, extreme horror.[21]

Part of the horror for Bataille seems to lie in the fact that the victim's face exhibits unbearable pain that is at the same time an expression of orgiastic abandon—the horror in this case is not, as he says here, the opposite of the latter but the union of the two.

Late medieval paintings on death, punishment, and atonement typically juxtapose youthful beauty with its ugly end: famously, they dwell on the inevitability of human decay, the fleeting (and often costly) character of pleasure. The punitive character of medieval Christian (and Muslim) morality has been much written about by moderns. And yet in secular modernity eroticism is sometimes deliberately linked to sadism—the sex instinct, Freud said, is always intertwined with the instinct of aggression. Of the paintings reproduced in *Les larmes d'Éros*, two might be seen as emblematic of this intertwining. First: Hans Baldung Grien's *Love and Death (Vanitas)* (1510) shows a nude young woman with long tresses absorbed by her image in a hand mirror and, hovering behind her with one arm raised above her head and the other clutching at her modesty scarf, a corpse whose decaying flesh barely conceals his skeletal frame—a classic representation of memento mori. The second picture is

André Masson's *Praying Mantis* (circa 1920), which depicts a naked woman lying—whether in ecstatic abandon or unbearable pain is not clear—with a man-sized praying mantis atop her with one limb in her crotch and his mandible kissing her face—or perhaps chewing at it. (Is this a misogynist allusion to the figure of the female praying mantis biting off the head of the male after copulation?)

There is a long Christian tradition of depicting—in words and images—the agonies endured by sinners after death. But these medieval works do not deal with horror in Cavell's sense; their purpose is to evoke extreme fear of divine punishment in the hearts of sinful believers. Masson's secular representation, on the other hand, makes no pretense at teaching a moral lesson. It simply illustrates in a disturbing way the Freudian proposition that the pleasure principle and the death wish—copulation and suicide, love and murder—are two faces of one natural reality. The sources of horror are already here, in the way we live and die, and not in a world to come.

I return to the torture of "the hundred cuts." What is represented in that photograph is not merely the dissolution of a living human body—and therefore of its identity. For Bataille, it also seems to be an intimation of something else: the possibility that the distinctions by which all recognizable, nameable human life is lived can be dissolved in ecstasy. Slowly, agonizingly, in exquisite delight—Burke's sense of "delight"—the living body of the condemned man becomes a mound of dead flesh.[22] In this transfiguration, the very possibility of ethics appears to be undermined. When no signs of the living body can be relied on, the ground that sustains the sense of being human—and therefore of what it is to be humane—collapses. What seems to horrify is the ease with which the boundary between what is alive and what is not—between the sanctity of a human corpse and the profanity of an animal carcass—can be crossed.

In 1949 Georges Franju made a documentary about a slaughterhouse in a Parisian suburb called *Blood of the Beasts* (*Le sang des bêtes*) that was to become a classic of surrealist cinema. The studied depiction of industrial death produces an effect of overwhelming horror

in most audiences. Adam Lowenstein, in a fascinating monograph on horror films, draws on Walter Benjamin's idea of allegory to argue that "*Blood of the Beasts* insists on disclosing connections between everyday life and the horrors of history."[23] In particular, Lowenstein joins critics who have made the connection between the grim labor of the abattoir and the Holocaust. But I disagree here: the experience of horror (as opposed to the horror story) does not depend on interpretation, whether allegorical or symbolic. It does not convey meanings: *it is a state of being*. The scenes of unbearable pain, of blood-soaked death, of life transformed into meat—all depicted unemotionally in the film—require no allegorical reading, no sudden discovery of evil. They do not symbolize the murder of human beings. The routine killing of life is itself shocking, the treatment of living animals as industrial products grotesque. The mechanized killing in Nazi concentration camps was undoubtedly facilitated by treating victims as *untermenschen*, as animals, and that is certainly part of *its* horror. But the emotional effect of a documentary about an abattoir at work does not depend on its being read as a Nazi death camp. Horror, I want to insist, is essentially not a matter of *interpretation*.[24] When the viewer makes a connection between the abattoir and the death camp, she has gone some way to mastering horror and begun to develop an ethical judgment. What I want to say is not that horror is natural (indeed, it is always mediated by sediments and traces that have been inscribed in the body) but that it requires no discursive effort.

Recall the utterly horrific suicide in Michael Haneke's recent film *Caché*: a brutal act of self-destruction (he slits his own throat as in the ritualized slaughter of an animal) by a man who has never before shown any sign of violence or even any hatred for the person who has done him terrible wrong. The force of the shock resides not in anything *representational* but in the treatment of a human being as an animal that has to be killed appropriately when it is to be consumed. But the power of the image (which is *not* a representation of reality) is far greater than any story we invent for it. The protagonist,

in whose presence the suicide occurs, is certainly horrified, but this doesn't open up for him any critical self-reflection. The point here is not, as an unsympathetic reviewer of the film in the *Nation* put it,[25] that the Arab conveniently kills himself in an act of symbolic self-negation in relation to a Frenchman. Rather, it is the horrible impact of that performance in itself that could (but doesn't as far as the protagonist is concerned) push viewers to reflect on the implications of suppressed memory—biographical as well as national—that constitutes, at least in part, what individual modern subjectivities are. By the end of the film, the protagonist is clearly in a state of shock, but he doesn't ask himself, "Why did he do this terrible thing? Was I in some measure responsible?" Instead, he takes a sleeping pill and asks his wife that he not be disturbed.

When Bataille writes, however, that he was horrified—and fascinated—by the photographic image, one needs to look at the faces of the onlookers and of the executer in the picture: they do not seem to express horror (any more than the workers in Franju's abattoir do), although they are looking not at an image but at the calculated act of violence itself. This suggests that since the actual witnesses to the ritualized punishment did not regard the scene as Bataille did, the gap between representation and perception is where human identity resides and that it is the tension between them that constitutes a permanent threat to it. The protagonist in *Caché* was probably horrified, but there is no evidence that he was able to move beyond that state into one of self-understanding.

Beyond this intersubjective horror at the destruction of the human body, one should perhaps mention another: the helplessness of an aging person regarding her own body, the body (perceived in reflection) in which her identity has been rooted. "When I read in print Simone de Beauvoir, it is a young woman they are telling me about, and who happens to be me," writes the author.

> I thought one day when I was forty: "Deep in that looking glass, old age is watching and waiting for me; it's inevitable, one day she will

> get me." She's got me now. I often stop, flabbergasted, at the sight of this incredible thing that serves me as a face. . . . While I was able to look at my face without displeasure I gave it no thought, it could look after itself. The wheel eventually stops. I loathe my appearance now: the eyebrows slipping down toward the bags underneath, the excessive fullness of the cheeks, and that air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring. *Perhaps the people I pass in the street see merely a woman in her fifties who simply looks her age, no more, no less. But when I look, I see my face as it was, attacked by the pox of time for which there is no cure.*[26]

There is, I think, a sense of horror—as Cavell conceives it—that comes through in this passage, and not mere regret or disgust.

The significance of this process lies not in an awareness of approaching death or of weakening powers but in *the irresistible dissociation between self and body*, between, on the one hand, the stationary image of an embodied identity built up in one's full vigor and, on the other hand, a body less and less able to respond adequately to the routines and expectations attached to that self-image. Memory mocks the present. If memory is the reproduction of the past in the present, there is a parallel process in an aging body that reproduces the future in the present. Physical and mental decay are not merely anticipated intellectually but embodied in the present as extensions: failing eyesight, hearing, and strength; the loosening of skin and muscle; the distortion of body and rotting of flesh. Passion, attention, and memory are together attenuated: unassisted, life declines into nonlife. Whereas the past is lodged in uncertain memories and is thus increasingly uncertain, the future acquires an increasing physical reality. *Inscribed in the body is an image of the future that is nothing more than a continuous unbinding or emptying.*[27] Repressed horror typically attaches to that process.

Subjects can and sometimes do end the perceived threat of decay to their identity by committing suicide. (Note incidentally: suicide bombers are never old, which suggests that agility and physical confidence are more important to their performance than an appropriate motive.) That drastic solution, however, is also an end to identity itself, at least for the subject, though not for those who survive. For in modern society generally suicide tends to produce anguish among those who are rejected by that self-punishment and who are therefore compelled to bear within themselves the accusations of the dead. When these accusations are unaccountable, unrelatable to a remembered past, the anguish congeals as horror. In an important sense, every suicide causes close relatives and lovers who are left behind to die in some measure.

In the most famous suicide in Judeo-Christian history, however, a suicide that helps to define the tradition, the potentiality of horror is translated through a history of ethical interpretation and learnt sensibility into a productive complex.

In that history, God's only begotten son gave his life willingly and deliberately in order to redeem mankind: the supreme sacrifice.[28] Although he did not murder himself, he devised that he should be cruelly killed. The Crucifixion has long been a model in Christendom for legal punishment, so that a convicted victim's suffering has been seen as the repayment by which social and metaphysical order can be restored, as a means of cultivating absent virtue, as an example to others of the death that is at once sin and the cleansing of sin.[29] In fact, Christ's indirect suicide—his public torture—constitutes a paradox: it is at once a loving gift and a model of unjust suffering. There is an echo of this paradox in secular humanism: One must urge the citizen-soldier to give up his life so that a particular way of life may be reproduced—a *sacrifice*. And yet one may not permit the death penalty because as a legal *punishment* it may be undeserved and as inflicted *death* it is always irretrievable. Humanists—even secular humanists—are impressed by the possibilities of repentance and moral improvement. For them, the theological idea of redemption

through repentance is a primary concern and often more important than the subjection of humans to cruelty.[30] As many reformers have argued, although repentance may not be a substitute for suffering, anguish is a sign that genuine repentance has occurred.

The Crucifixion is the divinely planned punishment of an innocent man, his vicarious suffering for humanity's sins. It carries a terrible gift: life everlasting purchased by a cruel death. The success of this supreme act of good is paradoxically dependent on a supremely (and convolutedly) evil act: the betrayal by Judas of his master, in which the latter colluded. The relevant passage in the *Gospels* makes this clear:

> When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, 'Verily, verily, I say unto you that one of you shall betray me.' Then the disciples looked one on another, doubting of whom he spoke. Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of his disciples, whom Jesus loved. Simon Peter therefore beckoned to him, that he should ask who it should be of whom he spoke. He then lying on Jesus' breast saith unto him, 'Lord, who is it?' Jesus answered, 'He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it.' And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon. And after the sop Satan entered into him. Then said Jesus unto him, 'That thou doest, do quickly.' Now no man at the table knew for what intent he spoke this unto him. For some of them thought, because Judas had the bag, that Jesus had said unto him, 'Buy those things that we have need of against the feast'; or, that he should give something to the poor. He having received the sop went immediately out: and it was night."[31]

What is striking in this well-known passage is that Satan is said to enter into Judas the moment he receives the order from Jesus to perform the act that will initiate the great drama of salvation, an expression of the paradox that the greatest gift to humanity must pass through the worst of evil.

But once we come to Christ's death, we are given to understand that its cruelty resides not simply in his physical suffering but in

the fact that all human beings are ultimately responsible for it by reason of their sinful indifference. Thus cruelty consists not only in the intentional infliction of suffering on others but in a deliberate indifference to it. In the Crucifixion, however, the violent breaking of the body is not an occasion for horror (as in the Chinese torture of a hundred cuts); it becomes the source of a transcendent truth through a story, a fable. It also constitutes, in and through violence, the universal category of "the human" to whom the gift is offered (unlike Samson's suicide that reclaims the identity of a particular nation). In short, in Christian civilization, the gift of life for humanity is possible only through a suicidal death; redemption is dependent on cruelty or at least on the sin of disregarding human life.

If the Crucifixion represents the truth of violence, what is its significance in a secular age? In popular visual narratives (film, TV, etc.), the male hero often undergoes severe physical punishment or torture at the hands of ruthless men,[32] but his acute suffering is the very vindication of truth. The audience suffers with him and anticipates a healing. This replays a modern secular crucifixion story in which the truth of the lonely figure is sustained by his willingness to suffer in mind and in body, to undergo unbearable pain and ecstasy that can become through sympathy an exquisite part of the spectator's own sensibility.[33]

Modern liberal democracies are avowedly humanist and secularist, and liberals take their distance from the religious zealotry that wreaked havoc in Europe's early modernity. The medieval sensibilities that accompanied religious cruelties are regarded by them with professed horror. Yet the genealogy of modern humanist sensibility joins ruthlessness to compassion and proposes that brutal killing can be at once the vilest evil and the greatest good. "With surprising consistency, though to varying degrees over time and with shifting emphases," writes World War I historian Richard Gamble, "Americans have been habitually drawn to language that is redemptive, apocalyptic, and expansive. Americans have long experienced and articulated a sense of urgency, of hanging on the precipice of great

change. . . . They have fallen easily into the Manichean habit of dividing the world into darkness and light, Evil and Good, past and future, Satan and Christ. They have seen themselves as a progressive, redemptive force, waging war in the ranks of Christ's army, or have imagined themselves even as Christ Himself, liberating those in bondage and healing the afflicted."[34] And more vividly, in the words of American orators themselves, here is a direct analogy between divine sacrifice and the United States' war casualties: "Christ gave his life upon the cross that mankind might gain the kingdom of heaven, while to-night we shall solemnly decree the sublimest sacrifice ever made by a nation for the salvation of humanity, the institution of world-wide liberty and freedom."[35]

Historians of Christendom have stressed the importance of late medieval thinking about atonement—particularly about Christ's final agony and its meaning for human redemption. They show how, through image, word, and deed, Christ's cruel death on the cross helped to create among pious Christians a distinctive sensitivity to human pain.[36] A sign of one's repentance was the measure to which one empathized with the *human* suffering of Christ—of Christ who was no longer (or not only) "the King" but also "the Man who restored man."[37]

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, so-called Passion tracts, depicting in great detail Christ's pain and pathos, became very popular and were produced in several European languages.[38] The painting and words in which Christ was represented as the ultimate martyr and his life presented as the model for redemptive imitation (*Imitatio Christi*) became an essential part of the Modern Devotion, especially in its "stress on the personal relationship between Christ and each individual."[39] This passive merging with Christ's suffering gave way eventually to secular sensibilities that assumed a more active attitude to pain by refusing in all conscience that human suffering had any virtue whatever and elevating the virtue of compassion in relation to it. And yet, ironically, the idea of sacrificing individual life for the sake of national immortality in war as in peace

has become quite familiar.[40] If "dying for the nation" sounds a little quaint and suspect to liberals today, "dying for democracy" seems to be more respectable.[41]

I want to suggest that the cult of sacrifice, blood, and death that secular liberals find so repellent in pre-liberal Christianity is a part of the genealogy of modern liberalism itself, in which violence and tenderness go together. This is encountered in many places in our modern culture, not least in what is generally taken to be "just" war. Take, for example, the moving volumes of war poetry written in the early part of the twentieth century: some critics have noted that the English poets of the Great War—Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves—were able "to express gentleness, tenderness, loving kindness, and love for each other" only when their readiness to kill was the accompaniment of these sentiments.[42]

Today, this contradiction is a part of a modern liberalism that has inherited and rephrased some of its basic values from medieval Christian tradition: on the one hand, there is the imperative to use any means necessary (including homicide and suicide) to defend the nation-state that constitutes one's worldly identity and defends one's health and security and, on the other, the obligation to revere all human life, to offer life in place of death to universal humanity; the first presupposes a capacity for ruthlessness, the second for kindness. The contradiction itself constitutes a particular kind of human subject whose functioning depends on the fact that the contradiction has to be continually worked through without ever being resolved.

"Dying to give life" is also found elsewhere in modern liberal culture. Anthropologists who have studied the medical practice of organ transplants write that the expression "giving life" is commonly used by organ procurement organizations.[43] This phrase must surely resonate, in a Western, humanist society, with Christ's gift of life to those who will receive it. But the use of this expression suppresses two horrifying elements in the whole business of organ

transplants: first, there is the market for body parts, in which the transfer of life is dependent on the circulation of money; second, and connected with this, is the incitement to violence on the bodies of individuals ironically called "donors." This is not merely because there is a flourishing black market in organs secured in dubious circumstances from the healthy poor. It is also that certain kinds of transplant (liver, heart, lung, etc.) rely on a new mode of determining death—brain death—that allows the rapid removal of fresh organs. Sophisticated new technologies and arguments are thus at the center of what it means to die, to kill, to have an identity—at the center of the seeming paradox that new life can be obtained from a dead or terminated body, that one's identity depends on a body that is and yet is not entirely one's own.[44] State law in liberal democratic societies seeks to resolve these problems of life and death, but it is continually undermined by the way the modern culture of death feeds our modern passion for life—at least *our* life.

I argued earlier against the idea of a clash between so-called Judeo-Christian and Islamic civilizations. Others who have dismissed this thesis have begun to insist that the significant clash is within Muslim society, between modern liberals and fanatics. But it should be evident that there are disturbing contradictions in modernity, too. The contradiction between compassion and ruthlessness and its capacity to generate horror in the liberal mind is a distinctively Western one.

For most witnesses, horror—a compound of pain and delight or (as Bataille put it) of ecstasy and unbearable pain—is generated by the unexpected image of a broken body, a shattered human identity. There are few things as shocking as a sudden suicide in one's presence. A suicide operation, in which many die and are wounded, extends that shock. A possible refuge from horrified helplessness in that case is righteous anger directed at the perpetrator of the deadly violence.[45]

So what happens if the perpetrator of death dealing dies of his own free will at the very moment of his crime? What, in other words, if crime and punishment are united? Refuge from the helplessness of horror, as I said earlier, may be taken in enraged self-affirmation, in a rhetoric against death the dissolver of identity. It may also lead to the construal of horror as a crime—to the desire to punish the criminal, the separation of crime and punishment. Mortal vengeance separates by eventalizing, by countering death as loss with death as restoration, the former a brutal crime and the latter a just satisfaction. Durkheim's famous thesis on criminal law, it may be recalled, was that all legal punishment is based on a sense of popular outrage and is therefore motivated by passionate vengeance.[46]

Mortal vengeance is death for death, the democratic principle of the substitutability of individuals, in death as in life. Revenge always justifies itself as fighting back, which is why it requires that crime and punishment be separated in time. It is when this eventalization is impossible, as in suicide bombing, that a fundamental sense of identity—of witnesses who identify with the dead and depend on retributive justice to produce a sense of satisfaction—may be radically threatened and horror may seize them.

This returns me to the question with which I began: Why do Westerners express horror at suicide terrorism—what is so special about it? In trying to answer it, I offered several reasons, each of which points to identity being destroyed, a process felt more acutely by Europeans when they learn that Europeans have been killed by non-Europeans—because that is where they have learned to invest an aspect of their identity as humans. Let me spell these reasons out briefly. First, an unexpected suicide is always shocking, especially so when it also occurs in public and when it involves the shattering of other human bodies and their belongings, a sudden disruption of the patterns of everyday life, a violence in which death is unregulated by the nation-state. Warfare, of course, is an even greater violation of civilian "innocence," but representations have sedimented

in us so as to see that *in principle* war is legitimate even when civilians are killed—that *in principle* deaths in war (however horrible) are necessary for the defense of our form of life. Here, the language of "civilization" and "barbarism" comes readily to hand rather than the more superficial "clash of civilizations." The second reason is that since crime and punishment, loss and restitution, are impossible to separate and since that separation is essential to the functioning of modern law on which liberal identities—and freedoms—depend, deaths in suicide operations are especially intolerable. Third, there are the tensions that hold modern subjectivity together: between individual self-assertion and collective obedience to the law, between reverence for human life and its legitimate destruction, between the promise of immortality through political community and the inexorability of decay and death in individual life. These tensions are necessary to the liberal democratic state, the sovereign representative of a social body, but they threaten to break down completely when a sudden suicide operation takes place publicly and when its politics is seen not to spell redemption but mutual disaster. Finally, I suggest the possibility that a highly emotional thought imposes itself on secular witnesses belonging to the Judeo-Christian tradition: the thought that the meaning of life is, as Kafka put it, death and only death. That catastrophic and brutal death can be, as the Crucifixion taught believing Christians, an occasion of love for *all* the dead. This is impossible on the occasion of a suicide bombing because there is no redemption there—none for the perpetrator, none for the victims, and none for those who witness or contemplate the event.

In the suicide bomber's act, perhaps what horrifies is not just dying and killing (or killing by dying) but the violent appearance of something that is normally disregarded in secular modernity: the limitless pursuit of freedom, the illusion of an uncoerced interiority that can withstand the force of institutional disciplines. Liberalism, of course, disapproves of the violent exercise of freedom outside the frame of law. But the law itself is founded by and continuously

depends on coercive violence. If modern war seeks to found or to defend a free political community with its own law, can one say that suicide terrorism (like a suicidal nuclear strike) belongs in this sense to liberalism? The question may, I think, be more significant than our comforting attempts at distinguishing the good conscience of just warriors from the evil acts of terrorists.