

JOSEPH VOGL

In the early hours of August 1, 1966, after murdering his wife and mother, Charles Whitman began to assemble equipment for further action: a transistor radio, bottles of water and gasoline, a flashlight, a compass, an ax, a lighter, a hunting knife, deodorant, food, toilet paper, adhesive tape, gloves, as well as several handguns, a carbine, and a hunting rifle. Shortly after 11 a.m., the twenty-five-year-old loaded a footlocker packed with these supplies into the back of his new black Chevrolet and left his small, single-family home for the campus of the University of Texas at Austin, where he was enrolled as an engineering student. He brought the footlocker into the thirty-story Main Building Tower on a two-wheeled dolly, took the elevator to the observation deck, killed the receptionist, and then, around lunchtime, opened fire on the campus below, killing thirteen people and injuring thirty-one more, before being fatally wounded in an extended shootout with the police, Texas Rangers, and armed bystanders.

If this mass murder was instantly disseminated as a mass media event, if it was proclaimed “the crime of the century” and arrayed in a series of similar cases before and after it, this is not only because it transformed a prominent scene of public and civil order into a battlefield and the landmark at a model university into a monument of terror.<sup>1</sup> Rather, it advanced directly into the ranks of those infamous deeds in which an interpretive impasse in the face of events is mirrored by an excess of meaning manifested in those same events. The conditions of the criminal act itself were surrounded by a penumbra of meaninglessness. Although Whitman had once sought psychiatric counseling, although the autopsy of his corpse revealed a brain tumor, although his suicide note spoke of “violent impulses,” “unusual and irrational thoughts,” and “mental turmoil,” the transition from disconcerting feelings to a carefully planned attack remained an uncomfortable conundrum.<sup>2</sup> A medical commission convened to uncover causes, investigate circumstances, and suggest preventive measures could only establish the impossibility of a clinical diagnosis: Nothing in Whitman’s previous history signaled his later act

1. “The Madman in the Tower,” *Time*, August 12, 1966, pp. 20–25; Richard D. Kelleher, *Flash Point: The American Mass Murderer* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), pp. 167–68.

2. Charles Whitman, quoted in Gary M. Lavergne, *A Sniper in the Tower: The Charles Whitman Murders* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1997), pp. 92–93, 255–58.

of violence. Despite the breadth of the nosological spectrum on offer in the wake of this and similar attacks (up to the most recent shootings in Las Vegas, Sutherland Springs, and Parkland), the various labels, such as psychosis or paranoia, dissociative disorder or psychopathy, could do little to bridge the striking gap between deed and doer, between the deranged act and its more or less rational agent. Those who hoped that these egregious actions might be reflected in the gloomy souls of their perpetrators would be disappointed. At best one could resort to pleonasm, declaring such incidents to be “sudden mass murders,” “episodic losses of control,” “periodic breakdowns,” or “explosive disturbances.” Charles Whitman, his actions, and their variants remained a nightmare of psychiatry.

And so it comes as no surprise that the mysterious substance of these crimes would be sought less in familiar regions than in exotic ones, where one could hope to find, if not a real explanation, at least a dependable pattern. In the specific mixture of attack, commando operation, and mass murder, a kinship with “running amok” was recognized, one that associated Western acts of violence with Eastern customs.<sup>3</sup> “Amok” is a Malay word that means something like “rage” or “frenzy,” and over a long period of time “running amok” was a grave concern in Southeast Asia. Since the early-modern period, European travelers had told of *amucos*, that is, of “mad men” who, in Southern India, on the Malay Peninsula, on Java, and other islands of the archipelago, suddenly took up arms and, in a kind of bloodlust, began to kill indiscriminately, only to die themselves or, from the nineteenth century on, to be placed in psychiatric institutions. These reports begin at the start of the sixteenth century, reach their apex around 1900, and then fade away starting in the 1920s.

A dual transformation can be observed over the course of the centuries. In the early-modern period, “amok” or “a-muck” first described tactics of war, ritualized military behavior, and suicide attacks by elite indigenous warriors. During their assaults, as one sixteenth-century report states, *amucos* slew “many men, women and children before they themselves were killed.”<sup>4</sup> Gradually, under constraints of European colonial rule, amok stepped out of its martial frame. It was individualized and privatized, mutating, under the gaze of modern medicine, into an isolated, erratic act, in which an indeterminate brooding or depressive malaise led to a sudden eruption of unmotivated and indiscriminate violence. What entered into the psychiatric discourse of the twentieth century as a “culture-bound syndrome” concerning Southeast Asia finally found an occidental application in evaluations of Charles Whitman, who had “run amok” as the “Mad Man in the Tower.” By the time “amok” entered into the glossaries of health organizations

3. “Ansteckend wie Masern,” *Der Spiegel*, August 8, 1966, pp. 81–82; Jin-Inn Teoh, “The Changing Psychopathology of Amok,” *Psychiatry: Journal for the Study of Interpersonal Processes* 35 (November 1972), pp. 345–50; and J. Arboleda-Florez, “Amok,” in *The Culture-Bound Syndromes: Folk Illnesses of Psychiatric and Anthropological Interest*, ed. Ronald C. Simons and Charles C. Hughes (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1985), pp. 251–62.

4. Gaspar Correa, quoted in John C. Spores, *Running Amok: An Historical Inquiry* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988), p. 12.

and medical associations, it had become a ratified component of contemporary typologies, designating "an outburst of violent, aggressive, or homicidal behavior," an "indiscriminate, seemingly unprovoked episode of homicidal or highly destructive behavior."<sup>5</sup> "Running amok" had been transformed from a martial ritual to a psychiatric incident, transporting exotic excess into affluent Western societies. And if the reverberation of the Far East did not bring any advances in the explanation, comprehension, or interpretation of Whitman's killing spree, it did at least provide a rough schematic: A long, historical, and geographical migration of warlike attacks found its most up-to-date form. In the days of the escalating war in Vietnam, Whitman's "amok" extended the trace of past and distant wars into the heart of an apparent peace.

What made this uncanny proximity to exotic military violence particularly disturbing was the mundane setting in which it presented itself. This resulted in a curious portrait. On the one hand, one could not fail to notice that Whitman had proved himself a prototypical all-American boy: an excellent pupil, a good son, an altar boy, a decorated Boy Scout, a successful college student, a likable colleague, a dear friend, a loving husband, a model citizen, and an ex-Marine (with training as a sharpshooter and an honorable discharge). According to reports, he was appreciated by all who knew him as "nice," "likable," "funny," "smart," and "ambitious"—all in all, a completely "normal" young man.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, his actions confirmed the grave concerns of counselors and psychologists, who for some time had been referring to "potentially dangerous individuals" and "hostile" students with "the means (usually firearms) to act out their fears and wishes with deadly efficiency." The average American face of normality and success was evidently not without its dark side, and what was now defined as "Whitman Syndrome" brought a "globally hostile student" into view in whom "antisocial ideas," "resentment of all authority figures," and simply "hate for all people" or "the world" were combined. Whitman was "oozing with hostility": "I am going to explode," he wrote.<sup>7</sup>

As little as the Whitman case and its variants could be explained and interpreted, it gave rise to a curious surplus of meanings and images. In the "Whitman Syndrome," a dangerous normality was discovered, a situation in which social catastrophes erupted not from blind spots and peripheries but suddenly and without warning from the middle of society, carried by inconspicuous, ordinary citizens who are "everywhere . . . driving cars, going to church with you, working with you."<sup>8</sup> Normality itself became a hallmark of threats embedded in the fabric of middle-class

5. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV)* (Washington: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), p. 845; WHO, *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders* (Geneva: World Health Organization 1993), p. 177.

6. "The Madman in the Tower," pp. 20–25; Lavergne, *A Sniper in the Tower*, pp. 50–63.

7. John L. Kuehn et al., "Management of the College Student with Homicidal Impulses—The 'Whitman Syndrome,'" *American Journal of Psychiatry* 125 (May 1969), pp. 1594–99; Lavergne, *A Sniper in the Tower*, pp. 44, 64, 69.

8. "The Symptoms of Mass Murder," *Time*, August 12, 1966, p. 18.

existence, articulated in status-seeking mentalities and American dreams like Whitman's: "I have great plans and dreams . . . I AM RESOLVED THAT I SHALL WIN THE TOMORROWS BEFORE ME!!!"<sup>9</sup> This portrait of Whitman fit well with analyses in which the American character had become more and more problematic to itself. It bears many of the features that David Riesman and his colleagues in the 1950s had ascribed to the "other-directed" type in contemporary mass and consumer societies. According to Riesman, this specimen belongs to the middle class, populates the suburbs, excels in consumption, seeks social harmony, strives for recognition, and reacts sensitively to the expectations and preferences of others. However, considerations of conformity create friction, diffuse apprehension, and engender a self-positioning in which the problem is always "the others."<sup>10</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that many sought to decipher in Whitman's attack the fingerprint of a societal crisis, which manifested itself in a precarious conglomeration of social modernization, the promise of success, the obligation to perform, the pressure to adapt, and the desire for normality. From this perspective, Whitman's murderous hostility is only the other side of the motivational slogans with which he addressed himself again and again: "Grow up," "Show respect for seniors," "Know your status and position and conduct yourself accordingly," "CONTROL your anger," "SMILE Its contagious," "PAY that compliment," "CONTROL your passion," "If you want to be better than average, YOU HAVE TO WORK MUCH HARDER THAN THE AVERAGE."<sup>11</sup>

Here we see not only a new social type with a great future but one that would reproduce itself in diverse forms, from murderous employees to unhappy high-schoolers, bringing devastation to the peaceful world of office parks, malls, and classrooms. A remarkable turn has taken place: Unlike in dramas of jealousy, crimes of passion, or murders involving rape or robbery, the inexplicable event has itself become an explanation. Out of the portrait of Charles Whitman, pieced together from countless commentaries, expert opinions, descriptions, and self-descriptions, the eyes that stare back at us are not those of a disturbed perpetrator but of a telling social figure. In them, it seems, one could recognize the condition of American post-war society, one in which the civilian public sphere was now crisscrossed by battle lines, where suburban idylls were permeated with hostility and middle-class milieus boiled with resentments. Contemporary American culture had interpreted itself in the Whitman case, which, with its diagnostic potential, took on the quality of a reproducible cultural script. Not for nothing were the attacks, starting in the 1980s, that "disgruntled" employees made on workplaces, office buildings, and especially post offices discussed in terms of Reaganomics: privatization, the deregulation of the work environment, downsizings, and the erosion of former reserves of security. (Of course, "going postal" has since become synonymous with "running amok.")<sup>12</sup>

9. Lavergne, *A Sniper in the Tower*, pp. 44, 121.

10. David Riesman with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

11. Lavergne, *A Sniper in the Tower*, pp. 88, 121; Arboleda-Florez, "Amok," pp. 258–59.

12. Mark Ames, *Going Postal: Rage, Murder, and Rebellion: From Reagan's Workplaces to Clinton's Columbine and Beyond* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2005).

That we are dealing, in these and analogous cases, with events that could be called “diagnostic crimes” is further demonstrated by the series of attacks that began in American high schools and colleges and have since become global in scope. Apart from the fact that these media events generated further media events, acts reproducing themselves in reports and reports in acts, we can recognize the different varieties of school shootings as both carriers and imitations of models.<sup>13</sup> Characteristically, the most prominent case, which to this day is emulated in other assaults and celebrated by fan clubs, was executed as a minutely planned program. The attack on April 20, 1999, in which Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, seventeen- and eighteen-year-old students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, shot and killed twelve fellow students, a teacher, and then themselves, was not merely a bizarre masquerade, carried out along the lines of a military commando strike. It was an act intended, through its imitation of models, to elicit a further imitation of models. First-person shooters like *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D*, films like *The Matrix*, *Natural Born Killers*, and *The Basketball Diaries*, and bands like Rammstein and KMFDM (Kein Mitleid für die Mehrheit) provided them with scenarios, training routines, procedural protocols, patterns of action, sartorial codes, and slogans. The plan of attack called for the ignition, on the arrival of journalists and news teams, of propane bombs, which were to take an additional six hundred lives. Harris and Klebold meticulously anticipated the effects of their attack, and as much as it would later be spoken of in terms of psycho- or sociopathy—of crises in the family or childhood, in the school or the media, in society or socialization—this diagnostic activity already circulated in the students’ own notes in the run-up to the event: “I wish I was a fucking sociopath so I didn’t have any remorse, but I do,” and “It’s MY fault! Not my parents, not my brothers, not my friends, not my favorite bands, not computer games, not the media, IT is MINE!” “Someones [*sic*] bound to say ‘what were they thinking?’ . . . so this is what I am thinking. I have a goal to destroy as much as possible so I must not be sidetracked by my feelings of sympathy, mercy, or any of that. . . . I have to turn off my feelings. Keep this in mind.”<sup>14</sup>

The 946 pages of records that the attackers left behind proved to be diagnostic in a more literal sense as well. Products of close-knit middle-class families and good or average students, Harris and Klebold survey a number of crisis areas, ranging from education and parenting to political scandals, mindless television shows, and the questionable character of norms and rules to the toxic climate of their own middle-class existences. Against this background, the texts focus more and more on the coming action. This is reflected not only in the increasingly concrete plans for the procurement of equipment and weapons, for the selection of the date and the execution of the assault, but also in the rising hostility and the prolif-

13. Sherry Towers et al., “Contagion in Mass Killings and School Shootings,” *PLoS ONE* 10, no. 7 (July 2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0117259>.

14. *Columbine Documents*, ed. Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, JC-001-026012, <http://www.acolumbinesite.com/reports/cr/900columbinedocs.pdf>; and Ames, *Going Postal*, p. 186.

erating declarations of animosity that accompanied their plans, moving outwards in concentric circles from fellow students to the population of Denver, the United States, “people,” “the world,” and finally society and humanity as such: “I HATE PEOPLE,” “I want to burn the world, I want to kill everyone,” “If I could nuke the world I would, because so far I hate you all,” “I say ‘KILL MANKIND.’ no one should survive.”<sup>15</sup>

The writer of these notes, who once imagined a way out by fighting in the Kosovo War, positions himself as a public enemy of the most extreme form. Names and individuals appear in these plans only as the representatives of a system, of society, against which the perpetrators advertise themselves as globally hostile students. The hostility that they articulate is as concrete as it is arbitrary and total. Thus they seem to occupy a vacant but historically fraught position: that of the absolute foe of humankind. If these crimes are legible without straying into personal hermeneutics, then it is only as a military or pseudo-military incursion, an unhinged assault, and a final, irrevocable animosity against civility as such. If one can speak of madness here, then it is a madness in disguised but immediate proximity to war.

This is the reason why such stereotypes are shot through with the names of history, seeking kinship with the most depraved of characters. April 20, one will recall, is Hitler’s birthday, and in Harris and Klebold’s texts references accumulate that can easily be situated as historical indices of varying scope and nature: references to Charles Manson, Vietnam and napalm, World War II and the Nazis, the Oklahoma City bombing and the riots in Los Angeles. Germanness and the German language have a special status: “I love the German language and the ‘BRUTE’ stuff.”<sup>16</sup> All this refers not only to the dark cult of the swastika, SS runes, and the Iron Cross; German is also understood here as the native language of history itself. In this language, all the atrocities that make up the raw material of history are, as it were, encoded: murder, mass murder, genocide, and their grim renown constitute the territory on which the killers claimed for themselves the place of utmost depravity, an outpost of political abjection.

If one takes these words and deeds together, as they appeared before being processed into case studies, they offer a diffuse spectacle of turmoil, revolt, and rebellion. One of the two students appropriated the motto of his educational institution—“Columbine High School, Home of the Rebels”—signing his notes with the cipher “REB.” Much as Georges Bataille spoke of amok as a “rebellious whim” and André Breton saw an “absolute revolt” in “dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd,” the killers in Littleton seem to have imagined a “total action,” confirming the literal sense of *re-bellum*, taking on the role offered them and turning ruthlessly “back to war”: “We’re going to kick-start a revolution, a

15. *Columbine Documents*, JC-001-026003, 026010, 026012, 026013, 026015.

16. *Columbine Documents*, JC-001-026856.

revolution for the dispossessed.”<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, the violent act and its discursive framing leave no doubt that these were the most universal declarations of revolt, which themselves evoked other declarations of the same kind. On the other, one can discern in this dismal program a dynamic that manifests itself as a politicized death drive. The extermination of the other, of the social, of the symbolic order was directed against a life that had become unpalatable (“i HATE my life”),<sup>18</sup> laying out converging lines of flight—dying, killing, and being killed, and thus a path of annihilation. Such is the latest, most hideous, and perhaps sole remaining grimace of rebellion.

If it is true, as Michel Foucault once argued, that we must investigate the realms of madness to understand what a society considers to be health, that we must analyze the domain of lawlessness to know what legality is, and that we must observe forms of resistance to discover how power relations function, then the age of amok can illuminate how the relation between the demand for order and transgressive challenges to that order is organized in contemporary societies.<sup>19</sup> The flagrant public outrage at such events can likely be explained by the failure of preventive strategies and intervention tactics in these cases. For insofar as the cultural script of these attacks dictates that they should erupt suddenly and unexpectedly, and that they should target conspicuous zones of civility, they provoke the desire for security of modern preventive societies. Societies of this kind, which date back to nineteenth-century penal reforms and culminate in the current debates about criminal-risk law and general preemptive needs, represent the latest phase of social modernization characterized by a displacement of the target of possible sanctions from real occurrences to pure potentialities. Accordingly, after the attack on Columbine High School, in addition to banning trench coats and displaying the Ten Commandments publicly in schools, guidelines for the “prevention of school attacks” and the “management of dangerous situations” were developed by a strategic partnership between the Secret Service and the Department of Education.<sup>20</sup> The pertinent categories within this hybrid of pedagogy and intelligence profiling are “threat” and “danger”: They demand a systematic orientation of precautionary measures according to vague perpetrator profiles and prospective cases of harmful behavior. The critical scrutiny applied to “potentially dangerous individuals” is governed by the concern that the possibility of future attacks grows precisely within forms of inexplicit conduct. It doesn’t matter what one has or hasn’t done, but rather what deeds one might someday be capable of.

17. Eric Harris in a video diary, quoted in Ames, *Going Postal*, p. 149; see also Georges Bataille, “L’enseignement de la mort” (May 1952), *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 8 (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 208; André Breton, *Manifeste des Surrealismes* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1977), p. 56.

18. *Columbine Documents*, JC-001-026390.

19. Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982), p. 780.

20. *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates* (Washington: United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education, July 2004).

Thus the preemptive coordinates of threat and emergency response have proven to be efficacious yet indeterminate reference points for governmental action. They are characterized by an internal lack of measure, giving rise to a social symptomatology that is incapable of limiting, objectively or systematically, the realm of suspicion and the field in which “fear factors” appear. This sets off a political catalysis of anxiety that produces security needs in the process of satisfying them, leading to a reciprocal escalation in the perception of danger and the desire for protection. Any anxious impulse in circulation can be exploited systematically, resulting in a hypertrophy of prevention apparatuses, which in turn increases the readiness and willingness to fear. The stimulus provided by any anxiety whatsoever—of “excess immigration,” infiltrators, sleeper cells, or latent violent tendencies—needs neither to be justified nor concretized, because it itself provides a reliable social and political basis for the preventive regime. The circulation of fear has become systemically relevant, and yet this anxiety lacks an object. On the one hand, systemic anxiety is maintained and fed by everything that doesn’t happen, everything that has not—or has not yet—become concrete. On the other, concrete objects and manifest actions do not appear as the cause of these stirrings of anxiety, but rather as floating evidence that the anxiety was always well founded.

We can draw two conclusions at this point. First, the preventive regime, systemic anxiety, and the category of “dangerousness” have redefined the profile of the public enemy. In preventive optics, distinctions between guilt and innocence and “humanist” remnants like intention, imputation, and responsibility are replaced by a spectrum of dangerousness that refers to the intensity of a threat to social and political security. In this way, specimens of mediocre socialization, who are marked by a less pronounced loyalty to the basic requirements of social intercourse and the norms of social harmony, come into view: Here the modern umbrella term “sociopathy” is applicable. Simultaneously, a gray zone is created that locates possible acts by dangerous individuals in gradual distinctions between crimes, acts of madness, and massacres, and precisely this ambiguous overdetermination makes the figure of so-called amok killings as problematic as it is significant. Confused students, knife-wielding overnight converts, sinister migrants, and suspected terrorists emerge from the same latency to find their common denominator in the greater or lesser threat that they pose to the social itself, in their “public enmity.” To the extent that the distinction between internal and external enemies has lost its meaning here, the category of “terror” itself has begun to dissolve under the influence of a universal alarmism.

Second, under the aegis of preventive societies and threat management, the social contract has been reconfigured, dissolved into security contracts that rest on a kind of emissions trading in fear derivatives and demand the regular surrender of certain rights (privacy, telecommunications secrecy, inviolability of the home) in exchange for promises of security. This shapes the political dimension of prevention and systemic fear. The investment of insecure situations with anxiety is converted

into an anxiety politics of risk prevention, a general readiness to fear transformed into a desire to be ruled better, more securely, and more attentively. One might refer to this as the "phobogenetic" character of certain forms of power. Insofar as zones of anxiety really are extended, with a corresponding withdrawal of legal guarantees (the law is, after all, insufficient to fulfill security needs), then we would do well to remember that the entry of fear into the interior of political power and its efficacy therein have always been connected to the cause of tyranny. This was pointed out by Hannah Arendt, who made the circulation of anxiety and fear renowned as tyranny's "guiding principle and criterion of action."<sup>21</sup>

The point here is not to conjure up a new despot and the spectral return of the totalitarian. If, according to Arendt, anxiety and fear in fact represent "antipolitical principles" within the domain of politics, then this is because within them experiences of powerlessness ally with desires for domination, undermining the character of political action as "acting in concert."<sup>22</sup> Fear and anxiety generate a "will to power in powerlessness," that is, a "will to rule or will to be ruled." This extension of zones of anxiety coincides with a proliferation of politics of resentment and protective police powers: Such is the "tyrannical" self-abandonment of democratic politics.

What has been referred to for some time now as "running amok," stretching at the very least from the attack by Charles Whitman to today's school shootings, cannot simply be reduced to the erratic acts of unhappy, unhinged, or infamous individuals. Rather, these acts first gain currency where they break through protective layers and preventive barriers, flying under the radar and setting early-warning systems on edge. They gain typological contour and visibility under the conditions of the current preventive regime. Every form of power programs its own enemies.

—Translated from the German by Noah Willumsen

21. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken, 1958), p. 467.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 478, 474.