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1

Revising the Canon of Crime and Detection

As Hayden White claimed in *Metahistory*, every historical account combines a certain number of 'data' with 'a narrative structure for their presentation'.¹ So let us now adopt this 'metahistorical' perspective and briefly examine the traditional accounts of the development of detective fiction to uncover the underlying narratives.

At the end of the nineteenth century, detective novelists and critics shaped the identity of what was increasingly perceived as a new genre by denying its sensational heritage – with its vibrant appeal to the emotions – in order to emphasise its rational character. As early as 1892 *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* was reviewed by Joseph Bell (a professor of Doyle's at the University of Edinburgh), who drew various parallels between detection and medical semiotics.² Only a couple of years later, Watson – another colleague of Doyle's... – opened one of his biographical sketches of Holmes with this declaration: 'In choosing a few typical cases which illustrate the remarkable mental qualities of Sherlock Holmes, I have endeavoured, as far as possible, to select those which presented the minimum of sensationalism, while offering a fair field for his talents.'³ These words are taken from 'The Adventure of the Cardboard Box', which was first published in the *Strand*. The story, however, was not included in the 1894 edition of *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* because its subject – adultery – was regarded as scandalous.

From its inception, the discourse on detective fiction discarded the sensational lineage of the new genre, grounding its literary status on its association with scientific method and highbrow literature. The melodramatic impact of sensation fiction was superseded by riddles and enigmas which respectably set the mind to work with crystal-clear lucidity. Death and crime – the corollaries of evil – were exorcised by the focus on the enquiry, an incontrovertible proof of the enlightened human potential for good.

When Doyle received the honour of seeing his works published in a twelve-volume edition (an important act of canonisation), he wrote a new preface (dated 1901) to *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, which was republished in 1903. Characteristically, Doyle described Poe as 'the father of the detective tale' and associated the brevity of detective fiction to the centrality of mystery and analysis:

the secret of the thinness and also of the intensity of the detective story is, that the writer is left with only one quality, that of intellectual acuteness, with which to endow his hero. [...] The problem and its solution must form the theme, and the character-drawing be limited and subordinate.⁴

Identifying Holmes with his method, Doyle appeared to forget how important the formulaic details of the detective's house, personal appearance and lifestyle were to his readers, as is proved by the enduring popularity of the illustrations that accompanied Doyle's texts in the *Strand* and elsewhere.

One of the first book-length studies on the genre was published in 1913 by the American writer Carolyn Wells, whose *The Technique of the Mystery Story* is focused on mystery rather than crime, and on form rather than subject. The progressive detachment of the detective interest from its sensational components is apparent in Wells's analysis, whose major concern is to assert the literary status of what was commonly considered as an idle pastime. Not only did Wells regard the literature of mystery as rooted in ancient riddles rather than in the representation of crime, but she quoted several sources to prove that detection is an intellectual problem and as such should be kept separate from sentiment, emotion or desire. Of course, this emphasis on the rational response elicited by detective fiction also amounts to a denial of its sensational components:

the Detective Story sets a stirring mental exercise, with just enough of the complex background of life to distinguish it from a problem in mathematics. Whatever thrills of horror are excited come by way of the intellect, never starting directly in the emotions.⁵

The critic was well aware of the fact that detective fiction stimulates a competitive spirit in its readers and her words seem to anticipate those metaphors of detective fiction as crosswords or a game of chess that, in the next decade, were to become critical commonplaces, conforming to an increasingly mechanical view of the act of reading as well as to an

increasing emphasis on 'fair play', that is on offering readers all the elements to solve the mystery autonomously.

During the 1920s and 1930s detective fiction finally achieved the full status of a literary genre thanks to a rich critical output, including R.A. Freeman's 'The Art of Detective Stories' (1924), Dorothy Sayers's introduction to *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* (1928) and H. Douglas Thomson's *Masters of Mystery: a Study of the Detective Story* (1931). These critical essays can be considered as symptomatic of the increasing tendency to disparage the nineteenth-century crime tradition in order to promote the more recent 'scientific' developments of the genre. Over the decade, both the theoretical and the historical approach to detective fiction tended to consign it to a space of rigid rules. In their attempt to assert the dignity of the genre, writers and critics emphasised its rational elements at the expense of other components and consequently pushed the more sensational aspects into the background.

In 1946 a large number of these essays were collected by Howard Haycraft in his seminal anthology *The Art of the Mystery Story*, the purpose being 'to bring together under one cover a representative selection of the best critical and informative writing about the modern mystery-crime-detective story, from Poe to the present time'.⁶ The canonical import of this anthology is apparent right from the foreword. Haycraft, who had also authored an influential narrative of the genre, *Murder for Pleasure: the Life and Times of the Detective Story* (1941), selected and canonised both literary and critical works in order to sustain a normative view of a genre whose borders were being traced with increasing sharpness.

In *Murder for Pleasure*, Haycraft made two decisive moves. First, he identified very precisely the genesis of the genre, claiming that 'As the symphony began with Haydn, so did the detective fiction begin with Poe. Like everything else in the world, both had precursors.'⁷ This was probably designed to emphasise the Americanness of detective fiction, since early critical works dealing with this genre often reveal chauvinistic competition for the identification of the ur-detective story. Second, Haycraft dated 'the earliest critical discussion of the genre'⁸ to 1883, thus entirely disregarding all the critical works that had flourished in the 1860s and 1870s as a result of the sensation vogue. He also claimed that on the whole 'the development of any competent body of detective story criticism did not occur until the mid 1920s',⁹ virtually erasing from consideration a whole range of critical works whose main thesis ran against his restrictive concept of 'detective story'. Of course this second move had a strong canonical import, for instead of acknowledging the continuity between crime and detective fiction, Haycraft aimed at distancing one from the other.

The Literature of Roguery (1907) – a seminal study in which the comparatist F.W. Chandler had investigated a large literary field, corresponding to what today we label as ‘crime fiction’ – was excluded from Haycraft’s anthology as a work ‘of little present-day interest’.¹⁰ A similar fate was met both by those critical works of smaller scope that did not focus on Poe and Doyle (suffice it to mention Walter C. Phillips’s *Dickens, Reade, and Collins Sensation Novelists*, 1919) and by various examples of continental criticism, such as Régis Messac’s *Le ‘Detective Novel’ et l’influence de la pensée scientifique* (*The Detective Novel and the Influence of Scientific Thought*, 1929), a book Haycraft disparagingly described as a hybrid, lamenting the ‘forbidding academism and esoteric content of these continental considerations’.¹¹ Needless to say, neither Chandler nor Messac conformed to the restrictive view of the genre that Haycraft supported. Without placing in question the merits of Haycraft, one should acknowledge that his works marked a fundamental step in the canonisation of the genre according to a centripetal view that was not exempt from chauvinism and authoritarianism.

On the other hand, the critical works Haycraft barred from his influential collection offered a radically alternative historical profile of the genre. Considering the literature of roguery as determined ‘by subject matter rather than by form’,¹² Chandler examined the Spanish, French and German sources of a genre that can be traced back to the early modern period. Chandler’s book aimed to study the representation of low life, which accounts for the almost total absence of Collins, who ‘preferred melodramatic villainy to roguery’,¹³ and the greater attention given to authors like Defoe, Fielding, Smollett, Scott, Ainsworth, Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens and Reade, as well as to the Raffles saga. While acknowledging the growing importance of ‘the literature of crime-detection’,¹⁴ Chandler’s wide perspective enabled him to see what the other critics of this period (including Doyle) seemed unwilling to acknowledge, namely that:

there has been a constant tendency to rise from the sensational to the analytical; and from a combination of the two a third type has resulted. Its purpose is to gratify the reader’s taste for the ghastly, the tragic, or the criminal, and at the same time to propose a mystery whose solution shall exercise all his intellectual ingenuity. The supreme example of this mingling of the sensational and the analytical is to be seen in the stories concerning Sherlock Holmes.¹⁵

Chandler was far from indifferent to the social dimension of the new genre and commented on the difference between the higher-class readers

Doyle addressed and 'the great unwashed', who were 'regaled in shilling shockers and in dime novels'. Curiously enough, however, the insightful Chandler (who had probably grown partial to the central figure of his study – the rogue as an anti-hero, either endowed with romantic panache or represented in a realistic vein) ended his work with a misleading prophecy: 'That this subsidiary genre will attain to the rank or to the influence of its picaresque parent seems unlikely.'¹⁶

Messac's *Le 'Detective Novel'* also included crime and gothic literature among the ancestors of detective fiction in an effort to understand the multiple components that had contributed to the formation of this new genre. Being a critic rather than a writer, Messac was able to achieve a more detached view, less influenced by the rigorous 'poetics' of the 'golden age'. Messac investigated the relationship between the development of scientific thought and that of detection, contrasting a religious vision based on mystery with a philosophical-scientific attitude which was grounded in the observation of reality. Although the critic defined the origin of detection as the triumph of analysis over revelation, he was well aware that the history of this genre had not been unconditionally dominated by rationality and that the development of detective fiction had by no means followed 'a straight line'.¹⁷ In Messac's study chapters such as 'Miracles and literature', 'Ghosts and brigands', 'The visionary' and 'Natural magic' bear witness to this fact and almost trace a counter-history of crime – rather than detective – fiction.

From detective to crime fiction

Criticism, like literature, is involved in a continuous process of change. As we have seen, in the first half of the twentieth century mainstream critics analysed works of crime interest – or 'criminography' – with the aim of singling out the centrality of detection in order to trace the genealogy of a genre whose borders were firmly and restrictively laid out. Haycraft's defensively normative conception of detective fiction was instrumental in mapping the progress of a genre that was still regarded as unworthy of much critical attention and that was also essentially formulaic in its recent developments. In the second half of the century, however, due both to the increasing public/academic recognition of detective fiction and to a renewed interest in criminals on the part of contemporary writers, this critical approach evolved in the direction of complexity. The literary status of detective fiction became less and less in need of defence, but the very category of detective fiction was simultaneously called into question, as critics – desiring to enlarge the scope of their enquiry – revised

the extent of the detective canon, rediscovering books that had never been republished or searching the pages of periodicals for relevant materials. Thus the history of detective fiction was reassessed within the larger literary territory of crime fiction.

Michel Foucault had a major impact on this process, since *Surveiller et punir* (*Discipline and Punish*, 1975) and other writings focus on issues such as the power/knowledge nexus, the body of the criminal and the eye of power, that is, the centrality of gaze in various activities of social/individual diagnosis, classification, surveillance and reform.¹⁸ From the 1970s to the present day, the categories that Foucault elaborated while studying the transition from sovereign to disciplinary power in modern Western civilisation have increasingly influenced the critical debate on detective fiction, which is no longer regarded as an isolated enclave, but as a country whose borders allow frequent exchanges.

A symptom of this new attitude is the increasing scope and importance that the term 'crime fiction' has acquired. While in 1958 A.E. Murch chose *The Development of the Detective Novel* as a title for her history of the genre, in *Bloody Murder: from the Detective Story to the Crime Novel: a History* (1972) Julian Symons acknowledged the complex status of this literary form, claiming that the most sensible way of naming it 'is the general one of crime novel or suspense novel'.¹⁹ The deconstruction of the centripetal view had started and, as a consequence, in the last thirty years crime fiction has become an umbrella term that includes the subcategory of detective fiction, rather than being defined by it as the weak pole of a binary opposition.

Of course critics did not unanimously pursue this new line of inquiry, but a few years later Stephen Knight published *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980), where – following in the footsteps of Symons – he invited readers and critics alike to reassess the traditional account of the genre in order to establish 'the nature and ideology of crime fiction without detectives'.²⁰

The development of 'theory' – with its new interest in ideology and suspicion of formalist close reading – largely contributed to this change of perspective. In *From Bow Street to Baker Street: Mystery, Detection and Narrative* (1992) Martin Kayman sought to revise the orthodox account of detective fiction as a genre pivoting on Doyle's works. While many scholars had chosen to trace the characteristics of this fully formed model back to its more or less 'imperfect' antecedents, Kayman described such 'anachronistic analysis' as dangerous 'because it collapses and rewrites the period prior to Holmes as a mere anticipation whose significance is valued only through the retrospective teleology'.²¹ Refuting this critical

stance, Kayman freely mingled gothic, sensational and detective fiction in a study that refuses to abide by any normative view of genre.

Martin Priestman's critical output – spanning more than two decades – likewise reflects the shift in perspective that brought the category of crime increasingly under the spotlight at the expense of detection. While in his early *Detective Fiction and Literature: the Figure on the Carpet* (1990) Priestman intended to deal 'with the relationship between detective fiction and established literature',²² in an effort to break the academic boundaries between 'high' and 'low' literature, his later *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present* (1998) testifies to the new canonical status of popular literature and to the increasing consensus the term 'crime fiction' enjoys. The same attitude marks *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, which was edited by Priestman in 2003. A major step in the canonisation of the genre, the book expands on the many facets of crime fiction, so as to provide – in Priestman's words – 'a sense of the genre's history as multi-layered rather than unidirectional, and of its criticism as in process rather than univocal'.²³

To understand this new perception of the genre as plural we should also take into account the wealth of studies that have been devoted to specific sub-genres of crime fiction in the course of the last two decades, ranging from Ian A. Bell's *Literature and Crime in Augustan England* (1991) to the overcrowded shelf of sensation criticism, including works by Jenny Bourne Taylor, Winifred Hughes, Beth Kalikoff, Sue Lonoff, D.A. Miller, Lyn Pykett and Ann Cvetkovich. This critical output made it imperative to reassess the traditional view of the development of detective fiction so as to take into account its relationship and exchanges with the neighbouring sub-genres. A veteran of crime criticism decided to meet the challenge and managed to encompass, with a bird's eye view, the development of crime fiction in its various dimensions. In *Crime Fiction 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (2004) Stephen Knight provided readers with a handy yet richly documented guide to the genre, reasserting his choice of 'crime fiction' as the most comprehensive definition:

there are plenty of novels (including some by Christie) without a detective and nearly as many without even a mystery (like most of Patricia Highsmith's work). There is, though, always a crime (or very occasionally just the appearance of one) and that is why I have used the generally descriptive term 'crime fiction'.²⁴

Although in recent years the label of crime fiction has gained wide currency, ousting detection from its central position as the key element

in defining the genre, the issue of terminology is still central to the contemporary critical debate and far from settled. Sub-generic labels such as 'hard-boiled' or 'clue-puzzle', for instance, are increasingly put to the test and regarded as interrelated – rather than mutually exclusive – literary forms. Contemporary critics feel the need both to historicise the definitions that were handed down to them and to redefine their meaning according to a more complex and flexible view of the genre as an aggregate of literary forms.

Blurring the boundaries

The issue of reception plays a major role in this volume. Thus, while subscribing to the prevailing view of the genre as composite and recognising the necessity to acknowledge the umbrella term 'crime fiction' to designate a constellation of sub-genres, I have nonetheless chosen to utilise traditional sub-categories such as 'sensation' and 'detective fiction' in order to historicise them, to deconstruct them from the inside, to analyse them as instruments of 'identity', and to retrace the steps that led to the formation of what came to be regarded as sensation or detective fiction.

The concept of literary genre is still instrumental in analysing the historical evolution of crime fiction, but a fundamental premise of this work is the refusal of any monogenetic account of the origin of literary genres such as the one Haycraft offered in *Murder for Pleasure*, where he regarded detective fiction as the product of the genius of Poe. From our more detached observatory, we can only subscribe to Alastair Fowler's poly-genetic view of genre formation – 'when remote antiquity does not obscure the period of a kind's beginnings, they can always be shown to have preceded the inventor'.²⁵ Fowler uses the term 'kind' as the equivalent of 'historical genre', that is to say as a flexible diachronic concept that has 'to do with identifying and communicating rather than with defining and classifying'.²⁶ Refuting the traditional vision of literary genres as fixed sets of rules, Fowler insists on their organic growth, and also denies a mutual exclusiveness between genres, since 'genres have no clear dividing boundaries'²⁷ and 'membership of one by no means rules out membership of others'.²⁸

As we have seen, Knight and Kayman both consider the traditional account of the origin of detective fiction – that of a genre rooted in a series of 'canonical' texts pivoting on the Dupin trilogy and the Holmes saga – as being far from objective. Knight also draws our attention to the fact that most nineteenth-century detective and crime stories originally appeared

in the pages of magazines and newspapers, and these periodicals do not 'when examined produce so simple or so gratifying a genealogy of the detective as the classic account suggests'.²⁹ This should teach us to nurture a healthy suspicion concerning the outcome of our critical inquiries, which are inevitably 'situated', since when looking backwards we always interpret the development of a phenomenon in an instrumental way in order to highlight those aspects that correspond to our current needs and wishes – ideology and desire both being involved in this process.

Drawing on these principles, then, this book will analyse some of the processes of cross fertilisation that took place within crime fiction between the Middle Ages and the early twentieth century; in other words before the genre was theoretically defined as 'detective fiction' and evolved towards the 'clue-puzzle' as the result of an increasing emphasis on the rational and scientific detection of essentially aseptic riddles. My aim is thus to take into account the heterogeneous components that went into the making of a genre whose formulaic character has not prevented imaginative – or heretical – variations on the theme of crime and detection. Indeed, the main object of this critical enquiry has been to problematise crime fiction in order to probe its multifarious nature.

This attempt presupposes an awareness of the 'political' dimension that crime fiction has had at every stage of its development. Although mainstream detective fiction had a traditionally conservative bias, the genre as a whole cannot be reduced to its bourgeois, capitalist, chauvinist and sexist dimensions, for it may well boast long-standing radical components, as Knight reminds us.³⁰ And yet we cannot but agree with him and other critics that crime fiction in general played a major role in the process of global policing that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, that is, in the secular dissemination of the principles of law and order into various fields of thought, communication and social activity – a process Kayman (the emphasis is his) describes as aimed at '*internalizing* the presence of the Law in the consciousness of that culture'.³¹

Elaborating on these assumptions, I will explore some aspects of crime fiction in order to underline its pliable and permeable character, as well as its sensitivity to external influences. My aim is to study crime fiction as a system of competing and interconnecting sub-genres, which are correlated to other forms of representation and either support or oppose the current social order in a variety of ways. Consequent on this premise, in addition to the intertextual approach that is virtually inherent in any historicist project, two basic strategies of analysis will be adopted. First, texts will be contextualised to investigate the ideological premises

and social energies that influenced their conception and early reception. Second, a metacritical approach will highlight the role of the critical and theoretical debate concerning sensation and detective fiction in progressively shaping the genre. This critical heritage not only influenced the development of detective fiction – by helping to create a set of expectations in readers and to define the conventions that writers respected or transgressed – but also refashioned the origin of the genre in order to accommodate it to the identity which the genre had acquired. Borrowing a term which is current in other fields of study, one could say that a ‘foundation myth’ identifying Poe as the father of detection was created to support a normative view of the genre.

The decision to focus my analysis not only on primary sources but also on critical and theoretical essays derives from the idea that a body of literary works is recognised as a genre not only because its components share a certain number of conventions and intertextual links, but also on account of the discourses it generates. These two dimensions are interdependent inasmuch as literary works trigger critical analysis, which in turn influences their reception and the production of new texts. Thus, a genre may be regarded as a set of models and a theoretical construction that jointly shape the expectations of readers together with the strategies of writers and publishers.

As regards its temporal span, the volume is rooted in the medieval period. Pre-modern and early-modern crime literature will be explored to analyse the revelatory/premonitory value of dreams and the code of revenge – two conventions that intertwined with the belief that the ghost of the victim would haunt the guilty party. It is my contention that far from disappearing completely in the eighteenth-century climate of Enlightenment to make way for an increasingly rational approach to crime these elements retained a powerful hold on readers.

Critical works have all too often emphasised the rational dimension of what they have styled as ‘detective fiction’ at the expense of other components that also contributed – and still contribute in a significant way – to its success. Reversing this line of enquiry, I will set aside those conventions that became dominant in the evolution of the genre in order to study the persistence of a supernatural element within the tradition of crime fiction. During the nineteenth century the paradigm of rational enquiry did not completely eradicate the search for a higher design ruling the fiction of law and order, and it may well be argued that the enjoyment of readers depended precisely on the interplay between natural and supernatural elements, which engendered a fruitful tension between the domain of the intellect and that of the emotions.

The volume ends at the beginning of the twentieth century, when those crime narratives that were perceived as ‘unorthodox’ were increasingly being marginalised as part of the trend to normalise detective fiction which reached its climax in the late 1920s. As we know, it was in 1928 that the American writer S.S. Van Dine – the creator of Philo Vance – pronounced his ‘Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories’, while one year later another novelist – Monsignor Ronald A. Knox – included his famous ‘Detective Story Decalogue’ in his introduction to *The Best Detective Stories of 1928* (1929).

A glance at the present

In order to understand how important the phenomena analysed in this book still are, let us briefly ponder on the ensuing question: how much of our enjoyment as readers – and film viewers – at the dawn of the third millennium AD still depends on forms of syncretism? Sensational elements – connected with the materiality of the body and its fluids, the brutality of violence, the cogency of physical pain – are part and parcel of post-modern culture. Moreover, contemporary crime fiction and films make abundant use of gothic and supernatural elements – sometimes to adorn with an additional frisson the formulas of mass culture, deepening our sense of awe and mystery, as is proved by several best-selling films. *Angel Heart* (1986) dramatises the timeless encounter between a criminal and the father of all thief-takers – the devil himself. In *Seven* (1995) – where a serial killer stages murder according to the gamut of the deadly sins – the religious element accords the gruesome fantasies of murder a sublime grandeur. *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) anachronistically shows a late eighteenth-century police detective who is sent to investigate a series of strange deaths in an out-of-the-way village in the recently formed United States. The son of a woman who has unjustly been killed as a witch, this young *ante-litteram* policeman denounces torture as a senseless abuse and applies rational methods to the detection of crime. Nor does the supernatural nature of the mystery he faces prevent him from solving it.

The supernatural, however, can acquire a more openly subversive character, as in the Mrs Hudson series, authored by Sydney Hosier in the 1990s. In turning the marginal character of Mrs Hudson into a female equivalent of Holmes, the writer offers an alternative view of Victorian detection, refusing to ground this discipline on positivist rationality. It is thanks to the out-of-body experiences of Mrs Violet Warner, Mrs Hudson’s friend and assistant (a character who self-ironically moulds herself on Watson) that the female sleuth is able to uncover the mystery at the heart of her

first adventure – *Elementary, Mrs. Hudson* (1996). Even one of the most successful and ‘respectful’ among recent Sherlock Holmes apocrypha – Caleb Carr’s *The Italian Secretary* (2005) – relies heavily on the presence of ghosts, a phenomenon which is hardly rationalised at the end of the story, when Holmes concludes ‘Are ghosts – indeed, are *gods*, real? We cannot know; but they are powerful facts of human intercourse. And so...’³²

Other contemporary authors use detection to meditate on our existential condition and on the metaphysical dimension. Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* (1980) owes its charm to a skilful blend of thriller features, gothic elements and a medieval background. One of Eco’s enlightening footnotes to the book, however, is devoted to a theme he defines as ‘The metaphysics of detective fiction’. After claiming that the public like detective fiction not because of a morbid curiosity for death or because order is restored at the end, but because they enjoy the act of conjecturing, Eco draws a parallel between detective fiction and philosophy, since they are both aimed at answering the same question: Who is the culprit? Hoping to solve the ultimate riddle, human beings enter what Eco describes as the labyrinth of conjectures – a rhizome-like space where everything interconnects.³³ As Michael Holquist wrote in 1971, ‘If in the detective story death must be solved, in the new metaphysical detective story it is life which must be solved.’³⁴ Instead of providing the reading public with ready-made answers confirming their world-views and the existing social order, metaphysical crime fiction focuses on detection as a search for meaning, turning it into a parable of life.

Numerous other examples include Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988) as well as Dan Brown’s unashamedly commercial *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). What these books variously exploit is the sensational appeal of worldwide conspiracies that span the centuries and are imbued with religious, masonic or otherwise esoteric symbolism. In a world that is obsessed with information, where complexity borders on ‘disorder’, and where knowledge often seems self-referential, the quest for ‘truth’ and for a ‘transcendental meaning’ is still a prime motive. In this cultural climate, novelists have repeatedly drawn on the paradigm of crime and detection to stage the adventures of postmodern knights of both sexes, whose tasks prove dangerous and bewildering, and whose ultimate achievements can disappoint those thriller-minded readers who simply look for a good mystery and a satisfying solution.

Although Pynchon and Eco may be regarded as exponents of what Stefano Tani defined as the postmodern ‘anti-detective novel’, utilising the detective formula to achieve effects which go far beyond the revelation

of a mystery and the restoration of order, a latent interest in the supernatural also marks the work of traditional 'clue-puzzle' author P.D. James, whose novels repeatedly capitalise on the relics of the sacred that still haunt our society. Suffice it here to mention *Death in Holy Orders* (2001), with its theological college housed in a mansion on the edge of a crumbling cliff, or *The Murder Room* (2003), where murder is described as 'a paradigm of its age'.³⁵ The contemporary murders that James presents in the latter novel are indeed 'copycat murders' – the emblem of an epoch that incessantly rewrites, mimics, fakes; thus masking (and paradoxically revealing) its void and meaningless inner core, responding to the absence of God from its cultural horizon.

Characteristically, in P.D. James's earlier *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1977) the person who is responsible for the death of Mark Callender is not brought to justice by Cordelia Gray but is actually killed by a woman who turns out to be the dead boy's mother. Implicitly regarding this act as a just revenge, Cordelia lies to police commander Adam Dalgliesh in order to protect the perpetrator, but a higher court decides the fate of this female revenger, who dies a little later in a car accident. With a last ironic twist to the plot, at the end of the novel Dalgliesh self-mockingly acknowledges that the whole development of the case had been decided from the netherworld by Cordelia's former associate – the late Bernie Pryde, a police agent Dalgliesh had fired years before: "I find it ironic and oddly satisfying that Pryde took his revenge. Whatever mischief that child was up to in Cambridge, she was working under his direction."³⁶

Sensational, critical or philosophical, melodramatic, nostalgic or ironical, the supernatural plays a central role in postmodern crime fiction, where it fulfils a variety of roles, including, of course, parody and deconstruction. This persistence of gothic and supernatural elements invites us to reassess the binary opposition between scientific detection and revelation as well as that between human and divine justice, for it is in the interstices of these dimensions that the appeal of much contemporary crime fiction still resides.

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