

DETECTIVE/TEXT/CRITIC

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This thesis is dedicated to the students of the MLit group in the hope that perhaps someday, somewhere, we may be able to find gainful employment.

Thanks all round to Lesley Marx, John Higgins and the one student who wrote about the women in Waiting for Godot.

I would also like to thank God that this is over.

Finally, the examination is at the centre of the procedures that constitute the individual as effect and object of power, as effect and object of knowledge.

-Michel Foucault. Discipline and Punish

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Abstract

This thesis grapples with the curious relationship of the metaphors of detection and reading. Detective fiction is often seen as an enactment of reading, while the literary critic is often described in terms of detection, investigation and interrogation.

The Introductory section discusses the implications that such a self-reflexive and reflecting involvement has for narrative, the self, logic and the very institution of academic literary criticism itself.

The notion of a detective genre, and genre-criticism in general, is put into question by analysing the legal and coercive nature of a literary concept that styles itself as objective, scientific and historical. The power of the critic to construct genre is likened to the legal capacity of the detective and a polemical call is made to re-examine the academy's resulting claims of authority.

An analysis of the crime of incest in two films, Roman Polanski's Chinatown and Jack Nicholson's The Two Jakes, is used to further problematise the notion of the law. Claude Lévi-Strauss' work on kinship structures helps to point to the aporetic and contradictory position that incest can be seen to occupy in the formation of human society. Criminal anthropology provides an interesting frame for this discussion.

Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 is used to explore the fundamental uncertainty in which the detective/reader necessarily finds herself. Sigmund Freud's concept of the

uncanny is introduced to account for the interpreter's state of unease in the face of ambiguity.

Finally, a literary essay, Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" , is read rather as a form of detective story than as a factual analysis. Whether this experiment is successful will be up to the reader.

The overriding claim of this thesis is that there is no such thing as perception.

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1. Intro-duction

Now I don't know what perception is and I don't believe that anything like perception exists. Perception is precisely a concept, a concept of an intuition or a given originating from the thing itself, present itself in its meaning, independently from language, from the system of reference. And I believe that perception is interdependent with the concept of origin and of center and consequently whatever strikes at the metaphysics of which I have spoken strikes also at the very conception of perception. I don't believe that there is any perception.

-Jacques Derrida¹

I don't believe that there is any perception. That is the general thesis of this dissertation. I do not try and pretend that this conclusion has leapt unbidden into my mind after much patient and diligent research. Rather, research has been undertaken in order to prove this (foregone) conclusion. So, my introduction is my conclusion and the ramifications of this conclusion are evident throughout the investigations presented here.

The three terms that my title puts into a relationship of vague equivalence are simple enough (perhaps), but it is this relationship that is (perhaps) not as simple as may first appear since the very method by which we may understand this relationship is intricately involved with that relationship

¹ In discussion after presenting "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" at Johns Hopkins University in 1966. The Structuralist Controversy. (Eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, 1970), p.272.

itself. A detective, the Oxford English Dictionary proclaims,² is one "whose occupation it is to discover matters artfully concealed" while the critic "pronounces judgment on any thing or person". The critic's task is not, however, as cavalier as this definition might make it sound, for to be "critical" one must exercise "careful judgement or observation" (OED). Thus the detective uncovers that which is carefully, artfully hidden; the critic observes and, taking into consideration all the evidence, "pronounces judgement". Both are expert readers and are capable of somehow seeing more than the ordinary reader.

Carl Ginzberg makes this analogy explicit in his analysis of the art historian, Giovanni Morelli:

The art connoisseur and the detective may well be compared, each discovering, from clues unnoticed by others, the author in one case of a crime, in the other of a painting.³

Here we see the introduction of the middle term of my series, "text", for, as Ginzberg makes clear, an analogy exists between the text of the artwork and that of the crime.⁴ As Sherlock Holmes' following metaphor emphasises, the

² The notion of an "authority" and "authority" itself, is yet another term that involves itself in this triangular meeting of detective, text and critic.

³ "Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes" in The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce (Eds. Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeok, 1983), p.82.

⁴ Peter Hühn writes: "The attempt to read the mystery...presupposes the existence of a text. According to a general convention of the genre, every murderer inescapably leaves traces: the murder story is always in some way imprinted 'on the world'" ("The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction"), p.454.

detective's task is to read the clues of the past just as it is the critic's task to read texts:

"If I had only been there!" he cried. "It is evidently a case of extraordinary interest, and one which presented immense opportunities to the scientific expert. That gravel page upon which I might have read so much has been long ere this smudged by the rain and defaced by the clogs of curious peasants."⁵

It is important to note that the text is in both instances seen as potentially transparent; if one were to possess sufficient acumen, the marks left on the page or on the ground would be more than adequate pointers to the missing hand or mind of the perpetrator.⁶ It is this ability to read, as we have mentioned above, that distinguishes the detective and the critic from the normal reader who merely sees without (in)sight. In The Genesis of Secrecy, Frank Kermode makes a similar observation:

There is seeing and hearing, which are what naive listeners and readers do; and there is perceiving and understanding, which are in principle reserved to an elect. (p.3)

This difference between the naive and the elect is one made famous in the relationship of the detective and his (sometimes) trustworthy friend and admirer. One of the more

⁵ Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Hound of the Baskervilles" in Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Long Stories, p.294: my emphasis.

⁶ Ricardo Piglia is reported to have said in an interview: "In more than one sense, the critic is like the detective: the reader of the law. And the writer is often the criminal, the transgressor". ("Entrevista: Ricardo Piglia", Hispanamérica, 1986: quoted by Ellen McCracken in "Metaplagiarism and the Critic's Role as Detective: Ricardo Piglia's Reinvention of Roberto Arlt"), p.1082.

famous instances of this is, of course, the duality of Holmes and Dr. Watson:

"Here is my lens. You know my methods. What can you gather yourself as to the individuality of the man who has worn this article?"...

"I can see nothing," I said, handing it back to my friend.

"On the contrary, Watson, you can see everything. You fail, however, to reason from what you see. You are too timid in drawing inferences."⁷

In a way, the Watson figure is closely allied to the position of the reader of literature since (unless that person is a critic) he or she, too, is "too timid in drawing inferences" from the available text and requires an elect critique (such as this one, perhaps) to reveal that which the text must, in some way, be concealing.

But what is it that the text hides? Kermode places the perceived existence of an enigma above the epistemological nature of that enigma:

What always interests us is the sense concealed in the proclamation. If we cannot agree about the nature of the secret, we are nevertheless compelled to agree that secrecy exists, the source of the interpreter's pleasure, but also of his necessary disappointment.⁸

There must always be disappointment, Kermode argues, because were the secret ever to be discovered there would be no more secrecy and no more need for the interpreter. This is,

⁷ The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes, quoted in William W. Stowe's "From Semiotics to Hermeneutics: Modes of Detection in Doyle and Chandler" in The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory (Eds. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe), p.367.

⁸ The Genesis of Secrecy, p.xi.

however, an impossibility since it is the very act of interpretation, of reading, that depends on that secret and thus cannot erase or destroy it without destroying itself. We will return to this point.

What I am introducing here is the curious metaphoric confusion that the figures of the detective and of the reader put into play. One is never sure whether the detective is a reader, or the reader a detective since the terms used to describe the actions and material of both ("perception", "authority", "reading", "judgement", "clue", "evidence") are virtually identical. Gian Paolo Caprettini writes that "No narration can stand without symptoms or clues.... Together with its clearly shown and defined parts, we find in a text other elements which hide themselves in the background, from where they imperceptibly vibrate".⁹ Dennis Porter develops the relationship in comparing the text of the critic to the body that bears the signs of the crime:

A novel, like a corpse, is approached by professionals as an enigma requiring a solution. It, too, is assumed to be in need of a mediating intelligence if its true story is to be told. The activities of both literary critic and detective involve a process of selecting from a multiplicity of soliciting signs those that may be organized into an interpretation.¹⁰

⁹ "Peirce, Holmes, Popper" in The Sign of Three (Eds. Eco and Sebeok), p.135.

¹⁰ The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction, quoted in Kevin J.H. Dettmar's "From Interpretation to 'Intrepidation': Joyce's 'The Sisters' as a Precursor of the Postmodern Mystery" in The Cunning Craft: Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory (Eds. June M. Frazer and Ronald G. Walker), p.157.

The detective story is often seen to re-enact the hermeneutic quest of the reader. Peter Hühn writes that the "stories that are narrated in detective novels can profitably be described as stories of writing and reading insofar as they are concerned with authoring and deciphering 'plots'"¹¹ and Shoshana Felman agrees that "the detective novel enacts reading and thematizes the figure of the reader in the very interior of its narration",¹² while S.E. Sweeney concisely claims that "the detective story reflects reading itself".¹³

This dissertation will complicate these observations further by claiming that, in addition to the detective story figuring the act of reading, critical interpretation models itself on the narrative of the solution of crime. Since neither has metaphoric primacy, the strict boundaries between literary criticism and detective fiction as separate genres cannot be considered inviolable and the supposed "scientificity" of criticism must be as "fictional"¹⁴ as that of the detective story.

¹¹ "The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction", p.451.

¹² "De Sophocle à Japrisot (via Freud), ou pourquoi le policier", quoted and translated by Julia Saviile, "The Reader's Quest: Reading and the Constitution of Meaning in Five Novels", p.68.

¹³ "Locked Rooms: Detective Fiction, Narrative Theory, and Self-Reflexivity" in The Cunning Craft (Eds. June M. Frazer and Ronald G. Walker), p.7.

¹⁴ If we take this permeability seriously, it is the very distinction between "fact" and "fiction" that is being put into question. Thus my point is not that supposed fact may be fiction, but that the demarcation of fact from fiction is not in any way self-evident.

This collapse of clear distinctions can be extended beyond the "genre" of detective fiction and into the realm of writing per se. In The Doomed Detective, Stefano Tani writes:

Reader's and the act of reading actually have quite a lot to do with detectives and detection. In fact a good reader is always a "detective", since he consciously or unconsciously strives for "what is next" as well as what is left unsaid and ultimately for the end (the denouement, the "composition" of the plot) when he reads a fiction, no matter whether it is a detective novel or not. (p.120: my emphasis)

Thus the reader of a text must, to an extent, behave like a detective, while the detective must be a skilled reader. This dissertation takes as its task to put this metaphoric confusion into practice.

I myself am especially interested in the narrative elements of criticism - criticism as a form of storytelling; often I see criticism as a variant of the detective genre. The critic as a detective who tries to decipher an enigma...¹⁵

Narrative Doubled Up

In this section of the introduction, I wish to present Tzvetan Todorov's analysis of the structure of the detective story and his alignment of this with Russian Formalist narrative theory. This analysis is central to much of the criticism concerning detective fiction and it will therefore be useful to introduce that analysis at this early point in order to establish some of the basic suppositions of detective and narrative theory.

¹⁵ Ricardo Piglia. "La lectura de la ficción" in Crítica y ficción (1986), quoted by Ellen McCracken, "Metaplagiarisms and the Critic's Role as Detective: Ricardo Piglia's Reinvention of Roberto Arlt", p.1080.

In his "The Typology of Detective Fiction" Todorov points out that every detective story has a double narrative structure. He writes that the whodunit "contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation" (p.44). It is the story of the crime that the investigation is trying to read. It is the aim of the investigation to reconstruct that original story which "ends before the second begins" (p.44). Todorov characterises the two narratives as "what really happened" (the crime) and "how the reader (or narrator) has come to know about it" (p.45).

Todorov goes on to expand this analysis to "every literary work". The Russian Formalists, he writes, distinguished:

the fable (story) from the subject (plot) of a narrative: the story is what happened in life, the plot is the way the author presents it to us. (p.45)

Thus every piece of fiction is a plot that paradoxically both covers and uncovers the hidden story. This paradox will become important when we consider the role that commentary plays in theoretical and detective writing.

Story, then, is always reconstructed from plot and it is the interpreter's task to do this as faithfully as possible; to reproduce that which is somehow inside and outside the text. A primary narrative of presence and insignificance is seen to conceal a second narrative that is "absent but real" (p.46).

Is the absent real as accessible to the reader as Todorov and the Formalists seem to think? If the absent real is indeed

another narrative (a story), is it not the case then that when it is discovered, story will immediately become its double, plot? For story to cease being absent implies that it is now present "but insignificant" (p.46) and therefore begins to act as yet another narrative mediator. The real story is, by definition, inaccessible since its presence would mean that it is no longer story but plot.

This necessary absence of a "beyond-the-text", a "real", is one of the implications concomitant to the assertion that there is no such thing as perception. The reader expecting to find the real, finds instead that textuality continually subsumes the existence of the "absent real".¹⁶ Already we see that the easy structural analysis of the detective story is becoming more and more complex. If the story (of the crime) is complicated in this manner, what is it that the detective/critic finds in her quest through text?

Sight's Double: The Self

So swift, so silent, and furtive were his movements, like those of a trained bloodhound picking out a scent, that I could not but think what a terrible criminal he would have made had he turned his energy and sagacity against the law instead of exerting them in its defence.¹⁷

¹⁶ The reader will, of course, be aware that this line of argument is a more or less plagiarised version of Jacques Derrida's infamous assertion that "There is no outside-the-text" or, more originally, "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" ("...That Dangerous Supplement..." reproduced in Acts of Literature, p.102, but taken from Of Grammatology).

¹⁷ Dr. Watson describing Sherlock Holmes in Doyle's "The Sign of Four" in Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Long Stories, p.186.

One of the prerequisites for a successful search is the possibility, or rather, necessity of an unbiased and objective searcher. Within the discourse of perception it is sight that becomes the privileged metaphor of insight. In The Birth of the Clinic, Michel Foucault points to the importance of the eye as the unveiler of that which is hidden:

The eye becomes the depositary and source of clarity; it has the power to bring a truth to light that it receives only to the extent that it has brought it to light; as it opens, the eye first opens the truth... (p.xiii)

A problem is already emerging through this formulation. Ideally, the "observing gaze refrains from intervening: it is silent and gestureless. Observation leaves things as they are..."¹⁸ But it must be remembered that the gaze brings a "truth to light that it receives only to the extent that it has brought it to light". The eye, then, brings to light that which it allows to be discovered.

It is not insignificant that in The Birth of the Clinic Foucault is concerned with the way in which medical analysis constructs rather than uncovers knowledge of the body. Many have pointed to the fact that Arthur Conan Doyle began his career as a doctor and that much of Sherlock Holmes' method is based on the technique of Doyle's medical teacher, Dr Joseph Bell.¹⁹ Doyle himself writes:

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, The Birth of the Clinic, p.107.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Howard Haycraft's Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story, pp.45-47 and pp.28-46 in Thomas Sebeok and Jean-Umiker Sebeok's "'You Know My Method': A Juxtaposition of Charles S. Peirce and Sherlock Holmes" in The Sign of Three (Eds. Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeok).

Having endured a severe course of training in medical diagnosis, I felt that if the same austere methods of observation and reasoning were applied to the problems of crime some more scientific system [of detection] could be constructed.²⁰

Following Foucault, we must entertain some suspicion towards these "austere methods", since it is this notion of scientific "austerity" and starkness that gives perception its supposed objectivity and transparency. Todorov observes (in another context):

Where the acquisition of knowledge is concerned, an elementary truth is too often forgotten: that the viewpoint chosen by the observer reconfigures and redefines his object.²¹

This simple statement is one that scientificity has great difficulty in accepting since the science of perception is one that insists on the stability of that which one observes.²² This insistence is often given a strong ideological reading in much detective fiction criticism. For instance, Stephen Knight sees the "aura of science" in the Holmes' stories as an important mobiliser of "the contemporary idea that dispassionate science was steadily comprehending and so

²⁰ Preface to Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Long Stories, p.v. Carl Ginzberg also points out that the three figures he considers, Freud, Morelli and Doyle, were all doctors and that in "all three cases we can invoke the model of medical semiotics or symptomatology...", p.87 ("Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes" in Eco and Sebeok).

²¹ "The Origin of Genres" in Genres in Discourse, p.16.

²² Although I am using a crude caricature of science that ignores developments in scientific thought throughout the twentieth century, it is essential to do so for the (polemical) purposes of this dissertation.

controlling the world".²³ The perceiving eye is seen as an interested agent of "control" rather than a dispassionate observer of fact.²⁴

The observer is always an interpreter and her research "involves a series of choices, to emphasize this and neglect that, to go on digging or to stop; and few of the choices are logically satisfying".²⁵ Frank Kermode calls the history of interpretation "a history of exclusions, which enable us to seize upon this issue rather than on some other as central, and choose from the remaining mass only what seems most compliant".²⁶ It is the observer who chooses, be it a conscious choice or not, what to call a discovery "through the suppression of elements deemed to be 'inessential' and thus irrelevant to truth".²⁷

Thus, that which appropriates the mystique of objectivity always relies on a prior conception of the way things should be and without this prior bias there could be no such activity as observation. As Kermode aphoristically pronounces:

²³ Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction, p.79.

²⁴ Foucault analyses this conjunction of power and observation more fully in Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison: "The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly. A central point would be both the source of light illuminating everything, and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known: a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a centre towards which all gazes would be turned", p.173.

²⁵ William B. Willcox, "The Psychiatrist, the Historian, and General Clinton: The Excitement of Historical Research" (1967) in The Historian as Detective (Ed. Robin W. Winks), p.508.

²⁶ The Genesis of Secrecy, p.20.

²⁷ Peter Brunette and David Wills, Screen/Play: Derrida and Film Theory, p.34.

Now all interpretation proceeds from prejudice, and without prejudice there can be no interpretation...²⁸

The detective/critic must inevitably shape her material in a way that depends on her prior schema of knowledge, what Kermode calls "a tacit form of knowing acquired from institutional training" (p.4). The interpreter finds only that which she brought with her in the first place: herself.

OEDIPUS: Say it again. Let there be no mistake.
 TEIRESIAS: Was it not plain?...
 OEDIPUS: I would have it beyond all doubt. Say it again.
 TEIRESIAS: I say that the killer you are seeking is yourself.²⁹

The observer is not, however, exempt from the instability of knowledge and her position is as constantly modified by the quest as that which she seeks.³⁰ The observer of the observer is not exempt from her own theoretical (un)grounding. Though the detective must inevitably face her own reflection in that which she uncovers, she finds, like Oedipus, that her image is no longer quite what it had been.³¹ In a way, this circular movement is mirrored in the structure of the detective story

²⁸ The Genesis of Secrecy, p.68.

²⁹ Sophocles, King Oedipus, p.35-36.

³⁰ "While the detective's interference thus actually modifies and shifts the meaning of the text, he himself is in turn also increasingly affected and changed by the results of his interpretive efforts" (Peter Hühn, "The Detective as Reader: Narrativity and Reading Concepts in Detective Fiction"), p.461.

³¹ This movement back to the self can be seen to function in a similar way to Sigmund Freud's formulation of the uncanny: the "homely" (das heimlich) as simultaneously a place of secrecy and a place where the self resides. We will return to this in our discussion of Thomas Pynchon.

(and therefore of narrative) itself. The detective moves forward only in order to discover how that impetus to move first came about. Julia Saville describes this circular structure thus:

The arrival at the truth which concludes the narrative of the investigation is then simultaneously the discovery of the origin of the narrative of the murder. The detective or reader is seen to have moved in a circle, back to the beginning, the "primal scene", prior to which there is no more to know.³²

The detective can only find her other, usually criminal, self.

The Quest for (dis)Solution

Why does the detective/critic search in the first place? What motivates the initial desire to find meaning? Kermode broadens the question by claiming that "the world is full of interpreters" and that it is "impossible to live...without repeated, if minimal, acts of interpretation" but still queries "why [we] would...rather interpret than not?" (The Genesis of Secrecy, p.49).

This drive to conclusion is often explained in terms of innate (biological?) drives and instincts. For instance, Stefano Tani claims that the detective (Oedipa Maas in this case) is "a human system striving for mental harmony and understanding, which are inherent and irrepressible human needs".³³ William Willcox explains the "excitement of historical research" in a similar way by claiming that the

³² "The Reader's Quest", p.90.

³³ The Doomed Detective, p.97: my emphasis.

historian "cannot let the mystery alone, and involvement with it brings its own reward. His research may be narrow in scope, transient in value, riddled with unanswerable questions; it is still inherently exciting" (p.512).

Kermode's explanation hesitantly points to "supra-literary forces, cultural pressures, which tend to make us seek narrative coherence" (The Genesis of Secrecy, p.53). He nevertheless denies having a "satisfying answer" but "it does appear that we are programmed to prefer fulfilment to disappointment, the closed to the open..." (p.64) and that there is a conviction that "in some occult fashion, if only we could detect it, everything will be found to hang together" (p.72). With a similar doubtfulness, Saville wonders whether the reader's quest, like the confused detective of Alain Robbe-Grillet's The Erasers, is "an attempt to reassure himself of the possibility of finding order, continuity and meaning in the world?".³⁴

It is not the aim of this dissertation to answer this question (assuming that it is at all possible to do so) since to attempt to do so would involve us in yet another double-bind, of which, I think, we have more than enough already. For our purposes it is enough to note that a crime is defined as a "violation of law" (OED) and thus an enigma, being a violation of order, must be seen as, in some ways, illegal.

Let us, now, consider more carefully how the detective/critic extracts information and tries to arrive at orderly and logical solutions.

³⁴ "The Reader's Quest", p.99.

Abducting the Logic of Evidence

Following on from our discussion of the double narrative of narrative, we can see that the detective must interpret events that can only be described as "historical". Historians themselves have noted that the "past simply as past is wholly unknowable; it is the past as residually preserved in the present that is alone knowable".³⁵ The only "objective material" that is available to the historian/detective/critic is the "material trace which the [past] event has left - usually a written document".³⁶ It is the interpreter's task to take the available evidence and produce an account of the events leading up to the formation of those traces. The world and "the world of the novel" is transformed into "a conglomeration of potential signs".³⁷ We must then ask the question: How does the detective/critic read these signs? What is the logical process involved in recovering the past?

Let us consider the logic of one of the basic materials with which the detective works: the clue. The clue is a sign of a past event and a pointer to the future course of an investigation. It, therefore, partakes of the double structure with which we are becoming quite familiar. Knight writes:

³⁵ Robin G. Collingwood, "The Limits of Historical Knowledge" (1965) in The Historian as Detective (Ed. Robin W. Winks), p.520.

³⁶ Carl L. Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian" (1932) in The Historian as Detective, p.6.

³⁷ Peter Hühn. "The Detective as Reader", p.454.

In terms of epistemology we have a materialistic model, which can read off from physical data what has happened and what will happen.³⁸

The clue is the sign of a hidden meaning and the possibility of the discovery of that meaning. Ginzberg writes that "Reality is opaque" but that "there are certain points - clues, symptoms - which allow us to decipher it".³⁹

But how are we to know what constitutes a sign? Even the most innocuous of things may be hiding terrible deeds. Sherlock Holmes is filled with horror by the sight of some country houses since it is their very appearance of innocence that conceals more readily the existence of crime:

Think of the deeds of hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on year in, year out, in such places and none the wiser.⁴⁰

Once it is accepted that there is a reality beyond that which is readily apparent, the detective can never cease his interpretive gaze in case a clue slips by unnoticed. The detective/critic can then quite easily be mistaken for a paranoid: one who reads too much. But this is, perhaps, an unavoidable hazard.

Franco Moretti, relying on the linguistic insights of Ferdinand de Saussure, points out that the clue is "that particular element of the story in which the link between

³⁸ Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction, p.74.

³⁹ "Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes", p.109.

⁴⁰ "The Copper Beeches" quoted by Marcello Truzzi in "Sherlock Holmes: Applied Psychologist" in The Sign of Three (Eds. Eco and Sebeok), p.74.

signifier and signified is altered". We cannot be quite sure what the clue/signifier means since that signifier "always has several signifieds and thus produces numerous suspicions".⁴¹ The detective must then reason back from the signifier to arrive at the most likely signified. Hühn describes this operation as being guided by "hypotheses about what might have happened" and through the application of:

[v]arious frames of reference, which could confer temporal and causal coherence and meaning on the heterogeneous and contradictory conglomerate of facts confronting the detective.⁴²

It is at this point that we must consider more carefully the various methods of deduction that are often called "logical" in detective fiction (and, we may add, in literary criticism).

Charles Sanders Peirce is famous for making the distinction between the operations of deduction, induction and abduction. He writes that:

Deduction proves that something must be; Induction shows that something actually is operative; Abduction merely suggests that something may be.⁴³

⁴¹ "Clues" in Popular Fiction: Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading (Ed. Tony Bennett), p.249.

⁴² "The Detective as Reader", p.455.

⁴³ Collected Papers, vol 5, quoted by Nancy Harrowitz in "The Body of the Detective Model: Charles S. Peirce and Edgar Allan Poe" in The Sign of Three, p.171.

Let us go through this carefully.⁴⁴ Deduction is the process whereby, a rule and a case being known, a result is inevitable: "something must be". Thus:

```

Rule:   A → B
Case:   A
        ↓
Result: B

```

If we are presented with a case and result, we are then allowed to induce a rule: "something actually is". Thus:

```

Case:   A
Result: B
        ↘
Rule:   A → B

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On the other hand, if we already have the result (the clue or signifier) we must then abduct a rule (which means, in effect, guessing the cause of the result): "something may be". Thus:

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Result:      B
             ↙ process of abduction
Rule  : A → B
Case  : A

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Harrowitz describes abduction as the "step in between a fact and its origin; the instinctive, perceptual jump which allows the subject to guess an origin which can be tested out to prove or disprove the hypothesis".⁴⁵ Sherlock Holmes claims that this process is one of "reasoning backwards":

⁴⁴ My understanding of the distinctions between Peirce's three elements is based on many of the essays in Eco and Sebeok's The Sign of Three, but especially on Marcello Truzzi's "Sherlock Holmes: Applied Social Psychologist", p.69.

⁴⁵ "The Body of the Detective Model" in The Sign of Three, p.182.

Most people, if you describe a train of events to them, will tell you what the result would be. There are few people, however, who, if you told them a result, would be able to evolve from their own inner consciousness what the steps were which led up to that result. This power is what I mean when I talk of reasoning backwards, or analytically.⁴⁶

But this could only be true if there were a finite number of rules available. Thus, the detective may make an educated guess as to the "real story" but it still, nevertheless, remains a guess:

What makes Sherlock Holmes so successful at detection is not that he never guesses but that he guesses so well.⁴⁷

The process of abduction does, however, have a much more disquieting implication than this. If the reader will reconsider the three logical cases on the previous page, he or she must account for the existence of the rule ($A \rightarrow B$) that is the cornerstone of deduction: that "something must be". Where did this rule come from if not from the abductive process of the third example? Abduction implies that even the rule that we feel sure is valid must have had its origin in a guess. Rather than being a peculiar quirk of logic, abductive guesswork is the basis of logic itself and, paradoxically, guessing is the one area that logic disallows. The process of logical investigation must be a process that destroys itself.

⁴⁶ "A Study in Scarlet" in Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Long Stories, p.134.

⁴⁷ Thomas Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok in "'You Know My Method'" in The Sign of Three, p.22.

How are we to understand this in terms of the very project of this dissertation? Are we not ourselves involved in a process of just such a "logical investigation" that we have so triumphantly forced to eat itself? It will be necessary to turn our own investigation loose on itself in order to understand the "specially designed trap" in which "the reader reads like a detective a tale which cautions against reading like a detective",⁴⁸ or rather (to paraphrase): a trap in which "a reader reads a reading which cautions against reading".

Considering a **Thesis**⁴⁹

[M]r. Maugham goes on, at least half seriously, to predict the day when the police novel will be studied in the colleges, when aspirants for doctoral degrees will shuttle the oceans and haunt the world's great libraries to conduct personal research expeditions into the lives and sources of the masters of the art.⁵⁰

Throughout this intro-duction I have been careful to emphasise the confusing relationship that critical work and detective fiction enjoy, but this is a somewhat disingenuous move since it is still clearly, despite its rather episodic structure, a piece of critical work. Is it enough to warn the reader that this is a necessary subterfuge insisted upon by

⁴⁸ Kevin J.H. Dettmar, "From Interpretation to 'Intrepidation'" in The Cunning Craft (Eds. June Frazer and Ronald Walker), p.156.

⁴⁹ It is worth keeping in mind that this is in fact a "mini-thesis": a full 75% of it is, presumably, elsewhere.

⁵⁰ Howard Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure, p.vi. Somerset Maugham's observation is brought about by his comment that "the serious novel of to-day is regrettably namby-pamby".

the academic institution whose task it will be to pass final judgement on this work? Julia Saville, for instance, eloquently prefaces her UCT MA thesis, "The Reader's Quest", thus:

Throughout the course of this thesis, the reader who writes it and the reader who reads it must be reminded that as an investigation of the reader's quest, the discourse of the thesis has been compelled to assume a discursive position outside that quest, from which to draw its conclusions. However, even from this position it cannot escape the paradox that it is itself a quest - a "meta-quest" - which repeats the very activities upon which it seeks to comment. Consequently, even as it performs the role of "commentary-upon-the-quest" it must find itself forgetting or repressing its simultaneous role of "performance-of-the-quest", and therefore of "material-under-scrutiny". (p.67)

Is this not a rather defeatist position to adopt? Must one always re-enact the problem that one is trying to analyse? The difficulty of this double-bind seems insurmountable. S.E. Sweeney writes:

That a narrative reflects its own analysis is only half of the problem; the other half...is that analysis reflects the narrative in turn.⁵¹

While Todorov expands this problem into the very structure of the sentence: "to combine a noun and a verb is to take the first step towards narrative".⁵² How is one to explain narrative with narrative? Again, we are caught in an infinite regression of self-reflexivity.

⁵¹ "Locked Rooms" in The Cunning Craft, p.12.

⁵² "The Grammar of Narrative" in The Poetics of Prose, p.119.

[W]e might say that what the theorist actually sees is her own image reflected [within the text].⁵³

Thus, just as the detective story has the prior story of crime, so the thesis has a prior proposition that it is the task of the reader to discover. But, as we have seen, the reader can only discover herself.

It is, of course, the institutional structure of the university that is the guardian of the law when it comes to reason and to theses. If one were to interfere directly with these sacred objects, the university would demand retribution. Jacques Derrida speaks of the "double gesture" that is essential to what he calls "thought":

They [deconstructionists] may continue to assume within the university, along with its memory and tradition, the imperative of professional rigor and competence. There is a double gesture here, a double postulation: to ensure professional competence and the most serious tradition of the university even while going as far as possible, theoretically and practically, in the most directly underground thinking about the abyss beneath the university...."Thought" requires both the principle of reason and what is beyond the principle of reason, the arkhe and an-archy. Between the two, the difference of a breath or an accent, only the enactment of this "thought" can decide. That decision is always risky, it always risks the worst.⁵⁴

This risk is the risk of censure from the university, the risk of becoming a criminal theorist, or even no theorist at all.

If one were willing to take the risk and if one really

⁵³ S.E. Sweeney, *ibid.*, p.13.

⁵⁴ "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its pupils" Diacritics (Fall 1983) quoted in Peter Brunette and David Will's Screen/Play, p.25.

believed that there is no perception, perhaps another writer of this dissertation would submit sixty blank pages (sixty being the number required by law). Of course, one would have to defend such an action and it would be this defense (rather than the perhaps puerile act of transgression) that would constitute an interrogation of the institution of the thesis and provide a degree of notoriety (if not a degree). The student would have to put her own status as student at risk.

Another possible strategy would be to push the logic of evidence to its breaking point. Within the academic thesis it is the quotation that the theorist uses to prove the basis of a reading.⁵⁵ But if it is admitted that the reading will always violate the supposed primary texts (even though they may already be secondary), should not the student submit sixty pages of quotations from which she would have taken a reading? In this way, the examiner would be sure that sufficient "work" had been done and would see in the spaces between the quotations the reading which could not be written since it is predicated on those very spaces.

The collection of quotations as fragments of evidence has already been prefigured in a series of four works by two authors who sought to take to the extreme the detective writer's injunction to keep the style of the story "perfectly

⁵⁵ The academic essay could be seen more as an interesting collection of quotes than as any great bearer of wisdom and insight. Susan Sontag, equating the quotation and the photograph, writes that each "is only a fragment, its moral and emotional weight depends on where it is inserted", (On Photography, pp.105-106).

transparent, imperceptible".⁵⁶ Roger Caillos observes that the detective story writer should be:

tempted to supply nothing but the raw materials: the reader opens a thick folder similar to the dossier of a case in progress. It is filled with police reports, the depositions of witnesses, photographs of fingerprints, railway tickets, bits of hair, matches, bloodstained pieces of cloth picked up at the scene of the crime, which together constitute the necessary evidence. Everyone must study this evidence and deduce from it the identity of the criminal: his name is sealed in an envelope which the enthusiast can always rip open in a moment of despair and which contains in addition the whole solution of the problem he was supposed to solve himself. This is, in fact, the form taken by Murder off Miami, by Dennis Wheatley and J.G. Links (1936).⁵⁷

The thesis of quotations would be the theoretical equivalent of Murder off Miami.

Perhaps there is a third practical possibility to solve the dilemma of the theorist attempting to interrogate the institutional confines of the thesis. One could divide up the	This strategy of using multiple columns to point to a multiplicity of reading possibilities is obviously inspired by Jacques Derrida's "Tympan". The writer of the	This rather pretentious strategy seems to confirm an earlier judgement of the writer's work by the present examiner, Lesley Marx. She writes on an essay submitted
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⁵⁶ Todorov, "The Typology of Detective Fiction", p.46.

⁵⁷ "The Detective Novel as Game" in The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory (Eds. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe), p.10.

page into a first column is, in 1989: "A series of columns however, still fascinating each of which forced to rely on essay, David. commented on the the metaphor of It's a bit too strategies of the "interrogation", clever, I think, ones to its left. whereas this is but very the very concept provocative that is being put nevertheless". into question.

The only serious problem with this methodological approach would be that one would require an infinite regression of columns. Such a feature has not yet been included on my word-processing package.

In such exercises one should be careful to avoid the rather peculiar fate that Tom Wolfe ascribes to the architect, Le Corbusier:

[He] was the sort of relentlessly rational intellectual that only France loves wholeheartedly, the logician who flies higher and higher in ever-decreasing concentric circles until, with one last, utterly inevitable induction, he disappears up his own fundamental aperture and emerges in the fourth dimension as a needle-thin umber bird.⁵⁸

Perhaps the best one can do is to accept this double-bind with a smile that seems to appear on the faces of those detectives often called "hard-boiled":⁵⁹

⁵⁸ From Bauhaus to Our House, p.27.

⁵⁹ Whether there really is such a thing will be examined in the next chapter.

[T]heir smile is wry, bitter, helpless in the face of the corruption of the world and of their own complicity in it; it is the sardonic smile of the reader who knows that his own life is no less ambiguous and stalemated than the novel he is now reading.⁶⁰

In reading a thesis, the examining reader attempts to establish a prior reading, signs of a reading: a reader, in fact. And due to the self-reflexivity of reading this reader will turn out to be the examiner herself. The list of quotations or the blank pages would force the examiner to examine her book of rules to determine her own position as the law. The student's only hope is to be found guilty of intelligence.

Research in semiotics remains an investigation which discovers nothing at the end of its quest but its own ideological moves, so as to take cognizance of them, to deny them, and to start out anew.⁶¹

Thus we arrive at the end of this lengthy intro-duction. The thesis will go on to examine the very notion of a detective genre and will finally engage with a series of texts that might be considered as detective stories. The notion of the incest myth and the origin of the law will be examined using Roman Polanski's Chinatown and Jack Nicholson's The Two Jakes. An earlier mention of Freud's theory of the uncanny and its implications for the detective's search will be developed

⁶⁰ Glenn W. Most, "The Hippocratic Smile: John le Carré and the Traditions of the Detective Novel" in The Poetics of Murder (Eds. Most and Stowe), p.352.

⁶¹ Julia Kristeva in Semiotekè: Recherches pour une sémanalyse (1969) quoted by Jonathan Culler in Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature, p.245.

in a reading of Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49.
Finally, we will take our proposition that the difference between detective story and critical text is spurious to its end-point and consider Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" as a detective story. The conclusion is contained within an envelope that the reader can "always rip open in a moment of despair".

The desires of interpreters are good because without them the world and the text are tacitly declared impossible; perhaps they are, but we must live as if the case were otherwise.⁶²

⁶² Frank Kermode, The Genesis of Secrecy, p.126.

2. Genre and the Anxiety of Distinction

It can be said from the outset that from a deconstructive point of view the concept of genre is, strictly speaking, untenable, relying as it does on exclusions and valorizations that are logically indefensible.⁶³

The notion of genre is central to much literary criticism since it provides a fairly accessible grid through which to organise the huge mass of "culture product" that has been produced over the last couple of thousand years or so. The existence of particular genres is so taken for granted that the proof of their validity is, tautologically, the undoubtedness of their existence. For instance Stuart M. Kaminsky writes that:

[t]he very persistence of genre films argues that they must be dealing with basic aspects of existence and social/psychological interaction or they would not continue to be made.⁶⁴

For Kaminsky, genre criticism provides "scientific stability" and such a measure of science is crucial for film criticism "because it implies the use of orderly, verifiable thought" (p.5). In fact, so scientific are genre classifications that "Certain genres are clearly universal, depending on archetypal patterns common to all civilizations" (p.214). Genre criticism brings to the critical gaze a neatly pervasive way of looking at the world and dividing it up into pleasingly coherent patterns.

⁶³ Peter Brunette and David Wills, Screen/Play, p.45.

⁶⁴ American Film Genres: Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film, p.5.

Not everyone is as enthusiastic about genre as Kaminsky would appear to be. Jacques Derrida writes that:

As soon as the word genre is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: "Do", "Do not", says "genre", the word genre, the figure, the voice, or the law of genre.⁶⁵

Genre is not seen to be reflective but coercive. If we remember our consideration of the gaze of the interpreter it will become clear that the search for clear genres is analogous to the interpreter's search for truth and clarity. Derrida continues that genre insists that "one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity" (pp.224-225).

In fact, even a critic that seems to have some patience with the new-fangled fictions of the "metaphysical detective" or "antidetector stor[y]" writers calls these works, that do not appear to him to fit into the "classic" genre, "perverted detective tale[s]" belonging to a "bastard subgenre".⁶⁶ It is noticeable that theorists who use "postmodern" as a generically usable term, are most concerned with developing a new genre-vocabulary to deal with texts that appear to have one limb too many. Stefano Tani, for instance, provides us with the rather tenuous distinction between "The Innovative

⁶⁵ "The Law of Genre" (1979) in Acts of Literature (Ed. Derek Attridge), p.224.

⁶⁶ Kevin J.H. Dettmar, "From Interpretation to 'Intrepidation'" in The Cunning Craft, p.154. The importance of the sexual imagery of deformity will be brought into focus when we discuss Chinatown and The Two Jakes.

Anti-Detective Novel" and "The Deconstructive Anti-Detective Novel".⁶⁷ In order to begin to classify texts in this way, the reader must already begin to distinguish elements that have no distinction aside from the interpretation of that reader.

David R. Anderson remarks on this move:

The detective novel is (often) about the reestablishment of social controls after a violent challenge to them. Ironically, the criticism of detective fiction often serves to reenact that same narrative structure: generic conventions constitute the social controls that are usually restored intact after the challenge to them which attracted and focused our critical attention in the first place.⁶⁸

To reiterate the point, Brunette and Wills write that:

[i]t is usually forgotten that even to speak of "textual elements" that can or cannot be readily accommodated to an interpretation or a theory is already to presuppose a great deal, for these elements are not simply lying around in the text waiting to be picked up. In fact, such details often become individuated in the process of looking for evidence to prove a point; what one is looking for often determines what is found.⁶⁹

Derrida notes that the "textual elements" that are used as markers or traits of that text's "participation" in a particular genre, can never be part of that genre since "remarks of belonging belong without belonging, participate without belonging" and therefore the text "umarks itself [se

⁶⁷ This ordering is particularly ironic since Tani ridicules the rule-manifestoes of the early twentieth-century writers as "the swan-song of old-style middle-class fiction, an attempt to freeze the last literary remains of the nineteenth-century novel wherein order is, in the end, always restored" (The Doomed Detective, p.20).

⁶⁸ "Afterword" to The Cunning Craft, p.189.

⁶⁹ Screen/Play, p.34.

demarqué].⁷⁰ That is to say, any element which is distinguished as a marker of a certain genre, immediately involves itself with a set of "participations" outside that genre, thus disqualifying the particularity of that genre.⁷¹

Interpretation then becomes a way of marking off territory, of establishing oneself as a reader of distinction. However, such a territorialisation, to borrow the terminology of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, is entirely arbitrary and therefore quite mad. Roland Barthes writes of the soothsayer delimiting a section of sky with his staff:

[I]t must have been a fine thing to see, in those days: that staff marking out the sky, the one thing that cannot be marked; then, too, any such gesture is mad: solemnly to trace a limit of which immediately nothing is left, except for the intellectual remanence of a cutting out, to devote oneself to the totally ritual and totally arbitrary preparation of meaning.⁷²

Genre can therefore be seen as this "intellectual remanence of a cutting out".

Consequently, we should be suspicious of those that are too eager to place texts into neat categories such as the

⁷⁰ "The Law of Genre", p.230.

⁷¹ Brunette and Wills provide the following example: "[T]he presence of six-guns, cowboys, and a Western locale may be the marks of the genre "Western" but will, unlike the texts in which they appear, themselves never belong to the genre of the Western. They also "belong", respectively, to a historical practice of law enforcement or law breaking, a sociological category, and a geographical region, all of which, larger than the text in which they appear, come to inhabit it. That is to say, a specific text containing these marks refers to a system of difference outside any given genre" (Screen/Play, p.48)

⁷² Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, p. 47.

"detective genre". The desire to generecise this area (for want of a better word) is evident in two ways. First, there is an immense amount of anxiety about the origins of the detective story and second, there is a glorification of the "classical detective story" and an insistence on the "proper" elements of such a story.

In order to have a clear genre, one must be able to exclude many more texts than one can include in order for that genre-distinction to make any sense. Therefore, it is more or less unequivocally agreed that the very first detective story was Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue". Nancy Harrowitz sees this certainty itself as a cause for concern:

Such an auspicious beginning staked out for any literary genre should always be suspect, and the suspects in this case are the detective historians themselves.⁷³

Critics spend much time on discussing the putative distinctions between Poe and such early collections of crime stories as The Newgate Calendar (1773) or the Mémoires de Vidocq of the criminal turned informer turned member of the plain-clothes Sûreté, Eugène François Vidocq.⁷⁴ The general consensus appears to be the common sense notion that, clearly, "there could be no detective stories (and there were none) until there were detectives. This did not occur until the nineteenth century".⁷⁵ This opinion relies on a very

⁷³ "The Body of the Detective Model" in The Sign of Three, p.179.

⁷⁴ See Stephen Knight, Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction, pp.8-20 and p.34.

⁷⁵ Howard Haycraft, Murder for Pleasure, pp.4-5.

circumscribed and arbitrary notion of what a detective might be.

It is, however, the inclusion of much older texts into the detective genre that most irritates the Primacy-of-Poe theorists. Haycraft writes that:

This ancestral resemblance (at most) has misled certain otherwise estimable writers, who really should know better, into "discovering" detective stories in Herodotus and the Bible and Kindred sources.⁷⁶

While Michael Holquist, arguing against an all-inclusive definition of the detective story, describes such a move as a confidence trick:

And it has long been a favorite trick of classicists to teach Oedipus Rex as a detective story. Such eclectic definitions of the genre create obvious difficulties.⁷⁷

The difficulty, of course, lies in the necessity of re-thinking one's own position.

Within the genre itself restrictions are seemingly endless. Almost every critic's list of do's and don't's immediately excludes some other critic's central detective texts.⁷⁸ Paradoxically, many of these theorists see exceptions

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.6.

⁷⁷ "Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Postwar Fiction" in The Poetics of Murder (Eds. Most and Stowe), p.154.

⁷⁸ See, for instance, Howard Haycraft's Murder for Pleasure, pp.12,225 and 254 and Todorov's summary of S.S. Van Dine's famous 20 rules (1928) in "The Typology of Detective Fiction". See also Carl R. Lovitt's "Controlling Discourse in Fiction, or Caring Very Much Who Killed Roger Ackroyd" (pp. 69 ff in The Cunning Craft) for an overview of the furor caused in Detective fiction

to their rules as further and absolute proof of those rules. Glenn Most describes what "seem to [him] the basic generic conventions of the literary detective" but in a note he writes:

Of course, exceptions can be found for every one of these generalizations....But all such cases are deformations of the expected conventions and must be understood as such; that is their point.⁷⁹

The exception is no longer an interrogation of that genre but a reinforcement of it. In fact, the logical outcome of such thinking (since there is no perfect example of a genre) is that genre can only be perceived through its exceptions:

The fact that a work "disobeys" its genre does not mean that the genre does not exist. It is tempting to say "quite the contrary", for two reasons. First because, in order to exist as such, the transgression requires a law - precisely that one that is to be violated. We might go even further and observe that the norm becomes visible - comes into existence - owing only to its transgressions.⁸⁰

But how is this possible? First, "the transgression requires a law"; ie. the law precedes the transgression, and second, the law "comes into existence - owing only to its transgression"; ie. the transgression precedes the law. This familiar double-bound structure reflects the impossible possibility of the law: the law that exists because of its exception and the exception that can only come into being after the law.

circles by Agatha Christie's murderer-narrator in Who Killed Roger Ackroyd.

⁷⁹ "The Hippocratic Smile" in The Poetics of Murder, p.364.

⁸⁰ Todorov, "The Origin of Genres" in Genres in Discourse, p.14.

The law is mad. The law is mad, is madness; but madness is not the predicate of the law. There is no madness without the law; madness cannot be conceived before its relation to law. This is the law, the law is a madness.⁸¹

What is the practical effect of the paradoxical nature of the law of genre? Let us briefly consider a short story by the most "classical" of the detective writers, Arthur Conan Doyle.

It is claimed by many that the Holmes stories "reflect a widespread optimism characteristic of their period concerning the comprehensive power of positivistic science".⁸² Let us then consider a (carefully chosen) story, "The Yellow Face".⁸³

Watson begins by explaining that Holmes' "method" was by no means infallible and that "it is only natural that I should dwell rather upon his successes than upon his failures" (p.36).⁸⁴ So, the Holmes' stories that we have at our disposal are only a smaller part of a much larger, missing canon.

In "The Yellow Face", a certain Mr. Munro comes to 221b Baker Street complaining of his wife's secretive behaviour. She has been using large sums of money and slipping out in the early hours of the morning to meet with newly-arrived strangers. Mr. Munro has seen a yellow face in the window of

⁸¹ Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre" in Acts of Literature, p.251.

⁸² Catherine Belsey, "Deconstructing the Text: Sherlock Holmes" in Popular Fiction (Ed. Tony Bennett), p.279. It is unfortunate that I have not the space to explore more fully Doyle's fervent spiritualism since I am sure that his mystical and detective work interact in very interesting ways.

⁸³ Included in The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes, pp.36-61.

⁸⁴ See "Abducting the Logic of Evidence" in my introduction for a fuller explanation as to why Holmes' method is in no way "empirical".

the strangers' house and we are informed that his wife's late husband died of yellow fever. After Munro has left Watson asks Holmes:

"You have a theory?"

"Yes, a provisional one. But I shall be surprised if it does not turn out to be correct. This woman's first husband is in that cottage." (p.54)

Holmes then proceeds to deliver a page long analysis of the entire case that "covers all the facts" (p.56) and they set off to Norbury to confront Munro's wife.

The three men storm into the cottage, while Mrs. Munro implores them to desist. Holmes' guesses could not have been more wrong. It turns out that Mrs. Munro's first husband was a negro and that her child, a "coal-black negress" (p.58), had just arrived in England and Mrs. Munro had been afraid that her husband would reject her and her black child. In order to keep gossip at bay, Mrs. Munro made her child wear a yellow mask and gloves. Grant Munro accepts them both, saying that "I am not a very good man, Effie, but I think that I am a better one than you have given me credit for being" (p.60).

As the newly formed family return to their home, Holmes shamefacedly plucks at Watson's sleeve, saying: "I think...that we shall be of more use in London than in Norbury" (p.61). Holmes remains silent until their return to Baker Street. As he is about to turn in, Holmes says:

"Watson,...if it should ever strike you that I am getting a little over-confident in my powers, or giving less pains to a case than it deserves, kindly whisper 'Norbury' in my ear, and I shall be infinitely obliged to you." (p.61)

Holmes' abduction from result to case falls flat since Holmes' own experience does not include the possibility of a disguised black child.⁸⁵ Whatever this story may tell us about race relations in late nineteenth century fiction, the use of disguise or the morals of twice-married women, it interferes with the easy classification of the "classical" detective, Sherlock Holmes.

Perhaps "The Yellow Face" should be more often whispered into the ears of genre theorists.

In this chapter I have tried to undermine the complacent ease with which literary critics adduce patterns to literature that are about as valid as Holmes' analysis in this story. Brunette and Wills argue that to generecise is to reintroduce a concept of proper and limited meaning:

Accompanying this constant assumption of [generic] totalization is the force of a certain epistemological violence. Paradoxically, totalization is, after all, only another word for finding an essence, or "discovering" a truth...⁸⁶

If genre were to be rigorously re-examined within the context of the university canon, the ramifications for course structures would be immense. Texts would no longer have to be grouped in certain ways and the inclusion of any text would never be self-evident. The awareness of the arbitrary nature of any such textual configuration would, perhaps, provide a

⁸⁵ That this failure on Holmes' part is occasioned by three women, Mrs. Munro, the child and the child's nurse, is not insignificant. See Belsey's fascinating discussion of the "shadowy, mysterious and silent women" (p.281) that "haunt" Holmes. ("Deconstructing the Text: Sherlock Holmes").

⁸⁶ Screen/Play, p.34.

more interesting way of discussing texts and the ways in which a certain reading has been forced on them by their generic inclusion. The task of the university would be, then, to foreground the complex relationship that the reader has with any one text, rather than to simplify that relationship. This is, of course, a double-bound programme of revolution:

Emancipation from this language must be attempted. But not as an attempt at emancipation from it, for this is impossible unless we forget our history. Rather, as the dream of emancipation. Nor as emancipation from it, which would be meaningless and would deprive us of the light of meaning. Rather, as resistance to it, as far as is possible.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification" in Writing and Difference, p.28.

3. Incest in Chimeratown⁸⁸

JAKE: It never goes away.

In our discussion of Chinatown (1974) and The Two Jakes (1990) we will concentrate on the function of crime and sexuality: the taint of blood and the taint in blood. In order to do this we will have to explore more carefully the origin of the law, especially as it is presented Sigmund Freud's in Totem and Taboo and Claude Lévi-Strauss' The Elementary Structures of Kinship. I choose to set these texts into circulation with the two films because they all have one thing in common: incest.⁸⁹

Many critics, including myself, have noted that Jake Gittes is a less than perfect interpreter. His sight is always slightly skewed or blinded: from his clumsiness with the camera to his misinterpretation of the bifocals in the pond. The two films mark sight itself as intrinsically defective; spectacles are broken, scenes of crime are presented out of focus,⁹⁰ eyes are blown out of heads. Jake's attempt to read

⁸⁸ This is a much altered version of a 1991 honours paper entitled "Chimeratown".

⁸⁹ Of course, there are a myriad other elements in common but my reading demands this particular one.

⁹⁰ The beginning of The Two Jakes presents the list of credits over an episode of defocussed, presumably extra-marital sex. The scene itself is a reflection in Jake's camera lens.

various signs is doomed from the start because it is the act of reading itself that is defective.⁹¹

JAKE: Like the clues that keep you on the right track are never where you look for them. They fall out of the pocket of somebody else's suit you pick up at the cleaners. They're in the tune you can't stop humming that you never heard in your life. They're in the wrong number you dial in the middle of the night. The signs are in all those old familiar faces you only think you've never seen before. But you get used to seeing them out of the corner of your eye and you end up tripping over the ones that are right in front of you.⁹²

As we will recall from the introductory section, "Sight's Double: The Self", the aporia of reading rests on the fact that the reader doubles herself in her vision. The films unsurprisingly present us with numerous doubles and repetitions. Jake first sees Hollis Mulwray and Katherine in Echo park. Jake returns twice to the reservoir, twice to the Mulwray's garden. Much of the drama is prefaced by earlier enactments:

How many of us cannot confess to being moved in some way by the foreshadowing of the catastrophic close when wilting under the interrogation of Nicholson-Gittes, Dunaway lets her head fall to the steering wheel setting off a horn blast? Or, when in the preceding scene Nicholson, to facilitate following Dunaway, shatters her car's tail-light, foreshadowing by violent recapitulation the "flaw in the iris [of her eye]" which becomes by a gunshot from behind a fatal wound? Or, more transparently, by the repeated allusions to "Chinatown", to the

⁹¹ One may be tempted to read this out metaphorically into the mechanics of cinema itself. Graham Fuller writes that "blindness has a compulsive relationship with a medium that forces us to look. Every time we step into a movie theater we enter a state of 'blindness', seeking enlightenment from the projector's beam" ("Shots in the Dark"), p.53.

⁹² The Two Jakes.

scene of an earlier catastrophe wherein Gittes apparently hurt a woman while trying to help her?⁹³

The Two Jakes itself revisits Chinatown. Jack Nicholson returns sixteen years later to direct, produce and star as Jake. Katherine Mulwray returns from wherever she has been for the last decade. Actors from Chinatown, now slightly the worse for wear, reappear.

Jake recalls the former orange groves that now house the B&B Estates and as he drives across a wasteland towards the housing estate, he reminisces in a voice-over:

Time changes things.... But the foot-prints and signs from the past are everywhere.... You can't forget the past, anymore than you can change it. Hearing Katherine Mulwray's name started me thinking about old secrets, family, property and a guy doing his partner dirt.

Jake Burman has the same first name and the same shoes as Jake Gittes and just as Noah Cross killed his partner so Burman kills Bodene. Burman affectionately calls Katherine "Kitty", while in Chinatown this nickname appears in quite a different context. In a famous scene, the director, Roman Polanski himself, confronts Jake at the reservoir with a hired thug and a switchblade:

POLANSKI: Hold it there, Kittycat. Hold it.⁹⁴....
 You're a very nosy fella, Kittycat. Hah? You know what happens to nosy fellows? Hah? No? Wanna guess?
He puts the blade into Jake's left nostril.

⁹³ William Galperin, "'Bad for the Glass': Representation and Filmic Deconstruction in Chinatown and Chan is Missing", p.1154.

⁹⁴ It is a further repetition that this order sounds similar to a director's off-screen instruction: the director-turned-actor mimics his own capacity as director.

Hah? No? Okay. They lose their noses.

He slits Jake's nostril.

Next time you lose the whole thing. Cut it off and feed it to my goldfish.

Jake is concussed by a natural gas explosion (which itself prefigures the final destruction of the other Jake) and flashes back to a scene from Chinatown in which he is also knocked out. The only difference is that instead of waking up to Evelyn Mulwray's face, he sees her sister/daughter Katherine instead. Everything seems to have a tragic inevitability. There is no escaping the past. But what exactly is this past and why must it recur?

At the base of every mystery in Chinatown and The Two Jakes lies a primal criminal act: a father and his daughter's sexual congress. This does not, however, mean that this act is in itself easily understandable and a solution to mystery. It will be argued that it is the enigmatic nature of incest that provides the possibility of mystery itself.

Jake's resistance to discovering Noah Cross' crime is only overcome by much violence against the supposed victim of that crime, Evelyn Mulwray.⁹⁵ When she declares that Katherine is her daughter and her sister, Jake can only understand this as rape. Evelyn's reaction is, however, ambiguous. Lesley Marx points out that:

⁹⁵ Jake seems to have taken Sherlock Holmes dictum that "Women are never to be entirely trusted - not the best of them" to heart. ("The Sign of Four"), p.216.

Critics generally go along with Jake, but she raises her head to look at him pleadingly and then shake it. Seduction then?⁹⁶

Whatever the explanation may be, the fact remains that Evelyn's body will always be the scene of the crime and Katherine's blood will always be the sign of that crime. It is this biological taint that cannot ever be eradicated and which will always cause the metonymic corruption of those involved with it.

Claude Lévi-Strauss analyses the taboo against incest as the only feature of human life that both "constitutes a rule", and is therefore culturally "relative and particular", but which "alone among all the social rules, possesses at the same time a universal character".⁹⁷ How can something be both instinctual (natural) and socially determined (cultural)? Lévi-Strauss sees that "the prohibition of incest presents a formidable mystery to sociological thought" (p.10: my emphasis). Sigmund Freud, agreeing with J.G. Frazer's Totemism and Exogamy, isolates the same problematic:

We are ignorant of the origin of the horror of incest and cannot even tell in what direction to look for it. None of the solutions of the enigma that have been proposed seems satisfactory.⁹⁸

Lévi-Strauss does not try to decide what the origin of the incest taboo is, but rather finds that the incest taboo is the

⁹⁶ "Playing the Detective: Parodic Elements in The Big Easy and Chinatown", p.163.

⁹⁷ The Elementary Structures of Kinship, pp.8-9.

⁹⁸ Totem and Taboo, p.125.

origin of the origin: it is "at once on the threshold of culture, in culture, and in one sense...culture itself" (p.12). Rather than being a peculiarity, the crime of incest is marked as the most heinous of crimes (even more reprehensible than murder) and in this way marks the limits of what culture can be: to commit incest is to threaten the very fabric of society.

[The prohibition of incest] is the fundamental step because of which, by which, but above all in which, the transition from nature to culture is accomplished. (p.24)

The law against incest is not, Lévy-Strauss claims, "a prohibition like the others". It is "the prohibition in the most general form, the one perhaps to which all others...are related as particular cases" (p.493). This is crucial. Because the incest taboo is the only one that is both natural and cultural, it must, then, be the very point on which the distinction between nature and culture appears. The law against incest is the law of the law; it is that which brings law into existence.

This analysis does not, however, exorcise the mystery of incest, since incest is defined as paradox: the fact that it is the ultimate crime (the one that the law most prohibits) means that it is the cause of the entire system of law. Incest brings into existence its own prohibition, prohibition itself.

' Incest, then, is the very basis on which cultural systems are built and therefore it is inevitable that culture must always in some way be making reference to its mysterious origin. Thus, we can understand Noah Cross' incestuous

relationship and its insistent (though muted) presence throughout the two films as the mythic origin of culture as a whole and, more prosaically, as the necessary origin of Chinatown and The Two Jakes.

The reason why Jake "steadily finds himself confronting a depth of evil and chaos so great that he is unable to control it",⁹⁹ is that society owes its existence to a law that has its origin in its ultimate transgression and the law must repress this history:

The law, intolerant of its own history, intervenes as an absolutely emergent order, absolute and detached from any origin. It appears as something that does not appear as such in the course of history.¹⁰⁰

The silent and inevitable historical scandal of the law speaks, in the two films, through the bodies of those within its domain. The notion that the criminal is a biological determined specimen dates back to the anthropology of the nineteenth century. Criminals, writes Stephen Gould, paraphrasing one of the most vehement of the criminal anthropologists, Cesare Lombroso, "are evolutionary throwbacks in our midst. Germs of an ancient past lie dormant in our

⁹⁹ John G. Cawelti, "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in recent American Films", p.566.

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Derrida, "Before the Law", p.194.

heredity".¹⁰¹ And if the crime itself infects our blood, as it does Katherine Mulwray's, we must also be innately criminal.

Even Evelyn is physically marked by this crime:

JAKE: Your eye.

EVELYN: What about it? What?

JAKE: There's something black in the green part of your eye.

EVELYN (*smiling*): Oh, that. It's a...it's a fl...flaw in the iris.

JAKE: Flaw?

EVELYN: Yes. It's a sort of birthmark.

Noah Cross is seen to possess a mythical and omnipotent power of incestuous progeneration. Evelyn's stuttering, which occurs throughout Chinatown, is yet another physical trace of her flawed origin. Physical imperfection as a metonymic sign of crime is taken to its logical extreme when disease becomes of itself a signifier of criminality.¹⁰² Lombroso writes in 1887: "We see in the criminal a savage man and, at the same time, a sick man"¹⁰³ and it is perhaps no surprise that the criminal

¹⁰¹ "The Ape in Some of Us: Criminal Anthropology" in The Mismeasure of Man, p.124. The biological origin of the criminal is a theme dear to Arthur Conan Doyle. For instance, in "The Final Problem" (1893), Sherlock Holmes says of the arch-criminal, Dr. Moriarty: He is a man of good birth and excellent education, endowed by Nature with a phenomenal mathematical faculty....But the man had hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind. A criminal strain ran in his blood, which, instead of being modified, was increased and rendered infinitely more dangerous by his extraordinary mental powers" (p.292).

¹⁰² In Samuel Butler's Erewhon a society is discovered which treats those that break its laws as if they were ill and punishes the sick with imprisonment or worse.

¹⁰³ Quoted by Stehen Gould in The Mismeasure of Man, p.134. Similarly, C. Jane Taylor notices that "Disease, for Doyle, is generally marked as foreign, in much the same way that poison is; further, both infiltrate the unknowing victim and undermine the system from within" ("The Poison Pen", p.12).

of The Two Jakes turns out to be infected with a fatal disease.

In The Two Jakes Jake Gittes lies at the hearing in order to protect Katherine's origin. The law, it could be said, cannot be exposed to the paradoxical truth of its own origin. Jake returns to his office (once again). He ruminates in voice-over:

Burman's x-rays said more than a couple of missing words on a wire recording. What's the difference who passes the sentence, a doctor or a judge? This way Katherine can deal with her ghosts in private.... But that's the problem with the past, there's always plenty more where that came from.

Even though Jake had been told at the end of Chinatown to: "Forget her, Jake. It's Chinatown", he cannot do so because the crimes of the past forever lie beneath and indeed constitute the present. Chinatown as the representative of an "alien order that has infiltrated our own, challenging our idealized conceptions"¹⁰⁴ turns out to be the double of that order which is supposedly the opposite of disorder and illegality:

Yet, after all, the foundation of many a distinguished older American fortune was laid by sharp practices and morally reprehensible methods. The pioneers of American capitalism were not graduated from Harvard's School of Business Administration. The early settlers and founding fathers, as well as those who "won the West" and built up cattle, mining, and other fortunes, often did so by shady speculations and a not inconsiderable amount of violence. They ignored, circumvented, or stretched the law when it stood in

¹⁰⁴ William Galperin, "'Bad for the Glass'", p.1157.

the way of America's destiny and their own - or were themselves the law when it served their purposes.¹⁰⁵

In the final scene of The Two Jakes Jake encounters Katherine Mulwray once more. Jack Nicholson is now old and large; in fact, he closely resembles John Huston's Noah Cross in Chinatown. Katherine has, throughout the film, been set up as Jake's spiritual daughter,¹⁰⁶ and when she tries to kiss him, there is the realisation that Jake might very easily slip into the position of the primal, incestuous father.¹⁰⁷ The detective returns to the criminal in his own self. Jake resists, reminding Katherine that the past "never goes away".

Just as Evelyn had to pay for her father's crime, so Katherine cannot escape the taint of criminality in her blood and this final pass at her father-figure confirms the danger and threat imbedded in the body of the woman. Her very presence is too much for society to bear and once again she

¹⁰⁵ Daniel Bell, "Crime is an American Way of Life" in The End of Ideology (1960), quoted by John G. Cawelti in "The New Mythology of Crime", p.347.

¹⁰⁶ In Chinatown, Jake first encounters Katherine just after Evelyn and he have had sexual intercourse. The phone rings, Katherine is hysterical because she has just found out that her supposed father, Hollis Mulwray, is dead. Evelyn rushes to her aid. Jake, in re-enacting the crime of Noah Cross on Evelyn's body, takes the place of Katherine's father.

¹⁰⁷ The detective, it would appear, cannot properly decipher the crime until he himself repeats it. Catherine Cresswell writes that in Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", Dupin "may assert mastery in the game of detection, yet such an assertion can be made only through a repetition of the criminal's actions: Dupin's silencing of the sailor mirrors the ape's crime and the sailor's quelling of the orangutan; his last word in the struggle to achieve control of the crime's narrative only serves to repeat the murderer's brutal gestures" ("Poe's Philosophy of Aesthetics and Ratiocination", p.46).

must disappear and know that no place can ever be her home. She cannot plead innocence against her own biological impropriety.

One of the most dangerous classes in the world...is the drifting and friendless woman. She is almost harmless, and often the most useful of mortals, but she is the inevitable inciter of crime in others. She is helpless. She is migratory.¹⁰⁸

In our next chapter, we will take a detailed tour through Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49, where the detective-wanderer is a woman. One may be tempted to recognise in the figure and the very name of Oedipa Maas a thinly disguised Katherine Mulwray, but that is, perhaps, a chapter written in the missing three-quarters of this thesis.

¹⁰⁸ Sherlock Holmes in "The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax" quoted in Marcello Truzzi's "Sherlock Holmes: Applied Social Scientist", p.71

4. There's No Place Like Home: The Detective Who Cannot Rest¹⁰⁹

It looked as if the attitude of some literary folks toward the Beat generation was the same as that of certain officers on my ship towards Elvis Presley. They used to approach those among ship's company who seemed likely sources - combed their hair like Elvis, for example. "What's his message?" they'd interrogate anxiously. "What does he want?"

-Thomas Pynchon¹¹⁰

'The story won't tell,' said Douglas; 'not in any literal vulgar way.'

-Henry James¹¹¹

Things then did not delay in turning curious.

-The Crying of Lot 49, p. 29

In beginning this investigation of Thomas Pynchon's Lot 49 this chapter is already caught in the problematic of significance and signification that the text so explicitly tackles. Will this text search through Pynchon's writing, trying desperately to find the final word on Lot 49; try to close reading once and for all? Surely such an attempt to "answer for" the text (to provide the last cry) would be a delusion. But, conversely, it does not seem adequate (nor academically feasible) to write nothing.¹¹²

This chapter will attempt to pick out resonances (sometimes

¹⁰⁹ This chapter is a modified version of a paper entitled "'Small Comfort': Significance and the Uncanny in Thomas Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49".

¹¹⁰ Introduction to Slow Learner, p.9.

¹¹¹ The Turn of the Screw, p.147.

¹¹² See "Considering a Thesis" in my introduction.

slightly muted, at others, loud and clear) between Lot 49 and certain other texts that I have found - through "rational" search and through chance. In fact, it is this very intersection of chance and reason that will structure much of the argument. For it will be a beginning hypothesis that it is the relationship of these two terms that The Crying of Lot 49, in one way or another, continually finds fascinating. On the one side "facts" and the other: something else - something that, by chance, happens. Or, even more radically, that it is impossible to tell whether something is, in fact, a "fact" or just a random coincidence. But we will come back to this often.

The chapter is divided into three (perhaps natural) parts. The first will discuss the status of the reader as detective (and even scientist) in the text. This will involve a discussion of the "search for knowledge" and what that "knowledge" might finally turn out to be. The names of Charles Peirce and Paul Feyerabend will be exhibited here.

In the second section, certain conclusions from the first will be used to discuss the peculiar procedure of **names** and **naming** that occur in Lot 49. In particular, Pynchon's use of anagrams, acronyms and "uncanny"¹¹³ words. The concept of "interruption" will also be introduced into our reading of reading at this point.

Thirdly, our discussion will turn to Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "The Uncanny" and certain correspondences with Lot 49

¹¹³ I introduce this term here in quotation marks of deferral - I will come back.

will be explored. In this connection, Henry James' The Turn of the Screw will be read in conjunction with Pynchon's text and certain affinities revealed. A reading of the uncanny¹¹⁴ will, I think, open up The Crying of Lot 49 in a way that is not possible through the periodising transfiction of the "postmodern".

The chapter is itself slightly transfixed by the strangeness of The Crying of Lot 49 and it is this uncanny reading effect that this investigation attempts to explore - the creeping ambiguity of the word and the "ghost of meaning".¹¹⁵

Detecting a Lot

'Hey,' said Oedipa, 'can't I get somebody to do it for me?'

'Me,' said Roseman, 'some of it, sure. But aren't you even interested?'

'In what?'

'In what you might find out.'

(Lot 49, p.12)

Oedipa's quest begins as a chance event. When asked by Roseman why Inverarity should choose her to execute the will, she replies: "'He was unpredictable'". Her search, however, seems to gain more and more significance the more "interested" she becomes. This significance is not so much the revelation

¹¹⁴ Based largely on Shoshana Felman's work on The Turn of the Screw.

¹¹⁵ This phrase is taken from Dorothy Kelly's article: "The Ghost of Meaning: Language in the Fantastic".

of hidden meanings (as in a "traditional" detective story¹¹⁶) as the occlusion of them. Tony Tanner points out that Lot 49 seems to work in a "reverse direction":

With a detective story you start with a mystery and move towards a final clarification, all the apparently disparate, suggestive bits of evidence finally being bound together in one illuminating pattern; whereas in Pynchon's novel we move from a state of degree-zero mystery - just the quotidian mixture of an average California day¹¹⁷ - to a condition of increasing mystery and dubiety. (p.56)

The American landscape seems to be yearning to tell of something and it is that very yearning to communicate that becomes the goal of the quest: the status of communication itself. The investigation becomes an search for the possibility of that very investigation. Stefano Tani write:

Normally the detective finds out the truth through communication, by talking with suspects and witnesses, but here communication is the center of mystification.¹¹⁸

Oedipa arrives in San Narciso and immediately signs appear in the very configuration of the streets (yet the question of meaning as such appears to be the only "revelation"):

The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same

¹¹⁶ I am in no way positing that there is indeed the "easy" possibility of a "normal" or "straight-forward" story. See chapter 1: "Genre and the Anxiety of Distinction".

¹¹⁷ Whatever that may be.

¹¹⁸ The Doomed Detective, p.94.

unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. ...[I]n her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. (pp. 14-15)

This liminal position of almost-meaning is one which will recur throughout the text. Everything that falls within the scope of the detective becomes in some way suspicious: misspellings on letters, graffiti in bathrooms of bars (ironically "The Scope"), dying alcoholics and so on; culminating in the almost-revelation of the buyer of lot 49. The reader of the text (the buyer of Lot 49) occupies this self-same position of detection. John Johnston writes that "if the signs in The Crying of Lot 49 are haunting¹¹⁹ and ambiguous for its main character, they are no less uncertain for the reader, who must assume the position of interpreter."¹²⁰

This ambiguity becomes centred on the significance of the Tristero underground, but, more broadly, Oedipa searches for the Word itself - that which holds the pattern together and explains all. This final revelation¹²¹ is, however,

¹¹⁹ It is important to note the choice of words here!

¹²⁰ "Toward the Schizo-Text", p.52.

¹²¹ In terms of the religious overtones of this in Lot 49, Tanner's paraphrase of Edward Mendelson's explication of The Courier's Tragedy line: "Let us begin thy frightful Pentecost" seems more than adequate: "49 is the pentecostal number (the Sunday Seven weeks after Easter), but Pentecost derives from the Greek for 'fifty', so the moment at the end of the book where the auctioneer's spread arms are specifically likened to a 'gesture of some remote culture' is like the moment before a pentecostal

perpetually deferred and somehow just about to occur. The detective figure is no longer in control of the situation: the signs seem to have taken over. Oedipa begins to see or hallucinate the Tristero post-horn everywhere and her powers of interpretation lapse into "fatalism":

Where was the Oedipa who'd driven so bravely up here from San Narciso? That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops' rules, to solve any great mystery.

But the private eye sooner or later had to get beat up on. This night's profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication, was their way of beating up. (p.85)

And throughout this all, there seems to be the random figure of Pierce Inverarity. Although many games can possibly be played with this name, I wish to pick up on one (already familiar to us) pointed to by Johnston: "Not accidentally, Pierce's name evokes the American founder of semiotics, C.S. Peirce".¹²²

Peirce formulated the notion of "abduction"¹²³ which he called an "inferential step" and formulated thus:

The surprising fact, C, is observed;
But if A were true, C would be a matter of course
Hence, there is reason to believe that A is true.¹²⁴

revelation when we would all be able to speak in tongues and understand the Word directly" (Thomas Pynchon, p.68).

¹²² "Toward the Schizo-Text", p. 56.

¹²³ I reiterate this theory since, as we have learnt from J.J. Gittes, you can never learn anything unless you return to it.

¹²⁴ "Abduction and Induction", p.151.

However, the problem is to determine what A might be. As he writes elsewhere: "That there is any explanation of ['an extraordinary combination of characters'] is a pure assumption; and if there be, it is some one hidden fact which explains them; while there are, perhaps, a million other possible ways of explaining them, if they were not all, unfortunately, false". Peirce goes on to conclude that resolution is only possible by "piling guess on guess".¹²⁵ But this does not, however, account for the undoubted discovery of "truth".

Peirce went on to suppose that there must be a human condition of "guessing correctly" about the nature of things. He writes in "Abduction and Induction":

It was not until long experience forced me to realize that subsequent discoveries were every time showing I had been wrong, while those who understood [that "of two hypotheses, the simpler is to be preferred], as Galileo had done, early unlocked the secret, that the scales fell from my eyes and my mind awoke to the broad and flaming daylight that it is the simpler Hypothesis in the sense of the more facile and natural, the one that instinct suggests, that must be preferred; for the reason that, unless man have a natural bent in accordance with nature's, he has no chance of understanding nature at all.

(p.156)

Peirce argues that we must understand things "intuitively" because our "intuition" is structured in similar ways to the nature of the phenomenon we are investigating.

¹²⁵ Cited in Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok: "'You Know My Method'", p.17.

This, perhaps, is one possibility for Oedipa - she finds and stumbles over clues because she is somehow "in tune" with the conspiracy. For instance, she loses here way at YOYODYNE:

Then, by accident (Dr Hilarius, if asked, would accuse her of using subliminal cues in the environment to guide her to a particular person) or howsever, she came on one Stanley Koteks,... (p.58)

Again, we have chance and fact coming together in an inexplicable manner. But rather than (like Peirce and Hilarius) ascribe a certain "sensitive" nature to the detective, Oedipa always seems to merely posit the question - "accident" or "howsever" - no single solution becomes available. Perhaps this has something to do with the order of "facts" and "clues" themselves, which are often deemed to be literally outside and unaffected by the frame of investigation and therefore "unsuspicious".

In Against Method, Paul Feyerabend questions the status of the autonomy of fact. He writes:

All these investigations use a model in which a single theory is compared with a class of facts (or observation statements) which are assumed to be 'given' somehow. I submit that this is much too simple a picture of the actual situation. [...] [T]he description of every single fact is dependent on some theory... (pp.38-39)

In other words, rather than there being an available natural, subliminal truth: the only "fact" that can ultimately be discovered is the theory with which the investigator is working. When Oedipa tries to follow the route of the WASTE postman, she finds herself "back where she'd started, and

could not believe 24 hours had passed" (p.90). The world of empirical facts turns back on itself and detection merely results in self-reflection.¹²⁶ Signs and words are now strange and suspicious clues which conceal a meaning that may be non-existent.

Each clue that comes is supposed to have its own clarity, its fine chances for permanence. But then she wondered if the 'gemlike' clues were only some kind of compensation. To make up for her having lost the direct, epileptic Word, the cry that might abolish the night. (p.81)

Acronyms, Anagrams and the Apocalypse

Let us examine in a bit more detail the final sentence of the passage just quoted. The one word that appears to be loaded (and therefore dangerous) is the not-quite incongruous "epileptic". If we concentrate on how this word works its way through the text we may be in a stronger position to understand the sorts of signficatory "runs" that The Crying of Lot 49 seems to generate. In other words, we will accept this word's "intent to communicate" and see where it takes us.

The word's "almost-there-ness" imbues it with an almost sinister resonance.¹²⁷ It erases its logical, rhyming counterpart "apocalyptic" (apocalypse as the revelation of the Truth) while its own prosaic definition sends the trajectory

¹²⁶ "When she woke in the morning, she was sitting bolt upright, staring at her own exhausted face" (p.70). The various plays on reflection and Narcissism are obvious throughout the text.

¹²⁷ This sinister atmosphere will be discussed at more length in section 3.

of the word in a different direction. Epilepsy is defined by the OED as:

A disease of the nervous system, characterised by paroxysms, in which the patient falls to the ground unconscious, with general spasm of the muscles, and foaming at the mouth; the falling sickness.

But Lot 49 suggests some kind of secret connection between the vertigo of disease and the final Word.

She could at this stage of things, recognize signals like that, as the epileptic is said to - an odour, colour, pure piercing grace note sounding his seizure. Afterwards it is only this signal, really dross, this secular announcement, and never what is revealed during that attack, that he remembers.
(p.66)

Oedipa wonders whether she, too, might never remember "the central truth itself...which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying its own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back" (p.66). The signal is the only thing left. The voice that speaks in madness cannot come back into the world of reason.

Thus it is in delirium that the Word is revealed and delirium is (as Michel Foucault tells us) derived "'from lira, furrow; so that deliro actually means to move out of the furrow, away from the proper path of reason'".¹²⁸ When Oedipa holds the old alcoholic with the DT's, she sees that "[b]ehind the initials was a metaphor, a delirium tremens, a trembling unfurrowing of the mind's ploughshare" and "Trembling,

¹²⁸ Madness and Civilization citing the Encyclopédie, pp.99-100.

unfurrowed, she slipped sideways..." (p.89: my emphasis). In the last pages, Oedipa sees for herself only the possibility of this inscrutable delirium, this seizure:

For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to e at all relevant to it, was an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. (p.126: my emphasis)

Oedipa finds only dizziness (and can only find definition in vertigo; which Foucault terms the "delirious affirmation that the world is 'turning around'"¹²⁹). It is in the interrogation of the "system" that this vertigo becomes the only "stable" (or rather, predictable) fact (the "odour, colour, pure piercing grace note" that the epileptic remembers):

Again with the light, vertiginous sense of fluttering over an abyss, she asked what she'd come here to ask. 'What was Tryster?' (p.108)

It is this very "fluttering", this border state, that marks the paranoic possibility of a deeper revelation, and it is this that Freud marks as the "uncanny". He writes:

To [other instances of the uncanny, Jentsch¹³⁰] adds the uncanny effect of epileptic fits, and of manifestations of insanity, because these excite in the spectator the impression of automatic, mechanical process behind the ordinary appearance of mental activity.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Madness and Civilization, p.100.

¹³⁰ in "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen" (1906).

¹³¹ "The Uncanny", p.226 (my emphasis).

Further on, Freud again mentions the frightening possibility of "secret powers":

The uncanny effect of epilepsy and madness has the same origin. The layman sees in them the working of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-men, but at the same time he is dimly aware of them in remote corners of his own being.¹³²

Here, of course, one is reminded of the madness of Hilarius' Nazi paranoia, Inverarity's schizophrenic phone-call and the entire manic nature of Oedipa's "discovery" of the Tristero - all signs of "forces hitherto unsuspected". But what these forces might be is never answered. All we are left with is the "signal" of such forces. The text itself comes to function as the precursor of the epileptic seizure which "may have already visited" but "there [is] no way to tell" (Lot 49, p.66). Yet, the ambiguity remains as uncanny effect:

Either you have stumbled...on a secret density of dream. [...] Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you,... Or you are fantasizing some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull. (pp. 117-118)

The acronyms and anagrams that make swaggering appearances throughout the text would appear to function on exactly similar "delirious" principles. They are markers ("signals") of other meanings, but it is almost impossible to imagine what, if anything, the hidden message might be: their import always seems to exceed any explanation (or decoding) of their "actual" meaning.

¹³² Ibid., p.243.

DEATH (Don't Ever Antagonise the Horn), NADA (National Automobile Dealer's Association), LSD (Lysergic Acid Diethylamide or even "Pounds, shillings and pence" OED¹³³) and WASTE (We Await Silent Tristero's Empire). N. Katherine Hayles comments on Oedipa's pronunciation of WASTE as a word rather than acronym:

[S]ince each can turn into the other and carries some of the other's values with it, the question cycles around, growing more complex and encompassing more tropes, without ever being definitively answered.¹³⁴

A vertiginous "turning around" occurs within every one of these signs and even within the names of the "characters" (which always seem to point elsewhere). Oedipa thus thinks of the "high magic of low puns" (p.89) and Hayles' comments:

Puns have traditionally been considered "low" because they play on trivial or accidental correspondences. But what if the belief that these correspondences are trivial stems from an ideology that wishes to deny correspondences that puns reveal? In that case puns, far from being exercises in bad taste, become instruments of revelation, exposing what "they" want to keep hidden.¹³⁵

The only revelation, however, seems to be that there are correspondences (infinite amounts of them) but that their final significance is never determinable. Recall Feyerabend's

¹³³ The permutations and intricacies seem to become endless. "Oed", for instance, is 'Mucho' Maas' affectionate abbreviation of Oedipa's name - is there significance in this? (OED)ipa? Perhaps...who knows? The seeker of definitions? The maker of definitions?

¹³⁴ in "'A Metaphor of God Knew How Many Parts'", p.109.

¹³⁵ Ibid., p.117.

formulation that facts always rest on prior theories, yet there is no one, final theory which will encompass and explain all "facts" (since these are themselves imbricated in the theory).

One such (exemplary) example is the name of the 'Mucho' Maas' radio station: KCUF, which functions as both anagram and acronym. The acronym is never explained and the anagram is crudely obvious. It is impossible to interpret this "correctly" - the sign functions rather as an interruption.¹³⁶ Like the epileptic fit, it points towards some other (hidden) meaning which is never accessible. Any messages sent through KCUF must be "scrambled" in the hope that this compensation will dupe the interruption of communication. Oedipa is introduced on air as "Edna Mosh" since Mucho "was allowing for the distortion on these rigs, and then when they put it on tape" (p.96). Whether Oedipa emerges coherently on the other side of the communication is a moot point.

Chance and fact have become indistinguishable. Spelling errors on envelopes gain more and more dark significance, strangers in bars provide unhelpful illumination, children sing strangely relevant rhymes: the common point seeming to be the "other"ness of these places. The post horn decorates "each alienation, each species of withdrawal" (p.85) to the point that everything becomes abnormal and strange. Significance appears everywhere. Jean Baudrillard writes:

¹³⁶ "A breach of continuity in space or serial order; a break, the formation or existence of a gap" (OED).

[A]rt is now an infinite proliferation of signs, an infinite recycling of forms, past or present. This is the Xerox degree of culture.¹³⁷

It is this sinister "proliferation of signs" and inscrutable significance that I will go on to discuss in terms of Freud's "uncanny".

The ambiguity is crucial to the developing design of the text, haunting it until the final page.¹³⁸

The Significance of the Uncanny

In this final section I would like to point to some issues that have arisen in our discussion of The Crying of Lot 49 and tie them into a broader framework of American literature (in particular James' "The Turn of the Screw") through the use of Freud's formulation of the uncanny.

Freud takes the uncanny as that which "excites fear in general" and picks up the ambiguity of the German heimlich and unheimlich (the play on words seems also to function in English - "high magic"?). He writes:

In general we are reminded that the word 'heimlich' is not unambiguous, but belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different: on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight.¹³⁹

Thus the "unheimlich" is not only the strange and disquieting, it is also that which gives revelation and insight into the

¹³⁷ "Transpolitics, Transsexuality, Transaesthetics", p.10.

¹³⁸ Hayles, "'A Metaphor of God Knew How Many Parts'", p.104.

¹³⁹ "The Uncanny", p.225.

secret. Therefore, Freud claims, the unheimlich "is in some way or other a sub-species of heimlich". The "homely" is therefore the very origin of the uncanny (the strange, the unhomely). The uncanny is therefore not so much the wholly other as the secret side of the self - it is the destabilisation of the safe place. Freud himself does not go this far - preferring to rest the uncanny effect on castration anxiety. Hélène Cixous accuses Freud of "jumping from one effect to another until he reaches the 'point of certainty', or reality, which he wishes to present as a solid rock upon which he can base his analytic argument".¹⁴⁰

Where Freud finds finally explanation of the uncanny effect, Cixous sees a more radical function within the uncanny. Rosemary Jackson paraphrases:

The uncanny, however, removes structure. It empties the 'real' of its 'meaning', it leaves signs without significance. Cixous presents its unfamiliarity not as merely displaced sexual anxiety, but as a rehearsal of an encounter with death, which is pure absence.¹⁴¹

Oedipa's quest for the secret (the heimlich) results in a discovery of the unheimlich which is somehow also the homely (heimlich), the safe place. The space of the sign seems to unravel continuously through this aporia: the sign appears to have meaning, but that meaning never reveals itself - it just intimates at further meaning. Home is never reached - the

¹⁴⁰ "La fiction et ses fantômes: une lecture de l'Unheimliche de Freud" (Poétique. 10, 1973) in Rosemary Jackson's Fantasy.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p.67.

heimlich and unheimlich weave through each other without allowing for an end other than death.

That might she sat for hours, too numb even to drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world. They were all on something, mad, possible enemies, dead. (p.118)

Freud writes that in certain fairy-tales the uncanny is obviated by the assumption of "animistic" or supernatural conditions, but that this "situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality" (250).

He can keep us in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world he writes about is based, or he can cunningly and ingeniously avoid any definite information on the point to the last. (251)

It is undecidability and ambiguity (as Hayles pointed out earlier) that is the "ghost" of a possible meaning that haunts the text of The Crying of Lot 49. Jentsch, Freud writes:

ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one's way about in. The better oriented in his environment a person is, the less readily will he get the impression of something uncanny in regard to the objects and events in it. (p.221)

In Lot 49, where one does not even know what chance is (p.83), this disorientation is all-encompassing.

Here I would briefly like to point out some of the similarities this reading has with certain ways of reading Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw". As Shoshana Felman

points out in her exhaustive essay¹⁴², James' tale plays on this uncanny effect of radical ambiguity and does not allow us a safe (homely) position from which to judge whether the governess is mad or whether ghosts are in fact present. The act of extracting a single "meaning" from the text, Felman writes, repeats the "scene dramatised in the text" and that critical interpretation "not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly participates in it" (p.148). This is the trap "to catch those not easily caught" that James refers to in his 1908 preface to the story.¹⁴³

More broadly, James other projects seem to have much in common with the paranoia of Lot 49. In the "Preface" to The Princess Casamassima, James writes:

My scheme called for the suggested nearness (to all our apparently ordered life) of some sinister anarchic underworld, heaving in its pain, its power and its hate: a presentation, not of sharp particulars, but of loose appearances, vague motions and sounds and symptoms, just perceptible presences and general looming possibilities.¹⁴⁴

The possibility of an incomprehensible system with another meaning intersects both with Freud's analysis of the uncanny and with Pynchon's formulation of the text of Lot 49. Petillon makes this resemblance explicit:

¹⁴² "Henry James: Madness and the Risks of Practice" in Writing and Madness.

¹⁴³ Felman, p.148.

¹⁴⁴ in The Art of the novel, p.76 cited by Pierre-Yves Petillon in "A Re-cognition of Her Errand into the Wilderness", p.140. (My emphasis).

As Oedipa steps across the tracks and into territory lying both beyond and beneath the official grid, the "effects" produced on her as well as on the reader are just those James claimed he was working for, "precisely those of our not knowing, of society's not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore what 'goes on' irreconcilably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface."¹⁴⁵

Drawing on Richard Brodhead,¹⁴⁶ Petillon goes on to make this claim for a much broader section of American literature (and if we take Felman seriously this would apply to all literature). But this does indeed seem to be the "legacy of America" that Oedipa inherits.

[T]he unfolding of the story through time and space (the journey or quest) stops short for a static moment...where one is called upon to watch and decipher a cryptic sign, whether the "awful hieroglyph" of The Scarlet Letter or the doubloon nailed to the Pequod's mast. One is led to suspect that what might look at first glance like postmodern self-reflexivity and linguistic self-consciousness in Pynchon might be more generally ascribed to a larger American legacy - that of the hieroglyph or emblem. The result is that The Crying of Lot 49 is "pierced" with lexical "black holes" that threaten to swallow the tale altogether. (p.147)

The destabilising force of the uncanny seems to be present in the very functioning of the reading process. Meaning is never quite what it seems and the chance misprint may hold the key to the opening up of the letter (but will probably just lead to more and more significant signs).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p.77 (p.140).

¹⁴⁶ Hawthorne, Melville and the Novel.

We encounter Oedipa Maas very briefly and obliquely in Pynchon's Vineland. Zoyd Wheeler runs into his old friend, Much Maas:

Psychedelized far ahead of his time, Mucho Maas, originally a disk jockey, had decided around 1967, after a divorce remarkable even in that innocent time for its geniality, to go into record producing. (p.309)

Bernard Duyfhuizen remarks: "Although hardly the continuation we may desire, at least we can infer that Oedipa got out of the auction room. Small comfort".¹⁴⁷

Small comfort, indeed. The uncanny process of reading allows no easy place of rest. Home is only ever a distant and permanently lost possibility. Vineland (and Pynchon, to this date) ends on this uncanny note of almost-home-ness:

The small meadow shimmered in the starlight, and her promises grew more extravagant as she drifted into the lucid thin layer of waking dreaming, her flirting more obvious - then she'd wake, alert to some steps in the woods, some brief bloom of light in the sky, back and forth for a while between Brock fantasies and the silent darkened silver images all around her, before settling down into sleep, sleeping then unvisited till around dawn, with fog still in the hollows, deer and cows grazing together in the meadow, sun blinding in the cobwebs on the wet grass, a redtail hawk in an updraft soaring above the ridgeline, Sunday morning about to unfold, when Prairie woke to a warm and persistent tongue all over her face. It was Desmond, none other, the spit and image of his grandmother Chloe, roughened by the miles, face full of blue-jay feathers, smiling out of his eyes, wagging his tail, thinking he must be home. (p.385)

Chances are that for the detective and the critic, home will only ever be that: a thought.

¹⁴⁷ "Hushing Sick Transmissions", p.93.

5. Literary Theory - Theoretical Literature

In this final, brief chapter I wish to put into practice my contention that genre in no way limits the reader's ability to create significance. In order to do so, I will consider Jacques Derrida's "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" as a detective story of sorts: a detective story that aims to interrogate its own assumptions of detection.

The suspect that Derrida is interrogating here is "Western science and Western philosophy" itself. This structure, whose omnipotence we will recognise as similar to that of the secretive organisations that underlie the plots of Chinatown, The Two Jakes and The Crying of Lot 49, pretends that a lack of centre or certainty "represents the unthinkable itself" (p.279) yet is itself based on the contradiction that the centre is "at the center of totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center" (p.279). The cryptic paradox of this accusation immediately reminds the reader of the final lines of Samuel Beckett's detective story, Molloy:

Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining. (p.162)

Unfortunately I do not have the time to engage with Molloy at greater length, but it is necessary to note that just as Beckett's detective, Jacques Moran, turns into the man whom he

seeks,¹⁴⁸ so Derrida fears that Beckett is in fact himself.

Asked why he has not written on Beckett, Derrida replies:

This is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close. Precisely because of this proximity, it is too hard for me, too easy and too hard. I have perhaps avoided him because of this identification.¹⁴⁹

But I digress. What can it mean for the centre not to be the centre? Derrida, and perhaps the reader will now begin to understand why this particular piece of writing was chosen by the thesis, uses, as an example or piece of evidence, Claude Lévi-Strauss' analysis of incest prohibition. As we have argued earlier, the incest taboo is "no longer a scandal one meets with or comes up against in the domain of traditional concepts; it is something which escapes these concepts and certainly precedes them - probably as the condition of their possibility".¹⁵⁰ Derrida goes on to claim that philosophy as such is "designed to leave in the domain of the unthinkable the very thing that makes this conceptualization possible..." (p.284). The law cannot think the origin of its legality.

¹⁴⁸ The reader will have to take the following two descriptions of the detective and his prey as sufficient proof of this bold assertion: Molloy hobbles around on his crutches in a maze of contradiction and self-doubt throughout the first section of the novel. Moran, on the other hand, moves around freely and asserts self-assuredly: "My name is Moran, Jacques" (pp.84-84); but as his search continues things become less and less clear until his identity finally becomes that of Molloy: "My knee is no better. It is no worse either. I have crutches now. I shall go faster, all will go faster" (p.161).

¹⁴⁹ "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida" in Acts of Literature, p.60.

¹⁵⁰ "Structure, Sign and Play", p.283.

Derrida cannot, however, accuse Western philosophy outright of contradiction because it is within the structure of that thought that Derrida carries out his investigation:¹⁵¹

We have no language - no syntax and no lexicon - which is foreign to this history [of metaphysics]; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition that has not already had to slip into the form, the logic and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (pp.280-281)

This is the problem facing all detectives: he is "not only the solution, he is also part of the problem, the catalyst who by his very introduction both provokes murders and solves them. In the figure of this investigator, the investigation and its object become inextricably entwined".¹⁵² How, then, does Derrida, Jacques solve this conundrum?

He doesn't. Instead, he isolates two forms of reading: one that "seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile" (p.292) and another that "is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond the man and humanism..." (p.292).¹⁵³ He does not, however, claim that it is possible to move beyond this dual system: "although these

¹⁵¹ In Chinatown Jake comments that even Noah Cross "has to swim in the same water we all do".

¹⁵² Glenn W. Most, "The Hippocratic Smile", p.347.

¹⁵³ Kevin Dettmar remarks of this "Nietzschean affirmation": "This style of interpretation emphasizes not the solution of mysteries, but rather an acceptance of and openness to the essentially mysterious nature of existence.... This acceptance of the uncanny is not, of course, the message of traditional detective fiction", p.162: my emphasis.

two interpretations must acknowledge and accentuate their difference and define their irreducibility, I do not believe that today there is any question of choosing..." (p.293).

What will happen if we somehow manage not to choose? Derrida ends the essay with the idea that out of this kind of rigorous and double-bound thinking will emerge a question "whose conception, formation, gestation, and labor we are only catching a glimpse of today" (p.293). Derrida describes this question, this cry that may or may not "abolish the night" as the:

unnamable¹⁵⁴ which is proclaiming itself and which can do so, as is necessary whenever a birth is in the offing, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity. (p.293)

It is the speechless deformity prefigured in William Butler Yeats' "The Second Coming":

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in the sands of the
[desert
A shape with a lion body and the head of a man
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, ...
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Oedipus is once again called out to solve a riddle, but, as we all know, Oedipus is himself the source of that riddle and he is that "rough beast" bearing plague and famine in his tainted, incestuous blood.

¹⁵⁴ It will not have escaped the astute reader that The Unnamable is the final novel of the trilogy beginning with Molloy.

The detective and the critic realise that the killer that they seek is themselves and that, especially for the critic, the act of writing can only ever be an affirmation of blindness disguised as an act of (in)sight:

ATTENDANT: Her dress was pinned
With golden brooches, which the King snatched out
And thrust, from full arm's length, into his eyes -
Eyes that should see no longer his shame, his
[guilt,
No longer see those they should never have seen,
Nor see, unseeing, those he had longed to see,
Henceforth seeing nothing but night ... To this
[wild tune
He pierced his eyeballs time and time again,
Till bloody tears ran down his beard - not drops
But in full spate a whole cascade descending
In drenching cataracts of scarlet rain.¹⁵⁵

6. Conclusion

¹⁵⁵ King Oedipus, p.61.

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