

AMERICAN CRIME FICTION

Studies in
the Genre



Edited by Brian Docherty

American Crime Fiction

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Preface

This volume offers critical and theoretical perspectives on one of the most popular and enduring literary genres: American crime fiction. There are essays on Edgar Allan Poe, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Mickey Spillane, George V. Higgins and Jerome Charyn, covering the period from 1840 to 1980. Hammett and Chandler have two essays each, reflecting their importance and lasting influence on the genre.

Each essay deals with a major aspect or concept associated with crime fiction. A variety of reading strategies are employed to interrogate these texts, illustrating both the range of approaches available, and the fact that modern literary theory can usefully be applied to any text or genre. Students of crime fiction seeking new readings, and readers interested in modern approaches to literature, such as psychoanalytic theories, Marxist theory, semiotics and linguistic theory, will find this book useful and informative. The essays are all new, and have been specially written for this volume by leading academics.

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1

Introduction: Hard Talk and Mean Streets

BRIAN DOCHERTY

This collection of essays on American crime fiction is not an encyclopedia or compendium on the subject. It seeks instead to offer some critical and theoretical perspectives on a genre which has enjoyed popular support and huge sales figures for over sixty years, but which has never attained academic respectability. Dashiell Hammett is not regarded as 'literature' and thus is not generally taught in the university-polytechnic system, although he probably had a decisive influence on Ernest Hemingway, who *is* taught, and is recognised as a major figure in modern literature, credited with innovations in respect of style, technique and subject matter. Nine essays cannot possibly deal with an entire genre and its origins, developments, offshoots, blind alleys and variations. Nevertheless, we offer a selection of essays each of which deals with a major aspect or concept encountered in or generated by the genre.

The book therefore opens with Christopher Rollason's essay (Ch. 2) on Edgar Allan Poe's Auguste Dupin, perhaps not the very first detective in fiction, but undoubtedly the model for a great many later sleuths, investigators and private eyes. The essay is neither literary history nor evaluation, but a theoretical interrogation of Poe's procedures and strategies.

Peter Humm's essay (Ch. 3) moves into the twentieth century and the more familiar territory of the classic 'hard-boiled' thrillers of Hammett and Chandler. It seeks to present this new type of writing not as a sport or an aberration but as a form of writing with much in common with other writing of the period and informed by similar concerns. Peter Humm shows that a variety of authors had a similar perspective on writing and the nature of the relationship between literature and society in the Depression years, and that the common concern was to record, as objectively as possible,

social life as the authors saw it.

Gary Day (Ch. 4) focuses on Hammett's unnamed yet representative figure, the Continental Op. He examines the nature of Hammett's representation of reality by focusing on the use Hammett makes of an apparently plain language and a 'realistic' mode of writing. Psychoanalytic techniques are employed to demonstrate that this 'realistic' language is in fact highly mediated and has no privileged access to 'truth'. In fact the Op never proves anything, and the reader is obliged to accept his word: his *parole*.

Christopher Bentley's essay on Hammett (Ch. 5) focuses on *Red Harvest*, his first and politically most radical book. This essay offers a political analysis of the Continental Op's activities in 'Poisonville', using this to provide an analysis of Hammett's political views. Hammett has the reputation of being a left-wing radical in a very conservative genre, and the essay asks to what extent this view is justified.

Stephen Knight's essay on Raymond Chandler (Ch. 6) focuses on Chandler's hero Philip Marlowe, and the combination of values and attitudes which serve to define Marlowe. Marlowe is very different from the Continental Op or Sam Spade, just as Hammett's San Francisco is different from Chandler's Los Angeles. Marlowe has a code of values, even ideals, which seem oddly un-American in the hard-boiled America of violent crime and sudden death.

Richard Bradbury's essay on James M. Cain (Ch. 7) stays in California, but a much 'hotter' California of throbbing sexual passion, which turns to violence all too easily. It is a long way from the pure reason of Dupin to the murderous passion of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Perhaps Cain is offering an explanation of why the Continental Op and Marlowe are virtually asexual figures, afraid of involvement with women. Cain also offers a reversal of perspective in another important area, that of narrative viewpoint. His books are in a sense twice-told tales, being transcriptions of confessions by a convicted criminal.

Odette L'Henry Evans (Ch. 8) writes on Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, a private eye in New York. Spillane and his Cold War 'heroes' such as Mike Hammer are given a reading which by disregarding more traditional reading strategies, and the relation of crime fiction to some hypothetical 'great tradition', actually promotes the status of Spillane's writing. A semiotic approach which concentrates on the structure of the text is used to

understand the system of codes which produce theme and meaning. The text is revealed in its plurality, the same and yet always new.

Michael Hayes, in his essay on George V. Higgins (Ch. 9), offers a linguistic analysis of the books which demonstrates that the struggle between different criminals or between police and thieves is really a struggle for control of discourse. He offers an explanation for the paradox that crime novels, supposedly about action, incident, and movement, are predominantly made up of speech or reported speech. He also shows that Higgins's discourse has a logic which is artistically satisfying because it allows the reader a sense of healing through the consumption and exploration of abrasive human relationships.

Mike Woolf (Ch. 10) writes on Jerome Charyn, a contemporary Jewish writer, also New York based. A reading of the majority of crime books would never give the impression that America has a rich and vibrant Jewish culture. Indeed, the ethnic diversity of American life is strangely absent from the 'classic' writings of Hammett and Chandler *et al.* Rather than this mythic, depopulated America, Charyn affirms the tribal nature of American life, especially in the great cities such as New York. Each tribe or religious/ethnic grouping has its own territory and its own code of laws which are enforced within its boundaries. Conflict arises both internally when the laws are transgressed and externally when different codes come into conflict. The tribe also functions as a metaphor for the operations of American society as a whole, and criminality becomes a mirror image of 'official' capitalism. The essay also illuminates another aspect of Charyn's writing, its myth-making and spiritualising tendencies. In this sense, of course, Charyn belongs to a long tradition of Jewish writing. He uses the detective novel to explore the profane and the profound in a world where the bizarre is normal. Isaac, his hero of many names ('the Shit', the 'Pure', the 'Rabbi', 'the Brave'), is both a holy fool and the dark angel holding back the chaos of an exploding world.

Auguste Dupin by the exercise of pure reason restored order to a bourgeois society temporarily disrupted by crime. In the complex alienated tribal society of the modern world, any moral order reinstated by the detective can only be a temporary illusion. The genre, like the world from which it originated, has been exploded.

2

The Detective Myth in Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin Trilogy

CHRISTOPHER ROLLASON

This essay offers an analysis of Poe's trilogy of tales centred on the detective C. Auguste Dupin: 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841), 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' (1842–3) and 'The Purloined Letter' (1844),¹ with the main emphasis on the first and last.

The present discussion does not aim to place the tales in the history of detective fiction. For Conan Doyle, 'Poe ... was the father of the detective tale';² similar opinions are expressed by Paul Valéry (1928),³ Walter Benjamin (1938),⁴ T. S. Eliot (1949),⁵ and Jorge Luis Borges (1980), who goes so far as to claim that 'Poe exhausted the genre'.⁶ Historians of the genre – Howard Haycraft (1941),⁷ Julian Symons (1973)⁸ and Jerry Palmer (1978)⁹ – have come to much the same conclusion. Examination of precursor and successor eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, from Voltaire's *Zadig* (1748) through to Conan Doyle, tends to confirm this view, though space does not permit such an analysis here.¹⁰ Taking the historical perspective as given, the present study aims to consider certain psychological and sociological aspects of the detective figure, as mythical embodiment of a certain conception of the 'full', integrated, conflict-free subject – of what Terry Eagleton (1985) has called 'the bourgeois humanist conception of the subject as free, active, autonomous and self-identical'.¹¹

Idealist critics have frequently read Dupin as symbolising the apotheosis of the 'autonomous', 'disinterested' intellect. Thus for Richard Wilbur (1967) 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' is an allegory of 'a soul's fathoming and ordering of itself', which issues in 'the reintegrated and harmonious consciousness of Dupin'.¹² This type of reading is based on certain ideological notions of the possibility and desirability of a conflict-free subjectivity. It can,

however, scarcely fail to appear naïve today, given the Lacan–Derrida polemic over 'The Purloined Letter',¹³ which starts out from a psychoanalytic tradition of reading texts in terms of conflict and contradiction.

This tradition begins with Marie Bonaparte's study of Poe (1933). In her reading of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', the text signifies not any illusory coherence of the subject, but the persistence of unconscious psychic conflicts. The ape represents the Oedipal father, the locked room the mother's body; the murders correspond to the infant's 'sadistic theory of coitus'.¹⁴ In 'The Purloined Letter' the letter is read as symbolising the child's fantasies about active maternal sexuality.¹⁵ Jacques Lacan's 'Séminaire sur "La Lettre volée"' (1957) goes further than Bonaparte's text in its deconstitution of the illusory monadic subject. The letter is, again,¹⁶ read as a signifier of female desire ('like an immense female body');¹⁷ but, further, the whole tale is read as exemplifying the determining instance of the letter (the signifier) in the unconscious: 'the high degree of determination which the subject receives as it is traversed by a signifier'.¹⁸ The various fictional subjects have their actions assigned to them by the letter, which inserts them into their respective places in the signifying chain of events. Consciousness is thus seen as intersubjective and non-autonomous.

Jacques Derrida's critique of the 'Séminaire' ('Le facteur de la vérité', 1975), while offering itself as a deconstructionist alternative to Lacan's 'metaphysical' discourse, may also be read as taking the process of deconstitution even further. For Derrida the key structure in 'The Purloined Letter' is the double; as in Freud's 'The "Uncanny"' (1919),¹⁹ the motif is seen as productive of fear and disturbance. 'The Purloined Letter' is read as a 'labyrinth of doubles',²⁰ in which subjects double subjects and letters letters, and definitive signification is endlessly deferred; any notion of the unitary subject is thus seen as invalidated by a text which itself has no unitary 'meaning'.

In a different direction, recent sociological readings have exposed the divine detective as an ideological construct corresponding to determinate class interests. Stephen Knight (1980) sees Dupin as the first literary instance of the detective as 'intelligent, infallible, isolated hero';²¹ the texts are seen as palliating the anxieties of the bourgeois intellectual reader, objectively peripheral within his own class, making him feel that his own social group is

uniquely equipped to interpret the world. Jerry Palmer, in his genre study *Thrillers* (1978), sees the Dupin tales as the first fully developed instance of the thriller genre (of which the nineteenth-century detective story is a sub-genre). The basic structure of the genre is: competitive individualism versus conspiracy.²² The competitive, individualistic, isolated 'hero' represents 'the social order that already exists';²³ society as it stands is seen as 'a good place'²⁴ and as 'in the normal run of things, devoid of conflict'.²⁵ Order is disrupted in the thriller plot by a pathological, alien conspiracy, typically fronted by a specially evil 'villain'.²⁶ The source of disturbance is located either outside society (in foreigners) or in degenerate individuals – that is, 'forces which exist within society, but which have no social origin'.²⁷ The hero intervenes to crush the conspiracy and 'restore normality';²⁸ he thus functions as a social saviour.²⁹ The thriller-detective genre emerges as inherently conservative, tending to perpetuate the existing order by naturalising it. Palmer offers sociological explanations for the genre's popularity; competitive individualism is seen as fomented by the market economy,³⁰ while the fear of conspiracy is linked to the threat of working-class insurrection.³¹ For both Knight and Palmer, then, the detective story offers the middle-class reader an imaginary palliation for real social anxieties.

With the above social context in mind, the textual construction of Dupin as subject will now be considered in detail. In all three tales, the material is organised so as to give maximum prominence to Dupin's intellectual qualities – to what the narrator in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' calls 'some very remarkable features in the mental character of my friend' (p. 724). In this tale Dupin is differentiated from both the narrator and the Prefect of Police as the *only* person competent to solve the mystery. The narrator is presented as an 'average' middle-class intellectual (and stand-in for the intended probable reader); he is inferior to Dupin, though privileged in relation to the police (since he, and not the Prefect, is the recipient of Dupin's explanation). What Palmer calls the thriller triad of 'Amateur', 'Professional' and 'Bureaucrat'³² is thus constituted. The Prefect is a Bureaucrat, unable to handle anything outside the limits of his training and experience; the narrator is an Amateur, of only ordinary competence; Dupin is a Professional, in the sense not of making detection his profession, but of applying analytic rigour and specialist knowledge. 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' repeats much the same formula; 'The Purloined Letter',

however, throws Dupin's intellect into even greater relief by introducing a 'professional' villain – the Minister D—, whom Dupin has by the end 'outwitted' (p. 993) – and by constructing a complex hierarchy of intellectual levels. Lacan has shown how the text presents two triangular situations: the first, in the royal boudoir; the second, in D—'s 'hotel'. In each case, there is 'a look which sees nothing' (the King; the police); 'a look which sees that the first one sees nothing' (the Queen; D—); and 'the third which sees that both those two looks leave what is to be hidden exposed for the one who wants to take it' (D—; Dupin).³³ In the second triangle, D— is reduced from the first degree of vision to the second; Dupin is, conversely, raised to the status of having the only consistently all-seeing vision in the text. The detective thus becomes a model reader, an exemplary decoder and interpreter of the world.³⁴

On closer examination, however, Dupin proves to be a less homogeneous, 'integrated' figure than appears at first sight. By the end of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', the naïve or first-time reader may have forgotten that the infallible, rigorous analyst (who defeats both ape and Prefect) exhibits certain inconsistencies hardly compatible with the Dupin who was introduced at the beginning – although certain critics, such as Mireille Vincent (1975), have noticed this 'disturbing contradiction'.³⁵ Dupin initially appears in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' as an unstable, incoherent subject. His imagination is 'wild', and he is subject to 'fantastic gloom'; he is prone to 'wild whims', such as an obsession with darkness which the narrator terms a 'freak of fancy' and a '*bizarrerie*' (p. 532). All the above suggests that Dupin is marked by splitting and disintegrative tendencies; the narrator admits that an outsider might have seen them both as 'madmen' (p. 532), and suggests that Dupin's eccentricities may have been 'the result of an excited, or perhaps of a diseased intelligence' (p. 533).

Besides, Dupin is further characterised as *double*: 'I often dwelt meditatively upon the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul, and amused myself with the fantasy of a double Dupin – the creative and the resolvent' (p. 533). He has a double voice, alternating between 'tenor' and 'treble' (p. 533); it is the latter, anomalous voice, accompanied by an 'abstract' manner, that is the medium for his moments of analytic explanation, *including* the explanation of the murders ('I have already spoken of his abstract manner at such times' – p. 548). He has thus to split himself, to make himself other

and assume his treble voice in order to produce his feats of ratiocination; this hardly suggests that detection, as Wilbur has it, leads to a 'reintegrated' subjectivity. Doubling is, besides – as has often been noted³⁶ – a theme inscribed across the text of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'; Dupin is doubled by the narrator, Dupin and the sailor by the ape, and the Dupin–narrator couple by the L'Espanaye and ape–sailor pairs. The double motif will be further considered below, with special reference to the doubling between Dupin and the ape; it will return with a vengeance in 'The Purloined Letter'. For the moment, however, attention will be concentrated on another instance of doubleness in the texts: Dupin's methodology.

The detective is double in his methods; as Knight points out,³⁷ he is both artist and scientist – 'creative' and 'resolvent' ('Rue Morgue', p. 533), 'imaginative' and 'analytic' (p. 531). Dupin is expert on both literary and scientific topics, from Rousseau (p. 568) to the nebular cosmogony (p. 536). This multifaceted erudition may appear to constitute him as a 'perfect', 'balanced' subject; whether, however, the texts in practice hold his artist and scientist sides in balance³⁸ is highly dubious.

Dupin employs two principal methods, which operate *discontinuously* across the series. The first is 'scientific', the method of empirical deduction. In 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' and 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt', the mysteries are solved thanks to his deductive ability and possession of specialist information. By his explicit reference to Cuvier ('Rue Morgue', p. 559), Dupin places himself in a certain emergent tradition of science conceived as the description and classification of objects (he shows the narrator Cuvier's 'minute anatomical and generally descriptive account of the large fulvous Ourang-Outang' – p. 559). The English term 'scientist' had just been coined, by Thomas Whewell in 1840;³⁹ Dupin may be situated in the context of what Raymond Williams (1976) calls a model of science in terms of 'neutral methodical observer and external object of study'.⁴⁰ Indeed, the detective hero may be seen as anticipating the 'heroic-positivistic' model of the scientist that was to become dominant in the twentieth century (the scientist as disinterested, isolated, competitive investigator whose activity necessarily contributes to social progress).⁴¹

The second method, however, is best described as 'imaginative'; it involves placing oneself in the other's position in order to reconstruct his or her thoughts. It is thus that Dupin solves the