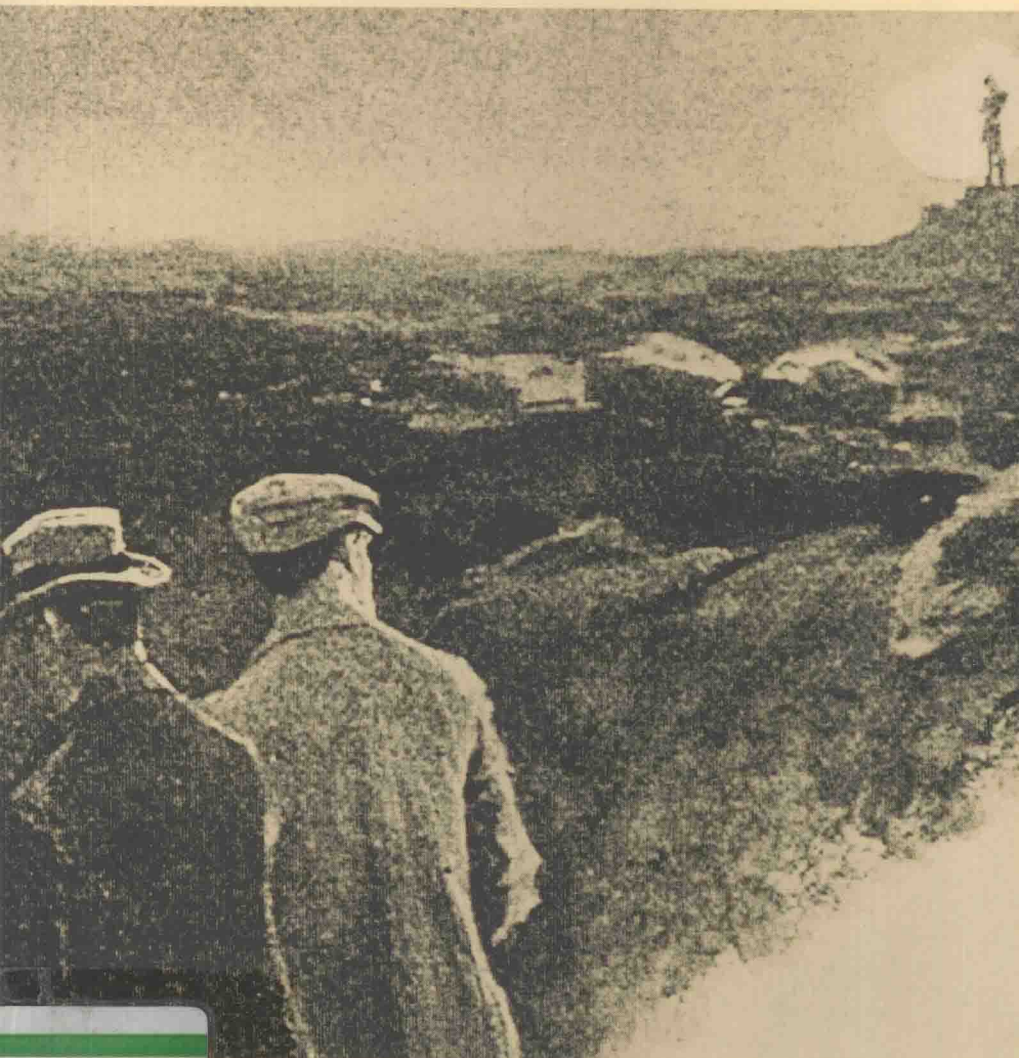


Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence

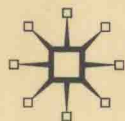
The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle

Lawrence Frank



Palgrave Studies in
Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture

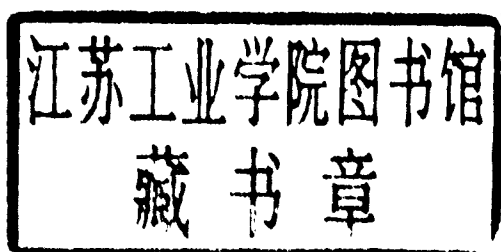
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Acknowledgments

This book had its beginnings in an undergraduate course at the University of Oklahoma that originally concentrated upon nineteenth-century detective fiction and the psychoanalytic case history. Over the years, in response to questions posed by various students in the course, the emphasis changed to an examination of the relationship between the new genre of detective fiction and certain nineteenth-century historical disciplines, including cosmology, geology, paleontology, archaeology, and evolutionary biology.

Such an examination of the interrelationships between detective fiction and nineteenth-century scientific texts was made possible through the resources of the History of Science Collections at the University of Oklahoma and through the thoughtful support of members of the History of Science department. Duane H. D. Roller, formerly the Curator of the Collections, and Marcia Goodman, formerly the Collections librarian, welcomed me and guided me to those nineteenth-century texts that constitute but a part of the holdings of the Collections. Duane Roller was succeeded by Marilyn Ogilvie as Curator, Marcia Goodman by Kerry Magruder as librarian, each of whom generously followed their predecessors in being receptive to someone entirely new to the discipline of the history of science.

It was Kenneth Taylor of the History of Science department who first invited me to present a paper at one of the weekly department colloquia. Other invitations – from Peter Barker, Steven Livesey, and Gregg Mitman – followed, each providing another opportunity to explore the topic of the historical disciplines and their relationship to detective fiction.

Such opportunities to speak before friends led to other papers delivered over the years at the annual meetings of the Society for Literature and Science; at the Dickens Universe held each summer at the University of California, Santa Cruz, under the auspices of the Dickens Project directed by John Jordan; and at a conference in 1995 on “Sherlock Holmes: The Detective and the Collector,” convened at the University of Minnesota.

From such occasions, there emerged early versions of Chapters 1, 6, and 7 that appeared in *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, and a version of Chapter 4 published in the *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian*

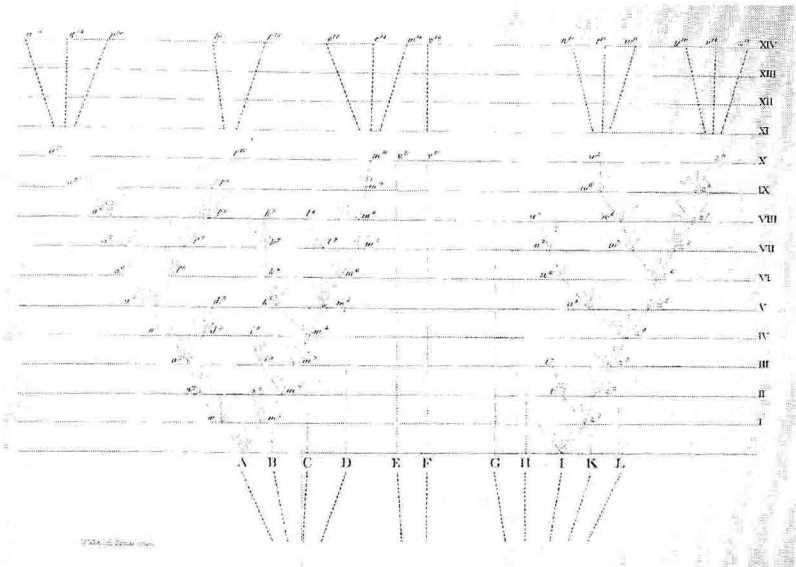
Fiction. The revised chapters appear in the book with the permission of the University of California Press and the AMS Press.

Throughout the time that I worked on the manuscript, colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Oklahoma were kind enough to read drafts of various chapters. I wish to mention specifically Robert M. Davis, Vinay Dharwadker, George Economou, and Henry McDonald. Those at other universities read and commented upon the manuscript in its different forms, particularly Robert Hudspeth of Redlands University, James Kincaid of the University of Southern California, and J. Hillis Miller of the University of California, Irvine.

The book as it now stands has been vastly improved (and shortened) as the result of the astute comments of Joseph Bristow of the University of California, Los Angeles, editor of the Palgrave series, *Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture*. In my experience Joseph Bristow has acted as the ideal editor, demanding, yet always thoughtful and encouraging.

Carol Roberts has patiently dealt with different drafts of the manuscript in completing the typescript.

However, fortunate as I have been to experience the generosity of spirit of so many, one person has sustained me through the visions and revisions of a project that must, at times, have seemed interminable: my wife, Augusta.



Charles Darwin's Tree of Life, from *The Origin of Species* (1859). Image reproduced courtesy of the History of Science Collections, University of Oklahoma.

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Introduction: Contexts

It is easy to say that the truth of certain propositions is obvious to *common sense*. It may be so: but how am I assured that the conclusions of common sense are confirmed by accurate knowledge? Judging by common sense is merely another phrase for judging by first appearances; and every one who has mixed among mankind with any capacity for observing them, knows that the men who place implicit faith in their own common sense are, without any exception, the most wrong-headed and impracticable persons with whom he has ever had to deal.

John Stuart Mill, "The Spirit of the Age, II,"
Examiner, 23 January 1831

And thus, when a word entirely refuses to give up the secret of its origin, it can be regarded in no other light but as a riddle which no one has succeeded in solving, a lock of which no one has found the key – but still a riddle which has a solution, a lock for which there is a key, though now, it may be, irrecoverably lost.

Richard Chenevix Trench, *On the Study of Words* (1851)

I

Writing in the *Examiner* in the winter and spring of 1831, John Stuart Mill referred to the "SPIRIT OF THE AGE" as a "novel expression": "I do not believe that it is to be met with in any work exceeding fifty years in antiquity."¹ In invoking a new sense of history in which ages differ from each other, Mill wrote of his own time as "an age of transition"

(*Collected Works*, XXII, 230), characterized by his claim that “the modes of thinking of our ancestors” (XXII, 231) had become irrelevant given changed circumstances and an increase in the knowledge of certain empirically determined facts, particularly in the realm of the sciences. The old order of the landed gentry and aristocracy, supported by the doctrines of the Anglican Church, were no longer adequate. However, so Mill wrote, no new source of political, religious, or moral authority had appeared to command the assent of the ordinary man and woman: “The progress of inquiry has brought to light the insufficiency of the ancient doctrines; but those who have made the investigation of social truths their occupation, have not yet sanctioned any new body of doctrine with their unanimous, or nearly unanimous, consent” (“Spirit, II,” *Collected Works*, XXII, 245).

Mill wrote, assuming the absence of a consensus, a new form of common sense, that could replace that sanctioned by the old hierarchical, semi-feudal deference society whose leaders were still clinging to power.² He hoped to call into existence a lay clerisy to displace the natural theologians of the old order, imagining in 1831 the ascendancy of men like Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895) who would, perhaps, forge a new consensus by which men and women were to live. But, at the moment, there was no social, political, or moral authority to encourage such a consensus: “society has either entered or is on the point of entering into a state in which there are no established doctrines; in which the world of opinions is a mere chaos” (“Spirit, III,” *Collected Works*, XXII, 252). In his essay Mill later observed, “society is at one of those turns or vicissitudes in its history, at which it becomes necessary that it should change its opinions and its feelings” (“Spirit, IV,” *Collected Works*, XXII, 294). However, Mill’s own age was marked by a new, unprecedented circumstance, the reality of a widespread literacy: “In an age of literature, there is no longer, of necessity, the same wide interval between the knowledge of the old, and that which is attainable by the young. The experience of all former ages, recorded in books, is open to the young man as to the old” (XXII, 294). While, by implication, the writings of the day – like Mill’s own essays in the *Examiner* and elsewhere – made available to readers a worldview in opposition to those opinions and feelings that had prevailed without challenge for centuries.

As Mill observed, “There are things which books cannot teach” (“Spirit, IV,” *Collected Works*, XXII, 294), but in a period of transition and a new literacy, publications of all sorts become necessary to effect the changes – political, moral, and scientific – that he envisioned. Of course, the concept of an age of transition can be seen at best as a useful

fiction, not only for Mill's program of reform, but for someone like myself setting out to provide a dissenting interpretation of nineteenth-century detective fiction from that which has been set forth by various literary critics over the last twenty years.³

Invoking Mill's age of transition, I represent the detective fictions of Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), Charles Dickens (1812–1870), and Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) as participating in the critique of those traditional doctrines and a prevailing common sense that Mill challenged in "The Spirit of the Age." Poe, Dickens, and Doyle promoted a *new*, emerging worldview that was secular and naturalistic in opposition to nineteenth-century scriptural literalism, Natural Theology, and the vestiges of an Enlightenment deism that were often conservative in their political perspectives. As a new genre, nineteenth-century detective fiction in the hands of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle responded explicitly and implicitly to the scientific controversies of the day, particularly those surrounding the nebular hypothesis of Pierre Simon Laplace (1749–1827), a naturalistic explanation of the origin of galaxies from a diffused cloud of heated gases that, in cooling and condensing, formed stars and various solar systems, including our own. Laplace's hypothesis was appropriated and developed by various British and American writers, both natural historians and laymen, including John Pringle Nichol (1804–1859), Regius professor of astronomy at Glasgow University; Robert Chambers (1802–1871), the Edinburgh literary figure who, with his brother, published the *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*; John Tyndall (1820–1893), the Irish-born physicist and polemicist who eagerly promoted Darwinian evolution; and Winwood Reade (1838–1875), the African adventurer and religious skeptic, no less a follower of Darwin than Tyndall. In their discussions of the nebular hypothesis (a precursor to the "Big Bang" theory), these writers set forth a naturalistic, potentially materialist vision of the universe, while offering an evolutionary perspective as a justification for political reforms resisted by defenders of a traditional hierarchical society, particularly natural theologians like Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847), Adam Sedgwick (1785–1873), and William Whewell (1794–1866) who, as the author of a history and a philosophy of empirical science and as Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, provided some of the more serious traditional responses to hypotheses concerning the transmutation of species. (Throughout the Introduction, the chapters to follow, and the Epilogue, I shall provide the dates of important figures and key texts in order to establish an historical context.)

Moreover, in alluding to the nebular hypothesis, with its speculations on the origins of galaxies and solar systems, Poe, Dickens, and Doyle

were inevitably preoccupied with epistemological and narratological issues. The nebular hypothesis of Laplace was to become associated with those other historical disciplines that sought to reconstruct the past from fragmentary evidence surviving into the present in the form of fossils or archaeological remains.⁴ Throughout the detective fictions of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle (unlike those of Wilkie Collins), there appear terms, figures of speech, and methodological practices indebted to nineteenth-century philology, geology and paleontology, archaeology, and evolutionary biology, disciplines that by mid-century were to share common preoccupations about the nature of evidence and narratological reconstructions of a past unavailable to the observer. A characteristic terminology and methodology established a continuum between the historical disciplines and were made available to the fictional detective who acted and spoke in a manner based on the models provided by such disciplines. In turning to these disciplines, and those who wrote about them, Poe, Dickens, and Doyle were to reject the prevailing common sense of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and were to promote a new version of common sense that seemed to defy the everyday experiences of their readers. In this way the detective fictions of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle possess, to this day, a complex intellectual dimension: they promoted a worldview that many modern readers, particularly in the United States, still reject as they introduced a middle-class readership to a universe governed by chance *and* necessity.⁵

In the chapters that follow I resist the claims of various critics represented by Stephen Knight in *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980) and by Dennis Porter in *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (1981). In his book Knight argues that detective fiction as a genre promotes "the ideology of the bourgeois professional intelligentsia" who constitute its "central audience," as it offers a consoling resolution of threats to a prevailing social and economic system.⁶ Porter claims that "the popular literature of a consumer society in an age of mass literacy" can be regarded "as a reflector and valuable barometer of the society's ideological norms."⁷ Both Knight and Porter can be seen to anticipate the thoroughgoing Foucauldian interpretations of nineteenth-century detective fiction offered by D. A. Miller in *The Novel and the Police* (1988) and, more recently, by Ronald R. Thomas in *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (1999). In a tour de force Miller argues that detective fiction serves the aim of a bourgeois, panoptical society not only by promoting an existing ideology, but by creating in its readers certain anxieties that are then controlled as the reader polices

his or her own consciousness to avoid deviant behavior. Ronald R. Thomas joins a new-historicist approach to a Foucauldian perspective by exploring various nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century forensic texts that, in concert with detective fiction, particularly in Great Britain, colluded to transform Romantic conceptions of consciousness, in the process "*conspiring . . . to produce a complex set of discourses on subjectivity*" that sought to "enforc[e] the limits of individual autonomy."⁸ Such collusion transforms individuals into figurative machines denied the complex mental life that Romantic literature offered as a model of human consciousness.

Not only do I question the hegemonic coherence of any society, including the contemporary bourgeois, bureaucratic one that Thomas discusses, I question his claims that nineteenth-century detective fiction was not concerned with issues involving epistemology and narrative and that it introduced a "paradigmatic shift in the realm of subjectivity: the replacement of the entire ideologically laden notion of Victorian moral character . . . with the more physiologically based but socially-defined conception of Victorian identity" (*Detective Fiction*, p. 63). Rather than turn to the biological determinism that was to emerge in the late nineteenth century, the detectives of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle were to reaffirm Romantic conceptions of consciousness within the context of a thoroughgoing philosophical materialism. It is appropriate to speak of a Romantic materialism to which Poe, Dickens, and Doyle turned, retaining for human consciousness the aura of mystery and awe that was to be found in the writings of William Wordsworth (1770–1850), Thomas De Quincey (1785–1859), and Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881).

In my book I discuss in chronological order the detective fictions of Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, and Arthur Conan Doyle. Part One concentrates on Poe: Chapter 1 explores Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), Chapter 2 "The Gold-Bug" (1843), establishing a pattern followed throughout in succeeding chapters. I explore in Part One the significance of the nebular hypothesis for the worldview enacted in the stories and novels under consideration and then the problematic nature of historical knowledge, involving a consideration of epistemology and narratology, in a universe characterized by pure contingency. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" C. Auguste Dupin refers in passing to "the late nebular cosmogony" promoted by John Pringle Nichol in his *Views of the Architecture of the Heavens* (1837), suggesting a context involving current scientific disputes over the origins of the universe in which to consider the significance of the deaths of

Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye at the hands of an Orang-Outang.⁹ In "The Gold-Bug" William Legrand, entomologist and natural historian, reconstructs the past from dubious evidence, leading him to pirate treasure, perhaps by chance alone.

In turning to the novels of Charles Dickens in Part Two, I trace in Chapter 3 implicit allusions in *Bleak House* (1852–53) to Nichol's *Architecture of the Heavens* and to the anonymous *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844) as Dickens exploited the famous and problematic double narrative through which to dramatize competing worldviews – one secular and naturalistic, the other Christian – at a moment when it could not be predicted which might triumph among people of science and the men and women who were reading the novel. In Chapter 4 I concentrate on Dickens's last, uncompleted novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), as the significance of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and Charles Lyell's *Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man* (1863) for the novel becomes clear: through a complex geological and archaeological perspective, *Edwin Drood* investigates the difficult process of reconstructing past events from fragmentary and inadequate evidence.

Part Three considers Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and novels. In Chapter 5 I discuss the significance of Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man* (1872) – recommended by Holmes to Dr. Watson in *The Sign of Four* (1890) – for an understanding of the evolutionary worldview informing Holmes's investigations. In his book Reade returned to "the nebula of the sublime Laplace," proceeded to offer an evolutionary investigation of the origins of life and consciousness, and engaged in a hyperbolic attack upon "Supernatural Christianity."¹⁰ In concluding with a discussion of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901–02) in Chapter 6, I investigate the way in which historical disciplines, both the geology of Lyell and the evolutionary biology of Darwin, inform Holmes's methodology, raising again the epistemological and narratological issues addressed in Poe's "The Gold-Bug" and in Dickens's *Edwin Drood*. In the concluding Chapter 7 I reconstruct implicit allusions to various expositions of the nebular hypothesis, leading to John Tyndall's promotion of a Romantic materialism that sought to retain the mystery of human consciousness as depicted by Wordsworth, De Quincey, and Carlyle, thus preserving the complexities of individual motivation denied by the biological determinism of Sir Francis Galton (1822–1911) and Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909).

II

Throughout I will be engaged both in close readings of various kinds of texts – literary and scientific – and in the reconstruction of an intellectual tradition sharing common figures of speech and methods of proceeding that informed the naturalistic worldview they were in the process of constructing. In the stories and novels under consideration there occur allusions and a characteristic language revealing shared assumptions that point to controversies about the origins of the universe, the age of the earth, the transmutation of species, and the very existence of prehistoric peoples. I conduct what might be termed an act of literary and intellectual paleontology in which the past is haphazardly preserved in literary and scientific texts that, in defiance of conventional generic classifications, interact with each other to point to a coherent intellectual tradition reaching into a past without a definable origin.

Such an investigation need not rely upon, although it must acknowledge, theoretical speculations of recent decades, particularly those of Hayden White in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973); of Dominick LaCapra in *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language* (1983); and, more recently, those of James Chandler in *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (1998) and of Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt in their *Practicing New Historicism* (2000). In *Metahistory* White emphasizes “the fictive character of historical reconstructions” as he argues that so-called historical events are depicted through “modes of emplotment” that correspond to the categories of Romance, Tragedy, Comedy, and Irony set forth in Northrop Frye’s *The Anatomy of Criticism* (1957).¹¹ White states that his “method, in short, is formalist” (p. 3), an orientation that LaCapra modifies by invoking both Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975) and Kenneth Burke (1897–1993). In his version of intellectual history there are no longer reliable documents, but texts that claim to correspond to reality and that demand, as literary texts do, the kind of close reading engaged in by literary critics. In examining a text of any sort, LaCapra argues, the intellectual historian cannot isolate it from various other texts with which it is engaged in a Bakhtinian dialogue that may constitute a particular moment in time. In this way LaCapra dismisses the conventional distinction between a text and its so-called intellectual and historical background: there is, implicitly, only intertextuality, part of that “unending conversation” that constitutes Kenneth Burke’s drama of history.¹²

In *England in 1819* James Chandler relies more fully on the writings of Burke to investigate the idea of the “historical situation” as a construct, the creation of Romantic writers, Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) among them, who perceived their own age as different from other preceding ages.¹³ Romantic historiography presented a model for the identification of periods organized around certain individuals of genius, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s poets as legislators of the world, or around a representative form of thought revealed in a pervasive figure of speech as Thomas Carlyle suggested in the *Edinburgh Review* in “Signs of the Times” (1829). Periods were to be identified chronologically by dates, clustered around a synecdochic event, idea, or individual identified, if not arbitrarily, then at least through an act of interpretation. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt finally assert that an “entire culture is [to be] regarded as a text.”¹⁴ There is no verifiable reality; there are only “representations” that claim to point to the real, representations that, in a Foucauldian sense, always contend with other representations for authority. All of these writers reject appeals to empirically verifiable facts to settle disputes among historians. There is no end to the scope of interpretation in an activity that must resist, so Gallagher and Greenblatt argue, the seductive notions of the period, the stability of genre, and any recourse to the quasi-miraculous activity of the transhistorical genius.

No one currently engaged in the practice of literary and intellectual history should ignore the contributions of those critics who have responded in various ways to post-structuralist and post-modernist thought. But, in considering the relationship between the historical disciplines of nineteenth-century science – including cosmology, paleontology, archaeology and, later, evolutionary biology – and nineteenth-century detective fiction, I have sought out a text central to the century, one that anticipated and sanctioned the kind of paleontological reconstructions in which I intend to engage. Such a text is to be found in Charles Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), read not as the classic investigation into the transmutation of species, but as a form of historiography that anticipated late twentieth-century speculations about the practice of any historical discipline.

As Ernst Mayr has noted in *The Growth of Biological Thought* (1982), “It was Darwin more than anyone else who showed how greatly theory formation in biology differs in many respects from that of classical physics.”¹⁵ Darwin was engaged in the construction of “historical narratives” that “can only rarely (if at all) be tested by experiment” (p. 521). In the *Origin* Darwin’s long argument became an historical enterprise