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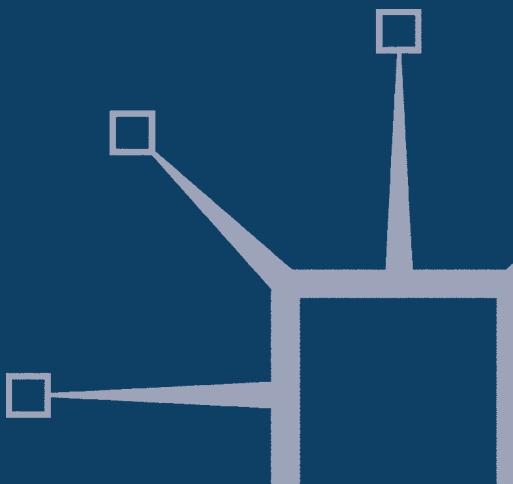
A Counter-History of Crime Fiction

Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational

Maurizio Ascari



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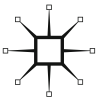

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Acknowledgements

Writing is always an enticing adventure. Writing in a language other than your own native idiom – Italian, in my case – is an even greater one, for instead of mastering the language one feels partly possessed by it. Thus while I was writing this book I did not feel like an armchair sleuth whose grip over reality is unfailing, but rather like a hard-boiled detective, who is vulnerable and liable to err, although instead of drinking whisky I occasionally bit my nails. I started from a handful of clues – connections that excited my curiosity, things I had either perceived or simply sensed – and I had this intimidating resource, a language that was both the object and the instrument of my research. Needless to say, this book has been long in the making. It has peopled my winter evenings with suspenseful plots and shady characters. It has kept me pensive while walking in the streets of my home town, Bologna, or driving my car along the motorway. It has been 'rehearsed' in the course of various conferences, where I gave papers focusing on the problems I intended to tackle, although at the beginning my view of the 'case' was rather hazy.

Complexity is often the result of a communal rather than individual itinerary. Therefore I wish to thank all the friends who kindly helped me along the way. First of all Stephen Knight, the 'master of mystery' who generously took on the task of deconstructing my prejudices on 'detective fiction', opening my mind to the wider implications of 'crime fiction'. Without his radiant readiness to share his immense knowledge of this literary field I would never have been able to achieve this goal. I am very grateful to Clive Bloom, whose highly original critical works greatly helped to reshape my approach to the galaxy of crime and gothic fiction, and who kindly accepted this study for publication in the series he edits. Heather Worthington also deserves my heartfelt thanks, for the keen attention she devoted to my typescript and for her moral and intellectual support in the final stages of the revision process. I have truly met with invaluable readers, whose wide perspective has enabled me to expand my horizons and whose advice has prevented me from falling into factual or theoretical traps. This venture also offers me the opportunity to thank Michael Webb, a long-time friend whose 'linguistic counselling' service has helped me to improve my English and to ease my anxiety.

Since writing a book is a painstaking process that often takes up the time one should spend doing other things, my warmest thanks go to

Franca, whose sympathy and patience are the prerequisites of all my enterprises. When a dream comes true I know that I owe it to her.

Shorter versions of various chapters of this book were presented as papers – either in English or in Italian – at international conferences or in foreign universities and/or appeared in proceedings, miscellaneous volumes or literary journals.

Chapter 1 – 'The Detective and the Mirror: a Literary Genre Discovers Itself', in *The Benstock Library as a Mirror of Joyce,* Joyce Studies in Italy, 7, eds Rosa Maria Bollettieri Bosinelli and Franca Ruggieri (Rome: Bulzoni, 2002), pp. 103–20; Chapter 2 – ' "Murder Will Out": Dreams, Detection and the Quest for Revenge in Medieval and Modern English Literature', in *Crime, detecção e castigo. Estudos sobre literatura policial*, eds Gonçalo Vilas-Boas and Maria de Lurdes Sampaio (Porto: Granito Editores e Livreiros, 2002), pp. 17–33; Chapter 3 – 'The Eye of God: Persecution, Omniscience and Detection', *New Comparison*, 32 (Autumn 2001): 17–35; Chapter 6 – 'Che lingua parla Auguste Dupin? Breve indagine sul poliziesco delle origini', 'I Convegno nazionale sulla letteratura popolare: il caso Sherlock Holmes', Roseto degli Abruzzi (TE), 5–7 July 2002; Chapter 8 – 'Londra come "cuore di tenebra": il primitivo nel centro dell' impero', 'Il primitivo e le sue metamorfosi: archeologia di un discorso culturale', Bologna, 17–19 November 2005; Chapter 9 – 'Artisti, anarchici e atavismo: il "degenerato" come mostro', in *Incontrare i mostri. Variazioni sul tema nella letteratura e cultura inglese e americana*, ed. Maria Teresa Chialant (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2002), pp. 141–56.

Introduction

In the last few decades the profile of the literary canon has changed significantly, for reasons as diverse as the 'rediscovery' of women's writings that had been previously marginalised, an increasing theoretical awareness, the effort to overcome national boundaries in order to study literature on a European or world scale and the tendency to relate literature to the discourses of science, politics and religion within the framework of a semiotics of culture. This transdisciplinary and comparative cultural climate, which encourages intellectual freedom and subversive readings of the past, is also accompanied by an increasing interest in exploring domains of knowledge and experience that were previously branded as 'unscientific' or 'irrational'.

Important studies have been devoted to the relationship between science and pseudo-science, to the conceptualisation of the supernatural in Victorian culture, and to the development of pseudo-sciences such as mesmerism, hypnotism, spiritualism, physiognomy, phrenology and criminal anthropology. As the organisers of a conference on science, pseudo-science and society remarked as early as 1980, while in the past philosophers of science had aimed 'to formulate a criterion of demarcation that would decisively separate science from every other area of intellectual activity', recent scholarship 'has turned to the examination of pseudo-science and its role in intellectual and social life.'[1] According to Michel Foucault, the Western search for truth consigned a whole teratology of thought beyond the margins of legitimate discourses,[2] but truth cannot be grasped once and for all, and we should unceasingly redefine these borders.

Whatever one's personal beliefs and sympathies, it has to be acknowledged that the vast container of imagination we call literature has always been marked by a wide range of approaches to the human condition and its predicaments. Realism is only one of the sets of conventions that have contributed to the development of literature, while the realm of fantasy has enabled writers to catalyse and express psychic energies that could hardly find an outlet within the boundaries of verisimilitude. In her seminal volume on fantasy, Rosemary Jackson underlines the complementary nature of realism and fantasy, which exists only 'in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real'.[3] Jackson also associates fantasy with the increasing secularisation of society, and subscribes to Tzvetan

Todorov's claim that the literature of the fantastic is 'the uneasy conscience of the positivist nineteenth century'.[4] Needless to say, the nineteenth century was also the time when crime fiction gave origin to what came to be regarded as detective fiction. Starting from such a premise, I will explore the centuries-long process leading up to this transition, and so highlight the interaction between realism and fantasy in the development of this genre.

Although the critical emphasis that has been laid for over a century on the association between detection and science might lead us to believe that nineteenth-century detective fiction was unambiguously realistic, in fact it had an ambivalent status. This is acknowledged by Clive Bloom when he claims that 'Other genres owe much to gothic concerns and neither detective fiction nor science fiction can be separated in their origins from such an association.'[5] Elsewhere, Bloom describes detective fiction as a bridge between late romanticism, which was marked by individualism and the search for an organic theology, and modernism, which felt itself freed both 'from a theological moral purpose' and 'from the cult of personality'.[6] According to Bloom, the detective story contributed to this transition by idealising personality as 'pure thought',[7] thereby reconciling 'the contradictions of a society under the dual pressure of eccentric individualism and dubiously safe conformism'.[8]

Having acknowledged the complex nature of crime fiction in general and of nineteenth-century detective fiction in particular, let us now focus on our position as early twenty-first century readers. No act of reading can grasp the multi-layered structure of a text in its entirety. Reading always translates into a selection of elements from the texts we approach, responding to factors as diverse as education, motivation and concentration. We grasp only those aspects of texts that our cultural position and subjectivity enable us to recognise and to relate to other data. Needless to say, I am no stranger to this phenomenon. On re-reading certain stories of crime and detection in the light of further (literary and critical) works, I began to realise how many elements of now-canonical texts did not fit into the literary patterns which I had previously used to interpret them. Likewise, further reading made me realise that works I had formerly discarded as uninteresting actually embodied important aesthetic and ideological tensions. This prompted me to venture into a new critical enquiry, although the many excellent studies that have been recently devoted to crime fiction repeatedly made me hesitate and retrace my steps.

The result is a critical survey that does not aim to study the nineteenth-century development of mainstream detective fiction, but rather to map

those hybrid zones where its conventions mingle with those of sensation fiction and the ghost story, or else are conflated with the discourses of pseudo-sciences. This volume is thus governed by the need to uncover areas of cross-fertilisation and to make connections, albeit without sacrificing that sense of categories and distinctions that is a fundamental intellectual tool. Parodies, adaptations, translations from and into foreign languages, as well as the critical works that the ramifications of crime fiction fostered, and that in turn fostered the public recognition of popular literature, will all be taken into account as contributing to the formation and the canonical status of this genre.

This text aims to trace a counter-history of crime fiction, both by disinterring texts that have had little or no critical attention devoted to them and by reinterpreting, in a different light, works that we believe we know all too well. Implicit in the act of naming a genre is the idea of a border which delimits and circumscribes. Since every classification and genealogy involves historically determined criteria that are not a symptom of timeless transparency but which partly construct a phenomenon, tracing the borders of a genre is inevitably a somewhat arbitrary process. Not only is the ever-changing profile of a genre defined by conventional lines which are produced by an encounter between differences and which are continuously renegotiated, but the 'land' that stretches on both sides of the border is also a fertile site of exchange. It is in these border-territories that processes of creative innovation often take place, thanks to acts of transgression and occasions of hybridisation. Moreover, while in the past border-territories were subjected to the scrutiny of normative criticism, in the postmodern age – as Linda Hutcheon writes – 'the borders between literary genres have become fluid'.[9]

This flexibility is linked to another aspect of our approach to culture, that is the tendency to regard 'canonicity' not as an essential property of literary texts, authors or genres, but rather as the result of a cultural process, and therefore as an object of study in itself. Like every other literary canon, that of 'detective fiction' has been increasingly subjected to critical scrutiny in order to make its assumptions explicit and to explore the circumstances of its formation. In the so-called 'golden age' of detective fiction, bodily fluids were 'washed away' from the pages of 'clue-puzzle' novels and crime was increasingly represented – by writers and critics alike – as an aseptic riddle to be solved by the detached mind of an investigating agent. Yet, in the following decades the popularity of subgenres as diverse as the 'hard-boiled', the 'crime novels' *à la* Highsmith, 'police procedurals', 'thrillers' and 'psychothrillers' – whose main ingredients are the materiality of the victim's body, the physical, emotional

and legal vulnerability of the detective and the psychology of the criminal – helped trigger a sweeping change of critical and historical perspective. As a consequence, the early twentieth-century prescriptive view of detective fiction as rooted in pre-modern enigma stories, implying that rationality was the guiding light of the genre, was radically revised by late twentieth-century critics, who conversely emphasised its debt to the early-modern traditions of picaresque novels, criminal biographies and broadsides.

Drawing on the many excellent critical and theoretical works that in the last few decades have shed light on crime/detective fiction, *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction* aims to provide new insight into the development of the genre. A meta-critical approach is at the heart of Chapter 1 ('Revising the Canon of Crime and Detection'), which discusses both the early twentieth-century *construction* of a detective canon and its late twentieth-century *deconstruction* so as to set the theoretical premises for an alternative view of the genre.

The relation between crime fiction, the supernatural and the gothic is explored in chapters 2–5. Chapter 2 ('Detection before Detection') analyses the paradigm of 'divine detection', which underlies several medieval and early-modern stories. Revelatory dreams and the apparitions of ghosts contribute to the workings of providence within fictional and theatrical texts that firmly locate the principles of order and justice in the divinity. Chapter 3 ('Persecution and Omniscience') explores a transitional stage, when omniscience ceased to be regarded solely as the attribute of a divinity that was represented as both benevolent and just. In the eighteenth-century climate of Enlightenment, equality and freedom, omniscience took on different shades of meaning, becoming both a sublime attribute of power and the arch-rational organising principle of Jeremy Bentham's machine for surveillance – the panopticon. Chapter 4 ('Victorian Ghosts and Revengers') describes the resurgence of the supernatural and the motive of revenge in Victorian literature in connection with the representation of crime. The link between this renewed interest in the supernatural and pseudo-sciences such as mesmerism, hypnotism and spiritualism is explored in Chapter 5 ('Pseudo-Sciences and the Occult') so as to reassess the importance of anti-positivist forms of detection, including the late nineteenth-century vogue for 'psychic detectives', dealing with occult mysteries.

Chapters 6–9 examine the multifarious sensational components of nineteenth-century crime fiction, taking into account the commercial aspects of popular literature as well as the developments of criminal anthropology and social science. Chapter 6 ('The Language of Auguste Dupin') focuses on the function of translation in the international growth

of crime fiction from the 1840s to the 1880s, delving into the mechanisms of popular culture. Chapter 7 ('On the Sensational in Literature') analyses the development of sensation fiction in the second half of the nineteenth century, discussing the role of women as writers and consumers, the critical debate between detractors and advocates of sensation, the increasing centrality of the professional detective and finally the cultural resonance this genre achieved by means of parodies and adaptations for the theatre. Chapter 8 ('London as a "Heart of Darkness" ') explores the pervasive presence of the metaphor of darkness in a series of nineteenth-century – mainly non-fictional – texts denouncing the deplorable conditions of life in the East End, with the aim of analysing the ideological and aesthetic implications of this rhetorical strategy. Chapter 9 ('The Rhetoric of Atavism and Degeneration') deals with the impact of late nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific anthropological categories on the literary treatment of crimes and criminals.

The conclusion ('The Age of Formula Fiction') looks back to the first chapter, focusing on the early twentieth-century formation of the canon of detective fiction as a multifaceted process, involving creative writing, criticism and the media. Doyle's works are thus presented as the hub of a complex cultural phenomenon, the Sherlock Holmes 'myth', while Chesterton's works are related to the development of neighbouring sub-genres such as terrorist/anarchist and spy fiction. Finally, the anthologies that scholars/writers such as Wrong, Wright, Sayers and Thomson edited and introduced are investigated – against the backdrop of modernism, with its search for form – to shed light on the theoretical elaboration that led detective fiction to be identified as a sub-category of 'mystery' – linked with stories of the supernatural – rather than of 'crime'.

This concise profile of my text is in itself a comment on its title. *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction* aims to reassess some of the assumptions concerning the origin and nature of detective fiction, showing that the identity of this sub-genre should be regarded as the result of a cultural construction rather than as a faithful mirror of the 'essential' qualities of a certain number of literary works. For this reason I have preferred to use the comprehensive term 'crime fiction', to permit the exploration of a wider network of texts, including Renaissance tragedies, criminal biographies, *Newgate Calendars*, gothic novels, Newgate novels, sensation fiction, the ghost story and melodrama. The wide scope of this volume is also reflected in its subtitle, *Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational*, where the term 'supernatural' embraces – in Bloom's words – 'all those areas above or beyond the material realm',[10] while 'gothic ' and 'sensational' designate both aesthetic categories and specific literary genres.

A further comment must be added regarding the comparative approach that underlies this study. As an Italian who teaches English literature I could not deny the desire to explore the links between the various national cultures that contributed to the genesis of detective fiction. The result is a book that freely crosses the borders between Great Britain, the United States, France and – occasionally – Italy itself, so restoring detective fiction to the cosmopolitan dimension that presided over its origin, in an effort to attain a better understanding of a genre whose complexity has been underplayed for both ideological and aesthetic reasons.

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1
Revising the Canon of Crime and Detection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

From detective to crime fiction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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