

DETECTIVE FICTION AND LITERATURE

Also by Martin Priestman

COWPER'S *TASK*: Structure and Influence
PEASANTS AND COUNTRYMEN IN LITERATURE (*editor with*
Kathleen Parkinson)

Detective Fiction and Literature

The Figure on the Carpet

MARTIN PRIESTMAN

*Senior Lecturer in English
Roehampton Institute of Higher Education*

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For Ben and Anna

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Preface

To look at a star by glances – to view it in a sidelong way . . . – is to have the best appreciation of its lustre. . . . By undue profundity we perplex and enfeeble thought; and it is possible to make even Venus herself vanish from the firmament by a scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct.

Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'

Such a perception, it seems to me, is in its very structure dependent on chance and anonymity, on the vague glance in passing, as from the windows of a bus, when the mind is intent on some more immediate preoccupation: its very essence is to be inessential.

F. R. Jameson, 'On Raymond Chandler'¹

Criticism of detective fiction seems to obey the law which these two quotations identify as operating within it: that the sidelong glance often reveals more than the 'scrutiny too sustained, too concentrated, or too direct'. Scrupulous studies of the genre, in terms of its historical development, its inalienable rules, or even of the reasons for its popularity, can result in the kind of snow-blindness that its heroes decry in the police. On the other hand, it is often when it is being made use of in relation to other kinds of evidence, in other kinds of quest, that its importance emerges most distinctively.

Much recent serious study of the genre assumes the relevance of three major types of adjacent inquiry: the Marxist, the Freudian and the narratological. The Marxist inquiry perhaps began, before the genre had emerged exactly as such, with Marx's own scrutiny of the noble redeemer-hero of Eugène Sue's *The Mysteries of Paris*. Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault continued to find the detective genre a vital source of evidence about social constructions, as, in their less rigorous way, did such thirties English writers as W. H. Auden, C. Day Lewis and George Orwell. Ernest Mandel's *Delightful Murder* has recently continued the more card-carrying tradition.²

Numerous critics, from Dorothy L. Sayers to Geoffrey Hartman, have related the apparently fixed 'rules' of the detective form to

those laid down by Aristotle. The structuralist Roman Jakobson's isolation of metonymy as a fictional method has made the form much easier to discuss, and Tsvetan Todorov's extension of Aristotle's story-plot distinction helps further to explain its split-level construction. The genre offers itself very effectively to attempts to deconstruct narrative more generally, Roland Barthes often turning to it for examples of the 'hermeneutic code', and Pierre Macherey using it to exemplify the self-abolishing tendency in all fiction.

Psychoanalytic approaches can be traced right back to Freud's description of the Oedipal 'family romance', to be shortly followed by Marie Bonaparte's analysis of Poe's Dupin stories. Geraldine Pederson-Krag, Charles Rycroft and Albert D. Hutter have related the form persuasively to the 'primal scene', while Jacques Lacan's 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' and Jacques Derrida's riposte 'The Purveyor of the Truth' have turned Poe's story into a *locus classicus* of debates about the Freudian deconstruction of literature.

Typically, in these cases, the detective text is used as a clue, as readily grasped evidence of what is going on rather less clearly elsewhere. Paradoxically, this often makes for more precision about specific works than in the kind of study where the ground-rules are seen as given and the differences only as revealing local irregularities of terrain. A growing awareness of the benefits of such sidelong glances has recently been reflected in a number of full-length studies which set their parameters wider than received common sense about the genre's entertainment function might suggest.

Julian Symons's indispensable history, *Bloody Murder* (1972, revised 1985), also provides a useful introduction, at least up to a certain 'common sense' point, to the anglicised combination of social commentary, psychology and myth-criticism pioneered by his own thirties generation. John G. Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery and Romance* (1976) situates the genre within a wider theory of popular formulae which permits scope for detailed analysis of specific texts from a range of thought-provoking angles. Dennis Porter's *The Pursuit of Crime* (1981) virtually exhausts the repertoire of recent literary theory, though this is then applied to a somewhat limited range of examples. Perhaps the best recent book, Stephen Knight's *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980), sustains an enormously flexible political understanding of the form through a deceptively conventional-seeming series of close readings of speci-

fic authors. As well as such full-length studies there are now a number of critical anthologies, of which Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe's *The Poetics of Murder* (1983) offers the most impressive array of current theoretical approaches.

While this book has some aims in common with all those just mentioned, it deals particularly with the relationship between detective fiction and established literature. At the outset, I should perhaps acknowledge that my main title embodies a deliberate confusion: in what sense and to what extent is detective fiction *not* literature? Since Raymond Williams pointed out that the notion of a 'literature' elevated above other kinds of imaginative and other writing was a construct born out of the Industrial Revolution alongside Romanticism (and, indeed, detective fiction), the word itself has become hard to use without visible or invisible inverted commas.³ None the less, the normal assumption that detective fiction and literature *are* distinct is a revealing fact about our reading habits, and ultimately our society, which this book tries to explore by pushing to its limits. The much-enjoyed *différence* between the two literary realms is itself a structural fact of great importance to both: it is in repeatedly crossing this boundary while remaining aware of it that I hope this book achieves its chief 'sidelong' insights.

This is partly done through direct comparison of detective and literary texts, partly through a broader exploration of themes and contexts common to both, but perhaps chiefly through close discussion of detective works 'as if' they were literary ones. This last practice deliberately aims to bridge the gap between different established ways of talking about the two types of text: hence, for example, it routinely demotes the 'character' of the detective and his adherence to a prescribed procedure from their usual centre-stage position, and unapologetically gives away the endings of stories when this is necessary for an account of their overall construction. Equally routinely, it assumes that all texts *can* be discussed in equivalent detail, whatever assessment of ultimate quality may be being implied: this point seems well worth insisting on given a traditionally implicit critical rhetoric which equates discussability with 'literary' quality.

None of this is intended as a form of special pleading, or a way of continuously implying that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is really 'as good as' *Oedipus the King*. Other books deal with that kind of thing, and for speed this one also sometimes voices its own brief

assessments, but this isn't the point of the exercise. The argument is more simply that the various social and other issues dealt with by detective fiction are not wholly alien to those raised in other books, and that sometimes the 'formulae' by which detective fiction can so easily be defined have a wider relevance (as, of course, various 'literary' formulae have for detective fiction).

Though loosely chronological, this is not a comprehensive history: while linked, the chapters are best seen as separate essays, each coming at different material from a slightly different angle. The adoption of such a variety of angles seemed necessary in order to bring out something of the range of what detective fiction can tell us about the world we live in, about other fiction, and about ourselves. Hence the first two chapters aim to introduce some of the social, structural and psychological implications of the form, as a preliminary to the more chronological account which follows. Chapter 1 conducts a rapid survey of the genre's approach to crime as a source of scandal and shock, relating this to changing social conditions and to some other literature, while Chapter 2 looks closely at two texts widely separated in time – *Oedipus the King* and *The Moonstone* – to explore the structural and psychological issues mentioned earlier in this preface. The next two chapters deal with the seminal early detective writers Edgar Allan Poe and Emile Gaboriau, but pay particularly close attention to their respective uses of the short story and melodramatic novel forms. The next four chapters bunch round the years 1890–1914, the 'age of Holmes' but also of modernism. Chapter 5 explores the social content of the Sherlock Holmes stories and goes on to examine Arthur Conan Doyle's crucial creation of the 'series', while Chapter 6 considers the Holmes myth and then looks at the late novel *The Valley of Fear* as a significant link with subsequent English and American forms of detective writing. Chapter 7 argues that in the hands of four of Doyle's contemporaries detective fiction played a significant part in intellectual and social debate; while Chapter 8 shows how and perhaps why some important experiments of early modernism have a particularly significant relationship with the form. In a briefer treatment of the period after 1918, Chapter 9 deals with the English 'Golden Age' manner chiefly in the shapes of Agatha Christie and P. D. James, while Chapter 10 looks briefly at Raymond Chandler's handling of the American hardboiled form, before turning attention to some of the uses made of it in a range of recent British writing.

The book's subtitle, 'The Figure on the Carpet', is intended to apply to the content in several senses as a kind of mnemonic for the various ways in which detective fiction differs from respectable literature while also closely resembling it.