Bloodscripts
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The classic detective story is the darling of literary formalism. First, it is one of the few genres whose origins are clear: by critical consensus, the genre sprang, fully formed like Athena from Zeus's forehead, from three stories written by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter," and "The Mystery of Marie Roget." Second, the classic detective story is a highly formalized and extremely self-conscious genre, whose practitioners have been aware, almost from its very inception, of playing a game with definite rules. These rules have been articulated by W. H. Auden: "The basic formula is this: a murder occurs; many are suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murderer is arrested or dies" (147).

This basic formula still structures a majority of detective stories published today. In the contemporary vast scene of crime writing, two main influences are to be distinguished: the classic Golden Age detective story and its rebellious offspring, the hard-boiled crime novel of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett. The classic (predominantly, though not exclusively, British) school embellished Auden's formula with additional ingredients: the Great Detective, an eccentric blessed with superhuman intelligence; his dumb sidekick, often functioning as the first-person narrator; the rationality of the murderer's motivation; and the strictly logical way in which the solution is
The heyday of the classic detective story was the so-called Golden Age between the two world wars. In the period between 1920 and 1939, the detective story accounted for one-quarter of all new novels published in the English language. The American school in the 1920s and 1930s rebelled against what it saw as the patent artificiality of the classic school and radically modified the formula, adding a certain gritty realism that found its perfect visual equivalent in film noir.

The classic tradition is very much alive today in work of the best-selling “queens of crime,” P. D. James, Ruth Rendell, Elizabeth George, and others. The hard-boiled tradition has its own champions, such as Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton. Crime literature dealing with serial murder, such as the novels of Patricia Cornwell and Thomas Harris I discussed in the previous chapter, combines the influence of both streams. But my focus in this chapter is exclusively on the classic detective story and, even more narrowly, on its four giants: Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton, and Agatha Christie. The reason is not simply the ever swelling volume of crime fiction that makes any comprehensive overview very difficult. These four writers, covering among themselves a hundred years of modernity, from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, epitomize the construction of the violent subject as the subject of discipline in an almost pure form. Their epigones dilute their paradigm or crossbreed it with other narrative modalities in a cultural and historical situation, in which the subject of discipline finds himself in retreat. Discipline is contested both by the media’s reign of horror and by the resurgence of violent ideologies, whose impact is magnified by the ever-present memories of the Holocaust. The conflict between discipline and ideology is the subject of my next chapter. But here I want to look at the disciplined killer in the moment of his full glory.

John G. Cawelti claims that “the detective story is a key mythos of the ideology of individualistic bourgeois democracy embodied in a unique formal pattern that ritually involves the reader in the celebration of the myth” (13). In what follows I will explore the subject of this “mythos,” the triad of the detective, the criminal, and the victim. But before trying to disentangle the intricate—not to say uncanny and perverse—web of correspondences among the three, another question has to be addressed, a question so simple that it is seldom asked. Why murder? What is the relationship between liberal individualism and the detective story’s raison d’être, violence? Why should democracy celebrate itself through incessant reiteration of the same drama of murder, investigation, and exposure? What exactly is being exorcised—or covertly acknowledged—through the detective story’s contradictory impulses of strict rationality and Gothic sensationalism?
To answer these questions I will, in the following sections, consider such seemingly disparate aspects of the genre as game theory, penchant for Christmas, dismissal of ghosts, and Holmes’s nonexistent sex life. All these aspects are informed by what I see as the dominant feature of the detective story: its repression of the sublime and the projection of the perfectly disciplined subject of violence. Such a subject is, of course, impossible. So, perhaps, is democracy. This might account for the popularity of both.

**SUBDUING SENSATION**

The detective story is often seen as form without content. Reading detective fiction is, then, “reading for the plot,” for the aesthetic enjoyment deriving from the beauty and complexity of its construction: “[The detective story’s] raison d’être is plot; and any element which is permitted to overshadow plot will weaken the effect of the whole, throwing it off balance and producing an ambiguous hybrid . . .” (Crispin 11).

Like Russian formalist definitions of poetry, such a definition of detective fiction stresses its self-referentiality. The genre is essentially autotelic, a narrative about narrativity: “It can be argued that classic detective fiction . . . perfected this ordering function of narration . . . In fact, classic detective fiction is constituted by the very process and problem of storytelling” (Huhn 39).

The idea of the classic detective story as embodiment of the “ordering function of narrative” is linked to two other common ways of describing the genre: as a logical exercise and as a game. What unites all three is emphasis on structure as opposed to content. In fact, while in Huhn’s definition the content is still present— a story must be about something, if only about itself— both games and logical exercises are founded on total evacuation of referentiality. Thus, the “method” of the classic detective, as epitomized by Poe’s Dupin and Doyle’s Holmes, becomes a species of formal logic. In *The Sign of Three*, edited by Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, the contributors argue that Holmes was a “consulting semiotician,” employing the logical technique called “abduction” (inference on the basis of a general rule, along the lines of “All men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore he is mortal”). However, semioticians, consulting or otherwise, have never boasted of a fraction of Holmes’s fame. The detective story is a popular genre that has sold exceedingly well from the moment of its inception. The same public that remained profoundly skeptical, if not downright frightened, of science lapped up adventures of various Great Detectives, even though a lecture on the difference between deduction and abduction would most likely put it to sleep. In order to explain the contradiction between the intellectual exclusivity of the detective story and its market value, critics
have seized on the concept of game. A mental workout can be entertain-
ing despite its difficulty.

Like all the major constituents of the genre, the game metaphor was
already present in the Great Detectives’ three founding texts, Edgar Allan
Poe’s stories “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie
Roget,” and “The Purloined Letter.” “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”
begins with a lengthy discussion of what we today would call “game theory,”
and the unnamed narrator invites the reader to consider the entire story of his
acquaintance with C. A uguste Du pin and Du pin’s investigation of the grisly
murders of two women “in the light of a commentary upon the propositions
just advanced” (143).

However, Poe’s “propositions” have a darker side that clashes with the san-
titized ambience of intellectual playfulness. The entire disquisition hinges on
the juxtaposition of two kinds of games. The first kind, epitomized by chess,
is elaborate and complex; the second, such as draughts, is simple with few
rules. Poe’s paradoxical conclusion is that “the higher powers of the reflective
intellect are more decidedly and more usefully tasked by the unostentatious
game of draughts than by all the elaborate frivolity of chess” (141). The rea-
son is that in chess the intellect is engaged with an abstract system of rules,
while in draughts the players focus on each other: “Deprived of ordinary
resources, the analyst throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies
himself therewith, and not infrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole meth-
ods (sometimes indeed absurdly simple ones) by which he may seduce him
into error or hurry into miscalculation” (142). In other words, Poe sees a game
not as a purely intellectual pursuit but as a competition between two oppo-
nents in which pleasure derives from the victory rather than from the process
of ratiocination. Cunning, ruthlessness, and psychological acumen count for
more than logic. The game between Du pin and his adversary is not a chain of
deductions but a duel. Violence is lodged at the very heart of rationality.

Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot often irritates his sidekick, Captain Hastings,
by his refusal “to play the game.” In Curtain the Belgian detective dismis-
ses Hastings’s complaint of “unfairness”: “Quite so, my friend! It is not
fair! It is not sporting! It is not playing the game! A dm it all this and pass from
it. This is not a game—it is not le sport. . . . It is a question. . . . not of your play-
ing a guessing game, but of preventing a human being from dying” (59–60).
While Christie’s books are often seen as the purest examples of the detective
story as an elaborate puzzle, her “artificial, contrived and fantastic” plots clever-
ly disclose their own darker underside, rooted not in the structure of logic
but in the chaos of violence. Just as Poe’s propositions on game theory turn out
to be about the psychology of competition, Poirot’s contemptuous “this is not a
game” reveals the detective story’s real subject: “a human being . . . dying.”
Why should a discussion of chess and draughts in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” be illustrated by two sickeningly mutilated human bodies? Why should abduction have something to do not with beans in a bag, as in Peirce’s original example, but with corpses? Why should a “pure” narrative construction revolve around murder? All detective stories deal with crime; an overwhelming majority of them deal with violence. It is almost impossible to imagine a satisfactory whodunit without at least one dead body. This is so much taken for granted that only rarely does a critical discussion of the genre pose the question of the strained relation between logic and violence. And yet, writers themselves have been profoundly aware of it from the inception of the genre.

In “The Adventure of the ‘Copper Beeches,’” Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson discuss the nature of their own narrative. Holmes initially praises Watson for dedicating his “reports” to “those faculties of deduction and of logical synthesis which I have made my special province.” Watson, however, realizes that the compliment is misplaced: “‘And yet,’ said I, smiling, ‘I cannot quite hold myself absolved from the charge of sensationalism which has been urged against my records.’” Holmes agrees and then takes his faithful chronicler to task precisely for that element of “sensationalism”: “If I claim full justice for my art, it is because it is an impersonal thing—a thing beyond myself. Crime is common. Logic is rare. Therefore it is upon the logic rather than upon the crime that you should dwell. You have degraded what should have been a course of lectures into a series of tales” (272).

The generic dilemma of the detective story is set out clearly here: logic or crime, deduction or sensation, “a course of lectures” or “a series of tales.” But, of course, both are necessary. The generic specificity of the detective story is created precisely by the sustained tension between its smooth and precise narrative exterior and its dark Gothic core. Few people would read Watson’s accounts were they no more than scientific monographs of the kind Holmes himself is supposed to have authored. But at the same time, horror fiction, giving free rein to sensation, has never achieved the widespread appeal of the detective story. Despite their bickering, Watson and Holmes are the one couple that is never going to split. They have to stay together to balance the narrative in which crime and logic are kept in constant creative tension.

Among Doyle’s most disturbing stories is “The Adventure of the Cardboard Box” (1893). The tale begins with an inoffensive spinster getting a mail delivery of two human ears pickled in salt and then evolves into a lurid narrative of adultery, incest, murder, and mutilation. Like most Holmes stories, this one follows the set format of problem, investigation, exposure, and the criminal’s first-person narrative that confirms the detective’s brilliant deduction. It is introduced, however, with Dr. Watson’s apology for even bringing such a story before the reader, his justification being that it is “impossible to
entirely separate the sensational from the criminal” (307). The story is framed in terms of “chance and not choice” and displays with an uncommon vividness the tension between the logic of deduction and the chaotic, irrational, uncontrollable nature of violence the plot attempts to contain.

Before Holmes is invited on the case, he entertains Watson by reconstructing the latter’s train of thoughts. This train has to do with violence and ends in Watson’s conclusion that it is a “preposterous” method of settling disputes. The case that follows mocks this smug assumption. It taxes Holmes’s power to provide a reassuring closure. The murderer’s account, given in writing and thus invulnerable to the detective’s interrogation, is driven by the passionate logic of obsession, disregarding the logic of causality. Jim Browner’s murder of his wife and her lover seems both inevitable, given his personality, and yet also preposterous, founded on a series of chance slips and improbable coincidences, culminating in the final irony of the wrong sister getting the gruesome package.

The murder is a “strange and inexplicable horror” (311). It is a horror precisely because it is inexplicable. Violence, says Jean Amery, destroys our trust in the world, which includes “the irrational and logically unjustifiable belief in absolute causality perhaps, or the likewise blind belief in the validity of the inductive inference” (28). The function of the detective is to uphold these two blind beliefs at the face of such irrefutable argument as a mangled and dismembered human body: “‘What is the meaning of it, Watson?’ said Holmes solemnly, as he laid down the paper. ‘What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable. But what end? There is the great standing perennial problem to which human reason is as far from answer as ever’” (319).

“It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable.” This is the creed of the detective who fights chaos, accident, passion, and unreason. Sometimes he fails; more often, with the help of the author who clears away the too-obtrusive signs of violence, he succeeds.

THE INSOMNIA OF REASON

Dupin never sleeps. He is a creature of the night, Dracula manqué roaming the streets under the cover of darkness. But unlike the Transylvanian count, he is not seeking the heady pleasures of the chase. He is satisfied with “that infinity of mental excitement which quiet observation can afford” (Poe 144).

Why exercise a power of observation in darkness? In this perversity (which the narrator acknowledges as such) lies the key to the relationship between logic and violence in the classic detective story. The Great Detective
must be a rationalist of the irrational. He is drawn not just to the night but also to what the night connotes in the Gothic: sensuality, mystery, and hunger. As opposed to the Gothic hero, however, the detective seeks out the irrational in order not to enjoy but to tame it. He sallies forth into the darkness to illuminate it with the light of reason.

Dupin boasts of his mental acuity, Holmes flaunts his logic, Poirot endlessly prattles about “order and method,” and Chesterton’s Father Brown extols common sense. All four are synonyms for reason: not just a general human faculty but a specific ideological construct, a post-Enlightenment sensibility that Foucault calls “the pure experience of order and of its modes of being” (1966 xxvi). The function of this “pure experience of order” in the detective story is to counter another experience that goes by many names: chance, chaos, disorder, the irrational, and the sublime.

In Christie’s “Dead Man’s Mirror,” when Poirot trots out a list of seemingly unrelated occurrences around the murder, another character asks irritably: “Are you going to tell me that that rigmarole makes sense?” (156). “Rigmarole” is violence devoid of explanation, the chaos of pure contingency in which things happen just so, without order or reason. Poirot’s function is to “make sense.” He brings “disorder into order” by fitting together “various impossibly shaped and unlikely facts which, though seeming to bear no relationship to each other, yet did each have its properly balanced part in assembling the whole” (Christie 1956, 151). Christie’s metaphor for this activity is assembling a jigsaw puzzle. But with a puzzle one knows that the “impossibly shaped” pieces do fit together because the manufacturer guarantees it. There is no such guarantee attached to the universe. The assumption of “making sense” is an ideological assumption propped up by fear of its being otherwise. The function of the detective is to allay this fear.

Just how serious this task is, just how frightening the rigmarole can become, is dear from Chesterton’s story “The Honour of Israel Gow.” Father Brown is called upon to investigate the strange goings-on in the Scottish castle of Glengyle whose owner has recently died. The atmosphere is dark and getting darker as the priest and his companions discover various peculiar things: candles without candlesticks, torn prayer books, broken pencils. The horror is built up very effectively out of the senselessness of these things, which, while not scary in themselves, do not add up to any comprehensible whole. Even before the final gruesome discovery that the corpse of the castle’s owner is missing its head, Father Brown succumbs to the fear of the nonsensical. Uncharacteristically for him, he begins to talk in the Gothic language of madness, torture, forbidden lusts, and black magic, imagining “the devil of the universe . . . sitting on the top tower of this castle . . . roaring like the Apocalypse” (83). With the discovery of the headless body, the normally
placid Father Brown makes this dramatic announcement: “Something has
fallen on us that falls very seldom on men; perhaps the worst thing that can
fall on them. . . . We have found the truth; and the truth makes no sense” (85).
The “worst thing” is not violence as such but the rigmarole of violence, the
truth of its materiality that “makes no sense.”

But when Father Brown does arrive at a logical and quite ingenious solu-
tion of the riddle, when all the pieces fall into place and a rational chain of
events can be reconstructed, he is ecstatic: “Six hours in the spiritual abyss,
and all because I never thought of the dentist! Such a simple, such a beautiful
and peaceful thought! Friends, we have passed a night in hell; but now the
sun is risen, the birds are singing, and the radiant form of the dentist consoles
the world!” (87). The “pure experience of order” embodied in the form of the
dentist delivers the implied reader from the hell of mere contingency.

The central opposition in the story is between the “radiant form” of rea-
sonable violence and the dark abyss of its unreasonable double: between, so to
speak, the dentist and the torturer. Though both inflict pain, the former does
it for a cause and thus his actions are subject to causality. The latter, a homi-
cidal lunatic, acts on contingency. And though the end result may be precisely
the same (the lord of Glengyle is missing his head), the two kinds of
violence are as different as the hell of horror and the heaven of the detective
story.

The hell of horror is populated by demons, ghosts, vampires, and things
that go bump in the night. But the radiance of the detective story’s heaven
flows precisely from the absence of angels or spirits of any stripe. It is an
empty heaven, cleansed of anything not amenable to the law of reason. If the
supernatural in horror is an aspect of the violent sublime, the absence of the
supernatural in the classic detective story signifies its expulsion.

In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” Dupin, in the face of the locked
room with two frightfully mutilated bodies in it, dismisses a supernatural
solution out of hand: “It is not too much to say that neither of us believe in
preternatural events. Madame and Mademoiselle L’Espanaye were not
destroyed by spirits. The doers of the deed were material and escaped mate-
rially” (156). This becomes the a priori axiom of the genre: “the doers of the
deed were material.” But why? Considering Poe’s own supernatural oeuvre,
why should a character be more skeptical than his creator?

At the beginning of The Hound of the Baskervilles, Dr. Mortimer expresses
to Holmes his belief that the mysterious death of Sir Charles Baskerville is
due to a supernatural influence. Holmes does not even deign to discuss this
proposition, dismissing the suggestion with a joke. It is natural to think that
Holmes here is speaking for his creator. But Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author
of The Psychic Quest, was a fervent believer in spiritualism who dedicated the
last twenty years of his life to propagation of the spiritualist gospel. Even though his conversion to spiritualism was a gradual process, it was well underway by World War I. And yet even in the last Holmes collection, The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes (1921–1927), there are no signs that Dr Mor-timer’s suggestion should have been treated seriously.

Whereas Doyle was a spiritualist, Chesterton was a devout Catholic. But Father Brown debunks claims of the supernatural with depressing regularity. More than once, he is confronted with a seemingly impossible crime, in which the criminal banks on what he considers to be a clergyman’s credulity, only to be defeated by Brown’s invincible common sense. As he says contemptuously in “The Dagger with Wings”: “Perhaps his [the criminal’s] only mistake was in choosing a preternatural story; he had the notion that because I am a clergyman, I should believe anything. Many people have little notions of that kind” (420). On the contrary, it seems, because he is a clergyman, Father Brown should believe nothing that is not rational. This paradox provides a clue to the role of reason in the classic detective story. The priest-as-sleuth exemplifies Chesterton’s view of God as supreme designer who has created the universe according to a rational and orderly plan. The supernatural is excluded a priori because it is aligned with chaos that has no place in God’s design: Good is logical; evil is chaotic, irrational, and muddled. The universe, in other words, is structured like a whodunit.

This is clearly set out in the first two stories in the first Father Brown collection, The Innocence of Father Brown (1910). In “The Blue Cross” French policeman Aristide Valentin pursues the famous criminal Flambeau who is hiding in London. It turns out that Flambeau, disguised as a Catholic priest, attempts to steal a valuable relic from Father Brown, who deliberately leaves a trail of senseless disturbances that Valentin follows on a hunch. This allows Valentin to arrive on the scene of the attempted robbery in the nick of time and to arrest the criminal who is already half-converted by Father Brown’s preaching (in the subsequent stories Flambeau abandons his criminal career and becomes a private detective). Valentin is very much a latter-day Dupin, a “thinking man” who achieves his remarkable successes by “plodding logic [and] clear and commonplace French thought” (11–12). Here he pursues a hunch. But the fact that this hunch pays off reveals the fundamental system of rational causality underlying the chain of seemingly unconnected events. Valentin’s success is not a lucky chance but a denial of the very idea of chance and accident. In the conversation between Father Brown and Flambeau, it is the criminal who extols the unfathomable mystery of heaven, while the saintly priest defends the intelligibility of God: “reason is always reasonable, even in the last limbo, in the lost borderland of things. I know that people charge the Church with lowering reason, but it is just the other way. A lone on earth,
the Church makes reason really supreme. Alone on earth, the Church affirms that God Himself is bound by reason” (20). I believe because it is reasonable. If Holmes can only hope that the universe is not ruled by chance, because the alternative is “unthinkable,” Father Brown knows it is not because the Church tells him so.

Of course, such knowledge is inherently unstable, especially in the charged episteme of the early-twentieth century. The clear boundaries of the detective story buckle under the enormous pressures of the ideological battles of the time. Already the next story in The Innocence of Father Brown, called “The Secret Garden,” revises the optimism of its predecessor. Reason alone, it appears, is not enough to lead one to the state of grace. In “The Secret Garden” Valentin the detective becomes the murderer. Such shifts are not uncommon, and later I will consider in some detail the doubling of the detective and the criminal. However, Valentin’s fall is more extreme than most since he murders for ideological reasons: to prevent an American millionaire from bequeathing his money to the Catholic Church, which he loathes. If the mountebank of “The Dagger with Wings” and other assorted cranks and pagans (often of Eastern origins) exemplify the madness of superstition, Valentin exemplifies the madness of reason. He is “great brutality of the intellect” (34) prompts him to commit a gruesome murder precisely because his logic is not restrained by faith. He is Dupin-become-Dracula, Holmes-turned-Moriarty, unable to sustain the delicate balance whereby the irrational is illuminated by reason, but reason is disciplined by the power of the law. Chesterton’s Catholicism is only a specific incarnation of the wider disciplinary framework, which constrains the detective in the classic detective story. Holmes’s unquestioned obedience of the law and Poirot’s bourgeois attitude to murder are examples of the same configuration: reason that knows its proper boundaries, content to stay within a system of axioms that it does not dare to probe. If the supernatural is the mystery, which reason is called upon to discipline, faith, morality, and law are the mysteries, which discipline reason itself.

A perfectly rational world may be perceived in two contradictory ways: as a prison or as a refuge. D. A. Miller sees “the world of significant trifles relayed to one another in a minute causal network” as a universal panopticon of omnipresent power in which we are perpetually “put under restraint” (32). The opposite point of view is expressed in Krutch’s famous observation that “Poe invented the detective story in order that he might not go mad” (quoted in Tani 10). Traditionally, the detective story has endorsed the second view, portraying the supernatural chaos of horror as frightening and repulsive. However, it is not unaware that the vigilance of reason breeds its own monsters. Some texts trace the fault line at which “the pure experience of order” slips into its opposite. Jorge Luis Borges’s metafictional “Death and the Com-
pass” (1942) takes to its logical extreme the genre’s presumption of “making sense” and creates a labyrinthine universe of absolute causality, purged of all traces of randomness and accident. In “Death and the Compass” the archetypal criminal lures the equally archetypal detective—modeled on Dupin and Holmes—to his death by constructing an elaborate maze of clues at the core of which lies the detective’s foreordained murder. The normal order of cause and effect has been inverted, so that the web of causality extends both to the past and the future, trapping the criminal, the detective, and the implied reader in a universal panopticon, in which, as in the paranoid delusion of a conspiracy buff, everything makes sense. Rather than being reassuring, this world of pure reason is horrifying, an oppressive jail, “a labyrinth, from which it [is] impossible to flee” (85). Absolute sanity slips over into insane compulsion, generating “superfluous symmetries” and “maniacal repetitions” (84).

The opposite of Borges’s story is Ruth Rendell’s brilliant A Fatal Inversion (1987), which spins an intricate plot out of a series of improbable coincidences, meaningless by themselves and yet leading up to an act of appalling violence. A Fatal Inversion and “Death and the Compass” tip in opposite directions the delicate balance of reason and unreason that sustains the detective story. The result is the same in both cases: a nightmare. In Ruth Rendell’s novel (published under the pen name Barbara Vine), the characters, a group of young people living in a commune in the 1970s, are caught up in a web as inexorable as the one Borges’s Red Scharlach spins out for his detective-victim. At the center of Rendell’s maze there is also a murder. But this is a web with no design. No mastermind plans all the numerous small coincidences, wrong decisions, peculiar crisscrossing of destinies, which eventually lead to an irrational outburst of violence that irrevocably blights the characters’ lives. Once the act of violence occurs, its consequences are inescapable and yet they cannot be predicted in advance, just as the narrative centrality of the murder does not preclude the fact that it is meaningless. The “why?” of the classic detective story simply has no place in a contingent world. “No one asked A dam why he had done it, then or later. He had done it, there was no point in asking” (1987, 302).

Stephen Jay Gould discusses A Fatal Inversion in his book Wonderful Life dedicated to the nature of evolution, as based on contingency rather than design. He calls A Fatal Inversion “a conscious text on the nature of history” (1989, 285). For the characters of Rendell’s novel, buffeted by forces they can neither control nor comprehend, their fully historical world appears as a dark maze of horror. If reason and unreason are represented as a choice of nightmares, it seems natural that the detective story is trying so hard to steer a middle course.
NEAT WOUNDS

The duality of reason and unreason structures the entire fictional world of the classic detective story. With regard to the plot, it mutates into the juxtaposition of causality and contingency. Projected upon the level of characterization, it becomes the Cartesian dichotomy of spirit and body, or rather of body and brain. Logic, the detective’s weapon, must tame the unruly passions of the corpse or, considering the genre’s main preoccupation, the corpse.

Grooming is a necessary prerequisite for a detective story corpse. Decomposition is out; but even ordinary untidiness is barely acceptable: “Even violence itself, the books’ reason for being, is somehow conformist, limited, unreal. A bullet-hole almost invariably is ‘neat’ (as a putt in golf, perhaps?), while scarcely a knife is on record that has not been embedded neatly between shoulder blades. Blood is generally a ‘spreading stain’ or a ‘pool,’ both fastidious expressions that convey nothing of the terrible glistening mess that is made by human butchery” (Watson 102).

In Christie’s *Cards on the Table* (1936) a man is fatally stabbed in a room full of people. There is no outcry, no bleeding, and the dagger protruding from the body looks like “a particularly ornate shirt stud” (22). This cardboard dummy is, clearly, nothing but a pretext for the subsequent game of wit played with the reader, which proceeds according to patently artificial rules: four suspects, four detectives, and the solution found through the study of bridge scores. However, no matter how unreal, there must be a corpse.

Christie’s self-caricature in the book, the famous detective fiction writer Ariadne Oliver, explains the secret of the successful whodunit: “What really matters is plenty of bodies! If the thing’s getting a little dull, some more blood cheers it up” (55). And yet at the same time, Mrs. Oliver concedes that real murder is not “very much in [her] line” (80), since, as opposed to fiction, real life is “badly constructed” (28). In other words, the detective story must balance “blood” and “construction” in such a way as to convey just enough of the shock of the former to be successfully neutralized by the orderliness of the latter. If the scale is tipped on the side of blood, the result is horror. If the reader is starved for bodies, the result is boredom.

The suppression, by the detective story, of the violent sublime does not mean total exclusion. On the contrary, violent sights are a necessary part of its generic repertoire but in a weakened and circumscribed form. “Vaccination” is perhaps a better term than “evasion”; the detective story vaccinates its readers against the shocking reality of violence by doling it out in precisely measured quantities. Again, Holmes and Watson provide the best critical argument about their own text. In *The Sign of Four* Holmes rebukes Watson’s “romantic” handling of the Jefferson Hope case, and when the doctor points
out that the facts were romantic enough, Holmes replies: “Some facts should
be suppressed, or, at least, a just sense of proportion should be observed in
handling them” (65). “A just sense of proportion” is different from outright
suppression.

In the same Sign of Four, however, violence intrudes into the text with a far
greater force than usual, turning the novella into a hybrid near horror.
Instead of a neat, bloodless prop, the corpse of the victim becomes an uncann-
y vision of doubling and dismemberment: “I stooped to the hole and recoiled
in horror . . . Looking straight at me, and suspended, as it were, in the air . . .
there hung a face—the very face of our companion Thaddeus. . . . The fea-
tures were set, however, in a horrible smile, a fixed and unnatural grin, which
in that still and moonlit room was more jarring to the nerves than any scowl
or contortion” (78).

This “hanging” face signifies the Real: the tear in the linguistic fabric
through which an unnamable trauma peeps out. Violence has wrenched the
corpse’s face from its moorings in the symbolic system and stripped it of name
and identity. Suspended in the air, an object of fascination and disgust, it is a
“thing in itself,” a site of the sublime trauma of violence. The “thing” has to be
veiled and yet at the same time displayed. This literary striptease is the detect-
ive writer’s greatest skill: to admit just enough of the Real but never too much.
Christie, who hones this skill to perfection, writes in the foreword to her novel
The Body in the Library: “I laid down for myself certain conditions. The librar-
y in question must be a highly orthodox and conventional library. The body, on
the other hand, must be a wildly improbable and highly sensational body” (5).

In this novel the body is indeed showcased in a way that contradicts the
“decency” of the ordinary whodunit: “The face was heavily made-up, the
powder standing out grotesquely on its blue swollen surface, the mascara of
the lashes lying thickly on distorted cheeks, the scarlet of the lips looking like
a gash . . .” (16).

Moreover, unlike Cards on the Table, the body here is not just the pretext of
the investigation but the most important clue. In order to solve the crime,
Miss Marple has to focus precisely on the stigmata of sexuality and deviance.
Whereas in Cards on the Table the body and the text (the bridge scores) are
kept separate, here they are collapsed. The corpse is divested of its horror not
by evasion but by too-intent gaze.

Euphemism is defined as a word or phrase that “once meant, or prima
facie still means, something else” (Holder vii). In other words, a euphemism
not only misnames its referent but also diverts referentiality into a different
channel. The object is doubled: the obscene or unacceptable meaning is cov-
ered up by another, which, however, does not nullify the obscenity but only
decently veils it. Insofar as it is possible to extend this definition of euphemism
to a set of literary strategies, it describes exactly the detective story’s handling of violence: the corpse, without ceasing to be an object of horror, is doubled into an object of cognition. The genre begins with a primal scene of the euphemistic rewriting of the body. In Poe’s “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” physical violation is flaunted with a brutality unparalleled until the appearance of the police procedural a century and a half later, and yet at the same time the story counters the horror with an equally startling degree of cognitive detachment. “The Mystery of Marie Roget” deconstructs the genre at the moment of its inception. In the language of Russian formalism, it “lays bare the device” by literally laying bare the body. The corpse of a rape and murder victim is displayed before the reader in all its pitiful nakedness, its injuries carefully enumerated and classified, while Dupin and his unnamed Watson engage in feats of dazzling deduction.

And at the same time the body is not there at all. All the evidence Dupin possesses is the newspaper accounts of the crime; he never as much as stirs from his apartment to confront the grubby reality of the murdered grisette’s life and death. Since these accounts are unreliable and self-contradictory, Dupin’s work is essentially that of a literary critic. He has to pinpoint the slippages and inaccuracies in the narratives of Marie’s murder, to unravel the metaphorical tangles, to argue with faulty logic. The corpse becomes a literary puzzle whose solution has as its object “the investigation of the truth” (169). But this investigation is enabled by the fact that the raw impact of Marie’s violated body is already filtered through layers of medical, criminological, and journalistic discourse. In a sense, Dupin performs a postmortem of language, tracing the contours of the missing corpse through the fractures, lacunae, and knots it has left in the textual fabric. The body is the text; but when it is only the text, it disappears. Marie’s corpse is the opposite of the torture victim’s body. In Kafka’s “In the Penal Colony” the sublime spectacle of the violated body overshadows the puerile text that the torture machine harrows into the condemned man’s flesh. Marie’s body, on the contrary, is reduced to its text; the beaten and bruised flesh veiled by a thick palimpsest of readable clues. But in the process of its deciphering, the body evaporates, leaving behind a sheaf of unreliable newspaper reports and an equivocal promise of the criminal’s eventual apprehension.

In Ruth Rendell’s Kissing the Gunner’s Daughter (1991), there is an attempt to strip away the reassuring layer of textuality from the corpse. In the descriptions of the crime scene after an entire family is massacred, Rendell attempts to convey the visceral impact of violence, to reveal what the euphemism of “neat wounds” works so desperately to hide. One of her detectives stands in the bloody room bereft of speech: “He felt a blankness, a sensation of being stricken dumb, of all words being useless” (29). When words are taken away,
all that remains is the mute protest of the flesh, shrinking in solidarity at the
sight of the fellow flesh disfigured by violence: "It was a long time, an age,
since he had felt actual physical nausea at such sights. On the other hand, had
he ever before seen such a sight as this?" (ibid.). The trauma of the "sight"
hollows out language; and yet, as Rendell's detective, Inspector Wexford,
wisely recognizes, the shock of confronting the unnameable Thing may eventual-
ly lead to addiction. One can become hooked on the horror: "Those great
dark splashes and stains were real blood. Was he privileged to see them, or
unfortunate?" (97).

Is he? The murderer has to see his or her handiwork and, like the young
girl in Kissing the Gunner's Daughter who participates in the slaughter of her
family, may become first ill, then indifferent, then jubilant and craving more.
But what about Inspector Wexford himself and all the other Great Detectives,
the guardians of reason and law? How do they protect their own bodies from
throbbing in sympathy with the mutilated flesh? How do they hold onto their
language, protecting it from the corrosion of the sublime? How do they guard
against the contagion of violence?

THE DETECTIVE'S BODY

The victim's body hides its corporeality by translating the stigmata of violence
into legible signs. But the victim's part is easiest. The corpse only has to be; the
detective and the criminal have to act. This acting inevitably involves their
bodies. And thus both are caught in a complicated system of corporeal dou-
blespeak.

The classic detective has gender but no sex. Dr. Watson, in the very first
tale in Arthur Conan Doyle's groundbreaking collection The Adventures of
Sherlock Holmes, dashes the reader's expectations of a traditional Victorian
love story: "All emotions, and that one particularly, were abhorrent to his
cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect
reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen. . . . Grit in a sensi-
tive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-powered lenses, would not
be more disturbing than a strong emotion in a nature such as his" ("A Scan-
dal in Bohemia" 117).

The detective is a logical machine, a human-shaped computer—the
metaphor later literalized in Jacques Futrelle's Golden Age tales about Pro-
fessor Van Dusen, called The Thinking Machine. To function efficiently, this
computer requires a sterile environment, since its involvement with the mate-
rial body and its passions results in pollution, malfunction, and failure. Wat-
son's surprising tropes for love—grit and crack—indicate that it is specifically
the physicality of desire that is dangerous to the detective's immaculate Logos:
“And if you have a form of fiction which is intellectual, then that form of fiction is fit for a Victorian man to read. . . . This was manly stuff. It accepted the physical world but kept clear that part of the physical world which was embarrassing” (Routley 23).

However, “manly stuff” did not endure for long. The generation after Doyle, both the writers and readers of detective fiction, showed the decisive trend of feminization, continuing till today. More importantly, however, the division of the physical world into the embarrassing and the nonembarrassing parts turned out to be difficult to effect. While Dupin, Holmes, and Father Brown are celibate, Christie’s female sleuth, Miss Marple, is a confirmed spinster, and Hercule Poirot, aged, freakish, and sentimental, is proof against any sexual temptation. The second generation of the Golden Age writers rebelled against this convention. H. C. Bailey, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, Michael Innes, Ngaio Marsh, and others began tinkering with the Poe-Doyle-Christie heritage, attempting to make their detectives more human. In the process, the thinking machine acquired a wife and occasionally a family. Bailey’s Reggie Fortune and Allingham’s Mr. Campion are married, while Dorothy Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey is the hero of a steamy love affair, which culminates in his marriage in Busman’s Honeymoon (1937). Sayers’s combination of the classic detective story and the women’s romance has proven to be a winning formula, exploited with great success in the 1990s whodunits of Elizabeth George, whose aristocratic foursome of sleuths, two men and two women, go through all the possible romantic permutations among themselves, not to mention fleeting liaisons with strangers.

Such developments, however, are less revolutionary than might appear. In fact, they can be seen as an attempt to contain the disturbing implications of the original formula. Watson’s statement hinges on the metaphorical opposition of the order of reason versus the chaos of desire. The romance sidesteps this opposition by producing the order of desire. It squeezes desire into very precise—and precisely gendered—boundaries. But the darkness at the heart of the classic detective story will not be so easily dispelled. The detective’s romance simply covers up what the absence of a conventional love interest starkly emphasized, stranger and more obscure appetites.

There is something perverse about Dupin’s and Holmes’s celibacy, giving rise to various ribald speculations about the relationship between the detective and his faithful sidekick. As opposed to the Victorian Doyle, Poe appears quite nonchalant about the homoerotic implications of his night-cruising couple: Dupin’s nameless friend candidly describes their relationship as “giving [himself] up to [Dupin’s] wild whims with a perfect abandon” (144). However, like Holmes’s and Watson’s, this relationship is also mediated by a woman’s dead body.
In “A Scandal in Bohemia” Watson qualifies his denial of Holmes’s sexuality by pointing out that there was, after all, “one woman” for Holmes, and that one woman not only dead but “of dubious and questionable memory” (117). While the love story is rejected, another Victorian genre seems to insinuate itself into the text at that point: the melodrama of the fallen woman, laden with the images of the unchaste female bodies stretched out on the swampy river shore or starving in some cluttered attic. “A Scandal in Bohemia” suggests a dangerous attraction of the “reasoning and observing machine” to a woman’s impure physique. Moreover, there is a strange slippage in this attraction, for though Irene Adler in this story is a clever criminal who outwits Holmes, the reference to her death aligns her with those dead females who furnish the traditional puzzle for the detective to solve. Dupin, after all, engenders the classic detective story on the dead bodies of three women: Madame and Mademoiselle L’Espanaye in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and Marie Roget in “The Mystery of Marie Roget.” It is as if Holmes, through Watson, admits of being in love with the corporeality of the victim.

The perversity of the detective stems not from any unorthodox sexual practices but rather from the very juxtaposition of the purity of his thoughts and the impurity of their object: the violated (female or feminized) body. His eroticism is what might be called mental necrophilia. Providing him with a respectable outlet for his erotic energies only disguises the implications of his initial renunciation of love and family. By declaring that desire would be “disturbing” to the balance of Holmes’s mind, Dr. Watson diagnoses his friend as suffering from an acute case of Cartesian dualism. Cloven by the gap between mind and body, spirit and matter, Holmes can only experience sexuality as an illicit attempt to bridge this gap. The only legitimate desire for him is the desire for the body that has been transformed into a sign; textualized, inscribed, written over with the obscure but decipherable script of murder.

This is not to engage in a Freudian reading, digging out the dark secrets of a fictional character’s nonexistent unconscious. Rather, I suggest that the detective story may be read as an allegory of the desire of the disciplinary mind for the disciplined body. What Derrida calls “the violence of the letter” seeks embodiment in the actual violence inflicted upon the receptive and obedient, therefore feminized, corpus of the victim. But in a peculiar inversion it is the detective’s own corporeality that perpetually eludes his all-seeing gaze. The missing body the detective hopelessly searches for is his own.

The collusion between the corporeality of the detective and of the victim is clear in Doyle’s story “The Adventure of the Dying Detective,” included in the 1913 collection Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes. In order to trap a criminal, who commits murders by means of infecting his victims with the germs
of an incurable tropical disease, Holmes pretends to be deadly sick. As usual, Watson is the narrator. Uniquely, however, his medical training allows him to assume the role of the detective as well. From a humble chronicler, Watson is transformed into the chief actor in the story. Normally, the narrative functions are unequally distributed between the two protagonists: to Watson belongs the not inconsiderable power of framing the narration through his exclusive point of view, but Holmes tops it with his control of the plot. In “The Adventure of the Dying Detective,” however, Watson, at least ostensibly, appropriates both functions. He is the one who confronts the criminal, Culverton Smith, while Holmes, feverish and delirious, seems to have lost control not only of the action but of his own body as well. And it is through this reversal that the detective’s own vulnerable corporeality is suddenly highlighted as the hidden source of the genre’s anxieties.

Watson’s profession is not accidental: if he is the physician of the individual body, Holmes is the physician of the body politic. Carlo Ginzburg famously relates the rise of the “evidential method”—detection of the hidden truth through study of seemingly trivial clues, which he finds at work in both Doyle and Freud—to medicine:

In each of these cases the model of medical semiotics is evident: that discipline which permits the diagnosis of diseases inaccessible to direct observations based on superficial symptoms, sometimes thought to be irrelevant in the eyes of the layman. . . . It is worth noticing, incidentally, that the duo Holmes-Watson, the perceptive detective and the obtuse physician, represents the splitting of a single real person, one of the young Conan Doyle’s professors, renowned for his extraordinary diagnostic abilities. (102)

In “The Adventure of the Dying Detective,” Watson collapses the two halves of this single whole back into one: for once, he performs the same kind of work that Holmes so often performs on the body of the victim, on the body of Holmes himself. He reads the text of symptoms, employing to the full “the model of medical semiotics”: “His eyes had the brightness of fever, there was a hectic flush upon either cheek, and dark crusts clung to his lips; the thin hands upon the coverlet twitched incessantly, his voice was croaking and spasmodic” (829). The cognitive mastery Watson enjoys over his friend is immediately translated into actual mastery: “‘Holmes,’ said I, ‘you are not yourself. A sick man is but a child, and so I will treat you’” (829).

The dying detective’s delirium brings to the fore the nightmare haunting the Thinking Machine, the nightmare of being locked in a material body. Even a computer is, after all, a metal box; even an engine is composed of the solid parts, which may, eventually, fail. Disease is a rebellion of the body but
objects rebel too. “I wonder,” says feverish Holmes, “how a battery feels when it pours electricity into a non-conductor?” (831). The “grit” of sexuality is only a metonymy for that stubborn materiality of the body, which no “reasoning and observing machine” can escape, precisely by dint of being a machine rather than a disembodied spirit. And while purification from sexuality is possible, the purification from corporeality is not. The nonembarrassing part of the physical world proves to be far more embarrassing than the Victorian underworld of sex, for an imaginary Holmes gripped by passion would be a less ignominious sight than a raving, gasping, helpless patient.

This is the detective’s fall, becoming a passive body, on which others may practice the disciplinary skills. But having been brought to the ultimate low, he must rise again, lest the ideological framework of the genre explode. And “The Adventure of the Dying Detective” ends with an extraordinary closure, in which Holmes admits to practicing a cold-blooded deception on his only friend. There was no infection, no fever, no delirium; the telltale signs of the body in pain were all faked: “there is nothing which a sponge may not cure” (837). The detective reasserts his absolute control over the body—his own and, by extension, the body of the criminal and the victim—by turning it into a pliant, “writable” surface, which can bear an imprint of any text whatsoever. Holmes’s unparalleled skill with disguises belongs in the same category of taming the body; in another story of his resurrection, “The Adventure of the Empty House” (1903), he rises from a faked death by putting on and then easily shrugging off the identity of an old man, which fools Watson again by its skillful counterfeiting of age and infirmity. Moreover, in “The Adventure of the Dying Detective” Holmes explains the seemingly gratuitous cruelty of his deception of Watson by the necessity for the latter to express genuine signs of anxiety when confronting the criminal: “You won’t be offended, Watson? You will realize that among your many talents dissimulation finds no place, and that if you had shared my secret you would never have been able to impress Smith with the urgent necessity of his presence, which was the vital point of the whole scheme” (837). Watson, in other words, is put back in his place by being reminded how undisciplined and grossly material his own body is in comparison with the elevated corporeality of the detective. He could never counterfeit the tremor in his voice or the twitch of his lips. Holmes, however, is another matter. “To the last gasp he would always be the master” (832).

The story of the detective’s death and resurrection is given an unusual twist in Chesterton’s “The Resurrection of Father Brown” (1923), the tale that explicitly draws upon Holmes’s paradigm. Unlike Holmes, who stages his own miracles, Father Brown becomes the victim of a conspiracy in some unnamed South American country. The aim of the conspiracy is to fake the
detective’s miraculous resurrection, which can be discredited afterwards in such a way as to cast obloquy on the Church. Like an incongruous Juliet, Father Brown is drugged with some mysterious substance that makes him appear dead, until he is dramatically resurrected in full view of a superstitious audience. Before that, however, he has been conned into writing to the publishers of his stories: “I am ready to die and come to life again like Sherlock Holmes, if that is the best way” (331). Waking up from the drug-induced coma, Father Brown, with his usual commonsensical wisdom, realizes what has happened and squashes the conspiracy in the bud by sending an appropriate telegram to his Bishop. However, the absence of miracle is, precisely, what is miraculous in the story. The little priest’s coolness, self-possession, and self-detachment are as superhuman as Holmes’s steely control of his body. Waking up in a coffin, most people would be more concerned with the state of their health than with the glory of the Church, and “canonized as a saint,” a majority of mere mortals might be forgiven some twinge of vanity (332). That Father Brown is absolutely immune to both fear and pride aligns him with Holmes as an exemplum of self-discipline rather than with more traditional instances of Christian humility. The contrived note tells the truth: Father Brown is “like Sherlock Holmes.” The dumpy, self-effacing man of God, created as an opposite of the flamboyant and arrogant private detective, turns out to be his hidden double, constrained by the law of the genre that demands that the detective’s immaculate body be resurrected from the grave of the matter.

However—and this is precisely the paradox of the detective story—the body cannot be simply discarded; it must be obdurate enough to be disciplined and yet pliant enough to obey. The Thinking Machine is constantly suspended between these two opposing demands of rebellious corporeality and miraculous self-control.

Signs of the flesh are often admitted into the narrative as a concession to “medical semiotics.” In fact, as if to offset the rigidity of the detective’s self-discipline, such signs are often morbid, monstrous, exaggerated. There is something freakish about the detective’s body. We know very little about Dupin’s physique, but the narrator’s frequent references to his “madness” and “eccentricity” beg for the correspondent corporeal marks according to the age’s favorite “sciences” of phrenology and physiognomy. Holmes’s striking appearance is described in great detail, but perhaps the clearest instance in which his physicality intrudes upon the narrative is his cocaine addiction. A source of embarrassment to many critics, this addiction, however, is less interesting as a moral failure than as the pretext for an intensely vivid description of the Great Detective’s vulnerable body: “Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece, and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate
needle, and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist, all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks" (The Sign of Four; Doyle 64).

Not only do we get a disconcerting glimpse of the detective’s steely physique “dotted and scarred” with self-inflicted injuries, but the subsequent conversation with Watson also calls attention to Holmes’s body. In response to Watson’s remonstrations, Holmes replies that, in the absence of “mental exaltation” provided by detective work, he requires the artificial stimulation of the drug, since his mind “rebels at stagnation” (64). Reason becomes a functional equivalent of cocaine; both are physiological stimulants craved by the detective’s brain. This is the paradox of “medical semiotics”: rooted in the body, it lacks the convincing lever to elevate certain bodily functions (such as those of the brain) above others (such as those of the genitals). Chesterton, of course, finds this lever in his faith; others found it in evolutionary theory with its imaginary ladder of progress from the lower to the higher faculties. But when Holmes, in his assumed delirium in “The Adventure of the Dying Detective,” gasps out “Strange how the brain controls the brain!” (832), he articulates the central contradiction underlying the detective's supremely self-disciplined body.

In the next generation of Great Detectives, the residue of physicality became even more important: the freakishness was accentuated in some, while others inherited Holmes's charisma exaggerated into the charm of a romantic hero. Father Brown’s short unprepossessing figure is meant to signify his unworldliness, but the constant stress on his “lumpy” appearance eventually achieves the effect of deformity. Ernest Bramah’s Max Carrados is blind; Rex Stout’s Nero Wolfe is so grossly overweight he cannot stir from his chair. Hercule Poirot’s egg-shaped head, waxed moustache, and shortness serve as a comic way of introducing the detective’s corporeality without the visceral shock of “scarred forearms.”

On the other side of the scale is the detective-as-romantic hero, from Dorothy Sayers’s Lord Peter Wimsey to Elizabeth George’s Lord Thomas Lynley. The dashing and irresistible titled sleuth is the obverse side of the little Hercule Poirot with the egg-shaped head and enormous moustache. Both admit the body in carefully controlled and meticulously limited ways. Romantic sexuality or endearing freakishness equally adumbrates the paradox of the detective: the Thinking Machine locked in the cage of “meat.”

**CHRISTMAS MURDERERS**

For all their importance, the victim and the detective are subordinated to the true center of the detective story, its raison d’être, the murderer. And it is in
its delineation of the subject of violence that the genre most clearly reveals itself as a narrative of discipline.

While highly sophisticated in its plot construction, the characterization in the classic detective story may be described as realism "lite." The genre is "the swan song of old-style middle-class fiction, an attempt to freeze the last literary remains of the nineteenth-century novel" (Tani 26). The "remains" that are being frozen are what is left after an act of violence has shredded the psychological consistency of the character. And the extraordinary effort invested by the detective story in not letting these remains disintegrate into the rotten subjectivity of a monster or a serial killer is what accounts for the reassuring quality of the genre.

All popular literature, of course, may be seen as reassuring in the sense that it tends to collaborate with the reader's prior ideological convictions, but detective fiction is uniquely cozy— uniquely, that is, among the genres of violence. One can easily understand why a Mills and Boon romance tends to put its audience into the state of pleasant daydreaming, but it is not immediately clear why bleeding corpses, autopsies, fingerprints, chases, mounting suspicions, arrest, and as often as not a suicide should have a similar effect. And yet they do. Erik Routley explains this quality of the genre by reference to discipline:

The detective story reader is not a lover of violence but a lover of order. . . . He does not love violence, and is not even primarily interested in what is bizarre. . . . It is not a matter of fear or guilt but of assurance. . . . And this feeling of surprising comfort is achieved not merely by the drawing of a satisfying rational diagram . . . but most of all by the disciplined dance of character which detection calls for and makes possible (223–24).

The connection between comfort and discipline is spelled out clearly here: the detective story is "cozy" because it provides "assurance." The assurance is not that justice will triumph (for formal justice is often flouted in both Doyle and Christie, whose criminals are as likely to eliminate themselves decorously as to put the state to the expense of a trial), but rather that the world and other people will ultimately make sense. Holmes's bleak "circle of misery and violence and fear" is turned into an arena where the implied author as the ringmaster puts his or her violent characters through the steps of the "disciplined dance."

The connection between character intelligibility, discipline, and reassurance is explored by D. A. Miller in The Novel and the Police, where, describing the "entanglements" of the novelistic form with the practices of police surveillance, he points out that the novel "interrogate" its characters in precisely the same way as the police interrogate criminals, attempting to elicit from them a full story of their being, marked by "continuity and repleteness"
In other words, the very notion of character is disciplinary in nature. The disciplined dance provides reassurance by smoothing away the violence inherent in the very process of the narrative construction of identity.

But this is true about any character, no matter how blameless. When actual physical violence compounds the violence of the text, the stakes go much higher. Trembling Oliver Twist in Miller’s example is hardly likely to arouse the reader’s anxiety even if he does not manage to give a “continuous and replete” account of himself. But Bill Sikes is a different matter. And it is precisely with him, as we have seen, that Dickens’s novel fails in its disciplinary role. The detective story sets out to rectify this failure. And if it manages to do for a murderer what Dickens does for a workhouse orphan, to provide him with a comprehensible story, the resulting surge of reassurance will be significant indeed.

In Christie’s Murder for Christmas a particularly bloody and gruesome murder is committed during a Christmas family gathering. To compound the transgression, the murder is a parricide and the criminal is actually the police inspector investigating the case. And yet the overall impression of the book is of cheerful, old-fashioned fun. Like Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol,” Christie’s novel invokes the frightening ghosts of the past, only to exorcise them through the vision of a happier, healthier future. This future is dependent on the process of investigation that restores authenticity to the characters. The Lee family is composed of unhappy hypocrites, each harboring a secret or playing a part. The grisly murder of the paterfamilias by one of his illegitimate sons provides the cathartic bloodletting, in the wake of which the therapeutic “interrogation and inquiry” take place, eventually producing a “full account” of each character, including the murderer (Miller 9). Only then may a true Christmas be celebrated. The greater the shock of violence, the more stringent is the narrative normalization of the character, and the emotional yield of this normalization is the Yuletide reassurance of “all’s well with the world.”

In Poe’s story “Thou Art the Man!” the body of a murder victim is made to speak from beyond the grave in order to reveal its killer. It is a horror tale, not a detective story. But its culmination— the finger pointing at the murderer, the name named, the identity revealed — is the sine qua non of the classic detective story. This is how it always ends, with the definite, authoritative, and final answer to the question “whodunit?” The secret that the genre pursues is the secret of identity. The gesture of the corpse is the gesture of interpellation, calling upon the murderer to recognize himself as the man, or perhaps simply a man. The classic detective story is a narrative machine for producing a specific kind of self. What Foucault says about the panopticon may be applied to the plot of detection: it is “the abstract formula of a very real technology, that of individuals” (1975, 225).
This technology has several components. The first one is labeling: the criminal has to be named, identified, given a specific position within the fictional world of the text. From the free-floating signifier of the murderer which, via the process of suspicion, attaches itself in turn to almost every character in the text, the criminal has to be transformed into a stable, singular corporeal identity. This might be described as “disambiguation”: the empty signifier has to coincide with the previously anonymous signified in a one-to-one relationship.

The second one is the assignment of a motive. “Find the motive, find the murderer” is Poirot’s motto. He refuses to accept that, as in Ruth Rendell’s novels, murder just happens. There must be a comprehensible, clear, and above all, rational motive. A gain and again, throughout his fantastically long career, he gallantly defends the dilapidated citadel of utilitarian rationality against the rising tide of deep psychology. In a late novel, Hallowe’en Party, confronted with a seemingly psychopathological murder of a young girl, Poirot, despite all the evidence to the contrary, insists that “we still have to find the motive involved” (118). And of course, he is right and his opponents, speculating about nature and nurture in the makeup of sexual killers, are wrong. The “simpler” motive turns out to be greed and fear of discovery: the respectable middle-class engines of violence.

Moreover, there is a perfect fit between the manner of committing the crime and the criminal’s personality. The “signature” of the serial killer is a remnant of the individualizing tendency of the detective story. “The murderer has, so to speak, signed his name by committing the crime,” says Poirot in Peril at End House (40). When motive and manner perfectly coincide, when all the extraneous tangle of red herrings is cleared away, the detective stages a traditional denouement in which his finger unwaveringly points at the murderer. In this exposure an individual is produced who is simultaneously typical and unique, transparent and complex. “Thou art the man!” happily unites the generality of scientific classification (for the subject in question is instantaneously assimilated to the class of violent criminals) with the psychological discrimination of the realistic novel (for the murderer is defined by a particular, unique, idiosyncratic murder, which functions as the infallible index of his personality).

The detective story, thus, seems to be a perfect machine of discipline in producing what appears to be the two distinct kinds of subjects: the innocent and the guilty: “Rather than in rendering all its subjects uniformly ‘normal’, discipline is interested in putting in place a perceptual grid in which a division between the normal and the deviant inherently imposes itself” (Miller 18). However, as we have seen in the example of Judge Wargrave, the situation is not so simple. On the contrary, the Judge is a baffling example of a disci-
plinary subject who is simultaneously totally normal—embodied both the judiciary and the narrative functions of normalization—and totally deviant, a pleasure murderer. *Ten Little Indians* betrays the secret of the genre: the normal subject is constituted precisely by its capacity for violence. The classic detective story may, then, be seen not as projecting two inherently different subject categories but rather as charting two different plot trajectories that any subject is potentially capable of taking. This follows from the very construction of the murderer in terms of a unique and coherent system of motivation. If the murderer is a perfect character, then any character can be a murderer.

In pursuing the narrative normalization of the violent subject, the detective story exposes the inherent contradiction of its own project. The discriminations of criminology, such as define the serial killer as a special biological kind, clash with the ideology of individualistic liberal democracy, which assumes potential equality of all social monads. The detective story leaves criminological profiling to true crime and the thriller. It does not endorse the category of the deviant and incomprehensible monster of violence. Rather, its formulaic plot functions as a dramatization of the ubiquity of violence, stemming from the very constitution of the liberal subject. The detective story shows that "ordinary psychological processes and normal, human motivations . . . are the primary sources of evil" (Staub 26). But in doing so, it undermines its own disciplinary grid, which establishes the categories of the normal and the deviant in the first place.

The classic detective story is perpetually tempted by horror’s representation of the violent subject as a monster. When it succumbs to this temptation, the result is *The Silence of the Lambs*. But in general, the classic detective story valiantly resists the lure of Dr. Lecter and his look-alikes, not, however, without introducing characters who are poised on the very brink of monstrosity. But normally, such malefactors are used only to set off the main modality of the violent subject as the supremely rational subject of discipline.

**THE BRUTE ON THE MOOR**

In Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), there are two criminals. One is Selden, a brutal murderer, whose death sentence was commuted “due to some doubts as to his complete sanity, so atrocious was his conduct” (481). Selden escapes incarceration and hides on the barren moor, adding to the heavy atmosphere of menace blanketing this most Gothic of all Holmes’s adventures: "Somewhere there, on that desolate plain, was lurking this fiendish man, hiding in a burrow like a wild beast, his heart full of malignancy against the whole race which had cast him out" (481).
It is not difficult to recognize in Selden both an offspring of Frankenstein's fiend, lurking in deserted places, and a progenitor of the monstrous serial killers we have encountered in the previous chapter. But the novel provides him with an even more spectacular genealogy, linking him to the prehistoric beast-man who had once inhabited that very moor: “Over the rocks, in the crevice in which the candle burned, there was thrust out an evil yellow face, a terrible animal face. . . . Foul with mire, with a bristling beard, and hung with matted hair, it might well have belonged to one of those old savages who dwelt in the burrows on the hill-sides” (Doyle 505).

Doyle here inscribes Selden within the fin de siècle favorite trope of “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” an all-purpose explanatory framework based on the notion that the development of the individual recapitulates the development of the species. Selden is a “throwback,” an atavism, whose savagery is the result of his arrested development. However, Selden has nothing to do with the true mystery, the murder of Sir Charles Baskerville. The man responsible for this murder, the adversary who elicits Holmes’s unqualified admiration, is Mr. Stapleton, the very opposite of the brutish Selden. Stapleton is a polished gentleman, a consummate plotter, a “cool and unemotional” player of games (492). Moreover, if Selden is defined through opposition to the civilization represented by Holmes and Watson—the opposition that amounts almost to species difference—Stapleton and Holmes are doubles. The criminal even taunts the detective with their similarity by introducing himself as Sherlock Holmes (477).

It seems that we are back to the split between “the ape and the minister” inaugurated by Poe. But Doyle complicates the scheme inherited from his predecessor. Selden may be animal-like, but he is no ape. The text undermines its own initial presentation of him as a bloodthirsty savage by adding yet another genealogy to Selden’s already complex heritage. Selden as a literary character has the Gothic pedigree, leading back to Frankenstein; as a throwback, his evolutionary history links him to the Neolithic man, but as a human being, he belongs to a sympathetic and suffering family. Selden turns out to be the younger brother of Mrs. Barrymore, Sir Charles’s stolid and respectable housekeeper. When Selden dies, his sister mourns him: “To all the world he was the man of violence, half animal and half demon; but to her he always remained the little willful boy of her own girlhood, the child who had clung to her hand” (531). The “half animal and half demon” is transformed into a pitiful human being by having what Frankenstein so strenuously denied to his creature: a loving family.

Stapleton, on the other hand, undergoes an opposite process. Initially, he is placed within the safest, most innocuous familial context of Victorian fiction: he lives with his sister. It turns out, however, that “Miss Stapleton” is really his
wife, and the first glimpse we get of the brutality smoldering under his cool exterior is when he objects so violently to Sir Henry Baskerville's courting of his "sister," that Sir Henry calls him "a crazy man" (501). At the end we find out that the super-rational Stapleton is a closet sadist who tortures his wife and was involved in some unspecified "infamy" in the school he kept. As Selden is raised to the status of full humanity through the intercession of his sister, Stapleton's abused sister-wife testifies to his real nature, calling him "the brute" (543).

Moreover, Stapleton is also a throwback. Like Selden, he is bound by murderous heredity, doomed to reenact the violence of his forebears. Stapleton is actually a Baskerville, a reincarnation of the wicked Sir Hugo who started the legend of the hellhound haunting the family. Reincarnation here should be understood in the strictly biological sense of the fin de siècle theories of heredity. If Selden recapitulates the history of the Neolithic man, Stapleton recapitulates the less distant but equally bloody history of the English gentry. When Watson marvels at the exact resemblance of Stapleton to Sir Hugo's portrait, Holmes responds: "Yes, it is an interesting instance of a throw-back, which appears to be both physical and spiritual. A study of family portraits is enough to convert a man to the doctrine of reincarnation" (533). Holmes expounds the "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" doctrine at some length in another story, "The Adventure of the Empty House": "I have a theory that the individual represents in his development the whole procession of his ancestors. . . . The person becomes, as it were, the epitome of the history of his own family" (566).

What this theory does in relation to Selden and Stapleton is to equalize them in a peculiar position of what might be called a "half-monster." Their bodies, while not outwardly deformed, become invested with an evolutionary history of violence; however, their humanity is not denied. Selden's pathos and Stapleton's rationality prevent them from sliding all the way down into the abyss of monstrosity or even into the limbo of broken selves inhabited by contemporary serial killers. Selden is redeemed by his loyal family, while Stapleton, despite his "craziness," does have a rational and respectable motive for murder: money. Neither monsters nor fully self-disciplined subjects, they epitomize the psychic anatomy of the detective story's murderer: the transparent veil of reason wrapped around the opaque core of violence.

Selden's atrocity is as far as the genre is prepared to go in exploring motiveless violence, and it is significant that he is not the murderer. Doyle's other criminals are often passionate, like Jim Browner of "The Adventure of the Cardboard Box," but never actually insane. Nor are Chesterton's, but in his case the "brute" reappears in a less innocuous guise as tainted not merely by bad blood but by bad race. The most egregious instance of this is "The Duel
of Dr. Hirsch” (1913), which rewrites the Dreyfus trial as a Jewish plot. Dr. Hirsch, who pretends to be his own anti-Semitic adversary in order to cast opprobrium on the conservative cause, is a politicized version of Stapleton’s brutality masquerading as sweet reason. Father Brown removes the mask and uncovers the Beast: “Seen thus in the glass the white face looked like the face of Judas laughing horribly and surrounded by capering flames of hell” (207). Chesterton’s anti-Semitism means he does not have to account for Dr. Hirsch’s wickedness. He is a Jew; this is explanation enough. But in using the detective story as a vehicle for ideological hatred, Chesterton pushes the limits of the genre. The detective story’s monster is never monstrous enough. Anti-Semitism does much better in horror and fantasy, relieved from the necessity to walk the thin line between the opaque Other and the comprehensible self. The detective story’s true protagonist is not the mad Dr. Hirsch, biologically programmed to do evil, but rather another doctor, the protagonist of Christie’s The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Dr. James Sheppard, who—even more successfully than Judge Wargrave—combines the functions of the criminal with those of the detective.

“A TWO-FACED HERMES”

Casting “a monstrous shadow,” this figure presides over the denouement of Borges’s “Death and the Compass,” in which the criminal and the detective mirror each other across the boundary of violent death (83). Lonnrot and Scharlach are doubles, collapsing the careful division of roles that the traditional detective story maintains. Both men are—in turn—predator and prey, logician and avenger, killer and victim. With its numerous references to Dupin, Borges’s tale makes explicit what is implicit in Poe: the uncanny undertext of the disciplinary discourse of identity.

I have already noted in the chapter on serial killers that Dupin’s adversaries are either the totally Other (the ape) or the totally Same (the Minister D. and the unnamed killer of Marie Roget). It has, of course, often been recognized that Dupin and the Minister are “moral duplicates and may ultimately be two phases of the same mind” (Babener 324). However, seeing this doubling as merely another example of what Poe elsewhere called “the bi-part soul” misses the point: the similarity is so close that there is no Jekyll-and-Hyde split between the good and the bad parts. Rather, we are confronted with reproduction of the same psychological structure, the potentially endless coinage of identity simulacra.

This reproduction becomes the basis for the process of detection itself. Poe’s game of draughts, the metaphor for a battle of wills between the detective and the criminal, presupposes that the detective “throws himself into the
spirit of his opponent [and] identifies himself therewith” (142). Such identifi-
cation is facilitated by the fact that there is little difference between the spirit
of the detective and the criminal. Professor Moriarty, Holmes’s adversary, is his
exact counterpart, “a genius, a philosopher, an abstract thinker” (437). Holmes
exults: “I had at last met an antagonist who was my intellectual equal” (ibid.).
Their joint death in the Reichenbach falls, later revoked by their author, has a
kind of narrative inevitability that cannot be overcome by Holmes’s subse-
quent resurrection. The Holmes who comes back in “The Adventure of the
Empty House” (1903) and continues chasing criminals for the next twenty-five
years is a diminished copy of himself. Deprived of his criminal twin, he is
simultaneously deprived of that symmetry, which, in Borges’s terms, “fixes . . .
death” (86). Without Moriarty, his stories become buffeted by melodrama and
corroded by intimations of the supernatural. It is not that every detective needs
a criminal mastermind, but every detective needs to confront a mind similar to
his own. In Chesterton’s “The Secret of Father Brown,” the priest explains his
method by stating that in his imagination he killed all the victims of the crimes
he investigated: “I try to get inside the murderer . . . I wait till I know I am
inside a murderer, thinking his thoughts, wrestling with his passions . . . Till I
am really a murderer” (465–66).

But Father Brown is a killer only in the imagination; Hercule Poirot, seem-
ingly even more upright and reliable than Holmes and Brown, is a killer in
reality. Throughout her oeuvre, Christie offers numerous hints that the detective
and the murderer are birds of a feather. Christie’s first tour de force, The Mur-
der of Roger Ackroyd (1926), created a sensation: instead of being narrated by
the detective’s admiring friend, it was narrated by the murderer, but the reader
did not realize that until the last couple of pages. This is a clever decon-
struction of the dynamics within the Holmes-Watson duo. Despite his
obvious intellectual deficiency as compared to the brilliant Holmes, Watson is
essentially his alter ego, embodying the middle-class, respectable side of his
friend, the very side that always keeps Holmes on the right side of the law.
Watson, in other words, is the incarnation of the self-discipline that contains
reason and prevents it from turning destructive. By making a Watson-figure
into a murderer, Christie brings out the hidden potential of violence in the
detective himself. Dr. James Sheppard, a Watson-turned-murderer, is indistin-
guishable from the original Watson. The cleverness of the novel lies in the
fact that Sheppard’s narrative voice is precisely the comforting, sentimental,
slightly muddleheaded but essentially honest and reliable voice of the detective’s sidekick. At some point Poirot tells him, “You must have indeed been
sent from the good God to replace my friend Hastings” (81; Hastings is
Poirot’s Watson in Christie’s early books). Sheppard never actually lies, not
even in describing his last interview with Roger Ackroyd, in the course of which the latter is murdered. All he does is to use an ellipsis, the narrative trope of violence. In the last brief chapter, “Apologia,” he talks of his skill as a writer, quoting again his description of the murder scene and commenting on it: “All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence. Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes?” (220).

Insofar as Sheppard is created as a character through his own narration, this remark is a “laying bare” of his own narrative subjectivity, the subjectivity shaped by a missing typographical sign that marks the ellipsis of violence. Shaped around this missing center like a doughnut is Dr. Sheppard’s Watson-like personality: the honest, upright, somewhat old-fashioned, not too bright but inquisitive and even slightly meddlesome general practitioner, an embodiment of Victorian and Edwardian virtues.

But the real giveaway of the detective’s potential for violence is Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case. The story of this novel is interesting: written in the 1940s (apparently as a sort of financial security for Christie’s family), it was kept in a safe for thirty years and eventually published in 1975. In the numerous novels written after Curtain, Poirot becomes a ghost of himself. He has already given away his secret, even though it is not available to the reader as yet. The secret is essentially the same as Father Brown’s: I have killed all those people or rather, I may have killed all those people and the reason I have not is because I have been constrained by the straitjacket of the disciplinary plot. But once the straitjacket is removed—in this case, by Poirot’s approaching death—murder ensues.

In Curtain, Poirot—now terminally ill—is reunited with Hastings at the scene of his first triumph, the country mansion of Styles, which is now a guesthouse. He is there to track a murderer among the guests. But the murderer is of a very peculiar kind. Modeled on Shakespeare’s Iago, he is a perfect killer because he murders without violence. Norton, a small inoffensive man, instigates others to kill without ever tainting himself with actual blood. He leaves a trail of corpses but “he could never be convicted of a crime” (169).

Norton is the ultimate in the classic detective story’s construction of the violent subject. He epitomizes all the efforts the genre invests in disciplining, taming, and controlling violence. No need for euphemism in describing his deeds because the deeds are nonexistent. There are only words, only a seductive web of manipulation, he weaves around his victims. Like the genre itself he produces corpses out of nothing, and before they are even glimpsed, they disappear again and dissolve into puzzles, literary allusions, stories. In fact, as Poirot explains in his own posthumous confession, the mainspring of Norton’s behavior is his fear and dislike of actual violence, which results in his
“developing a morbid taste for violence at second hand” (172). Like the detective story’s reader, Norton is addicted to the violence safely distanced, safely explained, rationalized, and verbalized. But precisely what has been lauded as the genre’s chief virtue—the “vaccination” against violence by providing a second-hand substitute—turns out to be a source of danger. For Norton is extremely dangerous. He is even more dangerous than Judge Wargrave, whose protection against the disciplinary law lay in his identification with the law’s power. But this identification, occurring on the diegetic level of the text, could be undone: even a criminal judge may be punished like any other criminal. Norton, however, identifies with the extradiegetic law of narrative that designates certain subjects as victims. Unlike Wargrave, he is immune to the “mark of Cain,” the irrational horror of spilt blood that corrodes the murderer’s pellucid rationality. Norton does not spill blood. His own body escapes even the minimal sympathetic involvement with the death of the Other that damns the judge. He is not a “body without organs,” in Deleuze’s phrase, but rather a collection of organs—the brain, the tongue—without a body. In order to be defeated, he has to be given back his corporeality—through an act of violence.

Poirot kills Norton by shooting him in the middle of the forehead. The same wound as Judge Wargrave’s, it is also, in Hastings’s words, echoing the judge’s confession, “the brand of Cain” (188). But in order to put this brand there, in order to entrap the elusive murderous spirit in a vulnerable body, Poirot must acknowledge his own corporeality. His body is showcased from the beginning of the novel in a way that invites comparison with Doyle’s “The Dying Detective”: Poirot is now a “thin little man,” crippled with arthritis, his “face lined and wrinkled,” his moustache painfully artificial (13). But here there is no marvelous resurrection: Poirot dies of a heart attack, having deliberately removed his heart medicine from his bedside. The detective imitates the confessional suicide that ends the careers of innumerable criminals in the classic detective story. The identification is now complete; or rather, the detective and the criminal have exchanged places. It is now the criminal who withdraws from the bloody chaos of actual violence and controls action by pure logic and calculation. It is now the detective who has to involve himself with the recalcitrant materiality of the body and whose hands are stained with blood.

The detective’s mastery of the plot dissolves in the terrifying sublimity of murder. In explaining his reasons for killing Norton, Poirot echoes the demented self-aggrandizement of Judge Wargrave: “I am the law!” (187). At the same time, he is lucid enough to realize that he is being infected by the madness of disciplinary reason that imperceptibly slides into the ecstasy of violence: “For the worst part of murder, Hastings, is its effect on the murderer. I,
Hercule Poirot, might come to believe myself divinely appointed to deal out
death to all and sundry . . .” (179). In order to prevent this from happening,
he must die himself before he completes the trajectory from the rational Dr.
Sheppard who kills to uphold order, to the even more rational Judge War-
grave, in whom passion for order has metamorphosed into addiction to vio-
ence.

Poirot’s final gesture is renunciation of knowledge: “But still I do not
know. . . . It is perhaps right that I should not know. I have always been so
sure—too sure. . . . But now I am very humble and I say like a little child ‘I
do not know . . .’” (187). This is the voice of Christie’s classic detective story
acknowledging its defeat, for the bulwark against violence it has so painstaking-
ly built out of the precise structures of knowledge and reason has turned
out to be worse than no protection at all.

What underlies the dance of substitutions, of the detective-turned-mur-
derer and murderer-turned-detective, is the classic detective story’s final pro-
nouncement on the nature of the violent subject, succinctly summarized by
Poirot: “Everyone is a potential murderer” (169). Turning away from its half-
hearted attempts to delineate a typology of “brutes,” to locate criminality in a
Lombrosian monster, the genre embraces the liberal judicial view of violence
as a necessary and inescapable component of any subjectivity. If so, the only
way violence may be contained is via an external apparatus of law enforce-
ment, the structure (and stricture) of discipline. The classic detective story’s
equivalent of this structure is the complex elaboration of its plot, the rigid
encasement of characterization, the gag of euphemism, and the handcuffs of
limited action. But all these devices, while confining individual violence,
eventually set loose what Benjamin calls “the violence of the law.” The ques-
tion whether one is preferable to another is being arbitrated by history at pre-
cisely the same time as Poirot commits his first and last murder in the
war-devastated mansion of Styles.

SLOUCHING TOWARD BETHLEHEM

Among the would-be murderers in Curtain is Hastings’s own daughter
Judith. She is one of those who almost succumb to Norton’s campaign of
insidious brainwashing, meant to liberate the murderer in each and every
one of us. But Judith is also strikingly different from the rest of Norton’s
puppets. Those who actually commit crimes under his influence do it for the
time-honored private reasons of the detective story: money, fear of blackmail,
getting rid of an unwanted spouse. Judith, a trained scientist, does have a per-
sonal reason in wanting to kill sickly Mrs. Franklin: she is in love with her
husband, a biologist of genius and Judith’s boss. But this personal motivation
is superseded by her firmly held ideological conviction (shared with Dr. Franklin) that certain lives are “unworthy of living.” And unlike an ordinary detective story criminal, who prudently conceals his or her reason for wanting person X out of the way, Judith and Dr. Franklin hold forth on every possible occasion about their eugenicist gospel: “Lots of people I’d like to kill,” said Dr. Franklin cheerfully. “Don’t believe my conscience would keep me awake at night afterwards. It’s an idea of mine, you know, that about eighty per cent of the human race ought to be eliminated. We’d get on much better without them” (49–50).

“Lives unworthy of living” is a Nazi catchphrase that became the slogan of the euthanasia campaign in 1939–1941, when at least 70,000 people were murdered for the reasons clearly and convincingly expounded by Judith: “I don’t hold life as sacred as all you people do. Unfit lives, useless lives—they should be got out of the way. There’s so much mess about. Only people who can make a decent contribution to the community ought to be allowed to live” (97).

Compare this with the points made in the 1920 book *Release and Destruction of Lives Not Worth Living* by Alfred Hoche and Rudolf Binding that later became the Bible of the Nazi eugenicist state: that the “ballast lives” and “human husks” of the incurably ill, mentally deficient, and “asocial” are “lives not worth living” and therefore killing them is a genuinely moral task (in Proctor 178). Such views were, of course, not limited to Germany; eugenics was a respectable science with chairs in all major European universities, and the first country to enact eugenic legislation, including compulsory sterilization, was not the Third Reich but the United States. In preaching the eugenicist gospel in the country house sanctuary of the detective story, Judith and Franklin open its French windows just a little bit to the bloody storm of the racial war raging outside. It is no surprise that Hastings, treated to such a sermon from his beloved daughter, looks like “one who has envisaged a nest of snakes” (50). Pressing the point a little, it is even possible to read Norton’s spellbinding tactics as an allegory of a far mightier Pied Piper who, at the very moment of the book’s action, is sending millions to kill in his name.

However, Judith and Franklin are eventually exonerated from all suspicions. It is Mrs. Franklin herself, a weak, empty-headed, useless woman who succumbs to Norton’s blandishments and accidentally brings about her own death. A seemingly “eugenicist” murder is committed but, in fact, it turns out to be a good, old-fashioned spouse killing (or would-be killing) with no ideological purpose in mind. The detective story approaches an ideological murder, only to draw away—no Raskolnikovs in Styles, let alone Himmlers or Hoesses.

The depiction of ideologically motivated criminality constitutes the subtext of Curtain, with Judith and Dr. Franklin, intellectual defenders of mass
murder, successful, arrogant, and pitiless, being a sort of preliminary character sketch for the bio-utopian New Man. But at the end both are shipped off to Africa, there, presumably, to practice their theories on the benighted natives, while the scope of the novel dwindles back to the resolutely private sphere of the classic detective story. The genre of discipline admits its incapacity to discipline genocide.

Another such double text, adumbrating the possibility of a different kind of murder, only to escape back into the safe confines of domesticity, is Christie’s 1940 One, Two, Buckle My Shoe. Here as well, the date of composition (and publication) is self-explanatory with regard to the historical anxieties the novel tries to cope with by simultaneous evocation and evasion. The England hovering on the brink of war, beset by fear and uncertainty, plagued by home-grown fascist sympathizers, creates a strange and unsettling background to the case of what looks like a botched political assassination but turns out to be the intended victim’s plot to get rid of an inconvenient witness to bigamy. And it is the identity of the murderer that focuses the genre’s aporia when confronted with violence whose determinants exceed the mythos of liberal democracy.

Alistair Blunt, a conservative politician and financier, is a bulwark of traditional English values, which Poirot enumerates in the slightly wistful tone of an admiring outsider: “sanity and balance and stability and honest dealing” (188). Poirot and his fellow Great Detectives have fought on behalf of these values, protecting the middle-class society, from which they have been barred by their own eccentricity or foreignness, or both. Blunt seems to be their fellow fighter and this is what makes him the target of potential assassination attempts by both the radical right and left. And yet Blunt is also a murderer who is responsible for the deaths of three people. In the last conversation with Poirot, pleading not to deliver him into the hands of the police, Blunt argues that he is “necessary to the continued peace and well-being of this country” (187). Poirot agrees, and yet insists that the lives of three people supersede the claims of the nation: “I am not concerned with nations, Monsieur. I am concerned with the lives of private individuals who have the right not to have their lives taken from them” (189).

This is the last stand of the detective story in face of the historical forces that threaten to open up its little country house sanctuary to the utopian vistas of the “New Heaven and the New Earth” (ibid.). This march into the millennium requires the inevitable sacrifice of “lives unworthy of living.” Poirot’s “bourgeois” insistence on the absolute value of individual life appears almost heroic in the bleak atmosphere of the catastrophe about to happen. In his uncompromising stance, the beleaguered mythos of liberal democracy battles the early-twentieth-century prevailing zeitgeist that focuses, in the words of
historian Michael Burleigh, on “such supra-individual entities as the family, nations, or races, whose future well-being overrode the rights of individuals” (1997).

The battle is impossible to win because the detective has lost his adversary. The moment Blunt, that embodiment of “playing the game,” begins arguing in the idiom of his radical enemies, claiming that national interests justify murder and that his victims are not quite “human beings” anyway, he becomes one of those New Men, who are impervious to the reach of liberal justice. Blunt may be brought to trial and executed but he cannot be disciplined and punished. All the tools of the classic detective story are blunted by his new subjectivity. Surveillance is impotent against a murderer who does not hide his deeds; reason cannot be used against a man who rationally argues the cause of irrationality; and repression is meaningless for a subject who is ashamed of nothing. The novel ends with Poirot’s renunciation of his role of society’s watchdog: his last request of the couple of young radicals who obviously represent Christie’s fearful premonition of the “rough beast” of the future is that in their brave new world there should still be “freedom and pity” (190).

Of course, Poirot’s renunciation was premature, as his flourishing postwar career demonstrated. “The New Heaven and the New Earth” perished in the furnace of World War II and in the protracted ice age of the Cold War. The detective has suddenly found himself triumphant once more, surveying the landscape pitted and scarred with the sites of multiple historical traumas but still amenable to democracy’s disciplinary narrative. And yet these traumas, the wounds and scars of the New Man’s sublime violence, are too insistently to ignore. Consequently, the postwar detective story, no matter how conservative in its adherence to the classic form, is underlaid by the unspoken mass murder and genocide.

Christie’s 1940s novels contain another unwritten text, dramatizing the clash between the liberal detective and the utopian New Man, between the subject of discipline and the subject of ideology. This text is only implicit in her whodunits that eventually retreat from their own daring agenda. The novels that Christie could—or should—have written are actually written today, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the Gulag, when the mythos of liberal democracy is retrenching its positions in head-on collisions with ghosts of the recent past.