

Detective Fiction and the Myth of the Urban Truth

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Abstract

Although the notion of an absolute Truth is conceived in post-structuralist times as a myth generated by logocentric thought, it remains at the core of a highly popular narrative genre such as detective fiction. From its inception, this specific iteration of an epistemologically unquestionable Truth depends greatly upon the urban paradigm, which generates and shapes the character of the detective at the same time as it reflects cultural hegemony, and tracing its evolution through the analysis of key works of modern detective narration will allow us to better comprehend how the city contributes to the representation of the enduring myth of the absolute Truth as well as of our epistemological certainties.

Keywords: the myth of the Truth, detective fiction, semiotics, deconstruction.

Título: El relato policiaco y el mito de la verdad urbana

Resumen

Aunque la noción de una verdad absoluta se conciba, en tiempos pos-estructuralistas, como un mito generado por el pensamiento logocéntrico, sigue funcionando como la base imprescindible del género narrativo policiaco. Desde sus orígenes, esta representación específica de una Verdad epistemológicamente incuestionable depende en gran parte del paradigma urbano, que genera y moldea el personaje del detective al mismo tiempo que refleja una hegemonía cultural, y su estudio a través de algunas obras claves del género nos permitirá entender mejor cómo la ciudad contribuye tanto a la representación del mito de la Verdad absoluta como a la de nuestras certidumbres epistemológicas.

Palabras clave: el mito de la Verdad, ficción policiaca, semiótica, deconstrucción.

Table of Contents

- 0.1. The Mythical Truth
- 0.2. Detection, Sciences and the City
 - 1.1. The Parisian Detective
 - 1.2. The Golden Sign
 - 2.1. Baker Street, Inc.
 - 2.2. The Ghosts of Baker Street
 - 3.1. The New Frontiers
 - 3.2. The New Detectives of the Spectacular City
- Ω. Rude Awakening

0.1. The Mythical Truth

One of the most enduring notions brought forward by post-structuralist thought, as well as an undeniable part of its always problematic legacy¹, is the systematic questioning of any absolute value; in a necessarily closed and self-referential logocentric epistemological system, we are indeed entitled to question any certainty, as well as to challenge the allegedly objective means by which it has been attained: it seems advisable, if not mandatory, in these times of cultural and philosophical relativism, to consider the Truth—any truth—as a myth, that is as a narratively constructed fallacy that fulfills societal needs, rather than as an objective reality. However, and regardless of how dialectically justified such position appears to be², the Truth perceived as a radical, absolute value and as a non-metaphysical signified remains at the core of a vast majority of contemporary narrative constructions and can even be considered in some instances, such as in that of detective fiction, as the only determining motivation behind the creation of a parallel imaginary dimension.

Deconstruction has become a household word in today's U.S. English language, and although it is generally albeit vaguely understood by the vast, non-critical majority as some type of post-modern skepticism, its deeper implications have become somewhat assimilated by our collective consciousness, assisted by the ever increasing globalization that has rendered information readily available and hence generated a healthy dose of lucidity. But even though the concept of an absolute Truth is today more than ever called into question at all levels of our understanding, detective fiction—which depends heavily upon our acceptance of the possibility to apprehend the Truth—appears to be thriving and materializes in a variety of mediatic shapes, from novels to films, from comic books to television series, as if our present consciousness simply could not have enough of the certainties put forward by the genre. According to the elementary laws of catharsis, it might indeed be precisely our growing doubt upon the possible existence of an absolute Truth that makes us embrace a narrative structure based upon its very defense

¹ The notion of legacy is naturally difficult to apply to post-modern theoretical criticism in general and to deconstruction in particular; in our times of forceful cultural constructionism (see Bauerlein 2005), the very concept of influence and necessarily that of legacy have become highly suspicious: ultimately, the legacy of deconstruction might simply consist in denying any possibility of legacy.

² In terms of radical skepticism, it could be argued that Derrida is merely re-stating Wittgenstein's position, and it is probably not by chance if the author of *De la Grammatologie* has never commented upon that of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; even Brice Parain's theories on communication and ambiguity that describe language as the vehicle of false certainties, seem strangely premonitory of post-structuralism—doubt is definitely not a new staple in philosophy.

and promotion: the detective emerges as the post-modern mythical hero of a one-dimensional, post-enlightened world, where traditional, metaphysically oriented mythical heroes have gone bankrupt, and detective fiction allows the myth of the absolute Truth to subsist and even prevail—if we are to judge by the apparently universal appeal of this particular narrative genre—against all of our post-modern ascertained uncertainties.

From its inception, detective fiction has benefited from one specific environment, just as representative of post-enlightened values as the genre itself, and which has always functioned as a necessary backdrop to the detective's positivist feats—the city. Whether it is Paris, London or Los Angeles, detective fiction is intrinsically related to the urban environment, which is where the myth of the Truth is best represented³, and a diachronic examination of the intersections between the city and detective fiction in relationship to the myth of the Truth will allow us to determine the evolution of our collective conception of both, the Truth and the City.

0.2. Detection, Sciences and the City

Modern detective fiction is born out of the new certainties established by the Enlightenment Century, which have re-defined the way we conceive our environment and erected rational positivism as the ultimate Truth, and feeds off the priorities of the industrial revolution by defending the values of the bourgeois order. In strict structural terms, the narrative tension of any detective story⁴ is created by a breakdown of the social and epistemological orders: not only has a crime been committed, that is, the bourgeois rule has been defied, but the means by which it has been perpetrated challenge as well our consensual view of reality and its laws. The narrative authority is sustained by the efforts of the protagonist(s) to understand and resolve the crisis in order to restore normalcy and ultimately to

³ In his important *El cadáver en la cocina: la novela criminal en la cultura del desencanto*, Joan Ramón Resina clearly establishes the relationship between detective fiction and the myth of modernity, and presents the city as the only possible setting for its development: "La fusión de una semiótica del paisaje urbano con la semiótica de la detección es uno de los aspectos funcionales de la novela policiaca [...]" (Resina 1997: 19).

⁴ The concept of "detective story" is used here as a general category which includes different narrative manifestations, from a traditional type, such as Conan Doyle's *The adventures of Sherlock Holmes* or Jean Ray's *Harry Dickson* series, to the hard-boiled style narrative, illustrated by Chandler's *The Big Sleep* as well as by Montalbán's *Los mares del sur*; it does not include however the sub-genre of what we may call, for lack of a better name, gangster fiction, exemplified by Donald Westlake's *The Hunter* or *The Outfit* in the United States and by Léo Malet's *La Peur aux tripes* in France. For a critical description of the genre that encompasses its trajectory from Poe to Chandler, see Martín Cerezo (2006).

reiterate the triumph and affirmation of a mythical Truth⁵. In a post-enlightened world, the propitious environment for the transgression of social and epistemological orders as well as for the subsequent struggle to reach a satisfactory solution to the conflict that such transgression implies is irremediably urban: both the crime and the truth are to be found within the confines of the city, which is where the achievements of pragmatic, rational and capitalistic ideals are the most pronounced. In demographic terms, the city emphasizes the social divide, and thus naturally provides a logical context for the confrontation between the promoters of the bourgeois order and its transgressors, i.e., the criminals; it is also where the qualities of the detective shine most efficiently, for he or she incarnates the defense of the collectively accepted social and epistemological orders. From the point of view of its narrative function, the detective can be considered as a metonymy of the city, for he or she is simultaneously a product and a defender of the urban structure, and represents it as well as benefits from it in terms of scientific and technological tools. The modern detective is first and foremost a creature of a post-enlightened, scientifically oriented mindset⁶, and sciences and technology, along with social conflict and concentration of riches, represent perhaps the first and widest intersection between the detective and the city's respective semiospheres: the city is the place where scientific progress is achieved, and the core of the detective's narrative syntagm is precisely a scientific, methodical progression towards the Truth—an absolute, hence mythological Truth, that corresponds referentially to the typically closed structure of the detective narration⁷. Sciences, as an expression of positivist thinking associated to the urban environment, is intricately tied to the detective's universe, as illustrated by the two latest cinematographic adaptations of the most canonical of all detectives, Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes*, and *Sherlock Holmes 2: Game of Shadows*, which have strayed away from the original model to the point of turning two

⁵ This summary description corresponds as well to hybrid narrations which include paradigms from neighboring genres, such as Dan Brown's politico-religious thrillers.

⁶ See the conceptions of Herbert Marcuse (1964) and the reduction of our perception of reality in rational times as expressed in his theories regarding the one-dimensional man.

⁷ As social criticism makes its way into the detective's universe with the hard-boiled detective tendency, the resolution of the conflict is no longer as satisfactory as it used to be in times of Sherlock Holmes when it comes to social order, for ethical certainties are usually wagered against attenuating circumstances; however, the culprit(s) is (are) identified, when not apprehended and punished, and the mystery surrounding the crime elucidated. In structural terms, detective fiction is founded upon the closure of its narrative syntagm and hence cannot epistemologically escape the mythology of the Truth, notwithstanding the diegetic twists and turns we may occasionally encounter, such as the well-known conclusion of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Acroyd*.

respectable, level-headed middle-aged fellows into a couple of sentimental and hot tempered young men, but have nonetheless preserved the scientific paradigm and present the great detective conducting experiments in his spare time, locked away in his room that he has turned into a laboratory. In a post-enlightened, industrial world, sciences have become the path to the Truth, efficiently replacing the former official metaphysics of religion, and the detective incarnates both the efficiency and the righteousness of this new certainty, born out of a fundamentally urban environment. The city, as the most concrete and advanced creation of post-enlightened and industrial consciousness, is the official repository of the Truth, hence, detective fiction is above and foremost an urban genre. From Poe's Auguste Dupin to Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, from Ray's Harry Dickson to *Miami Vice* and *CSI: Las Vegas*, we can see how the relationship between detective fiction and the city has evolved, and how it reflect historical and cultural hegemony; an entire narrative genre based upon the myth of the Truth such as the detective genre is necessarily loaded with political implications and we naturally find revealing correlations between its paradigmatic composition and its socio-historical context.

1.1. The Parisian Detective

From its inception, the modern detective is a product of the city and functions as a repository for its essential values, those which precisely allow him or her to construct or re-construct the Truth and re-establish the supremacy of the official epistemological order. The city being naturally closer to knowledge than the country side⁸, it symbolizes progress and modernity, and the original detective evolves within its parameters in order to resolve the ruptures created by both the crime and the mystery of its execution. The first literary detective of modern Western times is doubtlessly Edgar Allan Poe's very Parisian Auguste Dupin, a recognized direct ancestor and spiritual father of the most famous detective of all times—Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes⁹. It is indeed not a coincidence if Holmes compares himself to Poe's hero—to his advantage, of course—during one of the first conversations with Dr. Watson, at the very beginning of his career in a *Study in Scarlet*.

⁸ Although this equivalence between the city and scientific progress is still very much present in our consciousness, it should be underlined that it does no longer correspond to our reality, for much of today's applied as well as theoretical research is conducted at major universities, which, at least in the USA are not necessarily located within great urban centers.

⁹ In spite of his venerable age and of the ferocious competition from hard-boiled and much hipper contemporary detectives, Sherlock Holmes is the only one to have reached such a degree of universality.

Auguste Dupin is featured in three short stories, "Murder in Rue Morgue", "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" and the famous "The Purloined Letter"¹⁰. The fact that all three stories take place in Paris is significant, for the capital of France is also that of the most concrete and visible consequence of the change of values entailed by the Enlightenment Century, namely the French Revolution, which consolidated an entire change of consciousness in a very tangible historical event that ushered a new social organization: the first modern detective, Auguste Dupin, is French, just like France is the first modern democracy. Paris is where the new values put forward by the Enlightenment are initially structured, socially as well as epistemologically—let us not forget that the publication of *L'Encyclopédie* begins as early as 1751—and thus, the original detective, the spoke-person for our new certainties and the purveyor of the new mythical Truth, is logically Parisian.

The city is abundantly represented in Dupin's first adventure, "Murder in Rue Morgue", and serves both as the scene of the crime and as the detective's natural environment; the text abounds with names of streets and *quartiers*, as Paris is constantly connoted throughout the development of the narrative syntagm, and urban topography becomes an integral part of the resolution, for it allows Dupin to set the trap that will identify the owner of the orangutan without raising any suspicions, by claiming to have found the animal in the *bois de Boulogne*—the most classical Parisian *bois*—far from where the murders took place.

"The Mystery of Marie Rogêt", conceived as a sequel to "Murder in Rue Morgue", is just as indicative of the relationship between Paris, which remains the center of enlightened and post-enlightened thought, and the myth of the Truth as it is represented in modern detective fiction. Most of the narration consists of Dupin's analytical reflections regarding the different newspaper articles that have dealt with the mysterious disappearance of Marie Rogêt, including lengthy quotes from the journalists themselves that present each a different point of view as to what may have really happened to the unfortunate young lady, and this inflated value of the object "newspaper" corresponds to an urban, essentially logocentric conception of the transmission of information: in the new bourgeois social organization that has emerged after the French revolution, the printed press has

¹⁰ "The Purloined Letter" has attracted considerable attention of both psychoanalytical and post-psychoanalytical persuasions, from Jacques Lacan to Jacques Derrida to Barbara Johnson, and its remarkable typological qualities—it is after all the micro-structure of all detective stories—have somewhat been eclipsed by a meta-theoretical debate that has separated the receptor from the text, bypassing the pleasure principle to the profit of polysemic philosophical speculations.

become the privileged vehicle for the Truth, responding to the brand new concept of "public opinion". By elaborating his own theory upon those found in the newspapers, Dupin enters a public debate—the object of which is to reach the Truth—that could only take place in the city, for it is where newspapers are both generated and read, and where they function as instruments of political and social debate. Literacy is not the only issue at stake here, although, evidently, as the new European bourgeois class learns how to read throughout the 19th Century¹¹, it does so faster in the city than in the country: the city newspapers also represent the written space where opinions are presented, refuted and defended; they exceed a simple informative function and participates fully in the search for the Truth.

From the point of view of its genesis, "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" also presents a peculiarity that reinforces the semiotic value of Paris as the center of understanding and consequently the shortest and surest path to the Truth: even though the historical event that is known to have inspired Poe, that is the true murder of one Mary Cecilia Rogers, took place in the vicinity of New York, the short story is set in the French capital, and Mary Cecilia Rogers, the original cigar-girl whose murder was never elucidated in real life, has become a young perfumery employee, with a overly French name, for the circumflex accent on her last name, "Rogêt"—which is often dropped in many modern versions of the text—is in actuality quite uncanny in the French language. This particular graphic representation of the otherwise common French name "Roger" functions as a semiotic micro-structure that completes the French spelling of "Marie": the need to situate the action in Paris has led to the creation of an artificial "French" last name through the symbolic use of the circumflex accent, a fairly unique feature of French written form: the real murder of Mary Cecilia Rogers might remain unsolved in New York, which is still in the process of becoming New York as an urban global cultural center, however, that of Marie Rogêt in Paris can be analyzed and comprehended thanks to the tools of post-enlightened epistemology by a French detective, the Chevalier Auguste Dupin.

1.2. The Golden Sign

Besides the three aforementioned tales that feature Dupin and that can be considered as the first real corpus of modern detective fiction, Poe's story "The Gold Bug" deserves critical attention as well, for it includes all the parameters of a detective narration and furthermore provides a clear example of the mythology of the Truth in direct relationship to language and meaning. It is both a demonstration of

¹¹ It is estimated that the rate of literacy increased in Europe from 20% to 80% throughout the 19th Century.

the capacity of the human mind to reach an ultimate signified by means of an all encompassing logocentric epistemological structure, that precisely which has been the target of post-modern thought and a typical detective narrative syntagm, which exhibits all the paradigms of the genre—an enigma, a set of clues that need to be interpreted and a progression towards a final, closed resolution. In this particular instance, the Truth is literally a final, non-metaphysical signified, which is identified, reached and concretized in purely capitalistic terms: the protagonist discovers the treasure thanks to his analytical skills and in the economy of the narration, the treasure is a Truth of an undeniable nature, for it has a direct value of exchange in the post-enlightened, proto-industrial and one-dimensional world.

Just as in the case of one of Conan Doyle's most famous stories, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, as well as in several adventures of Jean Ray's Harry Dickson, it could be argued that the action takes place away from the city and that hence, the connection between the mythological Truth and the urban environment has been severed. The protagonist and improvised detective of "The Gold Bug" lives on Sullivan Island in South Carolina, and his definitely rustic, not to say primitive environment is constantly underlined by the speech of his Black servant, Jupiter, the incorrectness of which is faithfully transcribed, for, from the beginning, language emerges as an issue within the text itself, and will become the central piece of the enigma. However, just as in the case of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and in that of some of Jean Ray's short stories, the protagonist who succeeds in literally "reading" the Truth hidden in the ancient parchment by analytical, post-enlightened means in order to resolve the enigma remains the product not only of good breeding but of an urban environment as well. For starters, we learn very early on that he is originally from the city of New Orleans, which connotes France on two different levels: historically, for New Orleans was founded by the French¹², as well as semiotically, for it bares the obvious onomastic traces of an existing French city. New Orleans refers to one of the most historically significant cities in France¹³, as well as connotes the linguistic presence of France, for the Bayou traditionally speaks Cajun French, which it is an integral part of its cultural heritage. Furthermore, the last name of the protagonist, Legrand, functions both as a marker of greatness—"Legrand" means literally "The Great"—and as a constant semiotic reminder of a French presence, that is of the center of post-enlightened thought.

¹² La "Nouvelle Orléans" was founded in 1718 under the authority of Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville.

¹³ One of the most mythical figures of French history, Jeanne d'Arc, is also known as "la Pucelle d'Orléans" ("The Virgin from Orléans").

"The Gold Bug" is indeed a detective narration, whose elementary paradigms remind us of those found in very recent works, such in as Dan Brown's trilogy featuring professor Robert Langdon¹⁴, but it also stands as an illustration of the linguistic certainties established by Ferdinand de Saussure regarding sign, signifier and signified. In order to decipher the secret code that will lead him to the treasure, Legrand uses a process of binary oppositions, very much along the lines of Saussure's conception of language and against Derrida's critique of Saussurian linguistics, and therefore confirms the possibility of true meaning, that very possibility which post-structuralist thought rejects so enthusiastically: by structuring frequency and differences, Legrand is able to discover—and not construct—an ultimate Truth. "The Gold Bug" is hence a direct affirmation of the myth of the Truth, which is represented concretely by the treasure and semiotically as well as epistemologically by the certainty of the existence of a non-transcendental signified. The enigma presented in the narration is a linguistic one that Jupiter, who is a symbolic figure of the rustic environment where the action takes place, could never resolve, for he does not have the grammatical capacity to do so¹⁵. Legrand, on the other hand, is not from the island but rather a representative figure of French urban and encyclopedic epistemology that allows him to reach the Truth: this particular enigma is indeed resolved away from the city but only by a loyal heir to French urban consciousness—the treasure would have stayed buried forever if the spirit of the city incarnated by Legrand had not come to the island to shed light upon the secret of its location.

2.1. Baker Street, Inc.

If Dupin belonged fully to a post-enlightened perception of reality naturally located in the city of the French revolution, Conan Doyle's sleuth, however, cannot be dissociated from that of the Industrial revolution: Sherlock Holmes is intrinsically related to London, and his analytical skills, that allow him to solve any mystery and hence to always reach the Truth, are closer to a positivist industrial consciousness than to the somewhat still abstract reflexions of Dupin, as illustrated in "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt". Sherlock Holmes' "method" is less cerebral and more empirical than that of Dupin, and

¹⁴ In *Angels and Demons*, *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Lost Symbol* just as in "The Gold Bug", the narrative progression is determined by the elucidation of recently discovered ancient cyphers, which will eventually reveal an undeniable Truth, purely monetary in the case of Legrand and metaphysically oriented in that of Langdon.

¹⁵ Although the character of Jupiter lends himself naturally to post-colonial analysis, it should be pointed out that, within the narrative universe, his race is not as determining as his inability to transcend superstition, which is directly related to his linguistic shortcomings.

therefore suggests an industrialized consciousness by opposition to the still philosophically oriented mind-set of Dupin. In the world of Sherlock Holmes, the objects have become the first vehicles for the Truth and we are therefore much closer to materialism than when following Dupin's brilliant but very intellectual deductions. By now, post-enlightened consciousness has given way to an industrial, more materialistic conception of reality, which is, of course, best represented by the capital of the industrial world, London.

From its very genesis, the universe of Sherlock Holmes merges with the city, for it is where Watson meets the detective and hence gives birth to his adventures by becoming his biographer; Sherlock Holmes' semiosphere even includes an address, readily identifiable and which by now has become an integral part of its semantic field: 221B, Baker Street. The Parisian rooms imprecisely located in the Faubourg St. Germain shared by Dupin and the unknown narrator of his three adventures have turned into a very specific address, which will acquire additional semiotic weight as the career of Sherlock Holmes progresses, to the point of merging subject and place: we can hardly conceive Sherlock Holmes without Baker Street and vice versa, for, as post-enlightened times give way to the industrial era, the detective fuses further with the city, which acquires yet more weight into the narrative syntagm by being denoted in an increasingly precise manner, very much along the lines of the materialistic vision of reality that goes along with the dominating ideology and social practices of the industrialized world. The addition of the actual number of the street, by opposition to the vagueness of Dupin's address, indicates the tendency to pure quantization that characterizes the industrial era—compared to Dupin and his unnamed biographer, who lived in a still romantically vague Paris, Sherlock Holmes inhabits a filing cabinet. Semiotically, 221B Baker Street functions as a metonymy of London City and of Sherlock Holmes himself, and remains a meaningful paradigm throughout most of his adventures: it is if nothing else the natural place of birth for most of his cases, which usually start with the visit of whoever is in need of the great detective's services. The mythical positivist Truth of the industrialized world is not only represented by a subject—Sherlock Holmes—but also by an environment—Baker Street, that is London, the capital of the new industrial hegemony.

The presence of the "Baker Street Irregulars" reinforces the semiotic link between the official spoke-person of the Truth, Sherlock Holmes, and the city, by suggesting a personification of London that corresponds perfectly to the new type of human exploitation born out of the industrial revolution. The "Baker Streets Irregulars" are the different groups of street children that Holmes uses from time to time to gather information or create diversions, such as in *A Study in Scarlet* or in *The Sign of Four*. They remain an anonymous work

force—we are only aware of the name of their leader—which is both cheap and efficient, and always available. Baker Street is therefore onomastically personalized and becomes a living being, albeit faceless and expendable, who assists the detective in his search for the Truth. The narration of the myth of the Truth at the end of the industrialization process includes hence quite naturally the exploitation of children, as the city comes to life, more than ever fused with the endeavors of the great detective¹⁶.

2.2. The Ghosts of Baker Street

It is generally accepted that the fantastic mode, which is the product of a binary opposition between two apparently mutually self-exclusive semiotic codes, hyper-realism and supernatural occurrence (Ferrerias Savoye 1995), is more easily conceived within a rustic rather than urban environment, and its most representative authors have generally chosen the countryside over the city to generate the semiotic clash between the understandable and the incomprehensible. However, when, in its relentless search for the Truth, modern detective fiction tackles upon the supernatural, it does it in an urban setting, as illustrated by the adventures of Harry Dickson by Belgian author Jean Ray, a quite underestimated figure in the Occidental canon of detective fiction, who, in spite of still being read widely in France, Spain and Belgium, has never reached the notoriety that the quality of his work could have warranted¹⁷. One might speculate that the English speaking world has somewhat appropriated the detective narration and maintains an unspoken territorial monopoly upon the genre; besides Simenon's Commissaire Maigret, who had his moment of triumph in the United States and who has since all but disappeared from the Anglo-American collective memory, the only detectives that seem to be tolerated on a universal, globalized scales and the most paradigmatic seem to be either from England or the United States, which establishes yet one more correlation between the narration of a capitalistic, comprehensive Truth and the current dominating cultural hegemony, directly inherited from an industrial revolution conceived, generated and led

¹⁶ Regardless of how much they may stray from the original text's intent, the two recent cinematographic adaptations of Conan Doyle's sleuth, namely Guy Ritchie's two films and David Moffat's *Sherlock* series grant a fundamental importance to the representation of London—the opening credits of Moffat's series consists mainly in views of the city—for the semiotic weight of London in the Sherlock Holmes narration is simply irresistible: the mythical Truth at the end of the 19th Century is naturally to be found within the city limits of the industrial capital of the world.

¹⁷ In spite of being a canonical author in Belgium and a cult figure in some circles, Jean Ray remains virtually unknown in the United States and has not entered the same process of canonical rehabilitation as have Conan Doyle or Raymond Chandler.

by the United Kingdom. However, from a structural point of view, the adventures of Harry Dickson, when penned by Jean Ray, constitute an original, alternative treatment of the detective narration that deserves critical attention, for it introduces a suggested supernatural dimension into the detective's universe and could be considered as a diegetic sub-genre in its own right.

Harry Dickson did not only start as a carbon copy of Sherlock Holmes—he was actually Sherlock Holmes in the apocryphal continuations of his adventures in German, after Conan Doyle's death¹⁸. An indignant lawsuit brought forward by the heirs of Conan Doyle forced the publishers to promptly change the name of the characters and the false Sherlock Holmes to pursue his adventures under the name of Harry Dickson in a collection ambiguously entitled *The New Adventures of the King of the Detectives*, while his side-kick turned into a younger man named Tom Wills. If the first adventures of Harry Dickson, written by anonymous professional authors being paid by the page, are very typical of pulp fiction for mass consumption and unremarkable in every way, those penned by Jean Ray represent, on the contrary, a very interesting and aesthetically satisfying corpus of research, for they are among the best illustrations of a different type of detective story, which remains loyal to the fundamental parameters of the genre but broadens its limits: we are still narrating the myth of the Truth in the sense that Harry Dickson, just as his illustrious predecessor, always elucidates the enigma, however, the most significant paradigms of his universe, i.e., the factors of conflict that allow narrative tension to occur and thus establish textual authority, differ greatly from those encountered by Sherlock Holmes: they are, as a rule, bloodier and more uncanny, and usually point to dimensions of reality located on the fringes of human knowledge through recurrent narrative motifs such as madness, dreams, altered states, exotic drugs, secrete lairs, extreme tortures or unthinkable machines. The threats to the order that Harry Dickson must confront are both more dangerous and mysterious than those faced by Sherlock Holmes, for they suggest the existence of a possible Unknown, which represents the negation of the mythical Truth and the possibility of a terminal epistemological crisis.

Naturally, when the detective faces the near-supernatural, he does it generally in the city—being truly the literary son of Sherlock Holmes at the time of his inception, Harry Dickson could not but take up quarters in Baker Street—and the narrative syntagm is more than ever linked to London which is portrayed, in the words of Jean-Baptiste Baronian, as “[...] a mythical London [...] a fantastic,

¹⁸ For the details surrounding the genesis of Harry Dickson, see Van Herp (1970: 379-386) and Ferreras Savoye (2008a: 7-10; 2008b: 159-164).

extraordinary city, which, in some way, only exists in function of the existence of whom has tied himself to her in an indissoluble manner" (Baronian 1971: 384)¹⁹. As the Impossible becomes a tangible menace, the city turns into the battlefield to save the mythical Truth and to re-establish the soothing reign of official epistemology. Because it happens in the city, the pseudo-supernatural threat has a much greater potential impact upon reality, for it affects the center of knowledge and sciences: what is at stake is our capacity to understand and rationalize reality, regardless of how strange it might appear, and the unthinkable defeat of Harry Dickson would imply that of London as well.

In the case of the adventures of Harry Dickson, the omnipresence of London allows for the resolution of a structural paradox, that of the Fantastic by opposition to detective fiction. In strict structural terms, both genres contain most of the same elements: an unexplained event, a series of clues, and one or several protagonists looking for its explanation. However, whereas detective fiction resolves the crisis by providing a rational explanation, theoretically admissible according to the dominating epistemology, and closes the narrative structure, the Fantastic, on the contrary, denies the possibility of any answer and leaves the structure wide opened—the unexplained has become the unexplainable. Jean Ray's conception of Harry Dickson, which could be seen as binary, reaches a rare point of equilibrium between two apparently antithetic genres by emphasizing the impossible but favoring the ultimate victory of reason²⁰.

This balance between the incredible and the realistic, which implies renegotiating the level of suspension of disbelief generally associated with detective fiction, is achieved in great part through the use of London as a polysemic sign, capable of generating nearly impossible evil as well as the means to defeat it. London is no longer only the industrial capital of the Occidental world as it was in times of Sherlock Holmes, it has also become an international pole of attraction, which allows the detective to confront highly exotic and improbable threats of distant origins, displacing the epistemological conflict beyond mere materialism towards deeper levels of human

¹⁹ "[...] Un Londres mythique, [...] une ville fantastique, extraordinaire, et qui, en quelque sorte, n'existe que dans la mesure où précisément existe celui qui s'y est attaché de façon indissoluble". Baronian goes as far as stating: "Car Harry Dickson, c'est Londres" ("Because Harry Dickson *is* London").

²⁰ The relationship between the Fantastic and detective fiction is not only visible structurally but can also be demonstrated historically: Edgar Allan Poe practiced and participated directly to the creation of both genres, from "Ligeia" to "The Purloined Letter"; as to Conan Doyle, he authored his share of fantastic tales, among which "Lot No. 249", a short novella that can be considered as one of the first narrations based upon the supernatural motif of a mummy coming back to life.

consciousness that involve dealing with the very possibility of the Unknown. The fusion of genres that we observe at the very core of the adventures of Harry Dickson can only be maintained through the representation of London, which is indeed a mythical city, an ideal background to represent the triumph of the mythological Truth, even against the forces of the dark side.

3.1. The New Frontiers

As we have observed, the urban pole of detective fiction has shifted throughout the 19th Century from Paris, incontestable capital of post-enlightened thought, to London, the center of the industrialized world. Beginning in the 1930s, and foreshadowing both the political new world order that will emerge after the second World War and the increasing domination of visual narration that characterizes the second half of the 20th Century, the narration of the quest for the Truth emigrates again, both geographically and media wise: it becomes overwhelmingly Anglo-American and cinematographic, as the city, more than ever the privileged space to narratively reiterate the myth of the Truth, takes yet a stronger hold on the detective genre.

The arrival of the hard-boiled detective on the scene radically altered the protagonist's relationship with the city, which ceased to be friendly to become conflictive. Ralph Willett observes that "The 'urban jungle', vicious, savage, devoid of spiritual values, would become normatively the site for the detective's quests and discoveries" (Willett 1992), which is indeed true, however, as we have seen from Auguste Dupin to Harry Dickson, the urban context has always been part of modern detective fiction. What has changed most fundamentally is the rapport the detective entertains with his or her environment, for, rather than a propitious space to the type of *rêveries* in which Dupin and the narrator of his adventures indulge, the city has become a hostile environment where even the official authorities—the police—can no longer be trusted. We are far from the comfortable position of the "consulting detective", exemplified by Dupin, Sherlock Holmes and Harry Dickson, who work in perfect harmony with the Law, usually represented by a specific character, whether it be the French police prefect, inspector Lestrade or superintendent Goodfield. In the definitely urban universe of the hard-boiled detective, the Truth is tainted with moral uncertainty and social struggle, and the investigation itself has become more sociological, thus problematic, than purely materialistic and positivist. Whereas Sherlock Holmes successfully interrogates cigarette buds and mud prints, the hard-boiled detective interrogates people of all types and conditions, and his conclusions are always at the mercy of the uncertainties inherent to the human factor. Nevertheless, the myth of the obtainable Truth—the semiotic core of detective fiction—

remains the engine of the narration and whether the resolution of a typical hard-boiled detective story is morally satisfying or not does not deprive it from the merit of existing; diegetically speaking, the structure of the hard-boiled detective story is as closed as its traditional counterpart, for the problems are solved, the questions answered and the culprits identified and usually punished. However, the detective, due to the specific means of his or her investigation, has come into contact with different characters from a variety of social strata, hence the city, by complacently exhibiting its social architecture, has determined the progression of the narrative syntagm: the detective's actions are now molded by the different actors of the urban drama as the city comes literally to life and the detective himself is more than ever dependent upon urban structures to reach the Truth. This new personification of the city differs from that suggested by the "Baker Streets Irregulars", for whereas these London kids are mostly simples tools for Holmes endeavors, and an implicit acceptance of both cheap labor and child exploitation very much akin to the precepts of the industrial revolution, the different witnesses upon whom the hard-boiled detective must rely are not necessarily compliant nor willing to collaborate. The city, which is Holmes and Dickson's ally in the quest for the Truth, is now part of the conflict and creates another layer of narrative tension that directly affects its development. And as detective fiction takes possession of the screen, the city emerges as the one true protagonist of the story.

3.2. The New Detectives of the Spectacular City

To state that detective narration has moved from the text to the screen is neither provocative nor exclusive; if there is no doubt that the genre has triumphed cinematographically, this does not imply that written detective fiction has disappeared, and the fairly recent success of Stieg Larsson's *Millenium* speaks for itself²¹. However, the great success obtained by the genre when transposed to the screen cannot be ignored, nor can we overlook the effect that this transposition has had upon the role of the city within the narration. The visual medium favors the production of simultaneous multiple semiotic codes, hence the urban environment of the detective is omnipresent at every step of the sequence; whereas, in the written medium, the description, however elliptical and summary it might be, must sooner or later yield to action or dialog, the representation of the background naturally remains constant in a cinematic narration, establishing a permanent semiotic symbiosis with the remaining

²¹ In spite of using unorthodox paradigms, such as unlikely protagonists, the narrative structure of *Millenium* corresponds to that of a detective story.

elements of the narrative syntagm. This tendency is so pronounced that it has affected directly the titles of many detective narrations over the years, as if the city where the conflict takes place were part of, if not the conflict itself. From Polanski's *Chinatown* to *Miami Vice*, from *Hill Street Blues* to *NYPD Blue*, the city has onomastically eclipsed the human protagonists, who are now conceived as essentially, not to say ontologically inseparable from their environment: if Baker Street was a metonymy of Sherlock Holmes, it is J. J. "Jake" Gittes, Crockett and Tubbs who belong to the city, which structures and justifies their existence as modern mythical heroes in charge of reaching the Truth.

Contrarily to post-modern thought, which thrives to relativize every aspect of the human experience and limit our epistemological possibilities, the detective narration embraces scientific objectivity in order to defend the myth of the Truth as an absolute value that can be conquered through a rigorous positivist process. As the cinematic medium becomes the privileged vehicle for the detective narration, objective Truth and the urban environment become fused to the point of forming one single intent, perfectly symbolized by the titles of the extremely popular series *CSI: Las Vegas*, *CSI: NY* and *CSI: Miami*. In terms of investigative means, we have come full circle since Sherlock Holmes was examining cigarette buds with his magnifying glass—the cigarette buds are now DNA evidence and the magnifying glass has turned into a digital microscope. The role of any particular individual is reduced proportionally to the importance that is given to an objective reality—that of the cigarette bud or that of the city—which translates in structural terms into the collectivization of the protagonist. The one and only extraordinarily witty individual who would solve any mystery with the sheer power of his mind after examining a cigarette bud or beating a suspect to a bloody pulp tends to be replaced by a team of varied talented personalities, which establishes a correspondence between the social hierarchy of the city and that of the acting elements of the narrative syntagm: as the individual loses importance—a natural condition of today's urban living conditions—the collective subject gains narrative space and the artistic, disinterested detective yields to a crew of professionals.

The geo-cultural movement that we have traced, which clearly establishes a correlation between detective fiction, as a narration that promotes a belief in an absolute Truth, and a specific city representing contextual political hegemony is now more evident than ever before due to the globalized nature of cultural products distribution. More mythical yet than Jean Ray's London, U.S. cities, starting naturally with Los Angeles, have established their reign as capitals of the epistemological success expressed by detective fiction, in perfect correspondence with the United States' current economical and cultural domination: the myth of the Truth is still being narrated

in an urban environment, which happens to be that of the current hegemonic culture, but in a highly spectacular fashion that further separates the individual from reality, very much along the lines of Guy Debord's conception of spectacle and alienation. Although post-structuralist thought, mainly represented by French thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, has been welcomed and promoted in the United States to the point of reaching a much greater popularity on this side of the Atlantic than in its country of origin, current Anglo-American cinematographic detective fiction has appropriated epistemological domination as well as the ever elusive mythical Truth, the absolute value *par excellence*, that precisely which deconstruction set out to deconstruct.

Ω. Rude Awakening

From the individual intellectual feats of Dupin in a dreamy Paris to the assembly line style authoritative investigations in highly structured Anglo-American urban centers that we find in current popular visual narrations such as the *CSI* series, the city has taken further control upon detective fiction, dominating both characters and action, to the extreme of becoming an onomastic center; the mythological Truth is now to be reached within the system by the official actors of the urban structure rather by isolated and eccentric minds, which allows us to perceive a clear homology between the tendency towards the collectivization of the subject in modern visual detective fiction and its modes of production: whereas the adventures of Dupin, Holmes and Dickson—when penned by Jean Ray—were imagined and created by individual artists, current visual detective fiction designed for mass consumption is the product of a creative team, i.e., a collective consciousness, and hence, its protagonists are no longer exceptional individuals but crews of investigators working under a very defined hierarchy. This apparent victory of an all encompassing objective macrostructure echoes the increasing erasure of the subject in today's spectacular reality, which thrives to eliminate differences in order to favor globalized mass consumption: as the Truth is generated by a collective entity, the individual is implicitly dispossessed of his or her capacity to resolve the unexplained.

The enduring success and staying power of the detective narration is also the defeat of the deconstructionist project, for it demonstrate that the myth of the Truth still holds firm in our collective consciousness. The epistemological victory over the unexplained remains, untouched by postmodern radical skepticism, and the urban space is more than ever privileged ground to reiterate the myth of the Truth and to demonstrate the capacity of the human mind to reach it; only, today, our New Truth appears to have grown a little colder, a little less personable and a little more dehumanized. Just like the City.

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