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Stephen Knight. *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980. 202 pp.

Dennis Porter. The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. 267 pp.

Both Knight and Porter are committed to the ideologically oriented task of redeeming popular literature through the most popular of popular genres, the mystery-suspense-crime genre, and of seeing that genre as paradigmatic for all literature of whatever stripe. And both their studies are rewarding, although in slightly different ways, for while Knight focuses most of his attention on lengthy analyses of a small number of concrete cases, Porter focuses most of his attention on a theoretical framework (the former serving as an admirable and not untheoretical introduction to the not unconcrete latter).

Knight's *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* consists of a brief introductory chapter on methodology followed by chapters on the socio-literary origins of the figure of the detective, Poe's Dupin, Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie's Poirot and Marple, Raymond Chandler's Marlowe, and Ed McBain's 87th Precinct. There are no footnotes, but each chapter has its own bibliography of works mentioned. In addition, there is an index which is helpful despite certain [205] annoying peculiarities and inconsistencies (especially in the handling of pseudonyms).

Knight's thesis is that if literary criticism is to avoid being merely "self-gratifying connoisseurship," it must "establish the social ideologies of the works discussed," a task which is implicit in the very choice of popular literature as subject, and which must occupy itself with both the form and the content of the works. According to Knight, criticism should not allow the commercial success of a text to act as a deterrent or to be a ground for its dismissal, but rather criticism should reflect upon the societal interests and needs which the text encapsulates. Indeed, "a good literary critic should be able to say why a mass-seller works, and how it works." And Knight selects as his focus crime fiction, the "major examples of [which] validate a whole view of the world, one shared by" its audience.

Since the origins of detective fiction as we know it are in the crime literature of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Knight studies in some detail the collection of "true" crime and punishment stories collected under the title *The Newgate Calendar* (1773), a catalogue of simple crimes committed largely by natives and solved—with no machinery of detection—by the society itself closing in spontaneously on its malefactors, thus presenting a fable of societal integration under the aegis of Christian piety, a fable whose silences and fissures reveal its intrinsically false but ostensibly consoling character. Dissatisfaction with this picture of crime but inability to supersede it is manifest in William Godwin's *Adventures of Caleb Williams*, which presents a hero who is a detector although not yet a detective, a hero in whom subjective individualism (the strength of later detectives) is a clear weakness. The final precursor of the detective is the figure of Eugène François Vidocq, whose *Memoirs* (1828-29) reveal him to be a reformed criminal turned policeman, an agent of the people, but one lacking in rationality and alienation, two characteristics which Knight sees as essential to the detective in the true sense, and the lack of which marks the account of Vidocq's exploits as conceptually still very near to *The Newgate Calendar*.

In the chapters that follow, Knight examines what he regards as the key figures in the development of fictional detecting. Poe's three Dupin stories show a movement from isolated consultation to wage-earning detecting, from scientific analysis to

oracular insight, from realism to romanticism, from withdrawn cerebration to externalized self-awareness (as represented by Dupin's encounter with his double, D.); in short, they "together imply that the isolated intellectual and imaginative life is a sufficient and successful response to the world" and is a marketable commodity for the human good, a vision which validates "the ideology of the bourgeois professional intelligentsia." Of course, Sherlock Holmes is *the* detective, through whom Conan Doyle "domesticates" the twin notions of positive scientific necessary causality and the individual's power to discern that causality: "Doyle's ability to popularize and naturalize rational individualism runs through the stories and is central to their success." Holmes is the heroic apotheosis of bourgeois professionalism, fusing a materialistic view of the world, a pervasive egalitarianism (with its corresponding disdain for aristocracy), and a view of crime—at least in the most popular short stories—as petty and unthreatening. Agatha Christie presents a new level of [206] bourgeois self-consciousness through the clue-puzzle structure of her writing and the elevation of the bourgeois woman as a force for the restoration of societal order: both Poirot and Marple are defined by stereotypically female characteristics.

In all of this, Knight's analysis is frequently acute, but too often the writing seems labored. It is only when he turns to Chandler and McBain that the book and the writing seem to come alive. Indeed, except for certain passages in the discussion of Holmes, the sequence of historical and British chapters has the feel of an obligation, a paying of dues to entitle him to step at last onto what he regards as his terra firma, the American hardboiled novel.

In the discussion of Chandler, Knight tellingly shows how the ostensible objectivity and naturalism of the style are in reality a black mask for a subjective romanticism. Marlowe as the narrator is a central controlling consciousness with respect to which everything else is defined. "The mixture of an apparently open and modernist technique and an actually authoritarian romantic core . . . is a powerful and successful illusion, appealing directly to an audience for whom the pull of romanticism was great but for whom its characteristic nineteenth century formulation was no longer a viable medium of response." And Knight sees Chandler's idealist form and his presentation of the informed and self-defending alienated individual as a real advance over his predecessors. It is the elevation of the moral value of the individual and the denigration of the external collective and mechanistic world. Its only defect is that it deliberately evades "the realities of urban crime."

The police procedural story, a post-WW II sub-genre, is meant to remedy this defect and was formulated in response to the media-sophisticated and hence better informed audience which demanded greater verisimilitude in its crime fiction. Its most prolific and popular practitioners are the Englishman John Creasey (under the pseudonym "J. J. Marric"), with his Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard novels set in London, and the American Ed McBain (pseudonym of Evan Hunter), with his 87th Precinct novels set in Isola (a thinly disguised Manhattan). McBain's goal is to "create pragmatic liberal humanist fables about crime, the police and the city" employing a "quasi-objective mode" bolstered by documentary inserts to increase the sense of verisimilitude. In this way, McBain presents a mechanistic view of people together with its necessary concomitant, a liberal humanist ideology: "in the dual, self-contradictory patterns of his novels, McBain creates an illusion of security, enabling his readers to feel that a human protective quality is still present in the oppressive modern reality of the mechanical world of commodities." Knight's book, then, is an admirable beginning to a study of the sociology of detective fiction, and as such it whets one's appetite for a more comprehensive approach.

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Such an approach is found in Dennis Porter's *The Pursuit of Crime*, an exercise in what he calls metasleuthing. *The Pursuit of Crime* consists of a brief introduction; five chapters in Part I on the art (i.e., formal characteristics) of crime literature, suspense, textual readability, and narrative erotics; six chapters in Part II on the ideology of the genre, focusing on the detective hero and the language, landscape, and formulaic nature of detection; and two chapters in Part III on the pleasures of detective fiction and on modernist anti-detective fiction. It also contains a useful index

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In the introduction, Porter asserts that "perhaps the most compelling reason for paying attention to popular literature is its popularity," and asks what he calls the classic question: "Why, at a time when so much solicits the attention, do great numbers of people still choose to read tales of crime and detection, if they read any books at all?" He argues that since the formulaic component of all literature has been revealed by current critical trends, no text can be ignored simply because it is formulaic. Nor is an alleged escapism a valid ground for disregard, because "the interesting question that is often begged . . . is why people bother to escape into literature at all, if that is what they are, in fact, doing." In addition, the analysis of detective fiction illuminates the activity of novel reading in general, impels one to face the question of ideology, and demands a reader-centered approach.

Porter begins with a survey of the major crime literature prior to Poe, and he mentions that there are some who trace its roots back even to antiquity.

Here I must mention a regrettable blind spot in an otherwise fine book, namely Porter's failure to cite the work of Dorothy L. Sayers where it would be appropriate. In his first footnote, he cites a French work of 1965 and fails to mention *The Omnibus of Crime*, ed. Sayers, published in 1929, which includes tales of detection from Herodotus II, the Apocrypha Book of Daniel, and *Aeneid* VIII. In the second chapter (pp. 31 ff.), when he discusses the formal characteristics of the detective novel in terms of Aristotle's *Poetics*, he again fails to cite Sayers, in this case her 1935 lecture "Aristotle on Detective Fiction."

Porter introduces his survey by sketching the distinction between the ancient primacy of the mythic-sacred crime and the primacy of profane crime in the desacralized modern world, although both types have been co-present through all human history. He examines the picaresque and ephemeral literature of the eighteenth century, Godwin's *Caleb Williams*, Hugo and Dickens, the memoirs of crime fighters such as Vidocq, the sensation novels and the *romans feuilletons*. He concludes with a brief discussion of DeQuincey's seminal essay, "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts," showing how this sets the stage for the advent of "the Great Detective": "Poe invented the fine art of detection as a counterpart to the fine art of murder."

In the second chapter, the discussion of Poe as a historical culmination transforms itself into a structural analysis of the genre as a whole, in particular the principle of backward construction, in which the denouement is legislative for all the narrative units which precede it. With Dupin—the artist-detective amateur of genius, the fusion of gothicism and ratiocination—Poe demonstrated his mastery of the narrative technique of suspense which operates more or less in all narratives, a displacement of chronological time which must be logico-temporally restored and retarded simultaneously. Porter applies his insights to Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, each of which "illustrates the apparent paradox that the progressive and digressive units of a narrative sequence are often one and the same." The next chapter explores the role of

digressions in creating suspense and here the discussion expands to include novels of foreign scene and international scope, such as those of Simenon, Freeling, and Fleming.

Of course, the detective novel possesses readability *par excellence*, combining as no other form does both pleasure and intelligibility. One of the important aspects of the genre's readability, which is exemplified in the narrative of "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," is its *dejà vu* quality, the sense in which the reading of it is always a re-reading. (It is in this fourth chapter that another unfortunate lapse of scholarship occurs, in which S. S. Van Dine is cited in footnote 4 as the author of "the Detective Club Rules." The Club is actually the London Detection Club, of which the American Van Dine was not a member, and its oath is different from his twenty rules.)

The second part of Porter's study focuses on ideology. Here the verisimilitudinous character of detective fiction, its ties to the realist tradition, its fidelity to contemporary social reality, and its effacement of its character as text all come into play. And again, as in Knight, the keys are the textual silences and fissures, only discernible through an understanding of the socio-history of crime and punishment. And the ideological content which thus comes to sight is primarily and for the most part conservative: "it is in conformity with the most cherished behavioral norms of a given society." The most perfect language of detection, it seems, is the language of Chandler, a mythic stylization of quintessential American values which is a reaction to the tawdriness of American life.

Next Porter returns to the beginning and traces the history of the machinery of detection and the detective, the emergence of which was a consequence of the political and industrial revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He follows, then, the fictional detective from Inspector Bucket and Sergeant Cuff to Mike Hammer and James Bond. And this is followed by a consideration of the urban landscape within which the detective most typically moves, where Simenon's Maigret shows that this is not merely an Anglo-American phenomenon. Porter concludes his argument with the assertion that "detective novels provide reassurance, not only because they deal in identifiable good and evil and end up punishing the latter but also because they propose a world of fixed cultural quantities."

The third part of Porter's study is entitled "Beyond Detection." First, he elaborates Marjorie Nicolson's reflections on the academicist love of the mystery genre. Second, he examines works which he calls anti-detective, works which deliberately thwart the rhythm of desire that is satisfied so well in detective fiction, works by Henry James, Kafka, Robbe-Grillet, and Borges. This foray into so-called mainstream literature is more a program than a completed project.

Both Knight and Porter, then, have gone a long way toward providing a basis for studying the ideology of the mystery genre. Despite the fact that they both commit what used to be regarded as the cardinal mystery fiction critic crime, namely revealing the endings of the books that they discuss, Knight's and Porter's two studies are worthwhile, informative, thoughtful. They are thorough critical quests which will encourage readers who have not yet succumbed to the mystery fiction compulsion to succumb (or at least not to scorn those who have) and will reward and enlighten those as addicted to the genre as I am.

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