

THE FIGURE OF THE DETECTIVE

The English Classic

From this point, up to the final chapter on the metaphysical modern renewal, the proliferation of detective novels precludes a comprehensive survey. In any case, a history of the genre was never the objective of this book. Rather it is the origin and significance of a cultural icon which interests us. The detective genre, and hence the figure of the Detective, is concerned with the getting and deployment of knowledge. We will examine whatever illuminates that question.

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A genre is a formula, a set of quasi-industrial procedures for producing texts sufficiently alike that the reader's expectations are not surprised and the demand for more of the same is satisfied. A genre is more than that, of course. However, the systematization of production is the feature which interests us now, for it is the dominant feature of the English Classic. The problem which the Classic addressed was how to obtain uniformity sufficient to be predictable with sufficient variety to not be boring.

Recall the rules for the detective story listed earlier. (These were first formulated by Ronald Knox. I present them here as given by S.S. Van Dine¹ and reorganized logically. Van Dine's list is jumbled):

¹ Van Dine, whose real name was Willard Huntington Wright, was the creator of the series detective Philo Vance (1925-1939), an ersatz English lord affecting upper-class behavior. The American Wright in his Van Dine persona was the ironically perfect explicator of the English Classic.

I. Fair play: the detective should have no advantage over the reader as regards inside knowledge and there shall be no tricks or deceptions other than those between the detective and the criminal. The detective himself cannot be the criminal — aside from this being a deception on the reader, it is an offense to logical deduction. The crime itself must be actual, not merely apparent, such as an accident or a suicide or an illusion.

II. Roles: there must be a detective, and only one detective, and this person must actively gather evidence (clues) and draw conclusions from them by logical deduction.² There must be a corpse — other forms of victimization are too trivial. There must be a culprit — and only one culprit — who must have a prominent part in the story and who must be a person of social standing (hence not a professional criminal).

III. Method: the culprit must be discovered only by rational means, i.e. ‘scientific’ means. Rational truths are available to any reasoning person with the requisite knowledge, unlike imagination and fantasy. That is, (to repeat) the detective shall have no advantage over the reader, and over the other characters only by his innate reasoning abilities. The story must concentrate exclusively on rational processes, without distracting love interests, literary description, irrelevant character development, and the like.

IV. Setting: all the murders must be personal, and committed for personal reasons. These motives, and the circumstances of the crime, must conform to the quotidian expectations of the reader, neither exotic nor extraordinary.

²I will continue to use the word *deduction*, despite what was said about Holmes’s method of guessing (abduction), so as not to seem pedantic.

Notice that the particular complaints which Van Dine makes in his rules on method are all derived from the Holmes stories, or from attempts (such as Hornung's Raffles or Bentley's Trent) to counter Holmes's dominance. Doyle wanted first of all a dramatic story, and the *magic*³ of Holmes's method was part of the drama. Exclusive emphasis on the puzzle over other story-telling devices such as adventure, quest, or simple human interest, despite such tinkering with the rules such as Christie's Roger Ackroyd, is the characteristic modification of the English Classic.

What I am calling the English Classic begins with Agatha Christie and *The Mysterious Affair At Styles* (1919) and includes Dorothy Sayers, some authors of lesser note such as Marjorie Allingham and Ngaio Marsh, and then a great many others still worth reading. Some examples are Earl Derr Biggers, Arthur Upfield, R. Austin Freeman, Freeman Wills Crofts, Ernest Bramah, Anthony Berkeley, E.C. Bentley. The list could be much longer. Classic stories were enormously popular in the 20s and 30s and a great many people wrote them. What all these authors had in common is some allegiance to the Rules and a story which does more or less the genre work described in the first chapter on origins. As the thirties wore on the fears and social needs addressed by the Classic faded. Stories in the Classic tradition continued to be written, of course, but the force had passed on to new genre variants.

Much has been written on the English Classic, only a bit of it of use here. Let me begin with what Brian Boyd has to say in his work on the evolutionary origins of storytelling.⁴

³ I will have something to say about magic detection later.

⁴ *On the Origin of Stories* (Harvard, 2009) 20.

“The mind is not inductive, as Shakespeare's contemporary Francis Bacon suggested it should be. We do not patiently wait for all available evidence. ... Instead, we hastily construct inferences that ... hit home. Storytelling lies at the heart of literature, yet literary studies all too rarely explore our ability to construct a story on meager hints ...”

Might we conclude from this that the compulsively rational English Classic is an *aspirational* tale which hopes to show us how things could be if only we behaved so? But storytelling does not work this way. It is always slipping back to its origins in the human ability to find stories everywhere, in simply one thing after another. That given, we ought to find some remnants of the ancestral mode in the Classic tale of ratiocination. We are looking for magic.

Magical thinking is the interpretation of two closely occurring events as though one caused the other without any concern for a causal link.⁵ Joan Didion describes this in *The Year Of Magical Thinking* (Random House, 2005) as a personal language of secrets – interdictions, omens – the powers and forces which connect the world and the word. If we believe that the unspoken and the unseen will be released by their names and images, then refusing to name or depict them allows us some control over them.⁶ Magical thinking corresponds (loosely) to what I call warm knowledge. To an extent that storytelling arises from, and obtains its resonance from, warm knowledge, there is a contradiction at the heart of the English Classic.

⁵ James Alcock, “The Belief Engine” *Skeptical Inquirer* 19(3) 255-63.

⁶ This resembles the idea that a writ is not served until the recipient accepts it.

Glenn Adamson, in his book *Thinking Through Craft* [Oxford: Berg, 2007] articulates a description of Modernism which applies across the entire field of art from couture to sculpture and music. This theory consists of two parts: the now familiar search for the pure form of the art, and denial of the craft by which the art is brought into being. For example, the Modernist challenge to jewelry was to construct a form which could simultaneously be identified as jewelry and as art without requiring the physical body which it was originally invented to adorn. Adamson's schema thus reveals the English Classic as an instance of this Modernist agenda: the pure form of the rational detective story without the craft of storytelling — character development, allusion, rhetorical devices, humor, myth, and so forth.

Notice too the class bias in the exclusion from any significant role of servants, low-born persons (such as professional criminals always are), women (Rzepka 144-151, looking ahead to the psycho-intuitive tradition), and presumably anyone not white and Christian. Wilkie Collins's use of women and blacks (East Indians) was deliberate, a repudiation of exactly this feature of the then nascent genre.

And yet, despite all this systematic expiation, is not the Detective a magician? Not a mere prestidigitator, but a conduit to the spiritual world of correspondences to be interpreted as by a soothsayer, of inter-connections to be disentangled, sign-posted as if by a guide. Of course, the Classic detective ultimately provides his rational explanation, but what gives that explanation much of its force is the dangerous and uncanny world with which we are threatened.

The Detective may be said to capture stories and bring them into the safe world of rules and expectations. We are entertained by this, but one who is capable of converse with the world of magic is a dangerous person possessing knowledge and skills forbidden to us who know only rules and habits.

Rules, of course, are invitations to impudence. Every one of Van Dine's strictures had at least one counter-example already by 1928. His codification's appearance in 1928, almost at the end of the high Classic, smacks of bolting the barn when the horse is gone.

Why so tardy? Consider this reminder concerning the nature of genre:

Genres are not changeless structures ordained by natural law, destined to repeat themselves in every society, nor are they theoretical constructs. They serve a function in the overall cultural economy, an economy involving an industry, a social need for the production and consumption of messages, human subjects, technology, sets of signifying practices [social objects, possibly memes]. Genres are not treasure chests of cultural values or rituals to exorcize cultural demons. They are a network of formulas which serve a regulative role in delivering a certified product to the waiting customer. They ensure the production of meaning by regulating the customer's relation to the images and narratives constructed for the market in cultural goods, building and then satisfying desire. The values and rituals put to work by the genre will be whatever serves these

purposes best at the time.⁷

These remarks give some hint of the importance I attach to magic as an influence on the most ratiocinative collection of Detectives in the nearly two hundred year history of the genre. What I have said about demons, exorcism, rituals, and shamans bears on this, of course, but the Classic magic is also entertainment: simple prestidigitation. The detective magician distracts our attention from what is actually going on, engages in some hocus pocus and produces some inexplicable surprise – raw eggs out of thin air, prescient playing cards, whole women sawn in two, amazing escapes – which often leaves us as mystified as were the witnesses to the crime who called in the detective in the first place. Sometimes, after the surprised audience has become receptive, a more or less full explanation is provided. Sometimes there are unexplained loose ends. We might learn nothing at all about how the trick was done, but this is of no moment. The genuine English Classic employs in more or less good faith this framework of theatrical magic. The magician tempts us into over-hasty deductions and then exposes our mistake. We are invited to inspect superficial appearances only to find them vanish, exposing the underlying reality. We are told what to expect and then encouraged to allow our expectations to mislead us.

But perhaps we are not fooled. In the best of the English Classics, behind this stage detective lurks the real one, the figure of the Detective whose presence we might prefer to overlook.

These few remarks may be sufficient to distinguish the English Classic from its predecessor Holmes and from its noir successor.

⁷ Paraphrased from Dudley Andrew, *Concepts In Film Theory* (Oxford, 1984) 110-11.

Agatha Christie (career 1920-1975)

Agatha Christie is the most published author of all time, in any genre. Her detectives Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple illustrate a desire increasing in the 1930s to humanize the strictly rational Classic form. Miss Marple was created to give scope to character and narrative elements from the mainstream novel. This is the pattern also of Dorothy Sayers' Lord Peter Wimsey and his successor Harriet Vane. The difference, in the earlier versions of Poirot and Wimsey particularly, is between Poirot's little gray cells and natural wisdom.

Christie played a role in establishing several conventions, such as the English country-house murder (in her first book *The Mysterious Affair At Styles*), a small closed society hospitable to systematic detection and generally transposable to other settings, such as her *Murder On the Orient Express*. (The formula is so familiar and indissolubly tied to the Classic tradition that it is wide open to parody, as in Emma Tennant's *The Last Of the English Country House Murders*, Altman's movie *Gosford Park*, and Gertrude Stein's *Blood On the Dining Room Floor*.)

Christie soon challenged the limits of her own Classic method in *The Murder Of Roger Ackroyd*. Here the murderer is the narrator himself, and the virtuosity comes from not breaking the rules of transparent clues and fair play central to the Classic tradition. Christie also pioneered the courtroom drama, in *Witness For the Prosecution*, establishing a formula which was the mainstay of Earle Stanley Gardner's Perry Mason and has continued into the present with any number of television shows featuring lawyers.

An (initially) apparent departure from the rule of rationality is “The Adventure Of the Egyptian Tomb” (1924, filmed in the Suchet series) which sets up a science/occult conflict characteristic of the times when crossword puzzles and Ouija boards were the rage. However, the occult side is lamed, reduced to foolish gothic doings. Poirot is sometimes sensibly energetic, sometimes opaquely portentous, sometimes affectedly silly, whereas Hastings comes off as plain and open, and carries a particular air of authority as a narrator when Christie’s own familiarity with archaeology grounds it. The tease in the story is just that, a tease. We are given the facts more or less, but as a jumbled pile, not in the reasoned order in which Poirot acquired them, and so we have no chance of following his chain of reasoning. If the *clues* were suppressed (as is the inference chain) the result would be theatrical hokum. This is the ever-present narrative fragility in the Classic tradition. To expose *both* the clues and the inference chain can require a sacrifice of the best dramatic strategies, but to present clues *without* the inference chain, while it preserves the drama of discovery, forbids any warm inwardness in the narration. The solution here is to hide the true inference chain by scrambling the clues and supply the drama with a specious and anti-rational occult hypothesis. Doyle also tried this strategy in *The Hound Of the Baskervilles* with equally dismal results. In the milieu of the English Classic we simply cannot take the irrational seriously enough to scare ourselves. Earlier we concluded that Holmes did not deserve his reputation for coldness. The exclusively rational Classic detective is closer to the mark.

There is no fully satisfying solution to this narrative problem. In method the Classic story is the opposite of hardboiled. With Poirot, as with most Classic detectives, we are given the clues but denied access to Poirot’s

thinking. If it were the reverse — mental processes but no transparent clues — we would be in the realm of Hammet's Continental Op (who appeared only a year earlier, in 1923). The contemporary Neo-Classic narrative, we will see, does what the Classic could not. It gives access to both the detective's viewpoint and his psychology — to both the clues and the inference chain — but it does so by transferring the drama of discovery from the detective to the events of the story. It sometimes seems that the Neo-Classic story solves itself while the detective observes and interprets.

Hercule Poirot

Agatha Christie's detective Hercule Poirot offers an interesting comparison with Sherlock Holmes. The Poirot canon is larger than Holmes's. We know more about him than we know about Holmes. Much of this knowledge we have independently, whereas what we know about Holmes is filtered through Watson's testimony. Both of them are flamboyant, eccentric and vain. Both are confirmed bachelors, though Poirot has warm working friendships with Inspector Japp, Miss Lemon, and Captain Hastings.

Given these similarities, why is Holmes the *echt* Detective while Poirot occupies so much smaller a cultural space? The character of Holmes is open. He drives the plot, and the story is as much about him as about solving the crime. In comparison, Poirot is a puppet. His behavior is stereotyped. He does not drive the plot because he is utterly predictable and the plot is predetermined by the genre rules.⁸

⁸ In 2010 a new television version of *Murder On the Orient Express* attempted to humanize Poirot by providing him with a spiritual crisis. A comparison with Albert Finney's 1965 portrayal of Poirot in the same story makes clear which is the detective that Christie created. Her

The English Classic is concerned exclusively with the puzzle. The characters are there only to embody the puzzle. They are, so to speak, the ground on which the puzzle walks. No modern story written in that way would succeed. The Neo-Classic revival which we will examine later treats its characters very differently not because we have a different idea of what people are like than Christie's and Doyle's readers did but because the Neo-Classic stories are doing different cultural work. The disparity between what Christie says about Poirot and the way we see him shows this clearly. Christie's readers were concerned to defend a rational society according to their concept of what is civilized. Angst, cynicism, moral outrage, and epistemological niceties had nothing to do with that.

Poirot made his first appearance in 1920, in Christie's first novel *The Mysterious Affair At Styles*. Poirot is, as he will tell anyone who should make the mistake, not French but Belgian (and thus in this respect an outsider). He has had a successful career as a detective in the "Belgian police" — whether this is the national force or that of the capital, Brussels, is never specified. At the time of the Styles affair he is a refugee from the Great War who has been taken in, along with some others, by an English benefactress and given a room at Styles, her country place.

It is 1916. Captain Arthur Hastings, invalided out of the army, is telling the story. He has been invited to Styles, where he runs into (literally) the man Poirot, whom he knew earlier in Belgium. We learn that the little policeman is five feet four inches tall and limps badly — an infirmity mostly ignored afterwards — has an egg-shaped head and a great moustache. This is about all we ever learn of him as a

Poirot is impervious to ambiguity and moral quandry,

person.

After the murder at Styles it is Hastings who calls in Poirot. Hastings narrated some of the early tales but served too little narrative purpose, so after a decade Christie began to ease him out. He is presented as clueless naïf, not well-enough off to afford an automobile, for the workings of which he shows great enthusiasm. He is soon married off and sent to Argentina, where he buys a cattle ranch and raises four children, returning now and then to England and his earlier Watson persona.

Altogether, Poirot appeared in nearly a hundred cases between 1920 and 1975; 28 of these were novels. Among the things we don't know about him is his age. A plausible estimate is, if we assume from his former career that he is in his mid-forties at the time of the Styles affair, then he would have been born about 1870. If Hastings is 30 in 1916 and the last of his four children was born in 1920 (the most hurried scenario we can imagine) then in 1945, the probable date of the final case, Poirot would have been 75, Hastings 60, and Hastings's daughter Judith, who is portrayed as of marriageable age, 25.

After the Great War Poirot attempts to retire and devote himself to the cultivation of vegetable marrows (zucchini) — one thinks of Holmes retiring to raise bees — but professes himself, not surprisingly, bored. (*The Murder Of Roger Ackroyd*, 1926). Growing zucchini would not seem very difficult, after all, and he moves to London to set up as a consulting detective. Poirot is at the height of his career in the 1920s and early 30s.

Christie never confined herself to one detective at a time and often arranged for several to work together. In *Cards On the Table* (1936) Poirot is combined with Ariadne

Oliver (in her first appearance, not counting one story) and Superintendent Battle. Professionally, Poirot's relations with the official police are good, not unexpectedly for one who was himself a policeman. Of course, the Classic tradition's rationale being the defense of social order, together with Christie's own pronounced anxiety about outsiders (foreigners, mostly), the story would seem to require a sympathetic Scotland Yard Inspector, and James Japp duly makes his appearance as soon as Poirot sets up in business. Japp is competent but lacks the imagination of his eccentric colleague. An unusual feature of Japp's role in these stories is that we learn something of his private life — more, in fact, than we know about Poirot himself outside the catalog of his habits and foibles.

Japp is married in the conventional way which aims at contentment rather than happiness, and in marked contrast to Poirot, he prefers country food and beer and is completely without cultural pretensions.⁹

Despite Poirot's professionalism, he falls into the mold of the gentleman who engages in detection as a hobby, taking only cases which interest him. But this aesthetic attitude toward detection is really a polite fiction. Roger Ackroyd was a personal friend. When Poirot is traveling (mostly to the Middle East where Christie's own foreign experience was greatest) he is usually in the position of the doctor in the house who cannot refuse his services. And often enough — as when some young people living in his own building get into difficulties ("The Third Floor Flat") — he is sucked in by mere proximity. Poirot's true role is that of the village busybody who is always looking through the hedge in hopes of finding some strange goings-on. When Christie

⁹ Simenon's Maigret was the great exception to the detective's dismal personal life. Maigret's uxorious marriage is an important element in his way of thought, as we will see.

added Miss Jane Marple to her stable of characters it was so as to pursue this narrative strategy openly and engage with the human comedy.

An important feature of Poirot's working methods is the application of his "little gray cells." We are to take his meaning as being the operation of rational thought, but a closer scrutiny of his behavior suggests something more like subconscious speculation or mentally turning over the possibilities in search of one with particular appeal. The gray cells are an autonomous truth engine not under conscious control. Unlike Holmes, Poirot is rather often puzzled, and the mental impasse is not disassembled but exploded in a flash of insight and a rain of self-deprecating imprecations – the characteristic "Ah, mon ami! How could I have been so stupid!"

Unusually in detective fiction, we do learn something of Poirot's final years. In *Curtain* we revisit the Styles case, with Hastings again narrating. Styles has become a country hotel. Poirot is well-off (rich, he says) but in declining health. He has become meager, dyes his hair, and is confined by arthritis to a wheelchair. All of this proves to be play-acting. Poirot, we find, has hijacked Hastings for a role in his plan to visit retribution on an unconvicted murderer, an Iago who does his work by goading others into violence. Poirot's endeavor succeeds, after which he hastens his own end by depriving himself of medicine needed to stave off heart failure.

In this final tale, then, the roles are reversed: Poirot is the murderer and Hastings the detective. Hastings is a poor sleuth — he has to be told the truth in a testament Poirot has left to be read after his death. There might have been an opportunity in this story to learn more about Poirot, but as with all detectives in the Classic tradition, we are allowed

to interest ourselves in him only insofar as he is wrapped in his function of the Detective. Though his sleuthing is all done and his murderer's plot laid before the novel begins, he continues to play the role and this essential inscrutability is part of the disguise. What we learn in the end of his feelings and motives is no more than we have known all along.

A story in which Poirot is encountered only in passing, seen pottering in his garden perhaps while we are on our way to somewhere else, is unthinkable. In the later 1930s Dorothy Sayers experimented with her own second-string detective, Harriet Vane, as a fictional character in novels having little or nothing to do with crime, but this sort of crossover has been an oddity. Christie tinkered widely with detectives of various sorts. In the end her first (and possibly most popular) creation, Hercule Poirot, is mostly a collection of mannerisms. The interest of the story is not in him but in the ingeniousness of the puzzle in which Christie has set him going like a wind-up toy. And when, given the chance in *Curtain* to set his own puzzle, he stays thoroughly in character.

All English Classic detectives have this artificiality at their core as a consequence of the requirements of the tradition. This accounts in large part for the rarity of film realizations of these characters. Aside from Philo Vance, Charlie Chan, and Nick Charles no sustained attention was given by the movies to the Classic tradition until the neo-Classic revival beginning about 1980. The immediacy and illusion of reality inherent in film made it very hard to embody any of the Classic detectives in their recognizable artificiality without threatening to turn the film into a comedy. (And in fact there is a very large comic element in the 1930s portrayals of Vance, Chan, and Charles.)

Hercule Poirot embodies this difficulty in the extreme. For Poirot, before David Suchet's portrayal there are only a 1935 movie of *Lord Edgware Dies* (a dismal failure and consequently now rare), Albert Finney's Poirot in the 1965 *Murder On the Orient Express*, and a handful of other performances. Finney's realization should be studied closely — his Poirot is a genuinely human eccentric whose neuroses and extreme oddity cover feelings of anger, pride, and empathy not to be found in the print original.

Christie used Poirot throughout her career equally with her intuitive female creation Miss Marple. Significant novels in which Poirot appears are

- 1920 *The Mysterious Affair At Styles*
- 1926 *The Murder Of Roger Ackroyd*
- 1933 *Lord Edgware Dies*
- 1935 *The ABC Murders*
- 1938 *Appointment With Death*
- 1941 *Evil Under the Sun*
- 1955 *Hickory Dickory Dock*
- 1975 *Curtain*

Dorothy Sayers (career 1923-1937)

Sayers was an Oxford graduate whose education was as useful to her as Christie's Middle Eastern archaeology. Sayers's first anthology (1929) used a very broad definition of 'mystery' including occult, horror, and much else. Lord Peter Wimsey's foppish upper-crust manner contrasted with that of his vulgar assistant in the dominant pattern of Poirot/Hastings and Poirot/Japp, degenerating to the vaudeville of Campion/Lugg and H.C. Bailey's Reggie Fortune, reversed by Jeeves and Wooster. The neo-Classicist Elizabeth George's team of Inspector Thomas

Lynley and Sergeant Barbara Havers so exactly follows this pattern that one wonders whether the phenomenon really does indicate class discrimination or is now simply a narrative requirement. In the U.S. it was copied by Philo Vance, with the District Attorney and his sergeant becoming increasingly comic through the movies of 1930s just as the Allingham's Bailey became less and less serious, until the shock of 1939. It is not accidental that 1939 brought the advent of the noir variant.¹⁰

Sayers' solution to the problems of intellectual seriousness and human empathy with her invention of Harriet Vane — significantly a woman — anticipates the way women have been used since to humanize police procedurals and cop stories, formalized in Vane's time in the psycho-intuitive shift which will occupy us next. We will have to wait until the 1980s for a female detective with her own agenda.

The Police Procedural¹¹

Between them, Christie and Sayers embodied all of the Classic forms except one: the police procedural. For this we turn to R. Austin Freeman (career 1907-1940, series detective Dr John Thorndyke) and Freeman Wills Crofts (career 1921-1951, series detective Inspector French). Thorndyke was the first detective to make direct use of medical knowledge and is thus also an ancestor of the forensic procedural.

Although not first in the field, Crofts (in *The Cask*) consolidated procedural elements which had been implicit in the English Classic and especially common in French

¹⁰ Raymond Chandler displayed a notable ire toward Philo Vance.

¹¹ The procedural is a story in which the crime is solved by a systematic thoroughness which eventually invalidates every solution but the correct one. The insight of a Holmes or a Poirot does not play a role.

writing because of the presumed thoroughness of French practice inherited from Vidocq at the beginning of the 19th century. The nature of abduction, the dialectic of hypothesis and empirical validation, assures the importance of procedure. We will see in hardboiled writing that when the method of detection changes, procedure falls away. Procedural elements indicate the Classic method.

The procedural is an elaboration of the wish to exclude all elements from the story but the ‘deductive’ through the exhaustive testing of inferences. The detective must be a member of the official police force in order to command the resources for this. The relentless, almost mindless quality of the procedural (Thorndyke is incredibly obsessive about detail) means that there will be rather few pure ones, and television shows such as CSI which are inherently procedural quickly introduce other elements such as love affairs and difficult personal histories (Dana Scully, for example) in order to keep up interest. As we will see, the diluted procedural is now the dominant form of the cop story. The rationale for such detectives as Jane Tennant is to re-introduce humanizing elements (women, significantly) without sacrificing the detective focus or straying from the quotidian — and, since unofficial detectives are harder and harder to justify, hence the proliferation of historical dramas and adventure plots derived from spy stories and thrillers¹² — the cop story now dominates the neo-Classic.

Freeman’s detective, the medical Dr. John Thorndyke, first appeared in 1907. Freeman himself was a doctor, as were Doyle and his inspiration Dr. Bell, but Thorndyke was the first to make direct use of medical knowledge. Thorndyke’s sidekick Jardine narrates the stories in first person, as does

¹² Examples would be *The Pelican Brief* and the Indiana Jones series.

Watson (yet another medical doctor). We are here in the pure Classic tradition as developed from Holmes. Clues are presented transparently to all and the truth is made to give itself up by rational-empirical force alone. The detective is active throughout, never the beneficiary of opportunities happened upon. But the distanced affect of the English Classic taken to the extreme of the procedural cannot be sustained. In "A Mystery Of the Sand-Hills" (1925) Thorndyke is at work with Anstey, his Watson. The mystery begins with an encounter with a pile of clothes on the beach and gets bigger and bigger only because Thorndyke refuses to regard this, or any of his subsequent observations, as ordinary occurrences. He does this because his chain of inductions cannot be closed. To the reader, however, Thorndyke's behavior will appear a little mysterious because we are given only partial access to his thinking. He talks to Anstey, or rather to himself and Anstey overhears him, and resembles Holmes in terms of taking only his own counsel. (Compare the Holmes tale 'The Blue Carbuncle' as a similar production of a large result from a trivial occurrence.)

Crofts's "The Mystery of the Sleeping Car Express" is a representative early procedural and typical of the Thorndyke stories as well. The omniscient narrator begins with a retrospective rehearsal of the facts. The overt emphasis is on "details, casually remarked at the time" with a distancing, anti-sensational affect. But the narrator Girard Jones cheats: "sinister little hole", "dreadful apparition" ring false as language which eschews overt emotion. The story shifts to free indirect narration and the whole sequence of observations is then repeated as a conversation between two people in Scotland Yard. Finally, after a shift to first person the story is repeated a third time, in the form of a dying confession. Nothing is solved. The solution is discovered literally by accident. When Girard Jones

resumes in his own voice we find that he possesses the true answer only because he has had the fortune to come upon a bicycle accident in which a man who proves to be the criminal has had a fatal injury and wants to confess what he has done. This is a pure puzzle, three times narrated, derived from the device of the dying confession which has been used since time immemorial to escape from a narrative cul-de-sac. The truth is that the pure procedural makes for poor storytelling.

Other innovators of the English Classic were concerned primarily to tinker with the form or explore its limits. Ernest Bramah, for instance, invented the blind detective Max Carrados for this purpose. In "The Coin Of Dionysius", the first Carrados story, the bulk of the narrative is used establishing the Carrados's credentials as a detective and in introducing the person who will become Carrados's sidekick, Carlyle, and (looking forward to Batman) his butler Parkinson. Carlyle presages Rex Stout's Archie Goodwin, legs to the also disabled (by obesity) Nero Wolfe.

Bramah's narration is omniscient except when it is expedient to use Carlyle as the medium in order to excuse not telling the reader some fact or other. The mystery itself is solved through special knowledge possessed by Carrados. This is not expertise such as Holmes's knowledge of tobacco ash, though Carrados does possess such expertise in his knowledge of rare coins and other matters, but simply that Carrados happens to have had an experience which throws light on the case. This is a kind of knowledge, accidental in origin, available to Carrados alone, and is not the product of the empirical phase of abduction. When the narrative begins, this empirical phase is already over and we have only the Holmesian opening demonstration of virtuosity to form the whole story.

Anthony Berkeley (Francis Iles, career 1925-1939) was a founder of the Crime Club and the institutionalization of The Rules. His detective Roger Sheringham is in the mold of the upper-class amateur but less foppish than Wimsey. "The Avenging Chance" is a condensed version of *The Poisoned Chocolates Case*, Berkeley's best tale. This story seems to be told to an unknown listener by one Moresby, but that is a feint. The method is omniscient. Compared with realist work written after Raymond Chandler's noir reformulation, such as Cornell Woolrich's "Rear Window" the plot is conventional and implausible.

No other tradition or formula has dominated the field to the extent that the English Classic did in the 1920s. It is still the common tradition in England and Europe, where hardboiled is regarded as 'The American Style' and still interpenetrates its successors so thoroughly as to foil naïve periodization. Here, for example, from 1950 at the height of Mike Hammer's brutal reign, is a passage from Michael Gilbert's *Smallbone Deceased*.

Mr. Hoffman nodded. He was a qualified accountant attaché to the Fraud Squad. A man who hunted down facts with the passionless pleasure of a butterfly collector and pinned them to his board with the same cold precision.

Nabokov the impassioned butterfly collector turns in his grave.

The Classic on film

Although it wasn't done until recently (with a few exceptions already mentioned) an English classic is fairly easy to translate into film. The cast is limited and the

characters are well differentiated, though the apparent differences may prove false. The action is straightforwardly presented and ought to be free of devices such as showing us the act of murder but hiding the actor's face. It is fairly easy to free the *mise en scène* from the kind of commentary that would draw our attention to particular clues, a practice opposite to that of horror films or thrillers. These invariably attempt to ratchet up the suspense with appositely-timed music and such devices. This is the main difficulty, given the omniscient narration common to (indeed, forced upon) all these films: to keep the spectator from finding out what the detective knows until the time is ripe – that is, to preserve both the Rules and the suspense. More contemporary films, which benefit as we shall see from both a relaxation of rules in general and from the introduction of subjectivity, get around this problem either by not allowing the detective to know more than we do or by dispensing with omniscience. This second option replicates the textual experience of a printed classic. Narrative suspense in an English classic depends less on the overt events than on solving the whodunit puzzle. There may be a little *frisson* in anticipation of the nearly inevitable second murder or of the consequences of the final revelation, but the atmosphere of an English classic is calm in the face of the most bizarre and awful events. It is methodical, and above all gentlemanly. The detective is sometimes a gentleman (or greater – *Lord Peter Wimsey*) but often enough not, and some subversive class-bashing fun may be got out of that. In fact, the chief weakness of the tradition is that too much calm civilization too easily becomes comedy.

This is a significant weakness, as comedy is one of the best means for disarming the threat posed by rationality, and with that threat gone the iconic heart of the genre evaporates, leaving nothing but the butterfly collector. In

the 1930s when the English classic was the hegemonic tradition there were no alternatives to provide the *différance* against which the English classic would appear as effete or trivial and some comedy could be risked. When noir began to muscle in the situation was different. It is one thing to hedge the power of the detective and another to disable him completely. Basil Rathbone played Holmes with complete seriousness in his *Hound Of the Baskervilles* of 1939; in 1930 he played Philo Vance with the same gravity. Rathbone brackets the decade in which Vance, like the genre itself, grew steadily more light-hearted and light-minded. The same drift can be found in the airy *Kenel Murder Case* with Dick Powell playing Vance somewhat as he did Nick Charles four years later. All this came to an abrupt end in 1939. In *Calling Philo Vance* the comic aesthete is abruptly transformed into a muscular spy and an excuse for swashbuckling adventure. The tradition came to an end here, though it might be said that happened much earlier when the Rules were written.

In the 1930s there was a surprising resistance to detection as a good thing. The emotional grip of the genre, first explicated by practitioners of the classic form and later elaborated by Chandler in his criticism of it, had this plot: an act of violence (murder) disturbs the sense of order and predictability necessary to middle-class comforts. The basis of these comforts are intelligence and rationality, coupled with a materialist outlook and a standard of proof requiring physical evidence and an unbroken chain of causality. By this means the truth is recovered and our comfort and safety are assured. Absent (or at least overtly absent) are the emotional imperatives driving this narrative. This is rather an Enlightenment program of scientific inquiry. The detective is a form of scientist and brings with him the cultural values and qualities associated with the scientist. We expect people now to regard science as a Good Thing

and, given the spiritual emergency which is built into the heart of the detective plot, we would expect the detective to be welcomed as a savior and regarded as a hero.

Such was not the case. The initial transference of the tropes of detection to the new medium of film revealed an uneasiness about intellect and the products of the mind. This ancient attitude, in our time expressed as a fear of science (science being the most culturally powerful proponent of things rational and empirical) finds expression in the first film realizations of the figure of the Detective – in later argot the *shamus* or shaman whose knowledge gives him powers of life and death. The detective, among other things, is a sorcerer, a witch-doctor. His knowledge is *forbidden*. In the face of such German Expressionist films as *M*, the English Classic movie simply could not be made. It is too loaded with devices for hedging round the detective. What would have had to be done (and in our time is done) is to provide the thrill of violence without actual danger to anyone except the nearly anonymous victim. In remakes of the Classic stories we now accept this as light entertainment. This was not the spirit in which these stories were forged.

Contemporary with this belittlement of the 1930s detective were some initial attempts to model a less dangerous replacement, a female detective. Until 1935, women in detective movies were simply props serving a purpose similar to the maid who drops the breakfast tray on discovering the body. *The Casino Murder Case* introduces two new types, the *dame* (a hard, cynical sort) and her foil the *lush*, a more sympathetic character – because softer, more emotional, more *womanly*. In the dame and the lush we recognize two of the stock characters of noir.

The next step was to combine the lush and the dame into

the pert female sidekick, an Audrey Hepburn type. Women are useful as sidekicks because their limitations (warm, emotional, physically weak) assure that they will not usurp too much of the detective's centrality and so they can afford to be portrayed as both brainy and intuitive. They can be as pert as necessary so long as they cry at the worst moments.

In 1930 Dashiell Hammett published a novel, *The Maltese Falcon*.¹³ It is interesting to compare a sequence from *Dangerous Female* (1931, an early film version of Hammett's novel) with the 1941 film *The Maltese Falcon* itself and a film from The Falcon series (also 1941). The 1931 Sam Spade is a sleazy womanizer. Both The Falcon and the 1941 Spade are cosmopolitans (and womanizers) but the resemblance stops there. The Falcon is a wealthy dilettante with a pointless and completely superfluous "secret" identity. Bogart's version of Sam Spade is genuinely secretive, possibly dangerous, and street wise.

At the beginning it is curious that the 1931 Spade speaks Chinese, which Hammett's detective Spade does not. The use of Chinatown is only to heighten the drama with a spurious exotic intrigue. It plays no further role in the movie. In 1941 the death of Spade's business partner Miles Archer was returned to where Hammett had put it, at the intersection of Bush and Stockton, near but not within Chinatown. The sense of menace is still there, but it now emanates from the murder and from Spade himself. And

¹³ The novel is often called *hard-boiled*, but the true hard-boiled detective is a post-war invention who operates differently and does entirely different cultural work in a different milieu. We will take up the hard-boiled detective later. The novel is also called *noir* but that is also a later designation which strictly applies only to movies. The novel has the affect of both hard-boiled and noir but nevertheless, it obeys Classic rules.

Brigid O'Shaughnessy, the eponymous dangerous female, has been empowered with a genuine power of seduction. Flesh comes very near to capturing the detached Spade's rational – and *moral* – intelligence.

Perry Mason was another epicure and womanizing detective in his original film incarnation. Della Street is obviously his mistress. Spade would not have touched her counterpart, his Girl Friday Precious. The Commedia coroner from the Vance films has made a good re-incarnation. Paul Drake is still a functionary, ceding his sidekick role to the Pert Dame, Della.¹⁴

¹⁴ I will have more to say about the Pert Dame, the Lush, and women detectives in later chapters.