

THE FIGURE OF THE DETECTIVE

6: THE NEO-CLASSIC REVIVAL

Classic detection has just about died out in theatrical film. Theatrical films are thrillers. Classic detection's home is now television. This distinction between film and television is obscure and porous. About all it seems to mean is that since the 1980s films of detection in the Classic mode have been made for television. Holmes, Poirot, Marple, Wimsey, and Campion have been pretty well mined out, along with Maigret from the psycho-intuitive period. Many of the Detectives from the Classic tradition have been left untouched. Some others which, in light of a modern exploration of the possibilities of fallible or impaired detectives, ought to have been of interest, for example the blind Max Carrados and the hopelessly amateur busybody Trent, have been left aside. Very little can be learned from what has been done which we have not already encountered in the *Hound Of the Baskervilles* sequence which we examined earlier.

Instead, what we have is a flood of new work which resembles the old Classic but is not. There are new stories about the Classic detectives, some of them quite good (*The Origins of Sherlock Holmes*) and others entertainingly zany (*The Seven-Percent Solution*), but most of these are feeble. What is taking up all the space on television and on bookstore shelves is the neo-Classic, and there are a great many of them. P.D. James, Dick Francis, Donna Leon, Walter Mosely, Ruth Rendell, Iain Pears – a random selection from hundreds of authors. Many are openly literary: the Martin Beck series by Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo, the Inspector Barlach stories by Friedrich Durrenmatt, or the New York trilogy by Paul Auster. There

is a distinct sub-genre of humor (Sarah Caudwell, or the Benjamin Malaussène series by Daniel Pennac) and one of historical detectives: Aristotle (Margaret Doody), Cadfael (Ellis Peters), Marcus Didius Falco (Lindsey Davis), Judge Dee (Robert Van Gulik). There is also an ethnic sub-genre – Navaho (Tony Hillerman), Bantu (James McClure), Botswana (Alexander McCall Smith) – and an increasing interest in non-Anglo authors: Icelandic, Dutch, Swedish – and ever more female detectives.

My local independent bookstore has 220 feet of shelving devoted to mysteries, and 740 feet to mainstream fiction (23%). A large used book store in the area is about the same: 984 feet of mysteries and 4608 feet of other fiction (romance, horror, science fiction, westerns, mainstream, literary...) The public library is 35% mysteries: 2772 feet out of 7912 feet of fiction of all types. And nearly all of this is neo-Classic. At fifteen books per foot, allowing for a mixture of mass market and hardcovers, this is about 60,000 mysteries. Mystery fiction is second only to Romance in market share.

There is evidently a market for new mysteries, for which television and film are suppliers of trivial size. The neo-Classic, like the Classic from which it is derived, and unlike noir, spies, or thrillers, is a printed entertainment. But whether this flood of books is anything more than backward-looking cultural grief is doubtful. If the market for detection were linked to a really pressing concern we would expect to see a re-thinking of the genre, not remakes or imitations of old stories.

What the Neo-Classic¹ revival ignores is that by adhering

¹ I am not going to define neo-Classic, though I will later discuss some of its characteristics. At this point the reader should be familiar enough with the traditions of the genre to be able to parse any new product into

to a set of antiquated procedures for the genre, an amalgam of the Rules modified with psychointuitive and noir practices, the figure of the Detective becomes trivial, merely an entertaining game. Lew Archer and Travis McGee in their time (the 1950s and early 1960s) addressed in a limited way contemporary fears and put matters straight, or demonstrated how this might be done. Those fears by 1980 were no longer operative, just as the Comics Code in the early 1950's had become laughably irrelevant, and any response to the old fears as unrealistic as *Attack Of the Killer Tomatoes*.

A comparison with science fiction is relevant. *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* addressed superficially contemporary interests, against which one might set *Blade Runner*. In that film, Deckard operates more or less as the Continental Op did, but the narrative structure and themes address distinctively contemporary problems. What, by contrast, is the task of Indiana Jones? Even Mike Hammer, of all people, tried to address contemporary fears in *Kiss Me Deadly* [1953]. The film failed in that ambition through ignorance of nuclear reactions, although as *Atomic Café* [1982] makes clear, Hammer was no more uninformed than most others at that time, including a great many people who ought to have known better.

What is there of special interest in stories by Elizabeth George about the aristocratic Thomas Lynley and working-class Barbara Havers? Or Inspector Morse and Sargent Lewis? Rumpole and his wife are merely a sour recapitulation of the Maigrets – nearly all neo-Classic detectives are unmarried or divorced and sexually frustrated. There are several new conventions in the neo-

one or another of these traditions. Any story operating somewhat according to the practices of the English Classic or its near successors should be easily recognizable as such.

Classic but the crime, the method, and the inevitable solution are entirely Classic.

Things neo are backward-looking, of course. They may be simply nostalgic, or perhaps revanchist fantasies. Just what is our present relationship to the figure of the Detective after a hundred and fifty years? It can't be simply an interest in the things of the past. We read old novels, and some authors like Jane Austen and Conan Doyle have kept their appeal to the general public. The wish to preserve old things does not mean that we must make new old things as if there were not enough of them already. A glance at television programming or films, or a look into any bookstore, will convince anyone that most, if not quite all, examples of the Detective genre are now neo-Classical. How can this be explained? My arguments thus far have been built on the assertion that the form of the detective genre at any particular time reflects the needs and fears of that time, particularly for the getting, deployment, and control of knowledge, insight into the workings of society, and concerns about spiritual health. Why does the old Classic formula of nearly a century ago so dominate the present?

A preference for the way things were, together with a distaste for the way things are and a belief in the superiority of the old ways, is nostalgia. What is the work of nostalgia and how does it do it? Without digressing unnecessarily perhaps I can outline some useful notions which would help to understand the peculiar present dominance of the neo-Classic detective.

Nostalgia

To fully understand nostalgia requires the explication of three concepts. First, nostalgia is a relationship to the past,

so it is necessary to look into constructions of history. Second, nostalgia is perforce a relationship to the present, for it is dissatisfaction with the present that causes us to look to the past. Third, when we turn from the unsatisfactory present to the remembered past it is because we have an ancient lore of the lost paradise to which we can attach our *a priori* belief that the past was better than the present. To analyze the master narrative of the lost paradise from Eden to Shangri-La would be a formidable task, most of it having nothing to do with detectives. But it is important to recognize that without the story of the lost paradise there could be no nostalgia. Of course, we can have fond memories of the past, but *nostalgia* is a good deal more than that.

There are two kinds of nostalgia, both puerile. The first is merely sentimental, but there is a more virulent second form bound up with failure, at its worst *my* failure, and in this form is an important source of unhappiness, rage, intolerance, sour criticism, and much else. Worst, this second form is based on a false story about the past which we tell ourselves to explain the present, now falsified by the same story.

Readers of neo-Classics take up some relationship with the history of detective stories, either sentimental or of the more fraught sort. But detective stories, as we have seen, are themselves tightly bound to the past. Both the crime and its motivation come to the detective from the past. His task is to understand and explain history, for which he gathers and sifts evidence, and consults documents and informants, like any good historian. How bizarre if the detective were to suffer from nostalgia. It would cloud his vision, taint the evidence with opinion and presumption, and by poisoning his relationship with the inferior and objectionable present, take away his reasons for wanting to explain his findings, or in fact do anything of benefit at all.

This would surely annoy his clients and be a boon to criminals. How is it that the neo-Classic reader can afford what the neo-Classic detective cannot?

Nostalgia is not a property of stories but of the readers of stories. The Greek concept of tragic catharsis was that by experiencing the past through story-telling we revisit our fears and obsessions and are by this means able to purge ourselves of them. But the reader of the neo-Classic is not purged. He wants more sustaining nostalgia and less purgative history. If we are to break the hegemony of the neo-Classic and find some way of rejuvenating the figure of the Detective, if we are going to do something about this story consumption habit, we are going to have to get a history free of lost paradises and make a case for the interest of new forms of story-telling.

This does not seem probable. Paradise is always lost. Present paradise is just life. Only when present experience enters the memory can the contrast between memory and experience create the imaginary unrecoverable paradise. Paradises and utopias are inaccessible constructions of the mind and the wish to dwell in them is diagnostic of alienation. The desire to be whole, to be free of the ratcheting to and fro which is the dialectic of present and past which drives history, leads the alienated reader to seek out endless fragmentary and unsatisfactory substitutions for a lost original. Nostalgia is a disease of history.²

How then does nostalgia manifest itself in the Neo-Classic detective story?

2 The assertions are Hegel's. See John Rawls, *Lectures on the History Of Mind Philosophy*. Harvard University Press, 2000, 335-6

First, the Neo-Classic detective's outsider status is no longer that of a person outside society but has been rolled back to the position before the noir shift, that of a person with standing in society but an outsider to the local group. As a consequence, both the society and the group can no longer be thoroughly corrupt. This would tar the detective also, especially as the Neo-Classic detective is often cast as a policeman, bringing disrepute to the institutions of social cohesion. In the Neo-Classic story only some persons can be seriously wrong.

This situation is partly due to the increasing intolerance of society toward vigilantes, and the difficulty of unofficial persons to get access to the facts, the crime scene, police technology, and a whole host of privileges once accorded the Classic detective. It is impossible to imagine now that a busybody like Marple or the *droit de seigneur* snooping of an aristocratic Wimsey would be tolerated.

The present solution for the amateur or unofficial wannabe is generally to retreat to the ratiocinative thriller, in which a tyro can be sucked into any situation one chooses and then must extricate himself from it. Roman Polanski's film *The Ghostwriter* (2010) is an excellent example, but structurally this plot is brother to *The Ipccress File*, *Ashenden*, and other in what is a different tradition. The old P.I. ruse of being called into the case because the police must be kept out of it is no longer very plausible, either. Other openings for unofficial detectives are cases where there is no crime in the usual sense (Precious Ramotswe restores harmony), the whole thing is too shadowy to seek help (Woody Allen's *Manhattan Murder Mystery*), the crime falls within the potential detective's expertise (e.g. accounting fraud) and when exposed can be safely turned over to the police, or the investigator is simply a skilled snoop with chutzpah such as a news reporter, an old trope from the days of print news.

All of this only serves to further constrain the neo-Classic detective's outsider status, rendering it essentially nil, in fact, and soothing our fears for the social fabric.

The second important change to the Classic formula is to introduce elements to humanize the detective (his associates, the bystanders, and sometimes the criminal as well, even the victims). This mutes the puzzle which was a central feature of the Classic, introducing features from the literary novel and better conforming to present tastes in page-turners.

There are several humanizing strategies. The most important is to open the detective up to human failings and mistakes, most often in private life but sometimes in the professional one as well – succumbing to a desire for revenge, getting the wrong man out of an obsessive need to complete the case, and so on. In the detective formula these mistakes must be recovered in order to preserve our respect and the genre's sense of justice, but this is not always so in other variants. One thinks of Popeye going off the rails in *The French Connection*.

Another strategy is to endanger the detective's official standing, portraying him or her as a maverick, or prone to operate outside the law, or a member of a disfavored group, or a drunk, an aggressive comer, or simply someone with a personality clash, usually with the superior officer.

We may also notice the new prevalence of sidekicks, or at least of confidantes. The Classic sidekick was not unknown, of course. But Captain Hastings, be he Poirot's *mon ami*, cannot be admitted to real intimacy, which would compromise the Detective's Classic apartness. It is significant that Marple does not have a sidekick – in a way, she is herself the sidekick – in order to break down the distancing

effect of the Classic tradition. Now it is the opposite, and the sidekick is the entrée to the detective's personal life.³

The Neo-Classic sidekick opens up possibilities for distributed detecting. Sidekicks might be able to go where detectives can't or have needed social skills. Inspector Lewis, the former sidekick to Morse, now has a sidekick of his own who is an Oxford graduate and can serve as Lewis's guide in that inbred place. Sidekicks might be working-class or of a second-class ethnicity and so an avenue for exploring issues of class and prejudice which might have nothing to do with solving the crime.

The urge to engage us emotionally extends to the neo-Classic crime, which is often lurid or sordid, engaging our moral outrage and at the same time our sympathy for the victim, qualities which were almost totally absent in the Classic tradition. Whereas a Classic story might begin with the discovery of a body which we then hear nothing more about, a Neo-Classic will introduce us to some sacrificial character and then kill the victim after we have made a bond. All this gives an urgency to the still stongly rational investigation which simple intellectual engagement could not produce.

As we saw at the beginning, warm knowledge was thought (and still is thought) to be the special province of women. The humanizing strategies of the Neo-Classic are ideal for a woman detective and the need for official standing closes off the old subordinate role. One contribution of the Neo-Classic has been the creation of a range of serious female detectives and generally to soften or remove the anti-feminist tone traditional to the genre.

³ Sgt. Joe Friday's squad-mate was supposed to serve this function but the byplay was so cold and formal that it had the opposite effect.

The female detective

A particularly interesting development of the last thirty years has been the efflorescence of the female detective. An earlier version of this character, in the late thirties, was distributed between two types: the pert dame and the soft woman with a hard heart, as exemplified in two movies, *Private Detective* and *Nick Carter, Master Detective*. An important matter raised by this early manifestation of the woman detective is the issue of a subordinate role. In neither of these movies is the woman a sidekick, but in both there is a man, the supposed real detective, to whom the successful solution is attributed in the end. A surreptitious answer to this issue was the ambiguous gender of the apparent sidekick, officially a woman but in role and behavior a man, as captured in their names, Lou and Jinks.

The permanent solution was found in the early 80s by (among others) Sarah Paretsky in her character V.I. Warshawski. This was not to do away with the soft character (the Lush) but to harden the Dame's shell by the same method as Sam Spade used in his speech to Brigid O'Shaughnessy at the end of *The Maltese Falcon* when he tells her why, despite some things said and done, he is sending her over. For honor, that which he owes to his dead partner no matter what sort of sleaze Miles Archer was, and prudence, that which he owes to himself, to thrust off the fetters which this woman would use to confine him. It hurts, but Brigid O'Shaughnessy is going to jail.

This solution was generalized at the same time by Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone to allow a nearer balance between the matter of cool and warm knowledge which has pervaded the genre since the beginning and had been temporarily hidden but not completely suppressed by the

noir, spy, and thriller variants.

It is important to note that Paretsky and Grafton were not the first to grapple with this problem. Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone from 1982, Amanda Cross's Kate Fansler beginning in 1964, Miss Marple and Harriet Vane in the 30s, and several 19th century characters of note mentioned in earlier chapters are examples. Paretsky and Muller stand at the beginning of a new trend which by 2004 is sufficiently established to be parodied in the film *Sky Captain and the World Of Tomorrow* in which the characters Frankie and Polly fission the established union back into its original parts.

Until very recently the movies have shown their conservative, mainstream nature with this variant of the Detective. Kathleen Turner played Sara Paretsky's hardboiled V.I. Warshawski in 1991 and a worse affect and body type could hardly be imagined. This was a clever lightweight, not a bloodied kickboxer. A character like Kay Scarpetta, half hotshot lawyer and half forensic detective, has never been filmed. Instead we have remakes of *Mission Impossible*. The only representative at the box office until now may be *Fargo*. In 2010, however, we are given Lisbeth Salander in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, an amalgam of every characteristic invented so far – not a sidekick but a colleague, iron-hard and vengeful with hidden vulnerabilities, a brilliant hacker and thrilling action hero. With Lisbeth Salander I think we may say that the female detective has arrived.

An earlier character worth some careful scrutiny is Helen Mirren's portrayal of Jane Tennison in a series of six movies made for television. One really new feature of the

neo-Classic⁴ is its response to several social trends. Serious women in charge of their own investigations cannot be ignored with the increasing numbers of women in law and law enforcement and the increasing prominence of authoritative women everywhere. In an atmosphere where the treatment of women is a main index of respect for freedom and civil rights it would hardly be possible to continue with the old masculine dominance of the detective genre.

Film has been the slowest to respond. In our time television has been the more probing of the two visual media, with the likes of Tennison and Marg Helgenberger's Catherine Willows on CSI. The essential problem with women cops, as I have said, is the one we have already encountered in Inspector Jules Maigret. Willows can be conventionally feminine because she is insulated from the rough and tumble. She works with her mind in a laboratory. Tennison presents to opposite problem of how to feminize this pit bull without making it seem impossible that she should have survived long enough to become a D.I. By "feminine" I don't mean soft and likely to cry, I am referring to the territory of the psycho-intuitive which is women's aboriginal homeland (or barricaded reservation much of the time). The question is not what women are but what they are thought to be and what we want a female cop to be like in order to channel (ground) our problems and anxieties.

This a warm/cool problem. The female cop has to be smart and rational and expert at something the culture considers brainy — hence lawyers and scientists. She needn't be hardbitten, probably oughtn't be, but she can't have the required intuitive, empathic streak without being a little

4 What follows is indebted to Linda Mizejewski's *Hardboiled and High Heeled* (London: Routledge, 2004).

tough and emotionally resilient.

Here we have the detective artist — Sherlock Holmes and hardly anybody since his time — warm and cool not just balanced but blended. Is it because dissimulation and surreptitiousness, circumspection, hidden knowledge are part of the everyday experience of women? Or is there a more general cause? Because we have begun to be suspicious about knowledge — suspicious that “uncovering” is actually retelling or reinventing by people with other (possibly nefarious) purposes. Women are familiar with this. Contemporary intellectuals (do they go to the movies?) are familiar with this. Has this suspicion become common property, and we are now advised that safety lies in a judicious mix of warm and cool? Why would we ever have thought otherwise?

Stories about women detectives, when they drift away from this ideal, tend to move toward the sensational. It isn't just men who sexualize these stories. Feminist criticism inclines to the view that everything is always really about sex. Sexualization of a genre already inclined to psychodrama (fertile ground seeded by the psycho-intuitive tradition) distracts attention from detection toward the gruesome or morally shocking crime, the sordid histories of the participants, and the daily crises and depressions of the detectors. Sexualization foregrounds the body and the always embodied emotions. Men and women both are expected to display sensitivity to these matters. The readiest indicator of the true suspect in the neo-Classic is the character who fails to do so.

Consider the by-play between Lynley and Havers which takes up so much of the time in this mystery series by

Elizabeth George.⁵ They behave like a mismatched married couple. The man, who is married below his station to the working-class Havers, conducts unhappy liaisons on the side with a woman who purports to be the real wife, while the female half of the detective family becomes more and more possessive, doing such things as setting the metaphorical bed on fire and complaining about not having a life, ultimately engaging in unauthorized independent detection. Watson was occasionally invited to think for himself, but never like this. The two of them (Lynley and Havers) are then deployed to avenge a female victim, a revolting child murder or a prostitute ripped to pieces, which brings all these sexual attentions to the fore and complicates (or even disables) the detecting. It is the genteel alternative to the voyeurism of Warshawski's repeated violation.

What would a low-temperature female detective be like? A tough-love mom? You can't take the crime out of the genre, or the association of crime with violence. Insofar as feminine means not macho, would a nonviolent sleuth and sage resemble perhaps Dumbledore or Gandalf? A kind person of quiet power who will protect us from the worst evils, a nonviolent person who must be provoked to action and never uses more than the minimum force? There is now such a detective: Precious Rambotwe.

Pre-Precious this would have been a strange but not unheard-of variation on the genre. Printed stories of male versions such as Judge Dee come to mind, the zen detective pair Grijpstra and De Gier, and Pennac's Belleville novels featuring the domestic comedy of Monsieur Malaussène, who solves crimes by inadvertence, dogged persistence,

⁵ Or the falsely de-gendered relationship of the bachelor Morse and the family man Sargent Lewis.

and networking. But to get people to sit through a *film* of this sort would require that the usual attractions be replaced by something like a looming threat and at once we are back in the territory of the thriller, where knowledge serves primarily to protect the threatened detective. And of course, if that detective is a woman this will be all to the good for the box office.⁶ Under present conditions the neo-Classic will tend to the sensational and end in the thriller, by a different route than noir but with the same consequence: the dispersal of the tradition.

The Prime Suspect series, Mizejewski reminds us, “never allowed us to forget the grimness of [Tennison’s] job, her life, her choices. We frequently saw her alone in her flat, or cut off from colleagues, or without a friend to celebrate a triumph.” (p 93) Sgt. Havers isn’t any better off. This may be a statement about routine female experience, but many modern male detectives live similarly. We never really cared whether Poirot was *happy*. Unhappiness was a property of other people and a temporary consequence of the intrusion of violence which the detective was supposed to fix. Like sex and suspense, grimness seems to be one of the strange attractors of the neo-Classic. There never was nor ever will be any safe normalcy in these stories. The detective uncovers, learns facts, but it makes no difference. What’s the point? It’s *the detective* who is, who has to be, the story.

Mizejewski (p 91) suggests another cultural cause for this generic drift toward either the domestic psychodrama or the thriller: the legacy of the mysterious woman, the femme fatale, Milton Caniff’s Dragon Lady in *Terry and the Pirates*. This cultural icon is made up of two qualities: the

⁶ Mizejewski provides an extensive analysis of *The Silence Of the Lambs* along these lines, showing how the respectable victim can play an active role rather than just being tied to the tracks.

Bad Girl and an “inscrutable aura and shadow.” These are not the exclusive property of the woman, of course. Spade has them. What Spade doesn’t have is the right gender. Nobody thinks twice about bad *boys* and mysterious, devious *men*. They’re all over the place, whereas a fatal femme detective is a bizarre idea, a female Fantômas. Either it’s a pose to be discovered in the end so that the plot can melt away in universal domesticity, or we are being asked to sanction a social violation.⁷

Cultural Work

A tentative entry to an expanded analysis of nostalgia

I have noted some differences between the Classic and the neo-Classic figure of the Detective. I have claimed that the genre is exhausted. But the hegemony of the neo-Classic implies the opposite. The sheer volume of stories in print and on film and television indicates an undoubted continuing interest in the genre. There is cultural work being done – genres which do not die. What is the need or fear which is being worked out by the neo-Classic detective. Can nostalgia alone explain it?

Nostalgia works on the Neo-Classic to create a version of the past which assuages a longing for a lost paradise dislike of a mediocre present. But possibly there is also something new which a rejuvenated version of the Detective might

⁷ There is one movie type which will allow us to root for the bad guys: the caper flick. Here wile and guile are celebrated and there is plenty of room for a woman. In fact, the way women can generate suspicion is a positive benefit to the form. Caper flicks are inverted thrillers. They begin with the gathering of intelligence and end with the failure of the adversary in an implosion of scorn.

address, if it would.⁸ If so, it has not.

A judicious comparison might reveal something about this. If we set side-by-side a recent embodiment of Poirot by David Suchet (*Lord Edgware Dies*, 2000) and an exactly contemporaneous new film about the meeting of young Doyle with the model of Holmes, Dr Joseph Bell (*Murder Rooms: The Dark Origins Of Sherlock Holmes*) what do we see?

There is a characteristic difference between these two. In the neo-Holmes, the murderer (O'Neill) needs very little motive beyond a twisted concern with purity. This is because the *mise en scène* attributes so many criminal and degenerate qualities to the society in which he (the murderer) is embedded that his behavior is strongly over-determined. Whereas in the well-lit Poirot society of polite detection, this social corruption is unheard of and the criminals go off the rails one at a time. The Poirot murderer is a deviant from, not a representative of, his society, and to drive him to murder requires many strong and complicated experiences.

For both sleuths (Poirot and the proxy Holmes) a number of characters are cast up as possible malefactors. In Poirot's England we know only one of them did it; in the rethink of dark Edinburgh any one of them could have.⁹ The new-

⁸ We have we seen nothing in fiction to replace High Modernism either. It has been fifty years since the end of Modernism and still we have only a feeble and derivative post-modernism in its stead.

⁹ Or some, many, or all of them. This last option is that of *Murder On the Orient Express*. Taking the premise that everyone did it seriously would be Kafka. Christie's version is a gimmick. The 2010 Suchet version speeds up the story to leave room for totting up a lot of Christian nonsense concerning guilt which is utterly foreign to Poirot's pragmatism and faith in reason. If Poirot and the story were altered in good faith, why was it done? What cultural need is being served?

made Holmes story is constructed like a thriller, as are most contemporary movies which are not comedies or nature documentaries. The Poirot story is built on a society now vanished. Poirot is not battling irrationality as such, only a particular instance. A contemporary invocation of this vanished world, such as Altman's *Gosford Park*, would have to present itself as historical fiction or include a strong dose of irony and camp to be taken seriously. Altman's troupe soon enough emigrates from this two-faced *terroir* to inhabit the less self-referential country of Elizabeth George and P.D. James.

When we assent to these stories we set aside our relativizing skepticism about agendas, constructions, social objects, meta-narratives, and so forth so as to enjoy a night out — no worries, no morning-after. Nostalgia is at work. The same motive drives the thriller: the fear of the creeping hegemony of relativism which complicates the concept of knowledge with unwanted sophistication and spoils the belief that ordinary people can operate the world without Higher Learning. The thriller sneers at this; the nostalgic revival bemoans it.

Neo-noir, a bit more cautious, is willing to accept Hume-Foucault relativism so long as skepticism about knowledge and human perception of the phenomenal world does not degenerate into cynicism and amorality. This caution, recall, is what inflamed the arguments over Existentialism and Humanism¹⁰ in the years of the original noir. Then, the assurances of Sartre (and others, despite conflicting

10 The objection was to the Enlightenment idea of a perfectible society which the recent war had exposed as the ideological and propaganda engine of fascism, of totalitarianism generally, and of bourgeois (we would say suburban) complaisance. The intent was not to relegate compassion, generosity, and so forth, but it proves fatally easy to think so, as our own culture wars demonstrate.

alliances) were simply shouted down. Father knew best. As in all repressive families, this only makes things worse. It won't do to underestimate either of the parties to this struggle, which resembles, intellectually and culturally, that between the Impressionists and the Academie in France of the 1860s and 70s. The neo-Classicists have a serious grievance with the world which can be reified and assuaged by The Detective. The trope of The Detective has served in this role for now over a century. The problem is that rather than create a strong new version we are satisfied with a weak copy.

It won't do, however, to draw this classicizing nostalgia with too few lines. For instance, as between the Poirots of the Edgware and Ackroyd stories, note such common features as the interest in clocks and the discovery of the body. But a shadow has darkened the Ackroyd tale which is not there in the more purely classic Edgware puzzle. Both of them turn on timing, but time in Ackroyd is infested with feelings about lateness, missed opportunity, and inevitable decline. Time in the Edgware puzzle is only the ticking of a well-running machine, a toy. Both victims have knives sticking out of their necks. Edgware is discovered face down; Ackroyd is face up, the fact of his horrid deadness exposed. Tongues click over Edgware's body. We hear about missing money. There are some cool observations by Poirot and one of those "open and shut case" remarks by Jaap, as well as some detached hatred exposed by several parties as if hatred were reasonable and common. This is not the way the Ackroyd goes. The difference between the two charts the direction in which the classic tradition is to be modified to make it more plausible for a contemporary audience. The *Dark Origins Of Sherlock Holmes* is the predicted result. In our time, wherever we find hopes for the improvement of humankind (however unlikely) and a wish for objective knowledge of the world we are in the

presence of nostalgia.

But this nostalgia is hollow. In our time it would be difficult to screen an effective drama without psychological explanations for everything, especially the childhood traumas in which we indulge ourselves. The result is darker than the sunny original Classic.¹¹

In the *Baskerville* series the classic tradition moves from the well-lighted world of the original story to the light-minded one of 1955, to be then jerked in 2002 into the dim shadows of an alley and strangled. Films of the fifties tried to recreate the old atmosphere but the effort was in bad faith. More contemporary creations draw on noir elements to produce sensations (grisly baby murders and so forth) but have replaced the hopeful component of noir with despair. The moral conflict is empty. This is the Manichean thriller world of the faceoff; the detective may rage at the beastliness of the dark side but is never seriously implicated. Marlowe was not dirtied, either. Neither was he impotent. His disgust meant something. Nowadays we all have *mains sales* and can only whine. Adam Dalglish is not implicated. He does not play the game from inside as George Smiley or Alec Leamas did. This is, I believe, the fear that drives the nostalgic neo-Classic, that we may all be guilty and there is no solution which will set things straight.

I cannot conclude this topic without mentioning one case in

¹¹ There is an irony here. Everyone's psychology is unique. Its nature is hypothetical. It is not evidence in the way that fingerprints and alibis are. We *construct* it, thus bootlegging in the very relativism and radical uncertainty which we were trying to avoid. In order to prevent this result the psychological motivation must be broadly intelligible, turning the characters back into the stick figures which the appeal to psychology was intended to avoid.

which nostalgia can be turned to positive effect. My example is Juan José Campanella's film *The Secret In Their Eyes* (Argentina 2009). Campanella's work requires some exposition, but the point here is that nostalgia actually drives the plot, and in doing so exposes itself as an obstacle both to the solution of the crime and to the detective's own happiness.

We begin with an old unsolved crime about which a retired detective is trying to write a novel. He consults a colleague, a woman who was his superior at the time and with whom we learn he was in love. In the main part of the film a double investigation is recounted, intercalating the original inquiry with the new one. In the course of this both the detective and his colleague come to regret that they did not acknowledge their earlier love. We also learn that the man thought to be the murderer, who was convicted but then released by Argentinian Security to serve their own purposes, was in truth the villain. But we also learn that the husband of the dead woman, unable to overcome his grief, has captured the murderer and held him in solitary confinement for twenty-five years, as he would have been but for the intervention of Security.

None of the formal elements of this story are new. The present-day detective serves as his own Chronicler, filtering the story just as Watson would. His method is intuitive, as Maigret's was. There is what appears to be a Classic second murder, when a friend of the detective is assassinated by men who have mistaken him for the detective. Then, the detective does not solve the crime. Incorrectly, he doubts his original solution; meanwhile another man sees and acts on the truth. However, this supposed truth, not supported by any objective evidence, may in fact have been wrong, and the obsessed husband's incarceration of the supposed murderer is the real crime. This is the actual second murder

as explicated by Todorov and introduced here in the discussion of the English Classic. At this point the detective's original construction of the crime, deconstructed by himself during his second investigation, becomes congruent with narrative time and is reconstructed by the viewer, only to have the story deconstructed at once by the true detective. This leaves the original detective in the position of only another bystander. The fabric of society is in Neo-Classic fashion sufficiently knitted up to allow the two lovers to finally unite.

Nostalgia provokes the second investigation. Throughout, nostalgia hides the truth. Nostalgia for a lost love warps the purposes of the detective. It is only when nostalgia is cleared away and the obsessed nostalgia of the true detective is revealed that everyone, including the viewer, is released into the present. The past is finally in the past. Neo-Classic practice has been turned against itself to expose the futility of Neo-Classicism's response to our contemporary anxieties.