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Author(s): Ellen O'Gorman

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DETECTIVE FICTION AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE¹

By ELLEN O'GORMAN

1. 'Historical' knowledge and 'fictive' knowledge

We *know* that Cicero successfully defended Sextus Roscius on a charge of parricide in 80 B.C.; we *know* that Vespasian became emperor after the civil wars of A.D. 69, and founded the Flavian dynasty which ended with his son Domitian's death in A.D. 96.

We also *know* that Sextus Roscius was guilty of the charge of parricide, that there was an undiscovered conspiracy in A.D. 70 to oust Vespasian from his imperial position, and that Vespasian's son Domitian was party to this conspiracy.

These latter statements constitute what we might call 'fictive' knowledge. We know these things because we have read them in the novels of Stephen Saylor and Lindsey Davis. We keep this knowledge separate from what we might call our 'historical' knowledge: the knowledge we have acquired from ancient sources; the knowledge we have demonstrated in examinations; the knowledge which is validated by the degrees we have been awarded. At the same time we derive pleasure from the other knowledge, the novelistic representation of individuals from the historical past. Is it the incongruous mix of history and fiction which gives us pleasure? Or can we separate the two as easily as that?

In this short essay I want to bring together the usually disparate categories of historical writing and detective fiction for two purposes. First, I will argue that the fictive element of the whodunit is not the element which precludes its comparison with history, and moreover that the comparison of history and detective fiction can put the nature of historical writing under considerable scrutiny. Secondly, I will argue that the historical whodunit (that is, the detective novel set in the historical past) appeals for verisimilitude not only to the 'fictive' knowledge of the reader (that is the knowledge whose coherence is determined by the novelistic genre) but also to the reader's 'historical' knowledge. In other words, the historical whodunit has a dynamic relationship with the wider

historical endeavour which exists beyond the bounds of the narrative itself.

2. The historian as detective

One model of detective fiction which invites comparison with historical writing evokes a series of rather comforting parallels between detective and historian. The detective seeks a solution to a mystery or mysteries. The solution is arrived at through the scrutiny of material evidence and the careful questioning of witnesses: in short, through a process of retracing, recovering the past. The detective is bound by an obligation beyond that to any human individual: an obligation to Truth. When Stephen Saylor's detective, Gordianus the Finder, has arrived at an erroneous conclusion he speaks 'without conviction, like an actor speaking the wrong line'.² Above all, this model of detective fiction as history presupposes the existence of one prior, correct version of the past, at which it is possible to arrive by a careful process of recovery, and to which it is imperative to owe allegiance.

The model of detective fiction emphasizes the story of past events which the detective works to recover; importantly, the emphasizing of this story takes place at the expense of another story, the story of the detective's act of recovery. Todorov in his essay on detective fiction not only makes this point but also considers the implications of this for the style of the detective novel. 'The first, that of the crime, is in fact the story of an absence: its most accurate characteristic is that it cannot be immediately present in the book. . . . The status of the second story is, as we have seen, just as excessive; it is a story which has no importance in itself, which serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime. Theoreticians of detective fiction have always agreed that style, in this type of literature, must be perfectly transparent, imperceptible; the only requirement it obeys is to be simple, clear, direct. It has even been attempted – significantly – to suppress this second story altogether.'³

Significantly, were we to substitute 'history' for 'detective fiction' in the latter half of this quotation we would as well be reading a passage from Geoffrey Elton's *The Practice of History* or some other such reaffirmation of positivist anti-style in historical writing.⁴ Indeed, the detective of hard-boiled fiction, who situates himself in opposition to an intellectualism which he associates with unmanly decadence would (to

appropriate Katherine Kearns's words) 'be a figure congenial to the historian's view of himself as a hard-working guild member without philosophical pretensions . . .'⁵

But it is not just Raymond Chandler's 'chess-playing, Shakespeare-quoting . . . tough guy'⁶ Philip Marlowe who foregrounds the literary baggage which the hard-boiled detective and the hard-working historian have never successfully jettisoned. Despite attempts to suppress the detective's story in favour of the criminal's, as remarked by Todorov here, the most successful writers have always offered us a model of detective fiction in which the materiality of events and the material evidence which points to those events remain mediated through and therefore subject to the narratives that are told about them.

The most important feature of the detective novel is not the story of the crime but the story of its detection. The questioning of witnesses, the scrutiny of clues; the narration of these actions is where narrative pleasure and its expectation are situated. What occupies the reader's interest is not the witness or the clue or the crime or the criminal, but the questioning, the scrutiny, the process of recovery, and the act of detection, and most importantly the one who questions, scrutinizes, and recovers: in short, the detective.

Todorov, later in the same essay, characterizes this as 'fiction [which] fuses the two stories or, in other words, suppresses the first and vitalizes the second. . . . But the suppression of the first story is not an obligatory feature . . . the important thing is that it now has a secondary function, subordinate and no longer central . . .'⁷ Rather than the detective leading us to the criminal, the criminal leads us to the detective. Significantly, the displacement (if we may use so strong a term) of the first story in favour of the second changes how we may figure the relationship between the two stories. Since the detective's story is now pre-eminent, its coherence as a story becomes less dependent upon the subordinate story, that of the criminal.

We can look into the case of *The Silver Pigs* by way of example. Throughout the interwoven revelatory scenes of the novel an event of the past, the murder of Sosia Camillina, recurs, not as the moment of killing, but as the moment of realization, that is, realization on the part of the criminal. Even before the identity of the criminal has been revealed, his realization can still be read by Falco: 'When she found him, he *realized* she needed to be silenced.'⁸ Later, this realization is modified in the light of the criminal's identity: 'He acted in haste when he *realized* she must recognize his famous face.'⁹ The criminal's realization – part of

the motive – remains the constant in every reconstruction of the scene, because his realization remains plausible in every narrative of the crime. Falco's investment in this realization, his need for realization to be plausible, *precedes* even the first, provisional reconstruction of the crime. Realization in both reconstructions is realization of the *consequences*, a realization which cannot be pre-empted by the murder of one individual. Before the first reconstruction of the past Falco projects realization into the future: 'I know who it was. He must *realize* that. One day, however carefully he protects himself, the man will answer to me.'¹⁰ Falco's need to avenge Sosia's murder, a vengeance which he figures as inevitable – 'the man *will* answer to me' – is sustained and held in abeyance by the criminal's realization that vengeance will come. The criminal *must realize* that, must accept Falco's prospective narrative, his version of the future. Because Falco needs both the inevitability of vengeance and the criminal's acceptance of that inevitability, he foregrounds the criminal's realization of consequences in his narrative of the crime. Or, to turn things around, because Falco in his narrative of the past represents realization as a plausible constant he thereby validates the criminal's supposed realization of consequences in the present and the future.

Material evidence (the clue) becomes something of a red herring in a model of detective fiction where what matters is the congruence of the narrative about events of the past. The narrative must still *fit* with the creditable evidence and statements by creditable witnesses, but also and more imperatively it *MUST fit* with the expectations and requirements of the 'publicly admissible',¹¹ which constitutes a greater narrative subsuming both the first story and the second, both the events and their recovery.

At this point we need to implicate the investigators (historian and detective) more thoroughly into the events they recount, and to implicate the process of recounting events into the political sphere. The hard-boiled detective cannot remain detached from the crimes he sets out to solve; the process of recovery inevitably implicates him in any number of ways. We have already seen how Falco's need to believe in inevitable vengeance determines elements of his narrative. The implication of the detective, moreover, in part derives from the ambiguity and partial accessibility of the past. As John Cawelti has remarked, 'it sets the detective on a quest that becomes increasingly ambiguous and exasperating, forcing him to seek not only for a factual solution to the various mysteries he confronts, but for a moral stance toward [*sic*] the events in

which he has become enmeshed.’¹² Historians take note. This moral stance in relation to events is articulated through the type of narrative the detective *sees fit* to tell about them. The final recovery results in a narrative about the past which depends ultimately not upon Truth but upon congruence and admissibility.

But what is admissible to the detective, what is congruent with his moral stance, is not necessarily (or is necessarily not) congruent with the publicly admissible narrative about the past with which the detective novel frequently closes the case. This publicly admissible narrative is not an innocent one. Cawelti has observed that ‘[u]nlike the classical detective, for whom evil is an abnormal disruption of an essentially benevolent social order . . . the hard-boiled detective has learned through long experience that evil is endemic to the social order’.¹³ Gordianus, at the outset of *Roman Blood*, contextualizes his own dirty work by calling it ‘something not quite respectable – at least insofar as anything is worthy of respect in Rome these days. But not illegal – at least insofar as legality has any meaning in a city ruled by a dictator.’¹⁴ By the end of the novel Gordianus is forced to realize that his moral stance towards Sulla’s dictatorship is the main cause of his participation in a miscarriage of justice, that his efforts on Roscius’ and Cicero’s behalf render him merely a tool of the aristocratic opposition to Sulla.¹⁵ What comes to the foreground in the hard-boiled detective novel, therefore, is not the recovered past, but the narratives of attempted recovery, and the validation or discrediting of those narratives by the structures of power which constitute the law of the social order.

The model presented here may well make many historians more uneasy than did the earlier model. The materiality of the past remains, but what we are left with in the present is a narrative about the past which is permissible by the structures of power operative in the present. (One such structure being the University and the validity it confers upon certain narratives and certain types of knowledge in the conferring of a degree.) The historian, like the detective, may struggle to propound an inadmissible narrative, but in his silences and partial acquiescence he remains a collaborator with the social order he set out to criticize. Historians and detectives from Philip Marlowe to Neville Morley *collude* by means of the narratives they present about the past in the repression of inconvenient truths and the promotion of convenient truths. Their obligation, in short, is not to Truth but to narrative, specifically *congruent* narrative.

What detective fiction offers the historian here is a *persona* who can

more overtly stage his struggle with or against the publicly admissible. The reader of hard-boiled detective fiction is frequently presented with both the inconvenient and the convenient narratives of past events; the suppression of the inconvenient narrative is enacted *by* the novel, but also and discernibly *within* the novel. We can return to *The Silver Pigs* for an example of this. At the end of the novel Falco maintains a dissident stance in relation to the Principate, rejecting the offer of promotion to equestrian rank. Nevertheless his ungracious rant at Titus is remarkable for one exception: 'I had done him the favour of not specifying Domitian by name. It was not a name I ever wished to speak.'¹⁶ What is represented here as motivated by disgust and lingering pain is also compliant with Titus' earlier request: 'Omit my brother's name from your enquiries.'¹⁷ Falco may be behaving badly in the last scene, but he is also collaborating with the law he purports to criticize. At the same time Falco draws our attention to his omitting of Domitian's name, and in so doing he *does* identify, specify, and speak the name he does not wish to speak. He undermines his own collusive silence and reinstates the inconvenient truth. The naming/not-naming of Domitian in this final scene echoes the repeated and emphasized naming which takes place in the earlier revelation scene: '*Domitian* killed your daughter . . . *Domitian* killed her . . . *Domitian*, killed her.'¹⁸ The inconvenient narrative in this fiction will not be silenced.

3. The pointed style – history as material evidence

The staging of dissidence in *The Silver Pigs*, however, conforms to another social order: that constituted by the readership of the novel. The narrative which is inconvenient for Titus to hear and Falco to speak is, for the modern reader, a convenient narrative, congruent with what we have accepted as the respectable truth about Domitian: Domitian the tyrant; Domitian the murderer; Domitian the monster; 'immanissima belua';¹⁹ 'spoliator et carnifex'.²⁰

The evidence which implicates Domitian in the murder of Sosia Camillina is brandished verbally in the revelation scene: 'Domitian killed her. His initials are on the inkwell you saw me find . . .'²¹ The inkwell with Domitian's name on it constitutes creditable evidence because of its congruence with the ink stain on Sosia Camillina's dress: 'She found him there, writing (that was *evident*). . . because lampblack from the wet ink stained her white dress around the wound.' But, as I have said

earlier, material evidence in the mystery can be something of a red herring. The inkwell as material evidence draws our attention away from the murder weapon which is conjectured from the stain: 'he . . . stabbed her, a rising blow through the heart, once, *with his pen*' (Davis's italics). The inconvenient truth for Titus and Falco, that Domitian stabbed Sosia Camillina with his pen, is a convenient truth for us, because it *fits*, it is *congruent* with the narratives that we constitute as repositories of 'historical' knowledge – the ancient sources. We *know*, because Suetonius has told us, that stabbing living creatures with his pen was a favourite pastime of the emperor Domitian: *inter initia principatus cotidie secretum sibi horarum sumere solebat nec quicquam amplius quam muscas captare ac stilo praeacuto configere*. 'At the beginning of his reign he used to spend hours by himself every day and do nothing but catch flies and stab them with an extremely sharp pen.'²²

This 'historical' knowledge, which exists outside the novel, validates Falco's indictment of the murderer. Suetonius and Falco provide narratives which agree, which are congruent. At the same time, our 'historical' knowledge is validated *as* 'historical' knowledge by the 'fictional' crime; the congruence between the two narratives gives the reader pleasure. Domitian's stabbing of a young girl with his pen supplements the morsel of information supplied by Suetonius. Suetonius' story, with its authority as a classical text, lends weight to the narrative of the murder. All very convenient for us.

The pen as material evidence fades out as we focus on how stabbing with his pen was Domitian's *style*; in other words, we find ourselves reading here from within the tension of realism, where both reality and its representation are held in continual balance. What I am suggesting is that the pen with which Domitian stabbed Sosia is not so much realistic because of its detailed and particular materiality, but rather is realistic because of its reference to another text which through *its* realism claims an authoritative relationship to reality and to knowledge. The realism of the fiction here is demonstrably *plausible* realism within a given social order, one in which the reality claims of Suetonius' text remain, for the moment, admissible.

Fiction here does not challenge history; the two (insofar as they *are* two) are inter-dependent. Moreover, the materiality of evidence in both detective fiction and historical writing is, as I hope I have demonstrated, sustained *as* material by the congruence of narratives. Most chillingly, those narratives are only congruent, only work as narrative, when they are seen as appropriate or permissible by a given social order: the

dictatorship of Sulla; the regime of the Flavian emperors; the consensus of Classical scholars.

NOTES

1. This essay was originally delivered at the annual conference of the Classical Association in April 1998 at the University of Wales, Lampeter. I wish to thank my co-panelists Duncan Kennedy and Neville Morley (convenor), our chair, Charles Martindale, and all who participated in the discussion.

2. *Roman Blood* (Ivy Books, 1991), 274.

3. Tzvetan Todorov, 'Detective Fiction' in *The Poetics of Prose* (Cornell U.P., 1977), 46.

4. Cf. Keith Jenkins, *On 'What is History?': from Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London, 1995), 64–96; esp. 85–90.

5. *Psychoanalysis, Historiography, and Feminist Theory* (Cambridge U.P., 1997), 12 (the figure is originally '... Dorothy's scarecrow, lamenting his lack of a brain while performing at the level of a wily and inventive pragmatism ...').

6. John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), 182. Marlowe is, of course, named for Shakespeare's contemporary, the playwright and spy Christopher Marlowe.

7. Todorov, op. cit., 47–8.

8. Lindsey Davis, *The Silver Pigs* (Pan Books, 1989), 63.

9. *Ibid.*, 241.

10. *Ibid.*, 63.

11. Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy your Symptom: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and out* (London, 1992), 150.

12. Op. cit., 177.

13. Op. cit., 149. Cf. Žižek, op. cit., 150–3, 187.

14. *Roman Blood*, 5.

15. Sulla's words: 'Are you really so proud to be their champion, Cicero, to have saved a bloody parricide just so you could kick me in the balls, all in the name of old-fashioned Roman virtue?' (*Roman Blood*, 374).

16. *The Silver Pigs*, 249.

17. *Ibid.*, 164.

18. *Ibid.*, 241.

19. Pliny, *Panegyric of Trajan* 48.3.

20. *Ibid.*, 90.5.

21. All following quotations are from *The Silver Pigs*, 241.

22. Suet. *Dom.* 3.1.