

Parody and Detective Fiction

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The three most popular stances to take regarding detective fiction have been labeled as the psychological approach, the sociocultural approach, and the historical method. Of course, most of these methods are interested in detective fiction primarily as artifact rather than art, for as we've all been told by Edmund Wilson and others, detective fiction is, at best, sub-literary.

The psychological approach attempts to answer the question of why people read detective fiction. So does the sociocultural approach, but it also addresses the questions of why the formula is so massively popular and why literature of this sort came to be written. The historical survey, of course, tells what has been written where and when. The question still to be asked is "how": How does the genre generate new material within each sub-genre, how do these sub-genres evolve, and how does the formula plot stay true without becoming tiresome? John G. Cawelti sees these changes occurring in response to changes in the cultural climate (51), but this explanation cannot be the complete answer. There must also be an internal dynamic within the genre that aids in its propagation and flexibility, and parody can be considered a key dynamic element in the development of the popular formulaic genre known as detective fiction.

As yet there has been no consensus on a concise definition of parody. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition is

A composition in prose or verse in which the characteristic turns of thought and phrase in an author or class of authors are imitated in such a way as to make them appear ridiculous, especially by applying them to ludicrously inappropriate subjects; an imitation of a work more or less closely modeled on the original, but so turned as to produce a ridiculous effect. (489)

This definition has often been called into question, because it is based on only

one of the two meanings of the etymological root of *parody*. J. Hillis Miller explains the ambiguity of the word (from the Greek "parodia") by defining "para" as a

double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority, something inside . . . and at the same time outside, . . . something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold or margin, and also beyond it. (cited in Conlon 221-22)

As Linda Hutcheon suggests, this double meaning allows parody to cut both ways; it can either refer to "counter" (as in against) or it can mean "beside" (as in parallel) and therefore provide "a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast" (32). In light of this expanded etymology, parody can be freed from the constant need to ridicule.

There are critics who have recognized the importance of parody and have made an attempt to define it as a positive force. The Russian Formalists in general and Jurij Tynjanov in particular view parody as "a lever of literary change" (Erich 165) and a "sign of emancipation, indeed an act of literary 'warfare'" (Erich 225). While many critics and theorists will grant to parody an element of literary criticism, J. Gerald Kennedy comes closest to the Russian Formalists when he labels parody "exorcism":

Precisely because great writing weighs upon subsequent writers, exacting the tribute of conscious or unconscious emulation, any author who wishes to establish his own voice must come to terms with the "enemy"—the genius of his predecessors. (166-67)

Formalist criticism takes this individual exorcism one step further: The presence of parody indicates another step in the evolution of literature as a whole. As Victor Erlich explains, to the Formalist critic, parody is:

how literary change comes about. The old is presented, as it were, in a new key. The obsolete device is not thrown overboard, but repeated in a new, incongruous context, and thus either rendered absurd through the agency of mechanization or made "perceptible" again. In other words, a new art is not an antithesis of the preceding one, but its reorganization, a "regrouping of the old elements." (226)

More recently, Linda Hutcheon has devoted herself to the discovery of a positive definition of the term and has winnowed through the various explanations of parody to synthesize them into a useful working definition:

parody is repetition, but repetition that includes difference; it is limitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways. Ironic versions of "trans-contextualization" and inversion are its major formal operatives, and the range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage. (37)

Considering these definitions one can see parody as a positive influence on literature. At the same time that it acknowledges its predecessors, a parodic work carves out its own territory by means of a delicate critical distancing. Through self-consciousness and self-reflexiveness, a parodic work repeats "in a new, incongruous context" (Erich 226) and thus acknowledges a debt at the same time that it "exorcises" what has gone before. Irony is also a major component of a parodic work. As Hutcheon argues, because of the structural similarities between parody and irony, "parody can use irony easily and naturally as a preferred, even privileged, rhetorical mechanism" (54). While there has been much thought devoted to parody, most critics discuss the term as a genre rather than a literary device. Margaret Rose, however, is an exception to this tendency. In *Parody/Metafiction*, her study of intertextuality in a range of postmodernist works, she has shown that a parodic (according to my definition above) device can be an important element in texts that are not primarily parodies.

I wish to follow Rose's lead to examine how parodic elements work within detective fiction and how certain features of parody affect and structure this literary genre. There are reasons to believe that parody is at work within the genre of detective fiction. The first indication is that detective fiction creates the context necessary for audience recognition of parody. Readers of detective fiction often read widely within the genre, and "addicted" readers are likely to have read (and recognize allusions to) the original of any given parody. This preknowledge is necessary to the appreciation of parody. As J. G. Riewald says, since "the recognition of the original is a primary condition of the integral enjoyment of parody, it must be granted that the reader who is ignorant of the original is severely handicapped" (128).

Furthermore, because of the imitative nature of parody, it is especially interesting to study its effects and uses in an inherently formulaic genre. There are striking similarities between Cawelti's definition of a successful formulaic work, as "in addition to the pleasure inherent in the conventional structure, it brings a new element into the formula, or embodies the personal vision of the creator" (12), and Linda Hutcheon's definition of parody as "repetition that includes difference" (37). This is not to say that all formulaic fiction is parodic in nature, but it does lend credence to the study of parody within a formulaic genre.

There is parody at work within the specific formula of a detective narrative as well as within the larger aspect of the genre as a whole. As Lacan has stated, the basic formula of a detective novel is one in which the detective's actions parody those of the murderer (21-54). In his ability to deduce the criminal's actions or "reconstruct the scene of the crime," the detective effects a repetition that includes difference. The ironic and incongruous effect is that the character who embodies ultimate good (the detective) is the only character who can understand ultimate evil.

Also central to the formula are "red herrings," which are parodies of clues. These ultimately unimportant details must be enough like real clues to confuse

the reader, but they must also contain enough of a difference from real clues to keep the reader from claiming foul play on the part of the author. Red herrings emphasize the importance placed on reading correctly and also ironically delineate the fine line between appearance and reality that is the essence of both parody and detection.

Another parodic element often found within the formula is the slow-witted partner of the Great Detective. There is, of course, a sense in which the Watson character is merely a foil. As Julian Symons says: "[Poe] established the convention by which the brilliant intelligence of the detective is made to shine more brightly through the comparative obtuseness of his friend who tells the story" (38). As well as serving this function, however, the secondary character so often found in detective fiction fulfills another, parodic, function. He situates the reader in terms of the text by portraying a parodic example of a naive reader. As Margaret Rose writes:

the parodist creates a situation whereby the reader must also relate to himself as an object of the author's discourse if he is to understand the status of other objects represented in the fiction. He must, that is, see his own world through the image of himself, the reader, in the text before him, as a part of a fiction which, as he himself, has taken on a different form than in the world of objects. (65)

As indicated, there are various ways in which parody functions within the genre of detective fiction. A study of selected works by Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Fergus Hume, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle will delineate the function of parody in two ways: first, as the catalyst (by way of mocking both the novel of manners and the gothic) that creates a new genre and, second, as the means of establishing one's unique authority within the limitations of a prescribed form.

In "From Poe to Valery" (1948), T. S. Eliot remarked that, "as far as detective fiction is concerned, nearly everything can be traced to two authors: Poe and Wilkie Collins" (208). The genre now known as detective fiction came about partially because of a perceived need for rational and logical solutions within the sensational and gothic horror novels popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The patterns developed by Poe, Collins, and, to a lesser extent, Charles Dickens almost immediately became formulaic.

While the four "tales of ratiocination" ("The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter," "The Gold Bug," and "The Mystery of Marie Roget") are Poe's only detective stories, one must note his stance as a critic as well as an author to determine how instrumental parody was in the birth of detective fiction. Many scholars, including W. H. Auden, saw Poe as a self-appointed guardian of good taste and clear writing. Robert Daniel, in "Poe's Detective God," connects Poe's critical stance to his literary work: "There are several ways in which the detective stories appear to be extensions of Poe's criticism. As a reviewer, he is very much the sleuthhound; he ferrets out plagiarism, and

hunts down writers guilty of bad taste, confused thinking, or the murder of the language. Contrariwise, the detective stories may be regarded as essays in criticism" (105). Daniel's reading of the tales of ratiocination as literary criticism equates with the Russian Formalist definition of parody as literary criticism, in which "the obsolete device is not thrown overboard, but repeated in a new, incongruous context, and thus either rendered absurd through the agency of mechanization or made 'perceptible' again" (Erich 226). In order, however, to accept Daniel's statement one must examine Poe's focus as a literary critic and whether Poe used the tool of parody as the Russian Formalists have defined and prescribed.

The crux of Poe's critical stance is that he unites the two opposing forces of rationalism and imagination. David Ketterer explains this undercurrent present in Poe's tales of ratiocination. Poe distrusted reason because he considered "imagination [to be] the only avenue to a perception of ideality and reason being largely responsible for man's state of deception" (238). Privileging the imagination did not mean, however, that reason had no place in the work of an artist. Poe waged war on artists who he believed used "slovenly diction" (Auden 1950, xiii) or suffered from "confused thinking" (Daniel 105). Poe developed a theory of artistic synthesis between the two states. Both the declaration and the demonstration of this position are to be found in the tales of ratiocination. It is Dupin's companion, the narrator, who says it most succinctly, in the opening of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue": "It will be found, in fact, that the ingenious are always fanciful, and the *truly* imaginative never otherwise than analytic" (179).

By examining the synthesis of reason and imagination in his tales of ratiocination, Poe accomplished two things. He imposed standards of quality onto tales of gothic and sensational horror. No longer could writers indulge in horrific sequences for sensation's sake alone. By sticking Mademoiselle L'Espanaye in the chimney upside down in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Poe had outdone any horror imaginable. By deducing a logical reason for this terrifying action, he challenged writers to be responsible for their creative powers. He had proved that a reasonable explanation could be just as terrifying and far more believable than an unexplained phenomenon. It is important to note that Poe did not dismiss elements of the sensational; by using horror and intrigue to tell a story of rationality, he made it impossible for readers to be satisfied with the old formula. As Erlich describes parody according to the Russian Formalists, Poe created a new formula that was "not an antithesis of the preceding one, but its reorganization, a 'regrouping of the old elements'" (226).

In addition to imposing standards on gothic thrillers, Poe developed the prototype for all detective fiction that was to follow. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is the first locked-room mystery, a style John Dickson Carr later personalized with his detective, Dr. Gideon Fell. "The Murder of Marie Roget" is the first example of the armchair detective. Baroness Orczy's *Old Man in the Corner* is the most famous descendant of this line, though Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* might be said to indulge in this sport from time to time. One of the

basic rules of detective fiction is that the most unlikely answer will be the correct answer, and the acknowledged prototype for this is Poe's "The Purloined Letter." "The Gold Bug," which involves M. Legrand rather than the amazing Dupin, is based on Poe's love of cryptography; without it, Dorothy L. Sayers's *Have His Carcase* might not have been written.

If Edgar Allan Poe is the father of the detective story, then Wilkie Collins is the father of the detective novel. His two best-known works, *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), are the prototypes for the mystery thriller and the detective novel, respectively. Collins takes the basic recipe for the sensational gothic thriller and, like Poe, uses the ingredients to devise a new and far more satisfying concoction.

The Woman in White contains various essential elements from the standard sensational novel of the time (43-49). These include a case of switched and mistaken identity, kidnapping, drugs, true love, and a dusty and unused wing of a manor house. There is even an insane asylum thrown in for good measure. Two additions to this list are what signaled Collins as an innovator: Count Fosco, an evil mastermind the likes of whom literature had never seen, and the fact that, for all the mysterious and horrific events that occur throughout the novel, the seeds of plausibility and rationality are sown from the beginning. In this latter respect, Collins differed from Poe in the degree of his consistency; while Poe privileged rationality, there have been countless articles proving that Dupin could not have seen the address on the purloined letter, that the Rue Morgue orangutan could not have reached the shutter from the drainpipe, and that Mary Rogers likely took her own life. Collins, on the other hand, does not suffer from similar attacks. Every clue is planted from the beginning, and no loose ends are left trailing.

Collins had trained in law; this discipline is perhaps what persuaded him to use the technique of switching narrators throughout the novel. Each narrator speaks of only what he could have known at the time; although the narrating characters know the ultimate truth as they relate the story, they are honor-bound not to reveal the conclusion until the reader is apprised of all the facts in the case. In the preface to *The Woman in White*, Collins writes: "the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offense against the laws is told in Court by more than one witness—with the same object, in both cases, to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect" (1). Multiple narrators create a built-in self-consciousness in the text that, paradoxically, enforces the plausibility of the situation.

Collins often pushed this self-consciousness to the extreme. A case in point is the first narrator of *The Moonstone*, Gabriel Betteredge. Betteredge himself believes in the power and veracity of literature. He shows that a novel can be as powerful as scripture by discovering truths in rereadings and consultations with his well-worn copy of *Robinson Crusoe*.

I have tried that book for years—generally in combination with a pipe of tobacco—and have found it my friend in need in all the necessities of this mortal life. When my spirits are bad—*Robinson Crusoe*. When I want advice—*Robinson Crusoe*. In past times, when my wife plagued me; in present times, when I have had a drop too much—*Robinson Crusoe*. I have worn out six stout *Robinson Crusoes* with hard work in my service. On my lady's last birthday she gave me a seventh. I took a drop too much on the strength of it; and *Robinson Crusoe* put me right again. (34-35)

In the fifth chapter of his narrative, Betteredge makes a highly self-conscious statement to the reader:

Here follows the substance of what I said, written out entirely for your benefit. Pay attention to it, or you will be all abroad, when we get deeper into the story. Clear your mind of the children, or the dinner, or the new bonnet, or what not. Try if you can't forget politics, horses, prices in the City, and grievances at the club. I hope you won't take this freedom on my part amiss; it's the only way I have of appealing to the gentle reader. Lord! haven't I seen you with the greatest authors in your hands, and don't I know how ready your attention is to wander when it's a book that asks for it, instead of a person? (54)

This passage is remarkably similar to the opening paragraph of Italo Calvino's postmodernist novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*:

You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino's new novel, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought. Let the world around you fade. Best to close the door; the TV is always on in the next room. Tell the others right away, "No, I don't want to watch TV!" Raise your voice—they won't hear you otherwise—"I'm reading! I don't want to be disturbed!" (3)

The difference between these two passages, both parodies of the standard evocation to the gentle reader, is that Calvino's opening automatically creates a barrier between the text and the reader who wishes merely to sink into a fiction. It challenges the reader to participate rather than merely read. This postmodernist barrier is created by means of the voice Calvino uses, the voice of the implied author, but Collins is doing something different. True, he is parodying the Richardsonian style of appealing to the reader to demonstrate the truth of what is written, but at the same time, he is creating a convincing portrait of someone who has been asked to relate the truth as he witnessed it. By using multiple narrators rather than an omniscient, unseen storyteller, Collins has already created an atmosphere of veracity; once he has established this reality for his readers, he can parody the wooden stylistic devices of others with impunity. By inserting his authorial address to the reader, Calvino raises the question of his narrative's plausibility. Collins is self-conscious about the form of his narrative, but only in order to prove that the substance of his narrative is true.

Poe played with the possibilities of detective fiction, but quickly tired of the genre. Collins likewise ventured into new areas (without as much success) after *The Moonstone*. Gavin Lambert says of Collins, "he was the first to grasp [the mystery novel's] expressive possibilities. The genre became personal with *The Woman in White* and mechanical soon afterwards" (ix). Perhaps it was this fear of the mechanical that kept these innovators from continuing to write in the genre they had helped to forge. Needless to say, many writers were willing to jump into the breach. Detective fiction became and has remained one of the most popular genres of formulaic fiction. Parody and self-consciousness, tools that helped to create the genre, continued as elements of the genre. Indeed, parody quickly became an element of the formula itself: an element designed both to foster credibility and to generate new material within the highly mechanical formula.

The history of detective fiction is studied with successful practitioners of the craft who denigrated both the genre and their own fame within it. This seeming distaste occurred very early but made no difference to the proliferation of the genre or, indeed, the productivity of the particular authors. Although the name Fergus W. Hume does not evoke the same recognition as that of his contemporary Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, at one time his *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886) outsold the Sherlock Holmes stories. Hailed as the best-selling mystery novel of the nineteenth century, Hume's first foray into detective fiction was written not for any special love of the form but to make his name known in order to advance his career as a budding playwright. In a preface written in 1896 (ten years after *Cab* was first published), Hume describes the manner in which he came to write the book:

I enquired of a leading Melbourne bookseller what style of book he sold most of. He replied that the detective stories of Gaboriau had a large sale; and as, at this time I had never heard of this author, I bought all his works . . . and read them carefully. The style of these stories attracted me, and I determined to write a book of the same class; containing a mystery, a murder, and a description of low life in Melbourne. This was the origin of the "*Cab*." (8)

Hume never became a playwright. He wrote over a hundred more thrillers and, though none of them reached the popularity of the *Cab*, he made a comfortable living.

The Mystery of a Hansom Cab is indeed a respectable mystery novel, but it is the manner by which Hume claimed to have written it that makes it of interest today. One can infer from his explanation that, even as early as 1886, the detective novel had reached such a stage of formula that any reasonably intelligent wordsmith could manufacture one, given an accurate recipe. Almost from its inception, the detective genre was relegated to the readership that Wilkie Collins had once named the "unknown public" (Symons 42). Detective fiction was not serious literature; and no serious writer, no matter how much he

might profit from it, could admit to championing it. By denigrating the genre Hume insinuated that he, indeed, was a serious writer who had, to crib from Oliver Goldsmith, "stooped to conquer." The implication was that a detective novel written by an author who realized how inconsequential such novels were could not be of the same low stature as most detective novels. Like many writers who were to come, Hume managed by this subterfuge to claim superior status for his novel, which actually followed the hateful formula stringently.

Self-consciousness, which Wilkie Collins had used to plead the plausibility of his narrative, was now being used to distinguish one's novel from the morass of the formulaic. In the *Cab*, reference is made to other works of detective fiction in a very self-conscious way. One would assume that this reminder to the reader of the existence of the genre would necessarily harm the verisimilitude attempted by the author. In postmodernist fiction, self-consciousness is used deliberately to highlight the fictionality of the work in which it appears. However, in detective fiction, a peculiar double negative effect seems to occur. References to fictional works, and especially those within the same genre, enhance rather than deny the reality of the given novel. In much the same way as the play-within-the-play structure gives credence to the outer drama that frames the interior "fiction," references to fiction within detective novels extend the distance between the acknowledged formulaic genre and the particular example at hand. "If this were a detective plot, I should expect so-and-so to be the murderer, but . . ." is a familiar utterance to mystery readers. Statements such as these remind the reader forcefully of the formulaic and predictable nature of the genre, but in addition they imply that the story that houses them is superior to such conventions. The argument is as convincing as it is fallacious: Detective novels follow an obvious and predictable formula; if this were such a novel it would not speak disdainfully of its ilk; therefore, this is not such a novel. Hume is no stranger to this play.

"Puts one in mind of *The Leavenworth Case*, and all that sort of thing," said Felix, whose reading was of the lightest description. (48)

"Murdered in a cab," he said, lighting a fresh cigarette, and blowing a cloud of smoke. "A romance in real life, which beats Miss Braddon hollow." (56)

"But do you know anything of the detective business?" someone would ask. "Oh, dear yes," with an airy wave of his hand; "I've read Gaboriau, you know; awfully jolly life, 'tectives.'" (88)

The key to a successful detective novel, which Fergus W. Hume (and countless writers since) discovered, seems to be this: Follow the formula to the letter, and deny doing so at every turn.

While Hume had followed Collins by concentrating on the persona of the law officer or professional as detective, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle turned back to Edgar Allan Poe and Gaboriau for his models. As Ian Ousby states: "Doyle's

achievement was to create a stereotype of the private detective as complete and as expressive of its time as the earlier stereotype of the police detective had been" (136). Sherlock Holmes owes much to the Chevalier Auguste Dupin, who dislikes the sun, lives in seclusion, and astounds his companion/narrator with his acts of rational deduction. Holmes, too, is an eccentric: He is a cocaine addict, plays the violin, is insufferably arrogant, demonstrates misogynistic tendencies, and indulges in elaborate disguises. In his memoirs, Conan Doyle acknowledged his debt to Poe, but Holmes himself made clear what he thought of the comparison in *A Study in Scarlet*: "Now, in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friends' thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour's silence is really very showy and superficial. He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine" (1: 24).

Sherlock Holmes may then be considered a parody of Auguste Dupin, in the sense that Doyle recontextualized many features of Poe's logical hero. He is similar in order to qualify for the position of Great Detective; he is different from his predecessor in order to justify his existence as a separate entity. He is a repetition with a difference (Hutcheon 37); he is a "reorganization" of Dupin, to make him perceptible again (Erich 226); he is Doyle's way of "coming to terms with the genius of his predecessors" (Kennedy 166). The above passage not only demonstrates the previously discussed disparagement of similar fiction to enhance the position of one's own, it also shows how the great detective often owes his creation to the detectives who go before.

The passage also highlights another feature often found in the makeup of fictional detectives of the "great detective" mold—eccentricity. As Conan Doyle's brother-in-law, E. W. Hornung (creator of Raffles), once humorously penned: "Though he might be more humble, there's no police like Holmes" (Symons 85). Arrogance is not always a synonym for eccentricity, nor is it necessarily a prerequisite for a great detective. However, in the etiquette-filled minefield of Victorian England, where self-congratulations would be considered an exercise in bad taste, arrogance in the demeanor of an otherwise respectable gentleman would be the height of eccentricity. Eccentricity is a necessary element for a great detective. An ordinary individual cannot move freely through all circles of society. Anyone who can (and a detective must) has to be seen to be unlike other people; the greater his skills as a detective, the greater his eccentricities. As a parodic element, eccentricities can be defined as exaggerations of certain features of behavior and therefore as parodies, or verbal caricatures, of the great detective. At the same time that the detective writer had to impress the reader with the plausibility of his fiction, he had to underline the ultimate impossibility of his hero. As readers, to accept a fictional great detective as real, we must be convinced of his "superhumanness" or, indeed, his fictionality. A successful great detective must be a paradox of reality and illusion, a realistically articulated figment.

As shown from Poe's determination for rationality and Collins's insistence on a plausible explanation for the sensational, detective fiction owes its inception to parody, as a "lever of literary change" (Erich 165). The formula almost immediately absorbed the device of parody, and authors used it to situate their novels self-consciously above those of their predecessors and competitors. Parody also infiltrated the persona of the great detective by molding each new character on those who had gone before and exaggerating his abilities and foibles alike to emphasize his superhumanness. Since that time, parody has also been seen in the works of writers, most notably female, who use detective novel writers as protagonists in the inversion of the formula created by the hard-boiled school; and, working as an agent against the formula, in the works of various postmodernist "antidetectives."

If the detective formula were imagined as some sort of powerful bacterium, able to isolate, overpower, and absorb anything thrown in its way, it would be close to my vision of how detective fiction developed. Every addition automatically becomes part of the formula. Parody, as part of the initial impulse of detective fiction, has remained through the years as an essential element. Whether it consists of a minor tribute to the novel's antecedents or functions through wild bouts of self-reflexiveness, parody makes its presence known.

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"The Game's Afoot": Predecessors and Pursuits of a Postmodern Detective Novel

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The detective story today inevitably finds itself judged by the reader's experience of the genre's ancestry and traditions. A postmodern detective story cannot evade the context of the detective fiction genre it is "post" to, but the postmodern detective story seeks not to evade or eliminate echoes of its genre's traditions; rather, it embraces the traditional, then turns it right on its head. We often think of postmodernism as inventing such deconstructive inversion, but these inversions actually find their beginnings within the very tradition of British ratiocinative detective fiction. The dilemma confronting postmodern detective fiction is that the nature—the "formula"—of the detective tradition calls for a grounding in epistemological inquiry that postmodernism has abandoned to modernism's realm in favor of ontological pursuits (McHale 10). Hence the seeming contradiction of a postmodern detective story, which cannot establish itself epistemologically, but seems to need to do so in order to exist as a detective story at all. Does this mean the death of the detective story, the "doomed detective," in the postmodern age?

The distinctions between epistemological and ontological inquiries do not remain rigidly separate when applied to the detective genre. Certainly the postmodern detective novel inverts form, content, and expectations found in the traditional detective story; however, it need not leave behind epistemological issues while embracing ontological ones. Further, not all postmodern critics discover the postmodern absence of epistemology that others proclaim. Michael Holquist, for example, posits a different view: He maintains that postmodernist writers have used the detective story genre as a means to "experiment with the possibilities, limitations, and the power of conscious perception and the search for knowledge" (173). The result is the "metaphysical" detective story form. Using Holquist's argument, then, there is a thriving, though transformed,