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Modernism's illegitimate progeny: Fictions of crime and the experience of modernity

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Modernism's Illegitimate Progeny: Fictions of Crime and the Experience of Modernity

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by

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Abstract
Modernism's Illegitimate Progeny:
Fictions of Crime and the Experience of Modernity

This dissertation has two main concerns. The first is to see fictions of crime -- a general term which I use to signify those genres concerned with crime, including detective fiction, spy thrillers, and crime fiction proper -- as attempts to mediate and contain the anxieties brought about by the experience of modernity. Modernity is theorized as having three primary moments: the nineteenth, early twentieth-century experience of imperialism; the post World War I period, the high water mark of urban capitalism; and the post World War II period, which I theorize as postmodernism. I attempt to situate crime fiction within these social contexts, and to read crime fiction as a generic form which responds to these formations by looking at the texts in question as parts of lived cultures, cultures which co-exist with dominant ideologies in various modes of opposition, resistance and incorporation.

The second aspect of my study consists of my examination of crime fiction in relation to canonical or "high" literature. My thesis here is that this analysis of "high" and "low" cultural relations inevitably leads to a problematizing or re-evaluation of many received categories within literary criticism and theory. In arguing that "high" and "popular" culture are overlapping formations, I try to throw into question some accepted notions about both, as well as the ways in which they are usually understood. So, for example, if modernism cannot be defined by its difference from a genre, or genres, is it productive to stigmatize popular literature as
generic and canonical literature as not generic? If canonical or "high" literature shares many of the same conventions and responses to society as "popular" literature, is not the "high"/"low" distinction a misleading one? Finally, if modernism is not essentially different from mass culture, how then are realism and postmodernism to be understood? These are some of the questions this dissertation seeks to answer.
Introduction

Our culture is fascinated by crime. By any estimate, most contemporary films concern crime, whether theft, murder, rape, forgery, blackmail, extortion, influence-peddling, or any of the myriad forms of political corruption. But films are not all. Every September, each of the three major television networks (not to mention cable t.v.), launches its new line of programs, many of which take crime as their primary subject. Although most of these tend to focus on the action-packed lives of policemen (Hill Street Blues), or private investigators (The Rockford Files), the genre has broadened over the years to include the exploits of secret intelligence teams (for example, Mission Impossible!), as well as the role of legal advocates in the defense and prosecution of crime (the now-classic Perry Mason series and the more recent, trendier L.A Law series).

Indeed, this culture industry is now international: American television programs are telecast around the world -- the Japanese mania for Columbo is one of the most famous instances of this global television culture, a culture which is sustained to a considerable extent by fictions of crime. Some English programs dealing with crime have enjoyed success in America, notably the BBC productions of Le Carré's espionage novels, and the on-going PBS Mystery Theatre series hosted by Vincent Price which features mystery or crime programs made in the U.K. These programs are entertainments, fictions of and about crimes of various sorts (I have not included crime motifs in television in this inventory, but it is fair to say that they add a dramatic element to almost every genre, ranging from soap operas -- where adultery
and other sexual crimes add a salacious touch -- to westerns, to adventure and even to science fiction).

But there are also other types of television programs which present "fictions," or ideologically coded accounts, of "real-life" crime. The most obvious example of this type of programming is the evening news, a substantial portion of which is devoted to covering the most sensational crimes of the day. "Coverage" in this sense is a euphemism inasmuch as scheduling constraints, popularity ratings, and advertising pressures tend to lead to a distortion and dramatization -- in effect, a fictionalization -- of the commercial networks's representation of crime stories.\(^1\) Similarly, "newsmagazines" such as 60 Minutes, 20/20, and West 57th Street specialize, among other things, in lurid "investigations" of crimes, criminals or criminal patterns supposedly sweeping the nation. Talk-shows, likewise, seek to exploit the fascination that crime exerts on contemporary American society by interviewing criminals, victims, or the police -- sometimes simultaneously.

This interest in crime is nothing new; it is as old as English prose fiction. Indeed, English fiction has its roots in fictionalized accounts of criminal confessions, such as the Newgate Calendar (1773). Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders (1722) marks the beginning of the full-scale fictionalized crime novel, although it is purportedly told in the first person by Moll Flanders, a lady who, out of necessity, resorts from time to time to prostitution and theft. William Godwin’s Caleb Williams (1794) represents the first sustained attempt to use the detective fiction genre as a means of criticizing society. While Godwin’s analysis is informed by anarchist premises -- the notion that although man is inherently good, laws and institutions are inherently
repressive and should, therefore, be eliminated -- he inaugurated a way of evaluating society in his fiction which has since become a convention of crime fiction. These eighteenth-century fictions of crime, however, are not sensational in the sense that we would use the word. Indeed, the modern meaning of "sensational" came about only in the nineteenth century in conjunction with (and because of) the rise of a mass culture based on the newspaper. In Chapter Two, I deal with the rise and effects of this sensationalism in more detail; suffice it to say here that printed sensationalized accounts of crime still constitute a staple item in contemporary mass culture, especially in quasi-factual magazines specializing in the accounts of victims of violent criminals. Clearly, then, these various fictions of crime are deeply rooted in our culture, but what do they mean? Although sensationalism accounts for part of their interest, it cannot account for it entirely if only because a good deal of the mass culture of crime is not sensational -- as the formal English novel of detection of Christie, Sayers, and Allingham suggests. My argument is that the fictions of crime discussed above, in various ways, all offer myths of the experience of modernity, of what it is like to live in a world dominated by the contradictory impulses of renewal and disintegration, progress and destruction, of possibility and impossibility. I argue that the capacity of crime fiction to evaluate different historical moments in the experience of modernity is not an accidental feature, but is an intrinsic feature, a convention of crime fiction. I will return to this point in more detail later, but first I want to consider what it means to refer to a body of writing as "crime fiction."
Throughout this study, I use the term "crime fiction" to denote, in a generic fashion, all the genres and sub-genres that concern themselves with the violation of the law, whether or not this violation "actually" took place, and whether or not this violation is sanctioned by the novelist. Any definition which encompasses Crime and Punishment (Dostoyevsky), Lolita (Nabokov), The Big Sleep (Chandler), The Murder at the Vicarage (Christie), The Secret Agent (Conrad), The Spy Who Came in from the Cold (Le Carré), and The Crying of Lot 49 (Pynchon), will inevitably attract the charge of imprecision, or irrelevance. Yet it seems to me more preferable to use a broader, looser term to signify the generic similarities that these novels share, than to engage in meretricious and debatable judgments about whether or not a given novel meets the requirements of this or that sub-genre. This is not to say that all the conventions among the sub-genres are identical; clearly they are not. It is possible to categorize genres according to dominant conventions, but in practice many of these categorizations are called into question by the presence of other conventions, which "should not," as it were, "be there," and which then have to be rationalized away. In my view, the attempt to construct rigid generic categories as a basis for evaluating a novel's literary merit, not only tends to obscure the hybrid nature of genres, but it also tends to reduce the analysis of literature to the making of arbitrary literary judgments or worse, the making of redundant propositions about the text in question. This criticism is not meant as an indictment of genre theory as such, but only as a criticism of the excessive formalism of critics whose work is marked by the attempt to identify a text with a genre on the basis of a single convention -- the aim of this interpretative process then being the reading of the
text in question exclusively in terms of the genre to which it has already been assigned. Indeed, the theoretical infrastructure of this study depends on a theory of genre, but it is a theoretical orientation emphasizing the hybrid nature of genre fiction: Conan Doyle’s detective fiction, for example, is read as a hybrid of the adventure novel, sensational literature, and the ratiocinative detective story formula refined by Poe. Ultimately, this theory of genre leads me to a consideration of literary value: among other things, I argue that the traditional, dismissive judgements of genre fiction cannot logically be sustained because all fiction is generic.

This approach to crime fiction has not been the one adopted by most critics writing on crime fiction. Julian Symons’s history of crime fiction, Bloody Murder, in many ways the standard reference to crime fiction, tends to avoid making qualitative distinctions about the value of popular literature. Nevertheless, his concern with evaluating the literary merits of crime fiction tends to turn his study into a list of his favorite (and not-so favorite) crime novels. Symons, however, does see that fictions of crime transcend "high" and "low" culture categories. By contrast, John G. Cawelti’s Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture, perhaps the most famous academic treatment of "popular fiction," is permeated by a sense of the literary inferiority of crime fiction. Cawelti attempts to establish a hierarchy of literary value based on a distinction between formulaic and non-formulaic writing. This tendency to reinforce standard literary hierarchies even while seeking to do away with them can be seen in Michael Holquist’s interesting essay "Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Postwar Fiction." Holquist sets up a familiar opposition between "art" and "kitsch,"
which he contends is the characteristic division of cultural production in the modernist period. He argues that this opposition breaks down in postmodernist fiction, particularly postmodernist detective fiction, which has a more metaphysical scope, and is therefore able to shed its status as mere kitsch. Not all critics rely on this "high"/"low" distinction -- despite its title, Dennis Porter's The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction is a case in point -- but the tendency to associate cultural inferiority with crime fiction is still common.

My own approach is different. Rather than start from a position which assumes that literary value is the monopoly of this or that tradition, I attempt to understand the ways in which literary value itself is produced, and how ideologies of literary value are then used to valorize certain forms of writing over others. My argument, which is developed in full in "Preliminary Mappings: Modernism's Anxiety of Contamination," is that the dismissal of crime fiction and other "popular" forms of fiction is based on one version of high modernist aesthetics, which in turn depends on a number of unstable (and untheorized) oppositions: generic versus non-generic forms of writing, Literature versus popular literature, realism versus modernism, and so on. Paradoxically enough, many of the techniques and forms of "popular literature" have been appropriated into "high" literary forms -- a process which the Russian Formalists referred to as "the canonization of the junior branch." In the "high" modernist period of the early twentieth-century, this process of assimilation of popular culture was regularly accompanied by a highly conscious attempt to define itself in opposition to popular culture. This project of self-definition on the part of "high" modernism also involved the stigmatization of "popular culture." This
is why I refer to crime fiction as "modernism’s illegitimate progeny": born out of the same experience of urban modernity that gave its impetus to the great modernist fictions of Joyce, Kafka, Musil, and Mann, the fictions of crime produced by Poe, Conan Doyle, Hammett and others, were accorded a second-rank status by a faction of critics and writers who saw in them an erosion of "high" modernist aesthetic standards, as well as a threat to the select definitions that modernism was acquiring. Having said that, I do not want to be misunderstood as arguing that discriminations cannot be made about literature; they can and should be made. What is problematical, however, is the way in which these discriminations are frequently used as the basis for attaching evaluations about the "universal" literary merit of a given work. Evaluations of a work’s literary merit, I argue, are always relative: they are always historically made judgments, influenced by contemporary values and ideologies.

My theoretical approach has been most influenced by M.M. Bakhtin and Antonio Gramsci, writers whose theories of culture allow for a much more conjunctural, flexible understanding of the relations between "high" and "low" culture than those permitted by critics such as Calwelti and Symons. In this respect, Bakhtin’s theory of the novel as a hybridization of pre-existing genres, drawn from both high and low culture, has been especially useful. For Bakhtin, the provenance of a given genre is less important than the articulations it makes about society. Bakhtin’s attention to the often-overlooked articulations made within popular culture is used as a means of analyzing the dominant cultural practices of an age. This approach, I think, enriches our sense of the achievements and interactions of both "high" and
"low" culture, or as Raymond Williams put it in a famous phrase, culture as "a whole way of life."

Bakhtin and Gramsci enable us to see how cultural practices, such as crime fiction, interact with what Gramsci calls hegemonic values, beliefs, and ideas. Hegemony in this sense is not to be equated with rule by coercive means. Instead, it refers to the process in democracies in which a dominant class or class alliance struggles for intellectual, moral and political ascendancy by winning the consent of subaltern or subordinate groups and classes. Hegemony, then, is secured not so much by brute force, by terrorizing the subaltern classes, as it is by accommodating their alternate or opposing values onto a terrain dominated by those of the ascendant class. Within this theoretical framework, mass culture plays a crucial role in that it exists as a vital part of the public sphere in which the struggle for the consent of the subaltern groups takes place. Mass culture becomes one of the crucial arenas for the resistance, acceptance or incorporation of hegemonic values.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony thus allows for a theorization of ideology as impure, made up of dominant and subordinate (oppositional) elements. In this study, this emphasis has been valuable in relating fictions of crime to their cultural and historical contexts, inasmuch as it has allowed me to articulate mass culture as always ambiguously related to dominant values. Whereas previous schools and critics -- the Frankfurt School and F.R. Leavis, for example -- have tended to read mass culture as only commodified versions of dominant ideologies, Gramsci's and Bakhtin's sensitivity to its complex formal and ideological construction allows for an articulation of mass cultural beyond the positions of apologist or critic. Following
their work, my method is to relate the formal structures of the novels to the hegemonic relations of which they are a part. My assumption in doing so is that this method not only enlivens our sense of the cultural politics of crime fiction, but it also enlarges our sense of this genre's formal achievements.

As the title of my dissertation suggests, this inquiry is carried out within the framework of what Marshall Berman has called "the experience of modernity." Generally speaking, modernity can be said to date from around 1500, the middle period of the Renaissance, but more crucially, 1500 marks the date of the advent of the world market. Berman divides modernity into three major phases. The first phase runs from around 1500 to 1789, the date of the French Revolution; this period is marked by the initial disorientations in the life of communities that characterize the modern age. The second phase runs from 1790 to the end of the nineteenth century. To Berman, this is the age of revolution and the emergence of a modern public: "This public shares the feeling of living in a revolutionary age, an age that generates explosive upheavals in every dimension of personal, social, and political life" (17). The third phase consists of the twentieth century, in which modernity, paradoxically, becomes problematical ("conceived in numerous fragmentary ways, [it] loses much of its vividness, resonance and depth"), yet as a social process intensifies: "In the twentieth century, our third and final phase, the process of modernization expands to take in virtually the whole world and the developing world culture of modernism achieves spectacular triumphs in art and thought" (17). What is interesting about Berman's account is not so much his fairly standard periodization, but his theorization of the experience of modernity which for
him characterizes, to a greater or lesser extent, this process of modernization in all of its phases:

There is a mode of vital experience -- experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life's possibilities and perils -- that is shared by men and women all over the world today. I will call this body of experience "modernity." To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world -- and at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air." (15)

The thesis of this study, then, is that crime fiction's intrinsic interest in society -- in the law and in the violation of the law -- inevitably involves an exploration of the experience of modernity, of what it means to be caught up in this "maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish." In projecting an image of an individual in conflict with society, or social norms, this genre offers fictions of what modern experience is like. Too often crime fiction, especially detective fiction, is regarded as purely escapist, as providing the reader with comfortable and re-assuring myths of modernity. In some cases this is true, but it is no more true of crime fiction than of any other genre: every genre, that is, contains domesticating elements, elements that naturalize, re-assure, and confirm the reader's beliefs and expectations. What this cliché overlooks, however, is the extent to which crime fiction dramatizes the contradictory experience of modernity. In this sense, crime fiction is not escapist, but hermeneutic: it explores what it means to be caught up in the maelstrom of modernity.
This study is not comprehensive: it does not pretend to analyze all the traditions of crime fiction. And it is not a literary history of crime fiction. What I have attempted to do is to use my analyses of crime fiction as a basis for intervening in contemporary critical debates. This dissertation, that is, offers a re-reading of three modes of representation -- realism, modernism, and postmodernism -- from the point of view of mass culture. Modernism is construed here as the institutionally and culturally dominant field of literary practices containing residual ("realist") as well as emergent ("postmodern") elements. Thus, while my readings progress from "realist" to "modernist" to "postmodernist" texts, my overall contention is that these modes of representation are part of a larger field of writing practices which, for lack of a better word, have still to be designated as "modernist." One consequence of this theory of modernism is that the tri-part historical division I develop in this dissertation -- the age of imperialism, the post World War I and the post World War II periods -- cannot be understood as defined by a single mode of representation. Poe's work, for example, contains both modernist and realist elements, and cannot in my view be understood, even in conventional terms, as only "realist."

My analysis of crime fiction begins late in the time frame identified by Berman as modernity, at the point at which mass culture begins to manifest itself: in America this occurred in the first half of the nineteenth century with the rise of the mass-circulation magazines that Poe despised -- and to which he contributed, among other things, his detective stories. In England, mass culture began to be an identifiable social phenomenon in the second half of the nineteenth century, which
not coincidentally, marks a crucial time in the imperial life of both nations. In Chapter Two, "The Adventurous Detective: Conan Doyle and Imperialism," I read Conan Doyle's detective fiction in light of its relations to both mass culture and imperialism, or more accurately, I read his detective fiction in light of its relations to a late Victorian mass culture of imperialism. In Chapter Three, "The Heroic Spy Thriller: Kim and the Rhetoric of the Great Game," and Four, "The Ironic Spy Thriller: Anarchy, Irony, and Empire in The Secret Agent," I examine the emerging spy thriller genre in terms of its response to this culture of imperialism. Kim, I argue, offers a valorization of Empire, while Conrad's The Secret Agent offers a more critical interpretation of Empire in terms of the changes it has brought about within English society itself.

The second moment of modernity I analyze is the post World War I period, the age of high modernism. In "Preliminary Mappings: Modernism's Anxiety of Contamination," I look at the way in which some of the most famous modern critics and schools have treated fiction created for a mass audience, and offer a critical reading of the "high" modernist dismissal of so-called "popular literature." Much of the textual evidence for the claims presented there can be found throughout the dissertation, but are most specifically developed in Chapter Five, "Detective Fiction and Modernism," in which I offer analyses of the American hard-boiled school (exemplified by Hammett) and the formal English novel of detection (exemplified by Christie). These readings are articulations for a new theory of modernist literature, one in which a "residual" evaluative realism is absorbed into the culturally dominant field of modernism.

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The third and last moment in the experience of modernity I explore is the post World War II period, often referred to in literary and critical theory as postmodernism. The question of postmodernity is complex, but crucial for the present study, since it accords the artifacts of mass culture a more significant and positive role in the constitution of culture than "high" modernism. Suffice it to say here that my notion of "postmodernity" does not jettison what I have identified as the experience of modernity, but is seen as an emergent formation containing elements which are both continuous and discontinuous from earlier stages of modernity. In Chapter Six, "Agents and Human Agency in the Postmodern World," I analyze the post World War II anti-heroic spy thriller as an evaluation, in a quintessentially mass cultural form, of the postmodern world. This reading is then used as a basis for analyzing what I contend are some problematical aspects of contemporary theories of postmodernism, particularly Baudrillardian postmodernism. Following this discussion, in the Conclusion, I explore what it means to refer to crime fiction in general as postmodern.

Crime fiction / fictions of crime: the fiction in this study explores the experience of modernity, and the laws, written and unwritten, that help to define, regulate and maintain it. And it is precisely because these fictions challenge "high" and "low" cultural boundaries, because they occupy an ambiguous position -- a position at once central and marginal in the production of culture -- that these narratives also challenge many of the ways in which the experience of modernity is understood.
Introduction

1. For more on the way in which "free-market" forces shape the media, see Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media.

2. Marshall Berman's rich magisterial, argument is contained in All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity. Berman's reading of modernity has greatly influenced my own, as any reading of subsequent chapters will reveal.

3. Unless otherwise qualified, in this study I use "modernism" to refer to the literary formation and "modernity" to refer to the social experience of modernization.

4. The terms "residual," "dominant" and "emergent" are Raymond Williams's and are theorized more explicitly in Marxism and Literature, especially 121-127.
"Mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project"  
-- Andreas Huyssen

Is popular fiction aesthetically inferior to canonical literature? Is genre fiction more limited than non-genre fiction? Is modern literature intrinsically different from popular literature? If modern literature cannot be defined in opposition to popular literature, how is it to be understood?

In what follows, I want to recast the debate on modernism in terms of these questions, not only because I believe that this approach opens up new ways of understanding connections modernism had --and to some extent still has -- with other cultural formations, but also because it opens up new ways of understanding modernism itself as a cross-cultural mode of literary production. These are some of the issues explored in this preliminary section, questions which are of special relevance to the present study since it concerns itself with relationships between "high" and "low" culture. While this section is primarily theoretical, Chapter Five, "Detective Fiction and Modernism" contains textual analyses intended to be an application and substantiation of these theoretical claims. Let me begin, then, to answer the above questions by briefly considering the reception of two famous writers of detective fiction, Agatha Christie and Dashiell Hammett.

In 1980 UNESCO estimated that four hundred million copies of Christie's books had been sold world-wide since she first published The Mysterious Affair at Styles
in 1920 (Morgan 377). More recent figures put her world-wide circulation over the five hundred million mark, making her the most translated author in the English language and one of the most widely read novelists in the world. While popular, Dashiell Hammett’s work does not command the same global readership. Nevertheless, in most circles the work of both authors is generally regarded as sub-literary, mere pulp, disposable productions whose inferiority can be inferred from their large sales. Admittedly, the situation is somewhat different in relation to Hammett, and other hard-boiled detective fiction writers, inasmuch as their style as always exerted a kind of existential chic for literary critics who go slumming in popular fiction: by and large, it is fair to say that Hammett is not accorded the same position within the canon as, say, Hemingway or Fitzgerald. The unspoken assumption behind the dismissal of crime fiction in general seems to stem from two beliefs: first, that when it comes to popular fiction quantity and quality are mutually exclusive and secondly, that crime fiction suffers from the formulaic restrictions true fiction or literature transcends. My purpose here is not only to challenge this argument, but also to show that the opposition inscribed in modernist dogma between Literature and popular fiction is itself untenable, and that a close examination of this argument inevitably leads to a radical re-reading of modernism.

Much contemporary critical theory -- including structuralism, post-structuralism, marxism and semeiotics, as well as the more traditional, empirically-based criticism of popular culture -- tends to separate "high" and "low" culture, and valorize one area of experience over the other. This fetishization of what in actuality are overlapping cultural formations, and not separable entities, frequently leads to a
distorted understanding of the extent to which the techniques, forms, and ideologies of popular fiction shaped modernist literary production and vice-versa. In his analysis of "residual, dominant and emergent" forces, Raymond Williams offers a way of going beyond the paralyzing dichotomies and value judgments that inform many of the debates on popular culture. In allowing us to articulate the "residual" relations of realism to the institutionally "dominant" cultural field of modernism, his theory of cultural formation also enables us to theorize literary modernism as incorporating a much wider cultural space than avant-garde production: indeed, it is my contention that the detective fiction produced in the age of "high" modernism is part of what Irving Howe calls a "culture of modernism," but unlike Howe, I wish to suggest that this culture of modernism includes the sphere of popular culture, and is not limited to institutionalized "high" art. The modernism of popular crime fiction is not identical to "high" modernism; in my view it is more overtly concerned with what I shall call an evaluation of social reality, but it is, nonetheless, shaped by social and cultural forces of modernity, and it makes use of the technologies and ideologies of modernism in order to respond to the experience of modernity. As case studies, in Chapter Five I will examine two roughly contemporaneous sub-genres of detective fiction: the English formal novel of detection, typified in the work of Agatha Christie and the American hard-boiled school of detection typified by the work of Dashiell Hammett.

The relevance of Williams's theory of cultural formations to all of this is that it allows us to see that each sub-genre uses, in different proportions and for different ends, the residual literary strategies of realism in conjunction with the institutionally
dominant techniques and ideologies of modernism. This approach enables a revisionist re-reading of literary modernism: whereas most theorists and critics tend to see the transition to modernism in terms of a rupture with the realist tradition of fiction, Williams's work on cultural formations and realism allows us to see the continuity of realist strategies within modernism. Modernism, then, can be seen as an ideology of literary production, often radically at odds with the doctrines espoused by its apologists.

**Literary Value Versus Reading Subjects**

It is not as if the attack on popular fiction is anything new. But modernism upped the stakes, as it were, by defining itself in antithetical terms to popular culture, and popular fiction in particular. Indeed, the dense, complex, allusive and self-referential style which is so often taken to be characteristic of "high" literary modernism in Flaubert, Kafka, Joyce, Lawrence and Faulkner to name only a few, was widely seen in contrast to the more straightforward, less elliptical, realistic style of popular fiction. In the eyes of many critics, this style suffered in comparison not only because it lacked a dense verbal texture, but also because in popular fiction -- thrillers, science fiction, adventure, westerns and romance -- it was used more in the service of describing outward event and action rather than in exploring the subtleties and nuances of "centers of consciousness." Or so the argument went. In this connection it is interesting to note that critics, not novelists, were harshest in their dismissal of popular fiction. Many "high" modernists were fascinated by popular
fiction, and some, like Faulkner, actually wrote what was considered to be pulp fiction. It may be that many modernists sensed connections and similarities between the modernist project, which was culturally recognized, and the work of popular writers, which was not. At any rate this must remain speculative. What is not speculative, however, is that modernism's relationship to mass culture was and is characterized by what Andreas Huyssen in *After the Great Divide* has called "an anxiety of contamination":

Ever since the mid-19th century, the culture of modernity has been characterized by a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture. Indeed, the emergence of early modernism in writers such as Flaubert and Baudelaire cannot be adequately understood on the basis of an assumed logic of "high" literary evolution alone. Modernism constituted itself through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture (Huyssen, vii).

Modernism, that is, sought to define itself by what it was not. Accordingly, it shaped a tradition by elevating certain literary and artistic qualities and by excluding and denigrating others. The question of quantity versus quality therefore is not susceptible to resolution by adducing examples in which popular fiction can be shown to meet the standards set by modernist fiction -- not merely because counter examples can always be adduced, but more importantly, because this strategy leaves the premises of the modernist case unexamined. It is not, in other words, sufficient to say that popular fiction is as good as canonical fiction because this leaves modernist aesthetic premises in the position of dictating what is and what is not good literature. This essentially defensive posture leaves modernist criteria firmly in place. Instead of displacing the modernist hierarchy, this posture defers to it, and ultimately confirms it. When F.R. Leavis declared in the first sentence of *The Great*
Tradition that "The great English novelists are Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad - to stop for the moment at that comparatively safe point in history" it is clear that Leavis was attempting to identify an incontestable tradition of great novel writing in English. Several decades later, it is clear that the problems with this project are such that it becomes logically impossible to sustain. The first difficulty is that Leavis's Great Tradition is radically selective. Leavis himself realized this and obviously enjoyed the polemic nature of his project. But, by originally omitting Dickens and then later adding him to the pantheon, Leavis's position was compromised, forced to acknowledge, albeit implicitly, that the Great Tradition was subject to revision, and hence not God-given and eternal. What all this points to is that Leavis's Great Tradition, and for that matter, every tradition, is radically selective. Every construction of a literary tradition ignores or devalues certain forms of writing in favor of other forms. F.R. Leavis leaves out many writers and forms of writing that many people have valued, and continue to value, for reasons other than those which Leavis finds valid.

It may be objected that F.R. Leavis is not a modernist at all, but an anti-modernist, but I think it is more accurate to regard him as a conservative modernist. Scrutiny's list of approved modern writers, after all, included Conrad, Eliot, James, and Lawrence -- all modern writers who were themselves conservative or could be interpreted as fulfilling the criteria of Scrutiny conservatism which found in these writers a density and allusiveness of language devoted to counteracting the cultural and linguistic degradations of an industrialized mass society. While F.R. Leavis originally opposed the aristocracy and its cultural apparatuses, eventually he
came to see that the only redemption for society existed in a highly-educated elite who would sustain the embattled values of the past in civilization warped by philistinism. The job of the critic then, was to cultivate a sensitivity for the cultural values lost everywhere else. In its vitality of language and creative energy, Literature was seen as one of the last outposts of culture, and for Leavis, the critical task came down to identifying it as such. Yet in doing these "close readings" the critic was not to stray from the text into history or the conceptual structures that created those texts, for that would be to lose sight of the critic's primary task -- that of rigorously scrutinizing and judging literature, and on that basis, distinguishing the great from the good. In their attention to the text, in their rejection of history as a way of understanding the formal composition of the text, and in their attempt to locate in the structure and organization of the text an aesthetic coherence lacking in industrial civilization, F.R. Leavis resembles nothing so much as that other school of conservative modernism, the New Critics. By abstracting literature out of its social context, and by valorizing the notion of the text "in itself," both schools sought to locate different versions of a pre-industrial pastoral in literature. Because of this ideological agenda, for F.R. Leavis as well as for most of the New Critics, it became necessary to sharply distinguish between Literature and non-Literature.

Yet Leavis, like other critics who adhere to a Literature/ non-Literature mode of criticism, begins and ends by begging the question. There is no universally-acceptable, coherent set of criteria that will allow readers to make that distinction. There is, as Eagleton puts it, no ontological basis for deciding what is literature and
what is not; there are only functional reasons for doing so. Using a term like  "literature" does not describe the "fixed being" of a complex range of writing practices so much as it signifies in a casual and informal way a kind of writing which someone values for one reason or another (Eagleton 9). This is not a fancy way of saying that one man's meat is another man's poison: it is instead a recognition that literature, strictly speaking, is a relative term and that excluding other writing practices on this basis is a conventional or ideological operation.

Yet, having said this, it must be admitted that the problem of value in literary theory cannot be dispensed with so easily. I might say that on purely formal grounds, on the basis of artistic achievement or whatever, that the mystery novels of Ruth Rendell or Patricia Highsmith are equivalent or even superior to Annita Brookner's 1984 Booker Prize winner, Hotel du Lac and that the exclusion of genre writers from the consideration of the judges is only further evidence of the widespread prejudice of the literary establishment against genre writing and, indeed, is evidence of their inability to value the distinctive qualities and artistic achievements of genre fiction. The skeptical critic, who is also probably an unregenerate and unapologetic modernist, might concede as much -- and then go on to point out that there is a world of difference between Joyce and Conan Doyle, and further suggest that Joyce opened up ways of using and seeing language that Conan Doyle did not. Tony Bennett has addressed this issue in an interesting way. 1 Bennett concedes that there is a difference between the writing of say, Joyce and Conan Doyle, but that we cannot attribute value to one form of writing or another on this basis: "However, such purely technical assessments of the formal effects of different
practices of writing do not, of themselves, offer grounds for valuing the one above the other (Bennett, "Popular Fiction" 243)." The fundamental reason why such discriminations are invalid, and the fundamental reason why the question of value in writing is objectively indeterminate, is because both rest on the assumption that value inheres in the text, that it is an inalienable essence of the text. In actuality, literary value is largely a function of reading subjects who relate to texts in determinate ways: "Texts do not have value: they can only be valued by valuing subjects of particular types and for particular reasons, and these are entirely the product of critical discourses of valuation, varying from criticism to criticism" (Bennett, "Popular Fiction" 244).

The question of the value of different writing practices then, ultimately relates more to the valuing reader than the text in isolation; given this, the question of value ceases to be the primary consideration in the analysis of writing. Looked at in this way, Literature is no longer a uniquely privileged body of texts whose common factor resides in an undefinable difference from popular fiction, but instead signifies a wide range of writing practices differentiated by their strategic deployment of particular narrative strategies, modes of representation, registers of discourse, literary devices, conventions, forms, and so on. This fluid, mobile, more conjunctural theory of literature clearly is more suited to the study of popular fiction -- as well, of course, to those forms of fiction which have been canonized. One of the implications of this theory is that all writing practices avail of a common pool of literary and linguistic resources. Consequently, it becomes theoretically impossible to maintain a stable, objective distinction between genre and non-generic forms of
writing, even though, of course, booksellers market and display their books according to these categories. In "Discourse in the Novel" Mikhail Bakhtin develops the notion of literature-as-genre by contending that all forms of writing are mutations of different genres -- genres understood generally to mean "a horizon of expectations". For him, every new form of writing is merely an extension of the possibilities of a known genre or a creative synthesis of two or more already existing genres. So, for example, Madame Bovary, that most modern of novels, a novel which in the eyes of our unregenerate modernist critic may be taken to be at the furthest remove from genre fiction, yet can also be regarded as a particularly fine example of a genre which flourished in the nineteenth century, the novel of adultery. As Ken Worpole put it: "What are Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina, and Middlemarch other than particularly brilliantly written examples of the 'novel of adultery' (female adultery), another favorite 19th century genre that is as strong in the melodramatic tradition as it is that of the 'serious' novel?" (Worpole, Reading, 20). Every novel in some sense owes its existence to a genre, and as Worpole's comments suggest, the study of both the "serious" novel and the "popular" novel can benefit from this less rigid, more fluid conception of the relations between "high" culture and "low."

Before I move on to an exploration of the effect that the dismissal of popular culture by critics and different schools has had on received conceptions of modernism, I wish to clarify one point. As I have been arguing, there is no essential set of characteristics that we can point to in order to arrive at an objective description of Literature. Despite this, the academy and the literary establishment in
general continue to use and rely on, both explicitly and implicitly, many of the oppositions that I have been concerned to destabilize -- that of Literature/non-Literature, genre/non-generic forms of writing, "high" /"low" culture, "literary/non-literary fiction. While these oppositions do not have, in my view, any objective validity, it is necessary to acknowledge that they retain a political importance inasmuch as they designate the various ways in which existing literary institutions organize and value a multiplicity of writing practices.

Trashing Popular Fiction: Critical Past-times from Leavis to Lukács

In this century popular culture -- and by this I mean all the cultural practices produced as a form of entertainment for a mass audience -- has been denigrated by critics and theorists on both the left and the right. F.R. Leavis (again) led the way with Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture (1930). His thesis, as one might surmise from the title, is that while in every age culture is kept and preserved by a sensitive elite, in the twentieth century the rapid growth of a mass civilization threatens to swamp this embattled minority. Leavis’s argument is basically an updated version of Matthew Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy (1869). Leavis traces the disintegration in cultural values that has taken place since Arnold’s day by noting that where Arnold despaired of the Daily Telegraph as the most popular newspaper in the late Victorian era, more than half a century later it is tabloids such as News of the World that have the largest circulation. For Leavis, the contrast between the two newspapers is an index of the cultural depravity which has overtaken modern
life. As he says in the first sentence of the book: "For Matthew Arnold it was in some ways less difficult" (Leavis, Mass Civilisation 3). For Leavis mass production and standardization are not just new-fashioned American ways, but facts of life in Britain too. Leavis assigns them primary responsibility for the accelerated philistinism he sees about him in Britain and the related decay of traditional values:

It seems unlikely that the conditions of life can be transformed in this way without some injury to the standard of living (to wrest the phrase from the economist): improvisation can hardly replace the delicate traditional adjustments, the mature inherited codes of habit and valuation, without severe loss, and loss that may be more than temporary. It is a breach in continuity that threatens: what has been inadvertently dropped may be irrecoverable or forgotten (Leavis, Mass Civilisation 6-7).

As a critic of modern life, it is interesting to note that Leavis, like the theorists of the Frankfurt School, sees very little hope for liberation from the "triumph of the machine" (Leavis, Mass Civilisation 31). For Horkheimer and Adorno, the language is a little different, but the basic charge is the same: modern life and culture are debased by the onslaught of a all-encompassing, superficial mass civilization. While their rhetoric is infamously programmatic, it is no less so than Leavis’s:

Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part. Even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system. The decorative industrial management buildings and exhibition centers in authoritarian countries are much the same as anywhere else. The huge gleaming towers that shot up everywhere and are outward signs of the ingenious planning of international concerns, toward which the unleashed entrepreneurial system (whose monuments are a mass gloomy houses and business premises in grimy, spiritless cities was already hastening (Horkheimer and Adorno 120).

Or more explicitly:

Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through. The people at the top are no longer so interested in concealing monopoly: as its violence becomes more open, so its power grows. Movies and radio no longer need to pretend to be art. The
truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce (Horkheimer and Adorno 121).

The notion that popular culture is a degraded art form, or as Horkheimer and Adorno would have it, a mass-produced replica of a dominant ideology, is then an ubiquitous one in literary studies. Both traditions concur in that popular culture is seen to be distinct from "high" culture: it lacks the artistry of genuine art and exists as a disposable form of entertainment which embodies the "false consciousness" of the age. Whereas "high" or true art transcends the ideologies of its time, popular art is, on the other hand, deeply scored by them. Within Marxism this notion of popular culture as ideology has been widespread. Althusser follows in the tradition of the Frankfurt School in making a similar distinction. To put his case in schematic, somewhat figurative terms, for Althusser, Literature exists midway between Science (represented by Marxism and psychoanalysis, for example) and Ideology (although complex, his notion of ideology is not fundamentally dissimilar to Marx's notion of "false consciousness"). In addition, as his "Letter on Art to André Daspre" indicates, in which he distinguishes between "art" and "authentic art" (222), Althusser assumes that there is a fundamental, objective distinction between Literature and popular fiction -- an assumption which as we have seen is deeply flawed. But there is another problem with this formulation. As Tony Bennett has observed, within this triangle of Literature, Science and Ideology there is no place for popular fiction except the degraded sphere of Ideology (Bennett, "Marxism and Popular Fiction" 251). As with Lukács, for Althusser popular fiction is apparently not important enough to warrant any attention in the first place. I will return to Lukács in the next section, but for the moment suffice it to say that while there is
another approach within Marxism --the approach represented by Raymond Williams, M.M. Bakhtin, and Antonio Gramsci-- which takes a much more sympathetic view of popular fiction, the anti-popular fiction tradition within Marxism has been extremely influential, especially in its theorization of modernism. It is thus ironic that in this respect certain traditions on both the left and the right have confirmed each other’s dismissal of popular fiction, and have developed theories of modernism identical in their rejection of it.

Evaluative Realism and Modernism

If one of the cardinal features of modernism is this "anxiety of contamination" in regard to popular fiction, this anxiety has manifested itself in the attempt to distance itself from the modes of representation taken to be typical of popular fiction. In practice this has meant drawing a distinction between the "classic" realist tradition of fiction which flourished in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the radically different culture of modernism. Very often this has led to an accentuation of the differences between modernism and realism, to the extent that modernism has represented itself as coming into being by means of a rupture with realism: this is partly the sentiment that lies behind Virginia Woolf’s famous claim that "On or about December 1910 human nature changed." Allowing for the polemical nature of the claim, there is some validity to it, especially if one equates realism with a mode of representation which defines itself as a way of unmediated "natural seeing." If anything, modernism succeeded in problematizing representation. After modernism it
becomes increasingly difficult to maintain that art reflects reality in any direct or unmediated way; literary modernism's emphasis on the medium, that is, reminds the reader that reality is made, but made common, by language.

The argument I am putting forward is that modernist modes of representation did not abandon the realist tradition, as many modernist apologists suggest, but instead modernist novelists adapted and shaped realist strategies of representation for ends ideologically different from the conciliatory ends by and large promoted by the nineteenth century realist novel. I must emphasize, however, that my usage of the term "realism" is highly specific, and different from the usual sense of realism. By "realism" I do not mean a mode of representation which pretends to merely reflect a pre-given reality "out there."

Nor by "realism" do I mean a single style but instead "a method or mode of social representation with many styles" (Williams, Long Revolution 279). In "Realism and the Contemporary Novel" Raymond Williams develops this theory of realism by arguing that the function of realism is in some sense to adequate reality, but not by claiming to mirror it. For Williams realism is mode of registering experience which is fundamentally evaluative: "When I think of the realist tradition in literature, I think of the kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons" (Williams, Long Revolution, 278). Thus Williams is a long way off from claiming that realism is a style-less transparent way of writing, the type of writing that Roland Barthes criticized in Writing Degree Zero. Williams agrees that realism is a form of écriture, a highly-conventionalized way of writing that encodes certain ideological values. But he also differs from
Barthes in that he maintains that art is not only perception but communication, and reality is not just the vision of the monad or individual:

But art is more than perception; it is a particular kind of active response, and a part of all human communication. Reality, in our terms, is that which human beings make common, by work or language. Thus, in the very acts of perception and communication, this practical interaction of what is personally seen, interpreted and organized and what can be socially recognized, known and formed is richly and subtly manifested (Williams, Long Revolution 288).

This theory of realism is confirmed in the work of Volosinov and Bakhtin on language. In their work they acknowledge that language does not reflect reality in any direct way; rather, language speaks about it, engages in an evaluative discourse about it. Perhaps their most explicit statement on the subject is contained in an essay entitled "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art": "First of all, it is perfectly obvious that, in the given case, the discourse does not at all reflect the extraverbal situation in the way a mirror reflects an object. Rather the discourse here resolves the situation, bringing it to an evaluative conclusion, as it were. Far more often, behavioral utterances actively continue and develop a situation, adumbrate a plan for future action, and organize that action" (Volosinov, Freudianism 100). The view that the discourse of realism is not reflective but evaluative seems to me to be extremely useful. First of all it displaces the terms of the realism debate by shifting attention away from the vexed question of the veracity of realism to the social and moral imperatives registered in and through discourse. Second, the emphasis on the communicative function of realism, the fact that through the interchange of discourse reality is produced and made socially recognizable, means that realism need not be rejected as a naive medium, a pseudo-objective version of reality. Third, this formulation allows us to see that realism is moveable -- that realist strategies of
representation can be combined with other modes of representation. Using Williams’s theory of cultural formation, it is now possible to read realism as defined above as a historically "residual" element within the institutionally "dominant" modernist mode of representation. Far from inventing itself anew, literary modernism took over, adapted, and problematized realist strategies of representation, all the while integrating them with modernist ideologies, forms and techniques.

This notion of realism in modernism of necessity requires a re-thinking of received notions of modernism, many of which as I have argued depend on the idea of a complete break with realism. Georg Lukács’s The Meaning of Contemporary Realism is probably the most programmatic argument in this respect, and certainly one of the most influential. In it Lukács argues that realism represents the highest form of literary achievement. For him realism is the achieved artistic balance between objective reality and subjective consciousness. Realist characters typify the characteristic social and economic forces of a given era without ceasing, however, to be richly individualized; that is, they enact a dialectical synthesis of the psyche and the social. Lukács’s theory of realism enables him to develop a theory of naturalism and modernism, both of which for Lukács represent a fall from grace. Naturalism and modernism are the "decadent progeny" of realism; each represents a fragment or aspect of the perfectly-realized, many-sided synthesis of realism. Naturalism fetishizes objectivity, but in doing so yields a false and superficial objectivity. Modernism, on the other hand, fetishizes subjectivity. In emphasizing only individual psychology, modernism neglects the objective forces of history and remains lost within the solipsistic perspective of the individual. Lukács’s quarrel with modernism
stems from the fact that the modernist, unlike the realist, is incapable of making an objective critical assessment of the contemporary situation.

Once stripped of its prejudices toward naturalism and modernism, and its uncritical valorization of realism, Lukács's account remains a valuable model of the development of much twentieth-century literature. And yet there is a curious tension at the heart of his theory. On the one hand Lukács wants to maintain that realism is an essential component of all writing -- and yet his valorization of realism, and the rigidly analytical, a priori definition he gives it compels him to read naturalism and modernism negatively, as only fragments of the integral whole that is realism. And yet in relation to other forms and historical eras Lukács is surprisingly flexible in his judgments: Shakespeare, for instance, is admitted into the ranks of realists.

In The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, from time to time, Lukács has to do a little wrenching here and there to make recalcitrant authors or facts fit his scheme. Joyce is a case in point. Many of Lukács's criticisms of Joyce seem limited at best, and at worst, flat-out wrong. For example: "Joyce uses Dublin, Kafka and Musil the Hapsburg Monarchy, as the locus of their masterpieces. But the locus they lovingly depict is little more than a backcloth; it is not basic to their artistic intention" (Lukács 21). As I have argued elsewhere, this is not true either of Joyce's early work in Dubliners or for that matter, of his later work. This tension between wanting to assign to realism an essential role in representation and his unwillingness to find it in modernism, or to find it there only in distorted form, is inscribed in the title of the essay "Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann" -- Kafka being the "bad" modernist and Thomas Mann being the "good modernist" by virtue of his "critical
realism." (For Lukács, the only acceptable form of modernism is a form of realism.) The underlying logic of Lukács's argument is that to a greater or lesser extent realism constitutes an essential part of literary representation, but the narrow way in which he has defined what he regards as post-realist literature pulls in the opposite direction and compels him to deny this logic, indeed to dismiss these forms. Given that Shakespeare has been admitted to the pantheon, on Lukács's own terms Joyce could be too, and with fewer logical contortions. And given that he has conceded that realism is not restricted to a single style -- there is little stylistic similarity between Shakespeare and Balzac after all-- it does not make much sense to exclude other modes of social representation radically different from the nineteenth century classic realist style, like modernism for instance, and yet this is what Lukács does. Lukács sees modernism as an ideology, but, paradoxically, he accepts this ideology more or less at face value. He does not, that is, see it as at odds with modernist literary texts, which are a good deal less consistent in their technique, ends and world view than Lukács's taxonomy might suggest. The irony is that while Lukács sees modernism as an ideology he does not see it, as every ideology inevitably is, as a self-contradictory ideology. Modernism for him has a metaphysical consistency, even if that consistency is warped in its world view.

The evidence of their work, letters and lives suggest that Joyce, Lawrence, Woolf, Faulkner and many other "high" modernists were concerned with social existence and sought to evoke and evaluate it, albeit it in forms and styles different from those deployed in the classic realist novel that Lukács fetishizes. Indeed it is possible to argue that the realist strategies of representation within the dominant
modes of modernism enable referentiality in the first place. If one of the cardinal features of modernism is, as Irving Howe puts it, "an unyielding rage against the official order" (13), this critical function becomes possible by drawing on the evaluative capacities of realism.

In conclusion, then, having established 1) that there is no objective, essential distinction between Literature and non-Literature and 2) that realism need not be regarded as a unmediated reflection of reality and 3) that realist strategies of representation enter into the production of modernist fiction, it is possible to read many forms of popular culture as modernist evaluations of social experience. As I mentioned earlier, my own application of this theoretical argument is to be found in Chapter Five, "Detective Fiction and Modernism," but in virtually every chapter my arguments depend on the theoretical positions worked out here.
Preliminary Mappings
Modernism's Anxiety of Contamination

1. The idea for the example of the skeptical critic which I use in this paragraph was taken from this essay, and can be found on page 243.

2. This essay, along with three others, has been published under the title The Dialogic Imagination.

3. I have in mind Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, Freudianism: A Marxist Critique, and The Dialogic Imagination. The first two works appear in print in their English editions under the name of Volosinov, but there is a growing consensus that they were at least co-authored, if not in fact written, by M.M. Bakhtin. Due to this, and Bakhtin's emphasis that language is not owned by one writer or another but is accentuated by the intentions of all writers, it seems to make more sense to refer the co-authorship of the first two texts mentioned above.

4. See my article "Joyce and Dialogism: The Politics of Style in Dubliners."
Section One
The Emergence of the Modern Detective Hero

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Chapter One
The Power of Knowledge:
Poe's Detective Fiction and the Ideology of Rationalism

Perhaps, too, we should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can only develop outside its injunctions, its demands, and its interests. Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes people mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit, rather, that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. These "power-knowledge relations" are to be analyzed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system; but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known, and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations.

-- Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish

Poe and the Disciplinary Society

Poe's most famous detective stories, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Roget" and "The Purloined Letter" as well as his less famous ones, "The Gold Bug," and "Thou Art the Man" are rightly celebrated for inaugurating a number of sub-genres in detective fiction. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" introduced the famous amateur detective Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, and was the first of the "locked-room mysteries" which present the puzzle of a corpse in a room which appears to be sealed; "The Mystery of Marie Roget" was the first of the "armchair detection" stories in which the detective figure solves the mystery at
one remove from the crime by sheer analytical brilliance rather than by first-hand examination of the scene or of the suspects of the crime; and "The Gold Bug" was the forerunner of the code story which has as its main interest the solution to a cypher. While this concentration on Poe's formal achievement conveys the enormous impact he made on an area of fiction -- effectively transforming motifs of suspense and detection found in Romantic and Gothic fiction into what we now recognize as the conventions of the detective fiction genre -- this emphasis also tends, at least implicitly, to situate these texts within an abstract realm, distanced from the historical conditions that produced them. My thesis is that far from being merely abstract, intellectual puzzles devoid of social interest, Poe's detective stories embody a specific vision of knowledge structurally similar, but ultimately antithetical, to the dominant mode of knowledge fueling the social transformations in the early decades of nineteenth-century America, and that this conception of knowledge becomes a crucial element in subsequent detective fiction. Furthermore, I want to suggest that this vision of knowledge plays a crucial role in determining the style of these stories.

Poe's stories of detection were part of what might be called an emergent nineteenth-century culture of knowledge. Once transformed into new technologies and disciplines, these new forms of knowledge generated new forms of power and social relationships. Rooted in the same drive for knowledge that fueled the nineteenth-century American scientific and industrial revolution, Poe's stories are part of this larger formation of what Foucault terms a "disciplinary society," a society transformed by the extension of technologies of observation and control in
schools, factories, the military, and prisons. Within the "disciplinary society," this drive toward the acquisition of knowledge is achieved by the development of practices, institutions and technologies devoted to surveying and controlling individuals. Foucault's chief paradigm for the "disciplinary society" is the "panopticon," a circular prison arranged around a central watchtower in which surveillance is exercised on completely visible prisoners by unseen guards. While I do not want to suggest the eradication of human will in this "disciplinary society," a subject I will have much more to say about in Chapter Six, Foucault's notion of the "panopticon" offers interesting possibilities for understanding the narrative structure of Poe's detective stories.

The relevance of this conception of power-knowledge to my argument, then, is not that Poe recreates a "disciplinary society" in his detective fiction; rather, my argument is that in the person of Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, Poe creates a figure whose omniscience is comparable to that of a "panopticon." There is some similarity here with the classic English realist novel, in which the narrator typically enjoys a position of omniscience, but there is also a shift in narrative structure. Here it is not the narrator who enjoys an omniscient point of view, but a character. The narrator in detective fiction is often the less astute but still indispensable assistant to the master sleuth -- the classic example, of course, being the ever-faithful Dr. Watson. The chief significance of Foucault's notion of the "disciplinary society" for Poe's detective fiction, then, is that it articulates a desire for a complete form of knowledge, a desire which becomes a structural element of the genre. This desire for knowledge is not an immutable feature of detective fiction but changes with the
transformations in the genre. This change can be seen in the contrast between Poe's and Chandler's detective fiction. In "From Semiotics to Hermeneutics: Modes of Detection in Doyle and Chandler," William Stowe argues that whereas Poe and Doyle share a semiotic model of detection, Chandler develops a hermeneutics of detection: "He [Chandler] achieved his ambition by moving away from semiotics toward hermeneutics, away from the methodological solution of "mysteries" toward the philosophical understanding of mystery" (382). At the same time, however, Poe's stories reject the empirical, "scientific" mode of knowledge which was doing so much to revolutionize existing technologies and industry, recasting them into a modern industrial, capitalist and democratic mold. In fictional terms, Poe's rejection of empiricism as an adequate means of understanding reality translates into a certain aloofness, a definable distance that the detective hero assumes in relation to society: Dupin not only represents values antagonistic to democratic values, but his rationalism is repeatedly valorized over the narrow empirical values and methods used by the police, values which Dupin makes clear, are also held by the inferior democratic masses. For Poe, rationalism and empiricism represent ways of understanding the world which are linked to different social formations -- rationalism to the superior capabilities and values of the aristocracy, and empiricism to the creation of a democratic, industrializing society built on philistine values. Through Dupin's rationalism, Poe indirectly criticizes the values of democracy, and the narrow empirical methods which were doing so much to industrialize American society, always implicitly contrasting these values and mechanical methods to the ennobled lifestyle and aims of the aristocracy.
It is worth noting that the critical stance Poe gives to the detective hero in relation to society subsequently becomes a standard convention in detective fiction. Detective heroes after Dupin may or may not have aristocratic pretensions, but like Dupin, typically they are outsiders. This convention, especially pronounced in the American "hard-boiled" tradition, often provides the basis for the exploration of social and moral problems. Accordingly, in what follows, I will focus on Poe's most famous detective stories, those featuring Dupin as protagonist, as they highlight most dramatically the related issues of knowledge and power crucial to the genre.

Dupin's Romantic Rationalism and American Manifest Destiny

As an initial formulation, Poe's stories of detection may be defined as fantasies, even wish-fulfillment fantasies, of knowledge and power. They are, to be sure, masculine wish-fulfillment fantasies inasmuch as Dupin represents a gendered accession to knowledge.2 They embody a consciousness specific to an age of intense "scientific" investigation in which knowledge is power in radically new senses, without sacrificing older traditions of exclusivity. Yet for Poe, as for some of his Victorian successors, knowledge is not acquired empirically, through the observation of outward appearances alone; rather knowledge is gained when observation is combined with intuition or deductive forms of reasoning. This is the meaning of the abstract philosophical introduction to "The Murders of the Rue Morgue," in which "calculation" (mere observation) is repeatedly disparaged in favor of "analysis":

But it is in matters beyond the limits of mere rule that the skill of the analyst is evinced. He makes, in silence, a host of observations and inferences. So, perhaps, do his companions; and the difference in the extent
of the information obtained lies not so much in the validity of the inference as in the quality of the observation. The necessary knowledge is that of what to observe. Our player confines himself not at all; nor, because the game is the object, does he reject deductions from things external to the game. (Poe 3)

This brief meditation on the epistemological possibilities and limitations of the (game-playing) subject also reveals something of Poe’s world-view. Essential to it is an emphasis on the duplicity of appearances: any good player will make acute observations, but what sets the superior player apart is his incorporation of "things external to the game." Throughout the introduction to "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," games are presented as both examples and evidence. As examples, they are adduced to support the narrator’s contentions that the analyst’s power remains superior to the weaker ability of the plodding empiricist in the most intellectual of sports -- draughts, chess, and whist. But the metaphor is also evidence of a particular ideology founded on the desire to believe that the multiplicity of life can be reduced to a game-like structure in which variety is restricted to a finite number of possibilities and in which mutability is frozen within the unchanging laws of the game.

This ideology is radically different from the Manifest Destiny ideology, dominant in the early part of the nineteenth century, which articulated the America’s right to extend its territory throughout North America. Poe, on the other hand, wanted to locate a pastoral idyll in the South, and failing that, to at least create in his fiction and poetry an aesthetic world regulated by the combination of exoticism and control unfurnished by contemporary American society. In any event, Poe’s world-view had little to do with the contemporary belief that Americans had a divinely-sanctioned
obligation to conquer the American continent, a belief which was impelling "almost half of "Yankee-doodle-dum" [to keep] on the move toward the setting sun" (Miller 162).

Similarly, Larzer Ziff has noted that Poe's work figuratively opposes this ideology of expansionism: "In closing down access to wide nature in the world of his fiction, Poe was taking a social stand, asserting that art, growing from the imagination, is confined to the pure products of the mind and has no commerce with the collective destiny of the people" (Ziff 70). Within the context of his detective fiction, this withdrawal from a "wide nature," this desire to reduce life to convention, to formalized rules is in effect a fantasy of power in which knowledge plays a dominant role. (It might also be argued that Poe's desire to reduce reality to knowable conventions parallels his attempt to elaborate a theory of aesthetics in mathematical terms). The superior knowledge of the analyst, in this case the inestimable Dupin, is such that it pierces the bewildering array of surface appearances to find the actual source of the crime. The analyst, as Poe says, "disentangles" (2). Knowledge simplifies, clarifies chaos. Poe's lack of enthusiasm for the American imperial enterprise and scorn for what he regarded as the flaccid belief in democratic values finds its correlative in the alienated figure of Dupin whose intense, analytical, anti-empirical mind effortlessly resolves the most difficult of mysteries into neat formulas possessing knowable patterns of cause and effect. In this respect Dupin fulfills in fictional terms Poe's unrealized desire to dominate. While Poe's fortunes were dominated largely by a society embracing radically different values from his own, Dupin is similarly alienated, but dominant. He
appears to be above circumstance. Society’s most heinous or vexing crimes find their resolution in his hands. In principle there seems to be no mystery incapable of resolution. Dupin’s power of analysis is such that it has an almost preternatural quality. This is why I refer to Poe’s stories as fantasies of power and knowledge. In them reasoning is exalted to the degree that it loses any claim to verisimilitude; in them, knowledge confers power upon the subject. What is valorized in Poe’s detective stories, then, is not rationalism per se, but a romanticized version of rationalism in which reason, or more properly "analysis," figures as the highest mode of apprehension and ratiocination.

The contrast between the empowered mind of Dupin and the inferior mind of the police is nowhere foregrounded more sharply than in the beginning of "The Purloined Letter," in the initial dialogue that takes place between Monsieur G--, the Prefect of the Parisian police, and Dupin. The narrator begins the dialogue by addressing the Prefect:

"And what is the difficulty now? I asked. "Nothing more in the assassination way, I hope?"

"Oh no; nothing of that nature. The fact is, the business is very simple indeed, and I make no doubt that we can manage it sufficiently well ourselves; but then I thought Dupin would like to hear the details of it, because it is so excessively odd."

"Simple and odd," said Dupin.

"Why, yes; and not exactly that, either. The fact is, we have all been a good deal puzzled because the affair is so simple, and yet baffles us altogether."

"Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault," said my friend.

"What nonsense you do talk!" replied the Prefect, laughing heartily.

"Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain," said Dupin.
"Oh, good heavens! who ever heard of such an idea?"

"A little too self-evident."

"Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ho! ho! ho!" roared our visitor profoundly amused, "oh, Dupin, you will be the death of me yet!" (126)

The purloined letter is of moment precisely because it gives Minister D-- power over royalty, power which, once exercised, is lost. Blackmail, that is, is the quintessential form of knowledge as power. This "knowledge-power relation" is roughly analogous to Dupin's relations with the Prefect of the police. Just as Minister D-- enjoys ascendancy over the queen by virtue of his knowledge of the contents of the letter, so too does Dupin enjoy ascendancy over the Prefect by virtue of his confidence as to the letter's location. At this stage, Dupin has not been informed of any of the particulars surrounding the case, yet already he knows that the Prefect is in error. Dupin immediately discerns that the solution to the mystery of the letter's whereabouts lies in it being placed in an obvious place, not in its concealment. This omniscient faculty, what Poe calls "analysis" in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," clearly represents an idealized version of ordinary analysis -- indeed, Sherlock Holmes would be hard-pressed to come up with the solution to the mystery as rapidly as Dupin. And while it could be argued that Dupin "blackmails" the Prefect -- he extorts 50,000 francs for the return of the letter -- the most important analogue between Dupin and Monsieur G- and Minister D- and the queen is that in both cases knowledge gives Dupin and the minister power over their less clever victims.

What is most striking about the passage above, however, is not merely Dupin's supernatural acumen, but the tone in which he addresses the Prefect. Dupin's
superciliousness relates as much to his consciousness of his superior social position as to his intellectual superiority. Indeed for Poe, the two are one: Dupin's hauteur is the result of genius, but it is equally the result of being a member of the aristocracy.

It is not surprising then to find that the figure of Dupin arose out of a nineteenth-century American sub-culture which prized, or liked to think of itself as prizing, aristocratic values. Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin exists as a projection of the aristocratic ideals found in the antebellum South. These ideals, taken mainly from English Romantic literature, and particularly the work of Scott, Byron and Moore, were fashioned into cultural myths of the South, and in Poe's hands, formed the basis for his aesthetic theories. As an aristocratic man of letters (and science), a gentleman of grace and wit, Dupin embodies the refined aestheticism that Poe developed out of British Romanticism. As Michael Allen has noted:

Poe came to his first magazine, the Southern Literary Messenger, after growing up in a South that was extending an aristocratic code from the original Virginia gentry to the whole region to consolidate it against Northern pretensions. This process was considerably assisted by British literary and cultural sources, and the British conservative attitudes to the "many" and to the "trade" of writing fitted well into this milieu of cultural conservatism...(133)

Dupin's supercilious tone ultimately derives from Poe's investment in the Southern valorization of this aristocratic code. In this, as in so many other ways, Poe established the convention for much detective fiction; this tone, this lofty way of speaking, can be heard in the voices of many subsequent detective figures -- most obviously in Sherlock Holmes, but also in Lord Peter Wimsey, in Hercule Poirot, and more recently, in Adam Dalgliesh.
None of these sleuths, however, match Dupin's omniscience. Dupin's powers of ratiocination are such that phenomena capable of being understood are capable of being controlled. Individuals may behave stupidly, irrationally, perversely, or even maliciously as in "The Purloined Letter," but through Dupin, social disorder becomes order, the unknowable becomes knowable. Dupin's powers of analysis represent a fantasy of power, a fantasy for a kind of Nietzschean overman. Poe differs from Nietzsche, however, in that for him disorder is not systematic, but is individual, aberrational. The chief role of Dupin's ratiocinative genius is to rectify what in the larger scheme of things are temporary aberrations from the norm. Nowhere is it suggested that crime may have a social cause or a class character; for Poe it is an abstract puzzle, an intriguing deviation from an otherwise smoothly-running social mechanism.

Many critics have noted that the conventions of detective fiction uniquely qualify it to explore the social and political relationships in the society in which it is set. If this is true, given Poe's role in the shaping of the genre, it is somewhat ironic that these concerns are marginalized, present most tellingly in the knowledge-power connection constitutes such a vital role in the narrative structure to his detective stories. Poe's emphasis on the ratiocinative abilities of Dupin, and his lack of interest in depicting the workaday world in the detailed fashion of the realist novel implies a certain vision of society. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Purloined Letter" and to a lesser extent "The Mystery of Marie Roget" society exists as a backdrop for Dupin's disembodied intellect. Or to put it in another way, society exists as a mere aspect of Dupin's character and this, as we shall see
shortly, has a profound effect on the style of these stories.

The Political Unconscious, or, Negating Society

Up to this point, I have been focusing chiefly on the image of society projected by Poe’s narratives of detection, and have argued that it represents a fantasy of wish-fulfillment. I would now like to suggest that this fantasy is only one element in a larger drama of political tension and, at the same time, I would like develop my theoretical sanction for this appropriation of Freudian terminology.

While Poe’s stories do not render the complex, interlocking social, personal and working relationships found in the realist novel, nevertheless they register, indeed they cannot help but register, some repressed anxieties about society. Following some of Fredric Jameson’s work on what he has most recently termed "the political unconscious," I want to suggest that there is an economy of both wish-fulfillment and repression within the narratives I’ve been discussing. In "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture" Jameson argues that:

To rewrite the concept of a management of desire in social terms now allows us to think repression and wish-fulfillment together within the unity of a single mechanism, which gives and takes alike in a kind of psychic compromise or horse-trading, which strategically arouses fantasy content within careful symbolic containment structures which defuse it, gratifying intolerable, unrealizable, properly imperishable desires only to the degree to which they can again be laid to rest. (141)

In these narratives what is incompletely repressed is the "unrealizable" desire to be rid of society as an affective experience. In one sense, this is only the flip side of Poe’s desire to completely dominate society. To dominate it totally is to abolish it
as an entity which makes claims on the individual. This represents a reversal of the conventions of the classic realist novel. In Madam Bovary, Middlemarch, and Sons and Lovers it is society which determines the boundaries of individual possibility, what can and cannot be achieved, what course of action the protagonist will take. In Poe’s detective fiction this sense of the determinative power of society over the protagonist is almost entirely absent. Instead, Dupin’s analytical prowess enables him to dominate society. Yet his power of analysis is in itself an instrument of alienation, for the price he pays is an Olympian detachment from ordinary life. Dupin, it appears, is incapable of relating to others in any way other than through his rarefied mode of analysis. Consequently, social intercourse can only be understood in abstract terms. Life as emotion, as felt experience, is conspicuously absent, except when Dupin’s triumphant resolution of the mystery is at hand. The perverse, nocturnal life of Dupin and the narrator is indicative of this isolation from any larger human community.

This fantasy of a completely self-sufficient, pure rationalism --a fantasy familiar to Arthur Conan Doyle’s readers -- results in a reified vision of society lacking in the human conflict which enriched the nineteenth-century tradition of realist fiction. Paradoxically, Poe, one of the genre’s most important inaugurators, takes crime, the most social of phenomena, and drains it of its social character. In Poe’s detective fiction, crime is not a social problem, but an analytical one. The effects of this vision have been immense, particularly in the ratiocinative fiction of Christie, Allingham and Sayers, to mention just a few. Within this tradition, fascination with the power of knowledge is almost always associated with a related lack of interest
in the interaction between the individual and society, which as I have noted, in the realist novel determines the fate of the individual. In this sense, detective fiction, at least in the ratiocinative tradition, uses the conventions of the classic realist novel but also breaks with them, largely as a result of its deification of the ratiocinative detective hero or heroine.

Within the context of Poe's œuvre, however, the stories of ratiocination form a part of a larger polarization of logic and feeling. While his detective stories represent a fantasy of the intellect, unencumbered by society or feeling, much of his other fiction depicts the insufficiency of the intellect in the face of inadequately repressed or even overwhelming fears and desires. In this context, "The Fall of the House of Usher" can be taken as an allegory of the insufficiency of the rational mind to contain fears originating in the unconscious. From the very beginning, the narrator of the story struggles, through the exercise of reason, to exorcise the gloominess and horror hanging over the House of Usher. Roderick Usher, as he himself recognizes, has almost succumbed to madness by the time the narrator arrives: "In this unnerved -- in this pitiable condition -- I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together in some struggle with the grim phantasm FEAR" (181). The narrator manages to escape the ruin of reason; Roderick Usher does not: he dies facing it. The point, however, is not that the narrator escapes with his reason intact while Usher dies in a maddened frenzy, for the narrative problematizes this simple opposition between madness and reason: Usher's private madness ultimately becomes generalized, indeed real. In "The Fall of the House of Usher" reason cannot confer order on life; Roderick
Usher is thus the antithesis to Dupin. This tension between intellect and feeling is related to the struggle within the Victorian consciousness to synthesize the two. In Victorian literature, ratiocinative genius eventually comes to be seen as sterile and lifeless. George Eliot's Casaubon and Dickens's Gadgrind are tragic and parodic versions of this overdependence on ratiocination, which in the Victorian era and later is most often associated with the masculine while feeling is gendered as feminine. In *Middlemarch*, for example, the sterile rationalism of Casaubon is explicitly contrasted with the sustaining affections of Dorothea. John Stuart Mill's *Autobiography* is probably the most famous example of this split and in it he describes in minute detail the debilitating emotional and psychological effects of this valorization on the rational mind, and the succor he received from literature -- and especially his wife, Harriet. The relevance of the strain of this division can easily be seen in relation to Poe's fiction: if it exists as a fantasy of the self-sufficiency of the empowered ratiocinative mind, detached from society and bonds of empathy, and ultimately, beyond the demands of historical necessity, much of his other fiction negates that fantasy by luridly dramatizing the instability of reason. In both cases, society exists only as a background, or as a projection of the psyche of the protagonist. This profound ambivalence towards reason and Poe's more active desire to efface society "as a community binding the individual to others" (Ziff 76) are connected impulses, as Elliot Gilbert has observed:

Poe's experience paralleled that of the nineteenth century, which was also preoccupied with the idea of order, with the desire to subdue and control the universe through the application of reason. What the age discovered, however, in its quest for order and control-- and what it powerfully symbolized in the detective -- was not man's ability to achieve that order but his inability to do so. (31)
This is, I think, an acute observation on the continuity between Poe’s world-view and nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture, and detective fiction in particular, but it remains too general. What remains to be specified are the specific cultural tensions of the antebellum American South that Poe incorporated or rather, transformed in his fiction, including his detective fiction.

The Detective and the Garden

In The Dispossessed Garden, Lewis P. Simpson argues that the dominant image of paradise in the literary imagination of the South was realized exclusively in terms of a plantation society founded on the master-slave relationship. Over a period of time, slavery was gradually assimilated to the myth of the new world as a redemptive garden. This metaphoric association of the plantation with a pastoral order, Simpson argues, was further complicated by the Western pastoral tradition, ultimately Hebraic in origin, of the plantation as the natural locus for the cultivation of the life of the mind (182). The difficulty for the Southern writer, then, was the difficulty of reconciling the brutal, morally repugnant reality of slavery to this pastoral ideal. To be sure, harmonizing slavery with the values of the pastoral tradition presented no real difficulties to the ingenuity of some Southern writers. Poe’s desire to banish society as an affective community, as a social entity capable of regulating the fate of the individual, relates to this tension in Southern culture, partly because every available, contemporary form of social organization was distasteful. Rejecting both the industrialized, mammonistic society of the North and what he saw as its insipid
egalitarianism, and the tensions inherent in the South, Poe could locate no satisfactory, existing social archetype. Poe's relationship with the South is admittedly more problematic than his relation to Northern society, since he saw himself as an apologist of slavery and Southern values in general. Nevertheless, his work displays an acute awareness of the tensions of the plantation society, an awareness symbolized in "images of diseased nature, poisoned gardens, ruined castles, depraved humanity, and above all, in the image of a mysterious blight moving across the landscape and rotting the seed of all lovely, young life" (Sanford 298).

Poe's work thus reveals a much more ambivalent attitude toward the South than many of his public statements might suggest, partly because his self-given position as defender of the South against Northern condescension did not encourage an open admission of the problems of Southern society. Undoubtedly, too, Poe did not want to acknowledge, perhaps could not acknowledge even to himself, the real basis to Southern society because this would have amounted to an acknowledgement of the contamination of the pastoral idyll, Poe's plantation version of the Coleridgean notion of a "clerisy" -- an endowed class, made up of Southerners, devoted to the cultivation and diffusion of learning. Because of Poe's overt distaste for industrialism, his latent awareness of the social problems of Southern society, and his fascination for repressed, or partially repressed desires and fears, Poe's work gravitates toward a dissection of the individual psyche. Any predominantly realistic or mimetic mode of representation would involve Poe in social description; what we find instead is a proto-modernism which constantly refers back to the enlarged consciousness of the alienated individual in which external reality is dissolved into
intensified or even hyperactive mental states.

This alienation from what Raymond Williams calls a "knowable community," in other words, an alienation from an understanding of "an effective range of social experience by sufficiently manifest immediate relations" (Politics 247) is evident in the style of Poe's prose. Its syncretic, artificial quality -- that dense, orotund reworking of Romantic prose so despised by Twain -- attests to his remoteness from the idioms of everyday speech. If Poe's style is legitimately associated with a certain tradition of verbose Southern rhetoric, that association, however powerful, is due to the general effect of a tradition, and as such is qualitatively different from the more immediate, distinguishable, and genuinely colloquial speech patterns of a specific speech community. By drawing on the resources of a highly refined, educated, and geographically non-specific literary style, Poe's style attempts to transcend the boundaries and pressures, both social and linguistic, of a "knowable community." His style, then, can be seen as a way of mediating the conflict in his fiction, especially pronounced in his detective stories, between reason and society. While Poe's detective fiction testifies to his faith in the self-sufficiency of the ratiocinative consciousness, in its submerging of everyday speech, it stylistically asserts the autonomy of that consciousness from society. To adopt Richard Poirier's argument, Poe's style attempts to build a world elsewhere, removed from the perceived social and cultural failures of American society.

Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin and Mass Fiction
Of the many ironies of Poe’s career, one of the most striking concerns Poe and his audience. Poe’s relationship with his audience was curious: Poe, the father of the modern detective story, the founder of an emerging form of mass fiction, despised the democratic values which provided the ideological basis for the existence of this new mass fiction. From time to time Poe expressed a less elitist attitude toward popular literature and the mass audience that consumed it, but these more benign judgments were, in the main, aberrations from a vain, lifelong hope for an aristocratic, predominantly Southern literary community which would both produce and consume a rarefied, aesthetically superior, national literature. The question I want to explore here, therefore, is this: How does Poe’s ratiocinative fiction respond to the contradictions of its production?

To begin to answer this question it is necessary to identify the general conditions of literary production within which writers in Poe’s time worked. For most American writers in the first half of the nineteenth century, literary production was an extremely difficult business. The undeveloped state of the American publishing industry made the publication of non-mainstream American fiction a precarious enterprise at best. The centralization of publishing within a few urban centers, a disparate national audience, an extremely volatile market, the lack of finance capital -- all these elements combined to make high risk and low profit the norm in printing American fiction. Predictably enough, publishing concerns preferred to ensure their profits by reprinting the works of proven English and Continental bestsellers like Scott, Dickens, Eugene Sue, and Bulwer Lytton for which they paid no royalties. If they did publish the work of American writers, they tended to stick
to known genres such as moralistic or sentimental fiction. Magazines thus remained one of the few outlets for American writers like Poe or Hawthorne, who were not writing sentimental or realistic fiction (Clark 245). Most reviewers of Poe's Tales (1845) were not hostile but, with the exception of a few English newspapers, were generally receptive. This is not to say, however, that Poe's critical reception matched his popular appeal; apart from a few popular hoaxes, Poe's work never gained a popular audience. The chief problem with Poe's fiction was not that it was rejected by a conservative class of literary mandarins, but that Poe's literary tastes, values and aesthetic principles were at odds with the literary tastes of a newly literate, expanding middle class. A new moralistic, democratic -- not to say opportunistic-mass-circulation journalism was displacing the more middle-brow, self-conscious literary publication that Clark seems to have in mind. As Michael Allen notes in Poe and the British Magazine Tradition, Godey's Lady's Book exemplified the new mass-circulation magazine:

Popular literary articles and tales were "packaged" in the modern way with material of the kind most of the consumers wanted: sentimental love tales, gossip, recipes, popular songs, and fashion news, and plates; and the latter material guaranteed the circulation. (131)

Despite the fact that Poe was a capable editor of two mass-circulation magazines -- Burton's Gentleman's Magazine and Graham's Magazine, his idiosyncratic style and subject matter were ill suited to the lighter tastes of this newly-formed mass audience. In addition,

The "shudders" of moral perversity, putrescent corpses, living burials, apocalypse, plague, and ruin with which he still working were instinctive enough. They were attuned, however, not to the love-adventure-sentiment staple of the popular magazine fiction of the 1840's but to the morbid Byronic and Gothic stock-in-trade of the previous generation, which Poe had
absorbed in his youth and still found congenial. (166)

Another reason for his failure to appeal to this new mass audience was that his learning, aestheticism and aristocratic attitudes caused him, in spite of his best efforts, to condescend to his readership: as Allen points out, his tales of ratiocination, his burlesques and even his parodies depend on an appeal to an intellectually superior, select group of readers capable of catching the clues, subtle allusions and indirect, often caustic references that characterize his fiction (Allen, passim).

The answer, then, to the question of how Poe's detective fiction responded to the anomalous situation of an anti-democratic writer writing for a mass audience with decidedly republican views is complex. Nevertheless, within Poe's stories of ratiocination there is a strategy of neutralization which doesn't aim so much at negotiating this tension, as eliminating it. In his detective stories, Poe shows his distaste for democratic values by inversion, parody or satire, techniques with which he was more than adept, but also by creating a new form which valorized a different and superior epistemology. This epistemology takes the ideology of Common Sense empiricism everywhere evident in this young, pragmatic, productive country --and by extension the formation of a "disciplinary society" founded on the industrial, scientific and social changes it made possible-- and in a disdainful act of one-upsmanship, attempts to expose empiricism as a crude and limited way of problem solving. This is, to be sure, a more subtle strategy than the strategy he employs in his satires, where Common Sense empiricism is also the target. Dupin, the quasi-aristocratic rationalist, consistently seeks to expose what to him are the
shoddy assumptions involved in empirical thinking. In "The Purloined Letter" he criticizes the mechanical empiricism typical of the Prefect and for that matter, most men:

They [the Prefect and his cohort] consider only their own ideas of ingenuity; and, in searching for anything hidden, advert only to the modes in which they would have hidden it. They are right in this much -- that their ingenuity is a faithful representative of that of the mass; but when the cunning of the individual felon is diverse in character from their own, the felon foils them, of course. (132)

Dupin's acute faculty of reasoning, superior to the mere calculating ability of the Prefect and the unimaginative bourgeoisie in general, stands as an emblem of the superiority of the aristocracy to the levelling effects of democracy. Dupin's patrician intellect alone is capable of penetrating the mysteries of bourgeois society. Thus the aristocracy, of which Dupin is the proud descendent and representative in an otherwise tarnished age, figures as the implied Utopian resolution to the contemporary failures of industrial democracy and the polluted agrarianism of the South.

This is not to say that Poe was an abolitionist; on the contrary he was an apologist of slavery. In a review published in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, Poe declared of slavery that,

Nothing is wanted but manly discussion to convince our people at least, that in continuing to command the services of their slaves, they violate no law divine or human, and that in the faithful discharge of their reciprocal obligations lies their true duty. Let these be performed, and we believe (with our esteemed correspondent Professor Dew) that society in the South will derive much more of good than of evil from this much abused and partially-considered institution. ("The South Vindicated" 275)

This paternalistic attitude toward slavery, incidentally, forms the basis for the relationship between William Legrand and his freed slave Jupiter in the "The Gold
Bug," one of Poe's other detective stories. At the same time though, as I have argued, Poe's work like that of many other Southern writers, is marked by the struggle to reconcile slavery with the idealized notion of society as a pastoral idyll. Poe, it seems, could ratify slavery, and the society founded on it, only when its more brutal aspects are etherealized, transformed into a form of benevolent paternalism. This contradiction was rooted in the South's self-image. Southern culture saw itself as the guardian of literary and cultural values threatened by the utilitarianism and crassness of the industrial North, yet this genteel self-representation of Southern society as the locus of refinement and learning was called into question by the decidedly anti-pastoral nature of slavery. The relevance of the South to Poe's detective fiction, then, is not only that Dupin embodies the aesthetic fastidiousness of Southern culture, but he also represents an aristocracy of the mind, an idea deeply rooted in the pastoral ideal of the antebellum South. Dupin is an aristocrat. But more importantly, he possesses an aristocratic mind superior to the police -- muddling democrats that they are. As Dupin says, the police have only "ordinary intellects" useful only in "ordinary occasions" (133). Through Dupin, Poe suggests that intelligence, or at least the faculty of analysis, is class-based: only an aristocrat could understand with Dupin's completeness, for the police possess an ingenuity which is "a faithful representative of that of the mass" (132). Poe's reworking of the pastoral ideal in the figure of the aesthetic, yet supremely rational figure of Dupin thus enabled him to symbolically produce a model of Southern culture, a model which also implied the cultural poverty of the democratic masses.
Dupin, and Poe's representation of Paris, exist together, then, as an attempted resolution of real social contradiction. Dupin, the empowered aristocrat, not only presides over a society drained of the tensions of the American South and those of the industrializing North, but ultimately over an urban agglomeration which ceases to have any affective force whatsoever. Society, in the sense of the determinative network of relationships and institutions on individuals within a single social order, is effectively neutralized in these stories. Interestingly, Dupin's rationalism, the rationalism responsible for this valorization of this individual over society, replicates the ideology characteristic of aristocratic European formations which recognized only social equals as members of society: in English, this history is preserved within the semantic history of the word "society," which in the eighteenth century signified "active fellowship" and "company" before gradually evolving into a description of a general system or order (Williams, Marxism 11). There is no general society to speak of in these stories because there are no equals to Dupin; the narrator's inferiority is emphasized at the beginning of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" in the famous passage in which Dupin appears to read his mind; in subsequent stories the narrator's intellectual inferiority is never in question. Ultimately, his function consists in narrating his mentor's more prodigious mental exploits.

Poe's longing for a pre-bourgeois, settled aristocracy untainted by iniquity is one of the legacies he left to the genre of detective fiction, and persists to this day in the work of Allingham, Christie, Marsh and Sayers, novelists who added to this legacy by bringing an analysis of manners to the genre; indeed, it might be said that this longing is still one of the hallmarks of this ratiocinative tradition of
detective fiction. Poe's main legacy to the adolescent, popular fiction industry of his day, then, was in defining detective fiction as oppositional, antagonistic to contemporary values, mores, ways of thinking and seeing. To be sure, Poe wrote in the name of an idiosyncratic, radical conservatism, shaped by an unrealizable social fantasy; nevertheless, by articulating values alternate to those dominant in nineteenth-century America, he helped to define a genre rich enough in novelistic possibilities to be reworked by writers as ideologically and stylistically different from himself as Hammett, Chandler and MacDonald.
Chapter 1
The Power of Knowledge: Poe's Detective Fiction
and the Ideology of Rationalism

1. In A New History of the United States William Miller writes that this period of American expansionism was accompanied by wide-spread corruption: "The growth of cities, regional specialization in agriculture, expansion of the transportation network, the development of markets for American manufactures and the relation of all these to everyday politics and life lent a vigor and unity to the northern spirit probably unmatched in this epoch anywhere on earth. One consequence of expansiveness was the hunger for wealth at any price and a deterioration of business morality." (201)

2. For an interesting discussion of the way in which science has been specifically gendered as male in the West see Ruth Bleier's "Lab Coat: Robe of Innocence or Klansman's sheet?" in Feminist Studies/Critical Sheets.

3. The quote is from Charles L. Sanford's essay "Edgar Allan Poe" reprinted in Eric W. Carlson's (ed.) The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Criticism Since 1829. Sanford uses this summary of the dominant imagery in Poe's work to emphasize what he sees as Poe's "pain of loss" due to his failure to locate a paradisiacal culture. By contrast, following Lewis P. Simpson, I see this blighted imagery as a response to the tensions within plantation society of the South.

4. For more on Poe's anti-democratic views see Quinn's biography, Edgar Allan Poe, esp. 94: "He was never a democrat in any sense. His reference in Tamberline to "the rabblemen" is characteristic."

5. In a review in the New York Daily Tribune on the 11 July, 1845 Margaret Fuller declared in no uncertain terms that "Mr Poe's tales need no aid of newspaper comment to give them popularity; they have secured it" (Walker 176). Evert Augustus Duyckinck eulogized in a similar manner: "Few books have been published of late which contain within themselves the elements of greater popularity. This popularity it will be sure to obtain if it be not for the operation of a stupid prejudice which refuses to read, or a personal enmity which refuses to admire" (Walker 187). While the predominance of the freakish, the bizarre and the perverse in the Tales did little to ingratiate him with the mainstream consumers of sentimental or moralistic fiction, or with conservative reviewers, the Tales did well enough to justify the risk of publishing The Raven and Other Poems (1845) (Quinn 480-481).

For the purposes of the present argument, it is important to recognize that American and English reviewers, even where unsympathetic to Poe's fiction in general, tended to be more predisposed to his stories of ratiocination. An unsigned notice in the Spectator, which while deploring Poe's fiction as being "of a magazinish kind (Walker 180) may be taken as a fair example:
To unfold the wonderful, to show what seems miraculous is amenable to almost mathematical reasoning, is a real delight of Mr Poe; and though he may probable contrive the mystery he is about to unravel, this is not always the case as in the tale of the murder of Marie Roget; and in all cases, he exhibits great analytical skill in seizing upon the points of circumstantial evidence and connecting them together" (Walker 180).
I had called upon my friend Sherlock Holmes upon the second morning after Christmas, with the intention of wishing him the compliments of the season. He was lounging upon the sofa in a purple dressing gown, a pipe rack within his reach upon the right, and a pile of crumpled morning papers, evidently newly studied, near at hand. Beside the couch was a wooden chair, and on the angle of the back hung a very seedy and disreputable hard felt hat, much the worse for wear, and cracked in several places. A lens and a forceps lying upon the seat of the chair suggested that the hat had been suspended in this manner for the purpose of examination.

"The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle"

It is difficult to think of Sherlock Holmes as a mere literary character. Ever since his first appearance in *A Study in Scarlet* in 1888, and the subsequent, more successful series of stories which appeared in *The Strand* between July 1891 and June 1892, Sherlock Holmes seems to have led an almost larger-than-life, almost autonomous existence from his literary creator. Indeed, Conan Doyle so much resented the popularity of Holmes that in "The Final Problem" he killed him off. Even Doyle, however, could not assassinate the redoubtable Sherlock Holmes. Eventually Doyle's contribution to the Sherlock Holmes myth would include four full novels, five collections of short stories, and an immensely successful play, predictably called *Sherlock Holmes*. Once "killed" by the evil Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls, Holmes has outlived -- and continues to overshadow -- his creator in films and novels. One of the more notable, recent examples of Holmes's
enduring popularity is Nicholas Meyer’s novel *The Seven Per Cent Solution* in which Holmes and Freud together solve a mystery. To this day, the deerstalker hat, the magnifying glass and the meerschaum pipe are the totemic symbols of what can only be called the Sherlock Holmes myth.

No other myth centered on a single character in modern popular culture has been so familiar, so ubiquitous, so pervasive within the English-speaking world, and in many cases, outside it. Many explanations have been advanced to explain the popularity of the Holmes myth, most of them resting on the character of Sherlock Holmes himself. Holmes, it is argued, represents a qualitatively different type of detective hero. Where C. Auguste Dupin was a disembodied intellect, and Wilkie Collin’s Sergeant Cuff a mere eccentric, with Sherlock Holmes, Doyle introduced into detective fiction the first truly complex, fully-rounded, psychologically interesting detective hero. Sherlock Holmes was a new type of hero, or at least an interesting amalgam of older detective figures. It possible to see him as a synthesis of the ratiocinative qualities of Dupin and the eccentric character of Cuff. Yet this explanation does little to explain the popularity of a complex cultural phenomenon. One index of the popularity of Conan Doyle’s stories was that they quickly doubled the circulation of the Strand Magazine from 200,000 to 400,000 (Warpole, Reading 48). But the question remains: why did English and American audiences in the 1890s and after take to Holmes with a fervor matched in recent times only by the Beatles? Clearly the complexity of Sherlock Holmes’s character, as an explanation in itself, cannot account for this. After all, there were many literary characters in the 1890s and after, with more complex psychological portraits who were not
attracting comparable readerships.

To some extent, Conan Doyle's formal success was due to his refinement, following on Poe, of a new, quintessentially popular genre, featuring a single detective hero within an open-ended, continuous form responsive to public fears, hopes and anxieties. But the success of this form, and the Sherlock Holmes myth in general, depends on a particular use of language, a realistic style notable for its vivid, precise detail:

It was a September evening, and not yet seven o'clock, but the day had been a dreary one, and a dense drizzly fog lay low upon the great city. Mud-colored clouds drooped sadly over the muddy streets. Down the strand the lamps were but misty splotches of diffused light which threw a feeble circular glimmer upon the slimey pavement. The yellow glare from the shop-windows streamed out into the steamy, vaporous air, and threw a murky, shifting radiance across the crowded thoroughfare. There was to my mind something eerie and ghost-like in the endless procession of faces which flitted across these narrow bars of light -- sad faces and glad, haggard and merry. (The Sign of Four 98)

This use of a rich, referential language focusing on the primary qualities of objects enables Conan Doyle to produce a convincing, wholly "realistic" environment. Indeed, the London of Sherlock Holmes is almost as famous as Holmes himself. Nevertheless, it is only a representation, a fictional construct of late nineteenth-century London, and, as I shall argue, remarkable as much for what it excludes -- class conflict, racism, imperialism, even women -- as for what it includes. This is not to deny its efficacy as a representation, for the popular image of a timeless, fog-shrouded London is largely due to Doyle. But it does suggest that the Homes myth was at least originally produced by a particular way of writing which created the illusion of a fascinating, intricate, and believable society. There is, that is to say, nothing more solid, more "realistic," and more fictional than 221B Baker Street.
What perhaps appears at first glance to be a purely formal device -- style -- reflecting an objective reality, is on closer inspection a crucial element in the production of the Sherlock Holmes myth. This myth in other words is not simply a myth of an eccentric but brilliant detective, but a myth of knowledge and ultimately, a myth of society. To address the question, then, of the success of Conan Doyle's detective fiction, it is necessary to examine Conan Doyle's formal achievement as well as the ideological character of his work, for as the example above demonstrates, its appeal lies in its powerful combination of formal innovation and ideological statement.

**Sensationalism, Adventure, and Imperialism**

Conan Doyle did not, of course, invent the formal realist style, but he did develop one which drew on the resources and conventions of the sensational literature flourishing in Victorian England. Unlike Poe's detective fiction, Conan Doyle's style grew out of a culture of a mass-circulation, popular fiction, a great deal of which was devoted to sensational subject matter. These popular mass-circulation newspapers and periodicals were an established fact of life by the 1890s: Tit-Bits, Answers, Pearson's Weekly and others offered a staple diet of scandal, lurid crime, upper-class intrigue, melodrama, adventure, and sin. These periodicals were immensely popular and sold in the hundreds of thousands. This boom was facilitated by a number of factors, both social and technological: the abolition of the newspaper tax in 1855, the repeal of the paper duty in 1861, and two important
technological innovations -- the introduction of the rotary and typesetting presses. None of these changes would have mattered, however, if there had not been substantial improvements in literacy as the century wore on. Ironically, the huge sales of religious and devotional material in the early part of the nineteenth century did much to spread literacy and generally create the conditions in which sensational literature could flourish (Altick, Common Reader 348-396). In short:

The 1880s were a new period in the development of mass-publishing, just as the 1830s had been. Mass literacy was almost an accomplished fact; compulsory education had been in existence for a decade; the major cities were in a new era of expansion and the advent of the railways had brought not only a new form of communication but a new literature to go with it. (Warpole, Reading 19)

Sherlock Holmes was a product of this "era of expansion."

His popularity was directly related to the tremendous growth of the popular media in the 1880s oriented to a readership different in taste and size from the basically middle-brow literary audience for which Poe wrote. Conan Doyle's detective fiction not only appealed to a wider readership -- the urban masses which travelled to and from work in commuter trains -- but it also appealed to an increased public interest in sensational crime. Public interest in crime was not new to Victorian England. Indeed, the origins of the English novel has its roots in crime literature, beginning with the "true confessions" of criminals printed in pamphlet form in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, continuing through the moralistic crime stories such as the Newgate Calendar (1773). This topoi developed into the criminal-as-protagonist novel of which Moll Flanders (1772) is probably the most famous example in eighteenth-century English literature. But the degree of public interest in crime in the later half of the nineteenth century was unprecedented. In Deadly Encounters:
Two Victorian Sensations. Richard Altick documents the craze beginning in 1861 that set off this new era of sensationalism. While the 1850s had seen a spate of highly publicized homicides within middle-class families, these paled in comparison with the public sensation created by two cases in July of 1861, the "Northumberland Street affair" and the Vidil case. Both were remarkable for the mysterious circumstances and unanswered questions that surrounded them. The "Northumberland Street affair" concerned an Army major, the alleged ensnarement of his beautiful mistress by an unscrupulous moneylender and the desperate and bloody hand-to-hand fight that ensued in 16 Northumberland Street which ultimately cost the moneylender his life. The Vidil Case also had many of the elements of a sensational melodrama. It concerned the failed attempt of a French nobleman, named Vidil, living in England to kill his son in order to avoid giving him his inheritance. A number of things, however, distinguished these cases from the ordinary, garden-variety type of crime found in popular pamphlets. First of all the protagonists were real-life individuals, not literary types. This, along with the fantastic and bizarre events surrounding the crimes, caused many contemporary commentators to exclaim at the degree to which life was outdoing art. And in the "Northumberland Street affair" the mixture of treachery, violence and titillating sexual hints enthralled the public imagination. These already-present sensational elements encouraged newspaper accounts to further dramatize the cases by writing about them in the language of melodramatic and romantic fiction. The sensational aspect of the events, the newspaper's even-handed literary treatment of both real and rumored events relating to the cases, the rampant speculation in the newspapers on the guilt and innocence
of the parties involved all conspired to make the thrills and chills of contemporary fiction tame in comparison.

But more than that, what these two cases provided were literary prototypes for a new literature focusing on the dark mystery within the sacrosanct realm of the middle-class home: one has only to think of the work of Dickens, Collins, Hardy and of course Conan Doyle (especially in *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Sign of Four*) to see how deeply these sensational elements had penetrated into the Victorian literary consciousness. The Gothic novel contained many of these elements, but its locus is usually a fantastic and forbidding setting remote from the safety and comforts of the middle-class Victorian hearth. The "Northumberland Street affair" and the Vidil case helped to shift the locus of the sensational from the fantastic to the familiar. The craze for a sensationalism, the appetite for a literature full of mystery, lurid crime and eroticism which these cases whetted, also helped to make respectable what had previously been dismissed as working-class pulp: "In sensational fiction, the principal ingredients of the despised street literature, stories that sold in penny and halfpenny slices, moved up-market, so to speak, finding their way into staid households and corrupting the imaginations of susceptible readers" (Altick, *Encounters* 153). In taking "respectable" literature by storm, sensational fiction became somewhat more respectable, though Conan Doyle's own feelings of inferiority about the worth of the genre in which he made his reputation can be taken as a fairly typical indication of the limits of the respectability of this upwardly mobile genre at the end of the century. It would be a mistake, however, to see Conan Doyle's work as purely sensational. The most sensational scenes occur
in his early work, while his middle and late fiction becomes more domesticated, more ratiocinative: there is nothing, in his later work, for example, that compares with the lurid description of the murdered body of Enoch Drebber in A Study in Scarlet.

If it is true, as Mikhail Bakhtin argues, that every new genre is a synthesis of older ones, then Conan Doyle's detective fiction may be defined as a complex reworking of three genres. These are the genres of sensation, which I have already considered, and two others -- the detective genre and the adventure genre.

In late Victorian society, these genres had an essentially popular appeal. Conan Doyle's general debt to the genre of detective fiction begins with his adoption, from Poe, of the eccentric, brilliant detective hero as the protagonist and includes many others, such as his use of "backward construction" as the dominant narrative pattern, his use of the not-so brilliant narrator assistant, as well as a number of plots reminiscent of Poe. But whereas Dupin is deductive in method, employing a form of reasoning which moves from generalized propositions to particular conclusions, essentially an arm-chair detective, Holmes's usual modus operandi is inductive. Holmes's reasoning usually begins with facts and reaches conclusions by making generalizations based on them. As he counsels in "A Scandal in Bohemia": "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts" (163). Holmes, of course, reasons deductively too, but his desire to discover all the facts of the case makes him a much more physical, vigorous, dynamic detective than Dupin. And it is partly through this emphasis on Holmes's physicality, his strength and vigor, that
we can see Doyle's debt to the long tradition of adventure writing in English literature.

If we accept the definition of adventure put forward by Martin Green in *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire*, Conan Doyle's stories are adventure stories:

In general, adventure seems to mean a series of events, partly but not wholly accidental in settings remote from the domestic and probably from the civilized (at least in the psychological sense of remote), which constitute a challenge to the central character. In meeting this challenge, he/she performs a series of exploits which make him/her a hero, eminent in virtues such as courage, fortitude, cunning, strength, leadership and persistence. (23)

Significantly, Conan Doyle's first set of Sherlock Holmes stories was entitled "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" and while they usually do not take place in remote and exotic settings, his stories almost always begin in the domestic comfort of 221B Baker street and then move to more harrowing circumstances in which Holmes proves his "courage, fortitude, cunning, strength, leadership and persistence." At a formal level, the achievement of Conan Doyle's fiction can be described as a synthesis of elements of sensation, detection and adventure within a single genre. From the tradition of sensationalism he derived the emphasis on the exciting experience, whether of terror, horror, or surprise; from detective fiction, the ratiocinative element; and from the adventure tradition, the fast-paced action that characterized nearly all of Conan Doyle's detective fiction. In one sense, his fiction can be described as an effective combination of the intellectual appeal of a puzzle with the thrills and chills of a penny pamphlet.

In another sense, though, this taxonomy is misleading, for Conan Doyle did not only combine formal elements from these genres, but he also combined and reworked the ideologies these formal elements articulated. Underlying both the
novels of adventure and detection is a belief in empiricism as a means of organizing and making sense of experience. What Conan Doyle did in his fiction, and this is vital to its success, was to yoke together popular elements previously dominant in lower-class culture, and in a diluted fashion in mainstream fiction, with empiricism, which as an ideology, existed almost exclusively within the middle classes. The result of this fusion was a popularization and naturalization of empiricism. By empiricism I mean not so much the detached, quasi-objective method of interpreting phenomenon, but a way of thinking about the world, an ideology, which by definition necessarily excludes qualitative, ethical, even aesthetic considerations in favor of the abstract quantification, domination and use of resources, human or natural, in the name of progress or profit.2

This is not to say that Doyle’s fiction contains “themes” which take empiricism as their subject or that it crusades on behalf of a empirical point of view. Rather, the case I am trying to make is that the formal structure of these texts articulates an adherence to a particular ideology of empiricism, an ideology which in conjunction with a general ideology of imperialism determines the form of Conan Doyle’s detective fiction.3

Sherlockian Empiricism and the Values of Empire

Holmes is the quintessential empiricist. For him knowledge is attained by stripping phenomena of its social or emotive characteristics, reducing it to pieces in a puzzle. Of course this methodological ruthlessness, structurally identical to that of the
scientist or bourgeois economist, accounts for much of his success as a consulting detective. And while it is a definable part of the Holmes mystique, it also sets him apart as something of an eccentric, if not a freak, likable largely for his other more attractive qualities. Dr. Watson accusingly makes this point in *The Sign of Four*:

"You really are an automaton -- a calculating machine!" I cried. "There is something positively inhuman in you at times."

He smiled gently. "It is of the first importance," he said, "not to allow your judgement to be biased by personal qualities. A client is to me a mere unit - - a factor in a problem. The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning." (96)

While it is manifestly untrue that "The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning," it is typical of Holmes's character that he should think in this way. Holmes's acute empirical powers enable him to dominate the vast landscape of London, from its sordid back-alleys, hovels and opium dens to the sitting rooms of royalty. Yet Holmes, like Dupin before him, does not inquire as Marx and Freud did, into the underlying causes of things. Although Holmes is not lacking in compassion, he does display a notable lack of interest in social problems. In this respect Conan Doyle is strikingly different from almost every contemporary Victorian literary figure Carlyle, Arnold, Ruskin, Mill, Eliot, Dickens, Gaskell, the Brontes, Hardy, and others. William Stowe has remarked on this aspect of Holmes’s and Dupin’s character: "They do not, however, open themselves to questions from these clues, they do not allow the objects of their investigations to question their methods or the ideological assumptions that inform them, so they remain prisoners of method, brilliant technicians who can only go on repeating what they already do so well" (Stowe 374). This point may be put somewhat more forcefully: Holmes
does not move "away from the methodological solution of 'mysteries' toward the philosophical understanding of mystery" (Stowe 382) because he cannot perform this type of analysis. As a method, as a technique of analysis, empiricism is structurally incapable of theorizing its implantation within the socioeconomic domain, precisely because it admits only the laws of abstract logic as truly knowable entities. Because most social problems are not susceptible to resolution through the abstract logic of empiricism, these problems fall outside the purview of Holmes's expertise.

In addition, as Horkheimer and Adorno have argued in Dialectic of Enlightenment, the values of the Enlightenment are not merely an abstract form of power, but within capitalism become concrete in the quantification and subjection of human labor and natural resources to laws of profit. Although every capitalist formation is subject to its own distinctive combination of historical conditions and pressures, by definition they are geared to production for profit rather than production for use. The values of empiricism -- the emphasis on quantification and utility over qualitative considerations -- are the same values that have come to structure and regulate capitalist economies. Within capitalist societies, then, these values assume a material power in as much as individuals are compelled to conform to the distinctive, material pressures that are exerted on them. Whether critics or advocates of capitalism, Victorian intellectuals by and large recognized the tremendous energy and transformative power of this integration of enlightenment values within an economic system. Dickens saw this clearly. His public advocacy on behalf of the disenfranchised and obvious sympathy for them in his fiction are instances of this, as is the recurring imagery of systemic entropy in his later fiction-
society as a prison in *Little Dorrit*, the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House*, the
dust-heap in *Our Mutual Friend*. Indeed, Gadgrind in *Hard Times* is a caricature of
the unfeeling empiricist. Other examples include Mill’s attempt to enlarge and
reform the narrow utilitarianism which so crippled him; Carlyle’s rhapsodies against
the "cash-payment nexus"; the Bronte’s acute awareness of the subordinate position
of women in a class-ridden society; the contrast in Eliot’s fiction between an
organic rural society and the tensions of contemporary England; the displacement
and alienation of Hardy’s characters by the forces of rural capitalism. All these
indicate the wide-spread Victorian reaction against different forms of rationalized
capitalism, a reaction which, as these examples suggest, cut across class, gender and
ideological lines.

By contrast, Conan Doyle’s detective fiction is distinctive in its valorization of
empirical values and imperialism. Doyle was one of the greatest Victorian
apologists of Empire. Between 1893, the year of the publication of "The Final
Problem" and in 1902, the year of the publication of *The Hound of Baskervilles*, the
greater part of his energy was devoted to defending the interests of the British
Empire. In 1900 he went to the Boer War and enthusiastically worked as a doctor
in a field hospital at the front. After returning to England he wrote an
impressionistic history entitled *The Great Boer War*. Shortly thereafter, in response
to foreign criticism of English conduct in the war, he penned an influential defense
entitled *The War in South Africa*. Nor did his efforts end there. In 1914, at the
outbreak of World War I, with characteristic energy he quickly turned out a
patriotic pamphlet, *To Arms!*
It should be no surprise then that Conan Doyle’s fiction was shaped by these imperial values. The British Empire was the net result of the extension of the domestic relations of capitalism on an international scale, a process which, as Horkheimer and Adorno have reminded us, was justified and sustained by the abstracting, ethically-blind quantitative emphasis on Enlightenment values. Within Conan Doyle’s life and work, imperial and Enlightenment values were deeply intertwined, as suggested by his innovations in the form of detective fiction. As Martin Green has pointed out, "adventure ...is the energizing myth of empire..." (xi) and in Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire he traces the dependence of the adventure genre on the long history of English imperialism, beginning in its modern form in the seventeenth century. Conan Doyle’s work thus has a long history behind it. His particular genius was to take the tradition of adventure fiction -- a tradition which includes Shakespeare, Aphra Ben, Defoe and Scott -- and transform it into a recognizably new genre by combining it with other traditions, genres and values.

The result, however, is not a fiction which engages the issues which one might expect of a genre which draws on these rich traditions, but one which pushes to the margins almost every potentially disruptive subject imaginable -- racism, imperialism, class-conflict, even women. Yet the narrative strategies Conan Doyle uses to contain the threats these elements pose to the ideologies of Empire define the limitations of his fiction, and one might even say, his vision.⁵

Ways of Not Seeing
Except for a few scattered references to Dr. Watson’s war wound (variously located in the shoulder and leg) which he received in the Afghan war, and a few references to India in *The Sign of Four*, the enormous national pressures involved in maintaining the Empire are scarcely mentioned. Not that this is in any way obligatory, but it is demonstrative of a certain way of seeing, or more accurately a way of not seeing. In Conan Doyle’s detective fiction, once individuals are designated as cultural "others" by virtue of being foreign, from the lower classes, or simply by being women, they are not characterized at all. One such example is Tonga, Jonathan Small’s dwarfish native accomplice in *The Sign of Four* who remains a cypher throughout the novel. Typically, characterization is replaced by an assumption of inferiority. Similarly, whatever cameo roles Indians have in the Sherlock Holmes stories, they are invariably represented stereotypically, as unfathomable exotics of the East. Behind these stereotypes is the assumption that foreigners, and dark ones in particular, are not important enough to warrant the quick "snap-shot" characterization accorded to most of Conan Doyle’s other minor characters. In Conan Doyle’s fiction, political problems become decorations, part of a colorful background. The observation of class conflict, the representation of which for most Victorians constituted a necessary part of any general representation of society, becomes decorative, even quaint in Conan Doyle. Holmes’s contact with London low-life is similarly rhetorical: it is not so much represented as it is referred to. The same is true of women with the possible exception of Irene Adler in "A Scandal in Bohemia," the only woman in the world worthy of Holmes’s admiration. Holmes observes women in great detail, and yet to him, as to Freud, they are a
dark continent, as he readily admits in "The Illustrious Client": "Women's heart and mind are insoluble puzzles to the male. Murder might be condoned or explained, and yet some smaller offence might rankle" (988).

Many of these strategies of exclusion are understandable in terms of imperialism, and its related ideologies. Racism is one such ideology, and it has long served as an excuse for Western imperialism. In the nineteenth-century, when British expansionism was at its height, many took comfort in the rationalization that men of color were not fully human. This belief, so widely accepted that it often did not seem to be an opinion, had the advantage that it also functioned as a rationale for imperial domination. If countries have not achieved an advanced stage of industrialization and militarization, this signifies a backwardness, an inferiority on behalf of its people. According to this logic, it then becomes the duty of the developed nations to educate, civilize and improve these primitive peoples. In this way, exploitation appeared as enlightenment.

As arctic adventurer, Boer-war field doctor, propagandist and detective fiction writer, Conan Doyle ratified this imperial ideology of enlightenment. His adherence to it is the pre-condition, as it were, of the direction in which he took the adventure/detective-fiction genre: ever since *Robinson Crusoe*, one of the fundamental conventions of the adventure genre has been the diminished claim of affective ties on the heroic adventurer: we know more about Man Friday than we do about Crusoe's wife. Because the adventure genre stakes a claim to a type of experience completely different to the domestic novel or the novel of manners, little attention is given to social relationships -- whether of love, marriage, family, or
Eventually this emphasis hardened into a convention. Instead what is stressed is action, the overcoming of challenge and the hero's heroic virtues. Conan Doyle's incorporation of this convention, and his acceptance of an ideology which assumes the inferiority of women, are responsible for the effacement of women from his narratives.

The argument that I have been making is not that Conan Doyle's fiction fails because it isn't progressive enough; rather, it is that his fiction is constrained by his ideological outlook and the severe limitations it imposed on his fiction. Ultimately, these limitations on ways of seeing translate into severe formal limitations: if any English novelist in the 1880s and 1890s found it necessary to exclude the aspirations of women, relations between sexes, tension between classes, the experience of imperialism, and only focused on the exotic crimes that beset a narrow section of the professional middle class, then obviously there would be whole areas of social experience he is incapable of re-presenting and evaluating.

Conan Doyle's work thus stands as one of the most extreme examples of the narrowed social vision of English writers in the late Victorian period, which as Raymond Williams has argued, is attributable to the increasing cultural divide between this immensely strong and sophisticated bourgeois order and working-class culture.7

It would be wrong, however, to leave the impression that Conan Doyle's achievement is purely negative. If Conan Doyle possessed an extremely narrow social vision, it is also true that his fiction succeeded in bridging the gap between
dominant (bourgeois) and subaltern (lower-middle and working class) cultures by bringing together in a single genre traditions which had previously been separate: although adventure and sensational literature was often read across class lines, this was not as true of detective fiction, as the example of Poe illustrates. Ultimately Conan Doyle was not able to legitimize detective fiction as "serious": he could give it a new popularity, but he could not give it full literary respectability. Conan Doyle's hybrid genre was enormously successful in another respect however. Through the figure of Sherlock Holmes, and through the empirical values he championed, Conan Doyle's fiction ratified the principles and ideologies of an imperial, patriarchal Britain. The conventions of sensation and adventure which Conan Doyle incorporated into his fiction enlivened and dramatized what would otherwise be static tales of ratiocination in the tradition of Poe. While they give the stories excitement and suspense, these conventions are subordinated finally to the logical exigencies and the need for resolution typical of the detective story genre. The strategy in Conan Doyle's detective fiction of marginalizing subjects capable of calling into question the narrow empirical ideology by which Holmes lives, of refusing to question the nature of his method and the causes of crime, and of avoiding any overt consideration of social questions, regulates his vision, his characterization of women and non-Europeans (or lack thereof), the social base of his fiction, and finally defines the need for a vigorous and rich realistic style capable of off-setting these other deficiencies. In short, to an extent unusual in modern fiction, this radically conservative vision, and the narrative absences that result from it, determine almost every formal aspect of Conan Doyle's fiction.
Popularizing the Empire

Conan Doyle's detective fiction does not simply reflect a pre-formed, given, monolithic middle-class ideology. Instead, his reworking of an ideology of empiricism in a popular form helped produce a comforting and reassuring image of society untroubled by sexual, economic, or social pressures. This image of late Victorian society is itself ideological, and ultimately functions in order to produce consent to the existing socio-economic order. Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist and cultural theoretician, has argued that the production of consent among those governed in Western democracies is the most crucial element in maintaining and reproducing existing social relations. For Gramsci, the reproduction of social relations in capitalist society consists less in domination by force than in the struggle for what he terms hegemony -- the struggle by different classes, blocs and groups for moral, cultural and ultimately political leadership over society. Hegemony, in other words, for Gramsci is not achieved in democracies by a mailed fist; instead it is acquired by getting the various groups and classes of society, especially the subordinate classes, to consent to the rule of the dominant classes. Within this theory of hegemony, popular culture is of the utmost importance inasmuch as it becomes the locus for the acceptance, rejection, resistance, incorporation, or "hybridization" of dominant values, beliefs, feelings, and ways of seeing. To paraphrase Tony Bennett, popular culture is neither the site of a people's deformation (this was the emphasis of the Frankfurt School and some varieties of
structural Marxism) nor of their own self-making (the culturalist emphasis of E.P. Thompson and others) but a field shaped by these conflicting pressures (Popular Culture, xiii).

Conan Doyle's work is best understood in the light of this tension between human agency and ideological determination. His relations to the hegemonic values of late Victorian England were complex; his detective fiction, however, did not simply affirm these values, but as a great popularizer of empiricism, it helped to produce them. His fiction, that is, helped to define the kinds of beliefs to which a reasonable, educated Victorian or Edwardian gentleman might subscribe. Through Sherlock Holmes the image of science as cold, abstract and impersonal changed, was given a human face. Conan Doyle showed that the scientific method could be interesting to the layman. He did not work this shift in perception single-handedly -- Victorian science-fiction also contributed to this change in perception -- but his valorization of the efficacy of the scientific method was influential precisely because it was transmitted through a popular form.

Before concluding, I would like to return to Foucault's dictum "that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations" (Discipline 27). The values and methodologies of the Enlightenment provided the indispensable conceptual and material conditions for the organization of capitalism and later, the British Empire; that knowledge created that form of power. Sherlock Holmes's knowledge, his ability to unravel the most intractable puzzles gives him the power to penetrate the mysteries of London. The same form of knowledge that
ultimately produced the Empire also produced the figure of the empirical detective hero, Sherlock Holmes. The same form of knowledge that ultimately produced the Empire also produced the figure of the empirical detective hero, Sherlock Holmes. Within the economy of power in late Victorian England, the Sherlock Holmes myth produces consent to this economy by simplification and omission, the processes that perform the naturalizing function of myth, as Roland Barthes has observed in *Mythologies*:

> In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (143)

This is the world of Sherlock Holmes -- a world in which crime is intriguing, individual, and eminently soluble and not an ugly social problem; a world in which urban squalor makes a quaint contrast to the elegance of London hansom cabs and gas street-lamps; a world undisturbed by conflict, whether sexual or social. The myth of Sherlock Holmes is, therefore, a myth of England as well.

The myth continues to live on in books, films and games. Recently I came across a large, illustrated omnibus edition of Conan Doyle's detective stories. It was a maroon, cloth-bound edition with gilded pages and a spine with raised horizontal lines -- a poor imitation of the handsome Victorian novel. Yet it is remarkable that one hundred years after Sherlock Holmes first made his appearance in *Beetons's Christmas Annual* that Conan Doyle's work still sells in popular editions published for the Christmas trade. The publishers of this particular edition were willing to mar
this imperfect impression of antiquity by including a foreword by Donald Friedman, warning the twentieth-century reader of Holmes's prejudices:

Our late nineteenth-century cavalier is not without his faults: the modern reader must ignore the sometimes jarring racism, distrust of foreigners, and condescension toward women with which Conan Doyle peppers his stories. If he does so, the reader will find himself engrossed in a fictional world most satisfying to enter. (Conan Doyle, Illustrated Sherlock Holmes viii)

The myth lives on, in more ways than one. The point is, Conan Doyle's work doesn't deserve to be disparaged or ignored. It deserves instead to be understood -- in all its complexity and for all of its limitations.
Chapter 2
The Adventurous Detective: Conan Doyle and Imperialism

1. For a more complete account of the origin of crime fiction, see Stephen Knight's Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction esp. Chapter One, "... some men come up"--the Detective appears.

2. This formulation of the ideological structure of reason draws on the work of Horkheimer and Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment, and the essay "The End of Reason" by Max Horkheimer in The Essential Frankfurt School Reader.

3. For more on the way in which the form literary text articulates and produces an ideology, or ideologies which may not be explicitly articulated, see Terry Eagleton's Criticism and Ideology esp. Chapters Two, "Categories for a Materialist Criticism" and Three, "Towards a Science of the Text."

4. Paul M. Sweezy in The Theory of Capitalist Development offers a succinct definition of this complex social and economic phenomenon: "Imperialism may be defined as a stage in the development of the world economy in which (a) several advanced capitalist countries stand on a competitive footing with respect to the world market for industrial products; (b) monopoly form of capital is the dominant form of capital; and (c) the contradictions of the accumulation process have reached such maturity that capital export is an outstanding feature of world economic relations. As a consequence of these basic economic conditions, we have two further characteristics: (d) severe rivalry in the world market leading to cutthroat competition and internal market combines; and (e) the territorial division of 'unoccupied' parts of the world among the major capitalist powers (and their satellites)." (307).

5. The argument that I am misreading Conan Doyle by projecting into the past purely contemporary concerns can, I think, be summarily dealt with. Many Victorians, both men and women, took as their subject precisely these issues. The Brontes, Eliot, Mill and later, James were deeply concerned about the plight of women. Hardy and Dickens, to mention only two among many, took the inequalities of class society as the subject of their fiction. H. G. Wells's War of the Worlds is an allegory of imperialism; and if few English novelists directly addressed racism, prejudice is an ubiquitous theme in Victorian literature.

6. I am indebted to Stephen Knight for this point. See Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction, esp. 83.

7. In Politics and Letters Williams advances the following thesis: "Now in the same period [in the last two decades of the nineteenth century], there had also been a very deep and successful reorganization of bourgeois cultural and educational institutions: the creation of the new public schools, the renovation of Oxford and Cambridge, the development of a fully extended bourgeois press, the modernization of publishing. Together with these changes went an increasing centralization in London, which now functioned much more as an imperial cultural capital. The result
was an integrated and confident set of bourgeois cultural institutions such as had never existed in any previous period of English history. The social basis of the writers themselves had a much more limited experience. The characteristic change is from a George Eliot to a Forster. Now Forster proclaims the same aims as George Eliot, but there are areas of social experience to which he is no longer open (263).

8. For more on the importance of popular culture in the maintenance of social relations, see Antonio Gramsci’s *Selections from Cultural Writings*. 
Section II
Empire and Espionage: The Great Game Begins
Chapter 3
The Heroic Spy Novel:
Kim and the Rhetoric of the Great Game

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudice and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

-- Karl Marx, Manifesto of the Communist Party

The Dominant Viewpoint

Many critics on both the left and right have observed that Kim is an imperialist novel. This almost self-evident proposition scarcely seems likely to provoke much argument. Yet it is interesting to note that any uncritical acceptance of this proposition obscures a somewhat less evident point, that Kim is not in any obvious way "about" the Indian experience of colonialism and indeed successfully occludes this traumatic national experience from the novel. My argument is that as a formal and ideological "structure of experience," Kim is founded on this contradiction -- an imperialist novel which at the same time denies the Indian experience of colonialism. This contradiction is common to many English colonial novels, but what is distinctive about Kim, as we shall see, is the way in which this exclusion

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functions as part of the rationale of Empire which, since Kipling, has become one major tradition in espionage fiction, the tradition of the heroic spy novel.

If it is allowed that Kim is founded on this contradiction, then it may fairly be taken as the most typical of the Englishman-in-India novels in that it embodies a way of seeing India which derives from what Edward Said calls "the dominating viewpoint" (Introduction 10) of a nation which, with few exceptions, regarded English rule as natural, beneficial, even ordained. What I want to suggest is that this way of seeing, this tacit acceptance of English supremacy and Eastern inferiority, profoundly affects the formal composition of the novel. Kim is a historical novel in the narrow sense that it embodies an ideology of ascendancy typical of English imperialism, but is a-historical in the sense that Kipling's acceptance of this attitude in relation to India tends to transform his select observations of Indian life into timeless, universal truths. The result of Kipling's adherence to this attitude was that he was unable to grasp the enormous changes in India produced by the imposition of colonial rule. In Kim, Kipling lovingly recreates an image of India populated by artisans, an India structured and regulated by ancient customs and traditions. Yet this India had already been radically transformed by the English "reformations" which eventually led to the India Mutiny of 1857. These "reformations" dispossessed or altered nearly every class: the new system of higher education based on the English model dispossessed the old religious elite; the egalitarian emphasis of the judicial system insulted the honor of the highest castes; the new economic system of free trade turned blacksmiths, weavers, shoe-makers, and other urban artisans into beggars; and the wholesale imposition of capitalist
agrarian methods onto rural India, with the new profit-oriented disposition of land by individual ownership, fixed money rents, and the unrestricted sale of "encumbered estates," collectively destroyed the centuries-old pattern of rural life (Porter, Imperialism 32-33).

It is ironic that Kipling -- a writer renown for his keen eye and genuine appreciation for artisanal labor -- sees none of this. Indeed, Kim is distinctive in that feelings of social displacement, dispossession, or even mere disaffection, are entirely absent. And yet, Kipling's failure to grasp the consequences of the imperial ideology he publicly championed is not merely a local irony, detachable from history at large. Rather, this paradox is part of the paradox of imperialism in general. Historically speaking, English pre-eminence in the imperial arena began to wane in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and largely as a result, the major European nations engaged in an intense national competition for raw materials, cheap labor, for new markets, "new" territories, "new" countries. In South Africa this competition led to the Boer war; similar conflicts would culminate some years later in the Great War. For literary analysis, however, these common historical facts are less important than the ideologies which grew out of this phase of imperial domination, and supported it. To Kipling, as to most Victorians and Edwardians, imperialism did not signify disruption, exploitation, or subjugation but economic development and moral enlightenment. The paradox of imperial ideologies is that they do not appear to be motivated by any but the highest moral values. Imperialism was not so much a narrow political subject discussed in Whitehall as an accepted way of life, a culture which permeated the aesthetic, moral, and social life
of the nation. In *Propaganda and Empire* John Mackenzie has reminded us that in Victorian England it was virtually impossible to buy a bar of soap or tin of biscuits without being reminded of the glories of the British Empire. Picture postcards, cigarette cards, boy’s journals, music-hall entertainment (especially of the upper- and middle-class variety) commercial advertisements, sheet music, the cinema, novels, textbooks, as well as the self-named "imperial propaganda societies" all exalted the benefits and romance of the Empire.\(^1\) With the popularization of board games and jigsaw puzzles, the Great Game of the Empire -- the term used in British society to refer to the imperial experience and the intrigue that sustained it -- quite literally became a game, but unlike the Great Game of espionage, these were played within the safe confines of the middle-class Victorian household.

The spy thriller or the espionage novel emerged out of this culture of imperialism, for the general subject of all modern thrillers, then as now, is the threat posed to a nation by a foreign power or conspiracy, whether external or internal. The modern spy novel, that is, takes imperialism, with its attendant systems of domination and political intrigue, as its necessary precondition. *Kim* is part of a body of literature which responded to the fear of a foreign conspiracy against Great Britain, a fear which was especially prevalent in the years leading up to the Great War. In *The Spy Story* Cawelti and Rosenberg note that "In Britain, in addition to the growing fear of anarchism and later violence, an increasing anxiety about foreign invasion paved the way for the growing popularity of the espionage adventure" (Cawelti and Rosenberg 38). One historical response to this anxiety was an extension and refinement of the techniques of surveillance between 1900 and
1915 on the domestic population and on external enemies, real or perceived.² To a considerable extent, then, the Great Game of imperialism turned, and still turns, on surveillance, the covert search for knowledge which allows one group or nation to preserve or thwart the designs of another group or nation. In early espionage novels, the Great Game, the name for the covert activities performed while in the secret service, is an important element in the game of imperialism. The dramatic suspense and interest of these novels derives largely from the predicament of the protagonist who typically is responsible for the destiny of a group or nation by searching for the knowledge which will allow him to protect the interests of the collective which he represents. Within the espionage novel, knowledge as power takes on a new level of meaning, for in this genre knowledge determines the fate of nations. There is an obvious continuity here from the conventions of detective fiction, where detection, the search for knowledge, plays such a decisive role. But the difference between detective fiction and espionage fiction is that in the latter, the detective function takes on, to adopt Georg Lukács’s phrase, a "world-historical" significance: it is no longer the fate of individuals that are at risk, but in the case of England, and English literature, the fate of a proud imperial nation; indeed, in many cases, what is at stake is the course of history itself.

In its valorization of the life of action, exotic settings, and the heroic individual - as well as in its denigration of domesticity, lack of interest in women, and in its rejection of the conventions of the psychological novel -- it is possible, then, to see the continuation of the masculinist adventure tradition in espionage fiction. In this sense, espionage fiction is a hybrid of adventure and detective fiction, transformed
by the imperatives of an imperial age already in decay. In the remainder of this section, I will examine these ideological imperatives as they are contained within the rhetoric of the Great Game in two texts crucial to the development of the spy thriller, *Kim* and *The Secret Agent*. My general aim is to see how this rhetoric produces two different views on the Victorian culture of imperialism, and formally speaking, two very different novels. I selected these novels to illustrate the two main paths that secret agent adventure has taken in this century. Thus *Kim* may be taken as the precursor to the romantic and heroic tradition of Buchanan, Oppenheim and Fleming and *The Secret Agent* may likewise be taken as emblematic of the critical or ironic tradition of Maugham, Greene, Ambler and Le Carré.

**The Style of Empire**

*Kim* is an espionage novel in the form of a bildungsroman. Briefly, the story concerns the fate of Kimball O'Hara, a young street boy in India orphaned by the death of his father, a former color sergeant in an Irish regiment. As Kim's mother died giving birth, he is brought up by a half-caste Indian woman. Although European, Kim's sunburnt complexion and facility with languages allows him to pass for a native. Kim lives by his wits and is never daunted by circumstance. One day a Tibetan lama comes to Lahore in search of the holy river of the Arrow that will cleanse him of all sin. Struck by the possibility of travel and adventure, Kim takes up with the lama and becomes his "chela" or disciple. The lama and Kim set about their search. On the road Kim meets an old friend, Mahbub Ali, a horse
trader who is also a member of the British Secret Service. Kim delivers a coded message for him to a British officer in Umballa. The message indicates that thousands of troops are to be sent to the North to put down an uprising. Shortly thereafter, Kim and the lama stumble upon Kim's father's regiment. They discover his identity and plan to send him away to school. Kim is separated from the lama, who nevertheless, manages to pay for Kim's education at St Xavier's, a Catholic school in Lucknow. But before he leaves for Lucknow, Mahbub Ali draws the attention of Colonel Creighton, the director of the British Secret Service, to Kim's many talents. Impressed by him, Colonel Creighton hints that he might eventually become a valuable member of the secret service. From this time onwards, Kim leads a double life as a student: during his school holidays, he leads the life of a junior secret agent and chela to the lama. During his travels with the lama he meets many people on the road and involves himself in many intrigues. Much of the color and variety of India, for which Kim is famous, is depicted in the course of these exploits. Yet Kim’s acceptance of the role of chela to the lama is not just a cover for his espionage activities, although it clearly has that purpose as well. What is interesting about the novel is that Kim really is devoted to the lama and his quest. To him, there is no contradiction between being a spy and a spiritual disciple. For Kipling espionage in the service of Empire and the quest for spiritual harmony are complimentary activities: at the end of the novel, the lama discovers the purifying holy River of the Arrow and Kim, through his activities, discovers his identity and earns for himself a role in the preservation of the Empire as a member of the British Secret Service.
Throughout the novel Kim thinks of the business of espionage as a game. This is not simply an instance of naivete or boyish ignorance. Kim quickly apprehends the dangers the game poses as well as the geopolitical stakes involved. But the association of espionage with games in Kim extends beyond the novel and is indicative of an immensely influential way of thinking about the British Service in India which was wide-spread in Britain, indeed actively propagated in Victorian and Edwardian schools. In *Athleticism and the Victorian and Edwardian Public School* J.A. Mangan attributes the British belief in their colonial mission largely to the ideology of athleticism in public schools:

> It was the new imperialism of late Victorian Britain which produced the precarious fusion of Christian gentility and social Darwinism. Three sets of values became enmeshed: imperial Darwinism -- the God-granted right of the white man to rule, civilise and baptise the inferior colored races; institutional Darwinism -- the cultivation of physical and psychological stamina at school in preparation for the rigours of imperial duty; the gentleman’s education -- the nurture of leadership qualities for military conquest abroad and political dominance at home. In this amalgam Christianity came out second best. (Mangan 136)

The practice of habitually thinking of the domination and exploitation of inferior races as a game effectively displaces questions of ethics and legitimacy to the realm of sportsmanship. At the same time, the habit of thinking of colonialism as a game offered the dominant country the consolation that there were rules that were being followed, that an ethic of sorts was being observed, and that the contemporary colonial situation was the result of fair play. Thus, the public sport world was explicitly connected to the ruling and maintaining of Empire in a self-congratulatory and moralistic fashion.3
As a literary reworking of the experience of Empire, Kim articulates with great verve its own version of these imperial beliefs. Nowhere in the novel is the British right to rule India challenged. On the contrary, Kipling creates a number of minor Indian characters whose specific function is to ratify the legitimacy of English rule. Kipling was not unique in this respect; most Victorian intellectuals either actively supported British imperialism or silently acquiesced to it. But this attitude of complicity does define a novelistic point-of-view which has formal consequences. Again, this can be clearly seen in the style of the novel. In the following passage, Kim muses to himself before falling asleep about his past and future as a participant in the Great Game:

Well is the Game called great! I was four days a scullion at Quetta, waiting on the wife of the man whose book I stole. And that was part of the Great Game! From the South -- God knows how far -- came up the Mahratta, playing the Great Game in fear of his life. Now I shall go far and far into the North playing the Great Game. Truly, it runs like a shuttle throughout all Hind. And my share and my joy' -- he smiled to the darkness -- 'I owe to the lama here. Also to Mahbub Ali -- also to Creighton Sahib, but chiefly to the Holy One. He is right -- a great and wonderful world -- and I am Kim -- Kim -- Kim -- alone -- one person in the middle of it all. (Kipling 273)

In this passage, Kipling makes use of the language of worship to emphasize the characteristics the Great Game has enabled Kim to develop -- spirituality, maturity, and identity. Rhetorically speaking, the passage's hesitancies, exclamations, and parenthetical statements exemplify Kipling's facility for recreating a sense of the rhythms of natural speech; at the same time, the piling up of these coordinate clauses suggests a sense of beneficence, of blessing added to blessing. This is appropriate, as the function of the passage within the novel is to glorify a world of almost limitless possibility, a world to which the lama and Colonel Creighton have
given Kim access. This passage is an affirmation of self, of Kim’s newly discovered identity and place within the world. But it is also a radical affirmation of the lama’s conservative, not to say, innocent world-view. Two modes of perception are linked here: while Kim attains this new sense of self, of identity, he also arrives at a beatific vision of India, spiritually defined by the values of the lama and politically defined by the necessity of espionage as a way of keeping India within the British Empire.

But the passage also underscores how Kipling’s "dominating viewpoint" affects the novel’s style. The imposition of a poeticism such as "it [the Great Game] runs throughout all Hind" is clearly authorial, and is unlikely to occur to a sleepy boy, even one as resourceful as Kim: Kim’s discourse, that is, is overridden by Kipling’s. This is not particularly egregious, but in a small way it is indicative of a larger pattern of exclusion in Kim. For all of its apparent breadth and appreciation of the variety of Indian races, customs, castes, cultures and languages, the novel neutralizes whatever oppositional elements exist within them. In a similar vein, Edward Said has noticed how Kipling’s emotional and ideological investment in the values of Empire, at the level of character, translates into a principle of selection. Speaking of the Great Mutiny of 1857, Said notes that Kipling chose an old, loyalist Indian soldier as his spokesman:

Moreover, when Kipling has the old soldier describe the British counter-revolt -- with all its horrendous reprisals by white men bent on ‘moral’ action -- as calling the Indian mutineers ‘to most strict account,’ we have left the world of history and entered the world of imperialist polemic, in which the native is naturally delinquent, the white man the stern but moral parent and judge. The point about this brief episode is not that it gives us the extreme British view on the Mutiny, but that Kipling puts it in the mouth of an Indian whose much more likely nationalist counterpart is never seen in the novel at all. (Introduction 26)
In this sense, Kipling seeks to minimalize the polyphonic structure of *Kim*: it offers no vantage point from which the reader can evaluate competing points of view, no belief system which calls into question the values and rationales that inform the novel's imperial vision of India. The multiplicities of voices and languages within the novel are in this sense deceptive, for they do not so much signify an abundance of different beliefs, points of view or ideologies as reveal the extent to which Kipling's imperialistic vision excludes them. Or alternately, Kipling uses them to suggest that the different cultures of India find stability and unity in their status as parts of the Empire.

Contrary to the popular perception of the novel, *Kim* does not show us the clash of cultures within India, much less the clash between East and West. What Kipling offers instead is an almost completely harmonized vision of Indian society and one radically removed from historical actuality. While this vision produces an unity of tone -- a feeling of buoyancy, of possibility, of expansiveness, a sense that for Kim, anyway, the world is not capricious but benevolent -- by virtue of its intensity and narrowness, this vision is incapable of entering into other ways of thinking, other ways of seeing. It would be unfair to say that the style of *Kim* is mere reportage, but it does share some of that genre's conventions: a detached and omniscient observer; a seemingly neutral stance toward "political" matters; a reliance on a "realistic" mode of representation; an attraction for "local color," and the avoidance of narrative devices which call attention to the process of composition. In short, Kipling's dominating point of view means that there is little dialogic interaction between what Henry James referred to as different "centers of consciousness":
because there is only one authorially ratified center of consciousness, there is only one style. There is, that is to say, no interaction between different styles such that they call into question the ideological presuppositions of the dominant, pseudo-objective, descriptive style of the novel. Despite the Indian words and phrases incorporated into the novel, there is little attempt to grasp the cultures that those languages articulate, beyond the relatively superficial, quasi-cinematic appeal they hold as markers of the legendary variety of India. To a great extent, then, the homogeneous, descriptive style of *Kim* derives from the detached stance of the colonial observer.

**An Image of a Society**

As George Orwell noted in his celebrated essay on Kipling, Kipling was not a fascist but a "prophet of imperialism in its expansionist phase" (Orwell 118). Kipling despised progressivism, pacifism, socialism, trade-unions, democracy and all manner of liberal and left-wing politics, which he lumped together under the unfavorable epithet of "howling syndicalism" (Wilson 232). But he was also hostile to the "traditional, elitist country-house world" (Wilson 232). To Kipling, the aristocracy was an effete formation which, through sheer ineptitude, had allowed the narrow-minded middle class to get the upper hand, thereby opening the way to the disintegration of the country into class hatred and apathy (Wilson 150). Kipling believed that Britain could create a Pax Anglo-Saxonica which would be the basis for social regeneration and re-vitalization (Wilson 241). In his biography, *The
Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling. Angus Wilson argues that Kipling's ideal society is one "organised along army lines, a classless society like a boy-scout jamboree" (Wilson 243), and sees his affinity for hierarchies as a crucial element in his work. It is true that in Kim Kipling's affinity for hierarchies can be seen in his depiction of the British Secret Service as a more dangerous, but also more gratifying, version of the Boy Scouts. There is, however, nothing classless about the Army, the Boy Scouts, or for that matter, the British Secret Service. On the contrary, all of these organizations are essentially hierarchical, organized around a well-defined chain of command, and functioning on the basis of rank. And in the Army, especially in Kipling's time, officer's ranks were largely filled by members of the middle- and upper-middle classes.

The image of society that emerges from his work as a whole is not a classless one, but one specifically structured on class or caste. Within this hierarchically organized society, each individual has an identity, but also a role, and a function in the reproduction of the social order. The image of the ideal society that emerges in Kim is the result of this paternalistic, quasi-feudal imperial ideology. The careful description of different castes, the attention to different manners, the scrupulous detail given to religious differences and the elimination of any internal social conflict from the novel, all testify to Kipling's identification with this outlook. To Kipling, India caste system represents the embodiment of his feudal ideal. Kipling delights in the cultural differences that stratify Indian society and give it an order imperceptible to most Westerners:

They [the lama and Kim] met a troop of long-haired, strong-scented Sansis with baskets of lizards other unclean food on their backs, their lean dogs sniffing at their heels. These people kept their own side of the road, moving
at a quick, furtive jog-trot, and all other castes gave them ample room; for
the Sansi is deep pollution. Behind them, walking wide and stiffly across the
strong shadows, the memory of his leg-irons still on him, strode one newly
released from the jail; his full stomach and shiny skin to prove that the
Government fed its prisoners better than most honest men could feed
themselves. Kim knew that walk well, and made broad jest of it as they
passed. Then an Akali, a wild-eyed, wild-haired Sikh devotee in the blue-
checked clothes of his faith, with polished steel quoits glistening on the cone
of his tall blue turban, stalked past, returning from a visit to one of the
independent Sikh states, where he had been singing the ancient glories of the
khalsa to college-trained princelings in top boots and white-cord breeches.
Kim was careful not to irritate that man; for the Akali’s temper is short and
his arm quick. (109)

Kim, clearly, asserts that the many peoples within India exist within a delicate,
intricate balance with one another. But this order is not, for Kipling, organic. It
must be achieved. The hierarchy must be managed; most of all, it must have duty-
minded, moral administrators dedicated to the maintenance of order and vigilant
against outside threats.

For Kipling, significantly, social order and social justice are possible if the rules
of the Great Game are observed. As "legitimate" rulers, the British establish the
rules and enjoy the authority their privileged position affords; this is even true of
the sahib boy, Kim. Within the imperial ideology of imperialism, as benevolent
rulers at the top of the social scale, the British ensure an orderly systematic mode
of government. Below them the complex caste system obtains. Historically, these
two tiers co-existed in varying degrees of tension, and sometimes outright conflict.
But the paternalistic ideology of the novel does not permit the representation of any
widespread popular conflict, for this would call into question the legitimacy of
English rule, which forms the unspoken premise of the novel. The only dissent
alluded to in Kim is the conspiracy hatched by the traitorous kings in the northern
part of the country, and their action, significantly, appears not to have been motivated by ideological reasons, but by reasons of greed.

In the interests of maintaining the Empire, surveillance is of course required, but in *Kim* it is applied to the threat of a foreign, or foreign-inspired conspiracy; within the ideology of the novel, the possibility of any internal, popular uprising seems remote. Kim himself undertakes various kinds of surveillance early on in the novel and quickly grasps the power of this knowledge. Two relatively minor moments in the narrative are illustrative. In the first instance, Kim saves the life of Mahbub Ali by eavesdropping on the conversation of his would-be assassins. The second example occurs shortly afterwards. Kim’s first act of commissioned espionage, we recall, was to transmit a secret message to a British officer in Umballa with the result that thousands of troops were moved to the north to put down the uprising -- a bit of knowledge that Kim later uses to good effect when attempting to convince the soldiers in the Maverick regiment that he possesses prophetic powers. But even before his formal education at St Xavier’s, Kim demonstrates his knowledge of the rules of the Great Game. As he says to Colonel Creighton: "It is not good to sell knowledge for nothing" (*Kim* 167).

But the supreme example of the power of knowledge in the novel is embodied in the figure of Colonel Creighton. Creighton’s encyclopedic grasp of the intricacies of Indian society, and his appreciation of the uniqueness and diversity of Indian culture, are rooted in the recognition that knowledge of India is paramount in controlling India. "There is," he says to Kim, "no sin so great as ignorance" (*Kim* 167). Creighton also exemplifies Kipling’s profound respect for ordinary men of
action, those unrecognized individuals responsible for the construction, maintenance, administration and protection of the Empire. Creighton, like Kipling, appreciates craftsmanship and devotion to work and its traditions: to both, work signifies discipline, and more particularly, submission to the class or caste limitations it imposes on the individual. For Kipling labor is never alienating. It is always projected as the fulfillment of the individual.

Kipling sees types of work with great discrimination, but he does not see the systematic appropriation of that labor or the economic and political system that enables it, as for example, Conrad does. Despite his fascination for machinery and technology, Kipling possessed an idealistic, essentially artisanal conception of the social relations of labor, and it is significant that the social formation founded on this mode of production was feudalism. Just as the juridico-legal basis of feudalism was defined by the authority of the sovereign will, similarly in Kipling’s work, so is the observance of what in the *Jungle Book* is called "the Law" sovereign. For Kipling the ideal society is the projection of "the Law" in social terms. In this respect, it imitates the law of the natural order and, given its implicit affirmation of social Darwinism, it is almost inevitable that he should see the structure of society idealistically, as a copy of the natural order in which hierarchies of power are determined by the survival of the fittest.
Morality and the Great Game

One result of this way of seeing is that there is no sense of history as process in Kipling's work. Consequently, the dominant image of society in *Kim* has a timeless quality to it. Clearly, for Kipling, it is eternal, representing an order mandated by nature and, for all of its complexity, existing in a timeless dimension, divorced from change, from continuity, ultimately from history. Ultimately, this is the price exacted for Kipling's dependence on a monologic style: unwilling to create a novel which will re-present the contestation of cultures in all their stylistic and ideological specificity, *Kim* is necessarily a romantic, de-historicized version of India rather than being the empathetic and unbiased novel of Indian life that it is so often taken to be.

Another indication of this monologic, romantic style is the discrepancy in the novel between physical and linguistic specificity: while Indians are scrupulously distinguished in terms of their appearance, they are scarcely ever distinguished linguistically -- that is, they are not, as a rule, given the same linguistic individuality that Europeans in the novel have. By and large, they do not speak with the authority of the European characters; instead, they are spoken for. This, too, is the inevitable result of the position of the colonial observer that Kipling assumes throughout the novel.

Kipling's political vision is ultimately identified with moral sense. Since for him the social order is fated, power too is ordained: since the social order is moral it cannot corrupt. For Kipling power is not intrinsically corrupting, but a discipline
which cultivates the virtues. Power is ennobling. Creighton is political, but within Kipling's moral universe, he is also eminently moral. The same can be said of Kim. In the last chapter, both Kim and the lama experience an epiphaniac moment of self-realization. At first glance Kim's seems to be a renewed awareness of the world and a keener sense of his place within it, while the lama's seems to be a metaphysical apprehension of a dimension beyond "the illusion of Time and Space and of Things" (337). Yet the two apprehensions are essentially complimentary, not contradictory modes of understanding. For the lama his epiphany gives him an understanding of his quest; for Kim, his gives him insight into his quest too -- his initiation into the arcane world of espionage. But most importantly, both epiphanies affirm the existing order of things. As the lama exclaims to Kim at the end of the novel:

Son of my Soul, I have wrenched my Soul back from the Threshold of Freedom to free thee from all sin -- as I am free, and sinless! Just is the Wheel! Certain is our deliverance! Come! He crossed his hands on his lap and smiled, as a man may who has won salvation for himself and his beloved. (338)

Odd as this ending may seem for a novel which helped to define the emergent spy-thriller genre, in another sense it is not odd at all, for it provides a morality for the politics of the romantic, heroic tradition of spy-thrillers, a morality which continues to assert the necessity for covert, essentially undemocratic activities in the name of state security, a morality which in various ways is now used to sustain the politics of one tradition of spy-thrillers, and one version of democracy.
Chapter 3
The Heroic Spy Thriller:
Kim and the Rhetoric of the Great Game

1. For more on the differences between working-class culture and middle-class culture in Victorian England, see Gareth Stedman Jones’s essay "Working-class culture and working-class politics in London, 1870-1890: Notes on the remaking of a working class" in Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982.

2. See Michael Denning’s Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller, esp. Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of the effects of this spy fever on Edwardian spy fiction.

3. I am indebted to Robin Roberts for shaping my thinking on this point.
Chapter 4
The Ironic Espionage Novel:
Anarchy, Irony and Empire in The Secret Agent

Destabilizing the Rhetoric of the Great Game

If Kipling’s rhetoric of the Great Game in Kim sustains a morality justifying colonial rule, no such morality is possible in The Secret Agent (1907). The Secret Agent reworks Conrad’s fascination with the human consequences of imperial conquest present in his earlier work, but here it receives a new emphasis: if in The Heart of Darkness Conrad lays bare the moral corruption attendant upon the European depredations in the Congo and, in Nostromo shows that the extension of this corruption throughout the fictional country of Costaguana, The Secret Agent shows that the heart of darkness is no longer located in the undeveloped countries peripheral to Europe but in London, the administrative center of the Empire. In The Secret Agent it is impossible to find a phrase like "Well is the Game called great" (Kim 273): the Great Game of espionage in the service of Empire still exists, but it is, plainly, no longer great. Conrad shows no faith in the morality which can sustained Kipling’s valorization of the game. There is no adventuring on behalf of a great and glorious Empire, but instead only the grim and morally bankrupt business of bureaucratic infighting or pseudo-revolutionary wrangling, both of which promote only individual interests within the sordid and diminished world of London.

In this respect, The Secret Agent is the antithesis of Kim, for in it Conrad deconstructs the self-serving rhetoric of the Great Game in which, as one historian has put it, "the middle classes were able to dress economic benefits in idealistic
garb, substituting moral crusade for mercenary motive, romance and adventure for political and military aggression" (Mackenzie 258). In The Secret Agent, irony is the dominant mode employed to destabilize this self-aggrandizing imperial rhetoric. Conrad alludes to this function of irony in the novel in the preface: "Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity" (41). One object of Conrad’s irony is the politics of administration, the function of which is to ensure the maintenance of the status quo in what Conrad presciently sees as a decaying imperial society. But administration in this sense extends beyond managing the ordinary day-to-day bureaucracies that keep civil society going; it also includes the sordid business of gathering intelligence on subversive groups or individuals, or groups or individuals suspected of subversion. Interestingly, these two forms of administration interlock, forming one process. Although there is not a separate bureaucracy for surveillance and counter-espionage in The Secret Agent, as there often is in subsequent spy fiction, this emphasis on the necessity of surveillance against foreign-inspired intrigue has since become a convention of the genre. Conrad, however, uses it to make the point that these are not two separate processes but one, and one on which the stability and security of a smoothly running civil society depends.
The Game of Pacification

For Conrad the game does not mean extending or preserving the Empire, but the much humbler aim of pacifying the middle classes. Now played within the mother country itself, the game is anything but great; it is dirty, exploitative, and petty, a power struggle in which no single group can lay claim to moral ascendancy or contribute to a more enlightened social order. For Kipling, one plays the game of espionage by assuming an identity or disguise which later is shed. For Conrad there is no possibility of this effortless change of identities. For Conrad, being locked in the game of everyday surveillance, in which there are no winners or losers, defines existence in an age of fading imperial splendor. Sir Ethelred, the Secretary of State, the man who wants "no details but lucidity" is emblematic of the morally neutral, self-aggrandizing bureaucrat. Yet he, along with the seamy world of revolutionary London, is ruthlessly caricatured. Conrad's sweeping condemnation of anarchism in the preface as a "brazen cheat" (39), is in fact directed at poseurs, pseudo-anarchists and sham revolutionaries. Indeed, the only politically-engaged figure in the novel not caricatured is the Professor, the fanatical nihilist who carries an indiarubber detonator in his pocket capable of triggering an immense explosion. The Professor is the only revolutionary in the novel who lives according to his convictions. Paradoxically, then, the only figure with integrity in the novel is a fanatical nihilist prepared to blow up himself and anyone else foolish enough to try to apprehend him.
By comparing other characters and values to his, Conrad is able to mount a sustained attack on all compromised individuals, institutions, and beliefs. Strange as he is, in many senses the Professor assumes the role of spokesman for Conrad. Of all the politically involved figures in the novel, the Professor is the only one who is not seen as a hypocrite. Speaking to Ossipon, the Professor makes explicit the equivalence between law-abiding society and anarchism that remained implicit up until their meeting:

“You revolutionists,” the other continued with leisurely self-confidence, “are the slaves of the social convention, which is afraid of you; slaves of it as much of as the very police that stand up in deference of that convention. Clearly you are since you want to revolutionize it. It governs your thought of course, and your action too, and thus neither your thought nor your action can ever be conclusive.” (93)

Or again, later:

“The terrorist and the policeman both come from the same basket. Revolution, legality -- countermoves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical. He plays his little game -- so do you propagandists. But I don’t play; I work fourteen hours a day and go hungry sometimes.” (94)

Revolutionists and the staid bourgeoisie are both criticized for their lack of imagination, their narrowness, and their slavish adherence to “social convention,” that is, the existing social order. This is particularly ironic in that the theoretical agenda of anarchism calls for the dissolution of the “social convention.” But if the police and the upper and middle classes they protect are seen as philistines, to Conrad the anarchists are even worse, for they promote a political agenda they are unwilling to establish, and ultimately, are loathe to disturb existing social relations. As the Professor says later to Ossipon: "Revolution, legality -- countermoves in the same game; forms of idleness at bottom identical" (94). For Conrad the object of
the game played by the forces of revolution and legality is to conserve the existing social balance; not to force a checkmate, but to continually force a draw. In this game, there can be no appeal to a higher morality for both revolution, as represented by Verloc's circle of anarchists, and legality, as represented by Sir Ethelred, the Assistant Commissioner of the Special Crimes Department and Chief Heat, are fraudulent. Indeed, the legal system is only a cover for the petty power-struggles that take place within the various institutions and bureaucracies of London.

Typicality in Anarchy

Chief Inspector Heat, the putative guardian of the law, has perhaps less respect for it than the pseudo-anarchists he makes it his business to watch. He believes that his zeal sanctions the circumvention of inconvenient legal questions, as Conrad makes clear in an ironic authorial statement: "But, in any case, Chief Inspector Heat, purveyor of prisons by trade, and man of legal instincts, did logically believe that incarceration was the proper fate for every declared enemy of the law" (126). The police not only possess a "vanity of power" (132), but they are also career-minded philistines who specialize in avoiding issues. The moral enervation of this existence is typified by the Assistant Commissioner's fondness for whist: he plays one game, as it were, to forget his distaste for the game that dominates his life; it is "as though the game [of whist] were a beneficial drug for allaying the pangs of moral discontent" (118). This moral exhaustion is not incidental, or individual, but
systematic: the corruption of the police stems from the fact that it is a bureaucracy, intensely regulated by the official administrators of what the Professor despairingly calls "social convention."

The anarchists however are also morally bankrupt: their anarchism is just a cover for other, no less immediate forms of exploitation. Verloc, the pornographer and double agent, as a spy for an unnamed foreign embassy cynically exploits his anarchist connections. He also exploits his wife, Winnie. For him, she is a mere convenience. Ossipon too preys on women who support him, and eventually, he too betrays Winnie's trust by robbing, then deserting, her. Michaelis, the corpulent "ticket-of-leave apostle" (73), subsidized by a wealthy old lady, is able to proselytize freely about his dream of "a world like a beautiful and cheery hospital" (264). Yundt, the old "terrorist" makes a career of posturing on public platforms but "had never in his life raised personally as much as his little finger against the social edifice" (78). In his own way, each anarchist is an imposter, a poseur, an arm-chair revolutionary.

Seen collectively, it is clear that both revolutionary and official characters are intended to be "typical" characters in the Lukácsian sense of the word, characters that incarnate the transformative, or in the case of The Secret Agent, the non-transformative, historical forces of a given time into richly individualized figures. Many of Conrad's caricatures have a Dickensian quality to them, but the depictions of the anarchists do not have this same comic vitality. Not only are they all hypocrites -- a dismissal rooted more in authorial feeling than historical fact -- but more importantly, they lack specificity, the specificity which Conrad was able to
give the revolutionaries in *Under Western Eyes*. By contrast, the anarchists in *The Secret Agent* are not, as Lukács would have it, richly individualized; nor do they have compelling, psychologically-complex characters. They are, in the literal sense of the word, mere "types," embodiments of a single emotion or idea. One possible reason why they fail as characters is that for Conrad they are both revolutionary and inauthentic. Within Conradian ideology, or at least the ideology of *The Secret Agent*, all of them stand accused of being, to greater and lesser degrees, hypocrites; but more importantly, they are also guilty of idealism, of indulging in hopes for impossible reforms. Within the ideology of the novel, every revolutionary movement is guilty of this double charge. This is also largely the reason why Conrad does not distinguish between radically different revolutionary philosophies. In *The Secret Agent*, therefore, a parodic version of crude Marxist rhetoric is put in the mouths of anarchists. Conrad's lack of interest in distinguishing anarchism from other revolutionary philosophies results in a curious mixture of rhetoric. Doubtlessly, a parodic motive enters into this mix of discourses, but Conrad's lack of interest in discriminating between revolutionary creeds reveals as much about Conrad as the characters he lampoons. Michaelis, the "ticket-of-leave" apostle of anarchism is perhaps the case in point. In the following passage he devoutly intones a doctrine of economic determinism, a doctrine associated with crude Marxist propaganda, although here Conrad throws in a dash of anarchist rhetoric:

History is dominated and determined by the tool and the production -- by the force of economic conditions. Capitalism has made socialism, and the laws made by the capitalist for the protection of property are responsible for anarchism (73).

The rhetoric is as prefabricated and insubstantial as the speaker. Michaelis is not
only insubstantial as a character because he represents a recognizable social type -- a dreamy arm-chair revolutionary who is also an opportunist -- but like most of the other anarchists, Michaelis is nothing more than a stereotype because he is not seen as implicated in familial or the otherwise affective relationships of work and love. Accordingly, the depiction of the anarchists in the novel lacks the force or clarity of a Sir Ethelred, for example, or the psychological insight that distinguishes the characterization of Winnie Verloc. In short, because Conrad does not provide his anarchistic characters with a social basis, with any real engagement with historical reality, there is nothing to mediate between them and their status as self-parodies, which, it might be said, precisely suits his satirical purpose.

Irony and Naturalism

To fully understand, however, the role Conrad’s representation of anarchism plays in producing an ideology of equivalence toward revolutionary movements and bourgeois society alike, and its persistence in subsequent espionage fiction (of Le Carré and Greene for example), it is not sufficient to analyze the textual space that anarchists occupy in the novel. Instead it is necessary to examine, as Conrad does, their relation to bourgeois society. What is fascinating about The Secret Agent, and in this respect it is different from Le Carré’s fictions, is that anarchism is not posited as alien to bourgeois society but is instead seen as its basic principle. In this sense, the textual ideology of The Secret Agent is far more radical than any of the creeds espoused by the novel’s characters, or for that matter, by Conrad himself. In
The Secret Agent, society is already anarchistic, although it still retains the trappings of bourgeois legality. Fundamentally however, bourgeois legality, bourgeois morality and bourgeois order aren't only a sham -- the theme of Madam Bovary and countless other English and European novels of the time -- but far from being represented as cohesive structures, however repressive, the mainstays of bourgeois society in Conrad's novel are instead seen as disintegrating. This disintegration is figured most memorably in the basic unit of bourgeois society, the family. From the beginning, Verloc's family is a black satire on the morally upright, stable Victorian family: Verloc, after all, is a pornographer and spy; his relationship with his wife is one of convenience for them both; and his relationship with his idiot step-son Stevie is non-existent until he hits upon his usefulness as the unwitting bomb carrier in Verloc's attempt on the Greenwich Observatory. Later familial relations turn even more grotesque. Ultimately, of course, Verloc is instrumental in killing Stevie, a death Winnie avenges in turn by murdering Verloc. Winnie's "anarchic end of utter desolation madness and despair" (43) exists as a trope for the anarchy which has overtaken society in general.

The moral congruence posited in the novel between revolution and legality, the terrorist and the policeman, the anarchist sub-culture and bourgeois society proper foreground the deeper, ultimately political principle of identification between these ostensibly opposite groups, latent in the novel's subtext. The repressed signification within the political unconscious of The Secret Agent is the realization that society is already anarchistic. At least for Conrad, this repressed signification has the effect of neutralizing anarchism politically: if it already exists, for the anarchist there is
nothing to change. The persistent emphasis on the moral and ethical bankruptcy of the legal and anarchistic organizations in London makes sense only by explicitly acknowledging that individuals and groups are guided not by socially shared legal or even ethical standards, but by self-aggrandizing motives. The absence of any affective government and the atomization of society into competing groups thus defines the anarchistic social configuration of *The Secret Agent*. The much remarked-upon nihilism of the novel is itself a response to this perceived social chaos. Within the political economy of *The Secret Agent* anarchy is not creative but negative, the result of social disintegration. Neither the middle class nor the revolutionaries offer hope of regeneration.

Irony, then, exists as Conrad's literary response to a perceived state of social collapse. Conrad's use of irony establishes an authorial distance in relation to the anarchistic representation of society he creates in the novel. The negative capacity of irony is harnessed by Conrad to produce an ideology of nihilism toward the anarchy of London. As a literary technique, irony is perhaps the only technique available to the nihilistic writer, for as a mode of literary production it is incapable of simple affirmation; it works instead by negation, by affirming the opposite of what is said. Anarchy, and its literary correlative in *The Secret Agent*, irony, then, suggest the impossibility of community, for there can be no general community without a shared morality, a shared sense of social purpose, and an impartial and effective legal code.

Whereas Conan Doyle's London represented a "knowable community," a system of social relations and individuals made accessible by Holmes's keen intellect, there
is no such "knowable community" in The Secret Agent. Individuals are known incompletely. Moreover they don't have the vitality or dynamism of Conan Doyle's world: all of them are strangely static characters, with seemingly fixed, preordained personalities.

Unlike Kipling's characters, Conrad's -- with the exception of Winnie -- undergo no development, no growth of awareness. And even Winnie's sudden consciousness of the world is negative. This pre-formed, surrealist quality to Conrad's characters derives in part from their relation to an equally surrealist environment, which is, significantly, an environment and not a community. Conrad's London is far more unregenerate than T.S Eliot's; it is a waste land without redemption, as Winnie Verloc's death demonstrates. This lack of any sense of real hope or even order in London is eerily suggested in this naturalistic description:

In front of the great doorway a dismal row of newspaper sellers standing clear of the pavement dealt with their wares from the gutter. It was a raw, gloomy day of the early spring; and the grimy sky, the mud of the street, the rags of the dirty men harmonized excellently with the eruption of the damp, rubbishy sheets of paper soiled with printer's ink. The posters, maculated with filth, garnished like tapestry the sweep of the kerbstone. The trade in afternoon papers was brisk, yet, in comparison with the swift, constant march of foot traffic, the effect was of indifference, of a disregarded distribution. (101)

Imagery of decay pervade the novel. Dirt, grime and filth symbolize a more general social disorder, just as the inconsequential "march of foot traffic" suggests a state of normalized anarchy, an anarchy made routine by the exigencies of working. This sense of routine however does not so much connote order as it does a routine which takes place in a general context of disorder. Yet the naturalistic language which produces this image of entropy also contributes to the nihilistic ideology of the
novel.

Historically speaking, as a literary method, naturalism derived its emphasis on close and detailed observation from the application of developments in the natural sciences, particularly in geology and biology. This transference of technique from science to literature was typically carried out in order to give a new importance to the determinate influence of environment on the individual or his actions. The tension within the naturalistic mode in *The Secret Agent* arises from Conrad’s unwillingness to diagnose the reasons for the anarchy he sees around him. The tendency inherent in naturalism to analyze the individual in terms of determinative agency is thus thwarted. The naturalistic mode in *The Secret Agent*, that is, is inhibited by a nihilistic authorial ideology, with the result that finely detailed naturalistic description such as the one above, is possible but naturalism as a dominant ideology is not.

**The Secret Agent** and the Ideology of Modernism

As I noted earlier, the individual in *The Secret Agent* appears unaffected by his environment. The surrealism of the novel derives from the separation of individuals from their environment: individuals respond to different pressures, but the character of their personalities seems unaffected by these changes. The character of an individual in *The Secret Agent*, that is, typically does not expand or contract in relation to these pressures, but remains essentially the same. And yet, as the example of Winnie illustrates, environment is determinate. But it is less a regulator
of the boundaries of human possibility, as in the English realist novel, than simply an open space in which things happen. This apprehension of history as pointless, arbitrary, and fundamentally unknowable is, as Lukács noted in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, a cardinal feature of modernism:

This negation of history takes two different forms in modernist literature. First, the hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is not for him -- and apparently for his creator -- any pre-existent reality beyond his own self acting upon him or being acted upon him. Secondly, the hero himself is without personal history. He is ‘thrown-into-the-world’: meaninglessly, unfathomably. He does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it. The only ‘development’ in this literature is the gradual revelation of the human condition. Man is now what he has always been and will always be. The narrator, the examining subject, is in motion; the examined reality is static. (Lukács 21)

As Lukács suggests, the delineation of the protagonist and his environment are interrelated, generally determined by the author's attitude toward history. While I do not share Lukács's dismissal of modernist literature, his theory of the interdependence of the "attenuation of reality" and the "dissolution of personality" (Lukács 26) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the ideology of modernism at work in *The Secret Agent*. Like the fictional environments of other modernists -- Beckett, Joyce, Faulkner -- in the environment of *The Secret Agent*, events happen arbitrarily rather than by necessity. This is not to say that there is no causality; plainly there is. The central event in the novel, the attempt by Verloc to blow up the Greenwich Observatory, is proof of this inasmuch as the botched attempt ultimately leads to the deaths of Stevie and Winnie, and even Verloc. But like many other modernist novels, *The Secret Agent* uses a sense of the pressures of social and human relationships to evaluate an experience of modernity which seems
fragmented, arbitrary and alienating.

The ironic accentuation Conrad gives to the rhetoric of the Great Game, then, is indicative not only of a nihilistic authorial ideology, but evidence of Conrad's investment in a general ideology, an ideology of modernism. Most heroic espionage thrillers differ from The Secret Agent in their tacit affirmation of the legitimacy of bourgeois institutions, or in their more overt patriotic celebration of these institutions and the Western way of life (Fleming), but both the heroic and anti-heroic traditions of spy fiction have absorbed elements of modernist ideology, even while adhering to realist conventions and realist forms. Both Smiley and Bond, for example, are without "personal histories"; both do not "develop through contact with the world" except to become more world-weary and wise in Smiley's case, and more adroit and sexually-experienced in Bond's case. For both, significantly, "reality is static": the Cold War and the zero-sum game engaged in by the East and the West are constants, whatever else changes. There are, of course, many differences in the uses to which these two traditions put this ideology of modernism -- but this ideology, however selectively made use of, has almost become a convention of contemporary spy thrillers.

In The Secret Agent the Professor is the quintessential, alienated modernist. Within the vast and disintegrating metropolis of London, there are no rules in the game of survival: no generally legitimate government, no law, and no morality. And no one understands this better than the Professor, as he makes clear in the following conversation with Chief Inspector Heat after having accidentally met on the street. Here the Professor taunts Chief Inspector Heat:

'You'll never get me at so little cost to life and property, which you are
paid to protect.'

'You don't know who you're speaking to said Chief Inspector Heat, firmly. If I were to lay my hands on you now I would be no better than yourself.'

'Ah! The game!'

'You will be sure our side will win in the end. It may yet be necessary to make people believe that some of you ought to be shot at sight like mad dogs. Then that will be the game. But I'll be damned if I know what yours is. I don't believe that you know yourselves. You'll never get anything by it.' (112)

But Chief Inspector Heat is wrong: the Professor knows exactly what the game is and why it is played. In fact Heat unwittingly demonstrates that he has already lost the game inasmuch as he is ignorant of the stakes. For the Professor, "the game" is not one of survival, of recognizing balances of power and accommodating himself to them. For him, the game isn't a matter of physically destroying society, of blowing up its major institutions, but of making it destroy itself. The chief reason the Professor carries around a bomb is not to use it, although he is glad of the protection it affords him, and is happy enough to distribute explosives to anyone who asks for one; rather, he carries around a bomb in order to provoke the police into shooting him. This, he believes, will strip away the veneer of legality that bourgeois society clings to in order to justify itself, and will provoke a general realization of the anarchistic basis to society.

To the Professor, there is no generally accepted moral code, only the appearance of one disguising a hypocritical bourgeois order. Therefore, when he goads Inspector Heat into saying that "It may yet be necessary to make people believe that some of you ought to be shot at sight like mad dogs" (112), the Professor has already succeeded in persuading a representative of law and order to see the violation of the
law as justifiable; and by forcing Heat to contemplate compromising the principles he supposedly stands for, the Professor has already won the game. In his absolute adherence to his principles, the Professor is, paradoxically, the novel's only genuine idealist. As such, he is the antithesis of the many self-seeking hypocritical figures found in the anarchist underworld and in society proper. Easily one of the strangest characters in fiction, the Professor also represents the emergence of a new kind of hero, or anti-hero, the alienated-idealist who becomes the protagonist of much modern fiction.

In the passage I quoted from The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, Lukács pointed out that in modernist literature there is often a congruence between the subjective state of being of the alienated protagonist and his environment. This is true of The Secret Agent. The Professor's isolation relates to the more general social alienation within the novel, an alienation which is itself a function of the loss of a "knowable community" and in turn leads to a perception of the alienation of the individual within history. The recurrent imagery of the isolated individual illustrates this nihilism. But it is characteristic of the novel's anarchist subtext that it calls nihilism into question as an incontestable value, for even it contains, as I have argued in relation to my analysis of the Professor, an idealistic kernel. The novel cannot, that is, even assert nihilism as an absolute value. At its deepest level, it reworks the agonized quietism that marked Conrad's own outlook toward philosophies of political reform into an affirmation of nihilism -- but a notably impure form of nihilism, a nihilism contaminated by idealism. Skeptical of revolutionary change, cynical toward bourgeois values, Conrad tended toward a
nostalgic affirmation of a quasi-aristocratic order, a way of life which as Nostromo indicates, always exerted an attraction for him. Paradoxically, then, the only principle affirmed in The Secret Agent is this idealistic nihilism: within the topsy-turvy world of The Secret Agent, the "anarchists" are really nothing more than poseurs, and the only idealist is really an anarchist.

**Popular Fiction and The Secret Agent**

In this last section, I would like to consider in more detail Conrad's contribution to the genre of espionage fiction. I have already argued that part of Conrad's legacy to espionage fiction is his deployment of a distinctly modernist ideology which can be seen in the static world-view inherent in many post-World-War II spy thrillers which posit an alienated existence in which man is not only "unable to establish relationships with things or persons outside himself; but also that it is impossible to determine theoretically the origin and goal of human existence" (Lukács 20-21). The world of the spy thriller is, necessarily, always a vulnerable one, a world in which the satisfactory resolution of one conspiracy or threat does not ever finally establish the safety of the collective, whether it be a company, a government intelligence agency, or a nation. For reasons relating largely to the genre's commitment to suspense as a conventional element, the world of the spy thriller is always uncertain, a world in which nearly anything can happen. Unpredictability is valorized. The satisfactory resolution of one threat or one conspiracy is never sufficient. There is never any finality: there will always be another threat, another
conspiracy, as Bond readers and movie-goers well know.

The Secret Agent, however, is distinctive in that it combines two modes of representation -- naturalism and caricatural realism -- rarely found together in subsequent espionage fiction. Detailed naturalistic description of the environment is combined with a caricatural realism reminiscent of Dickens, to create a grotesque vision of Edwardian society. Like many moderns, Conrad is both repelled and fascinated by the grotesque. But Conrad uses these modes of representation to evaluate society, to accentuate the grotesqueness of ordinary existence and thereby condemn the official order which makes a pathology of everyday life. This condemnation also extends to the radicals who pretend to higher ideals, but are as counterfeit as the class they want to replace.

The ironic representations of society, and the ironic inflections in the rhetoric of the great game produced by Conrad's combination of naturalism and realism, ultimately exist as a recognition of the end of the Empire. This ironic attitude toward the Empire -- also found in the work of Joyce, Lawrence, Forster, and Woolf -- did not quash the tradition of adventure fiction; but by acknowledging that the old style of imperial adventure was breaking down, this new, critical attitude toward the Empire did much to undermine the world-view that sustained the genre of imperial adventure. By focusing on the social disintegration in the administrative center of the Empire, The Secret Agent suggests the entropy of the British Empire.

From this period forward, the elements that distinguish the genre of imperial adventure -- its expansionist tone, its emphasis on action, its lack of interest in psychological nuance and in the morality of action -- fracture and become subsumed
into other popular genres. Elements of the genre of imperial adventure can be found in romance, science-fiction (most obviously in novels of galactic imperialism), westerns, travel fiction, the hard-boiled detective novel, crime thrillers, and in espionage fiction where the great game of imperialism continues, after a fashion, in the form of the contest between East and West. The importance of *The Secret Agent*, then, is that it marks the transformation of the tradition of imperial adventure into a new popular genre, the genre of espionage fiction. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that the ironic mode Conrad adopted in the novel, along with its modernist outlook and narrative structure, effectively prevented it from becoming a popular success. In his book on Conrad’s critical reception, Norman Sherry notes that:

Conrad was beginning to look for a larger audience, a more popular appeal, and he saw that in writing about anarchists in Soho he was at least treating a "widely discussed subject," but treating it on his own terms. Writing to his literary agent, J.B. Pinker, on 18 May 1907, while working on the final form of *The Secret Agent*, Conrad spoke of "an element of popularity in it... my mind runs much on popularity now. I would like to reach it not by sensationalism but by means of taking a widely discussed subject for the text of my novel," and further evidence of his desire to gain popularity appears in another letter written two and a half months later. There Conrad speaks of *The Secret Agent* as a book "to produce some sensation" (Sherry 21).

Like *Nostromo* and *Under Western Eyes*, *The Secret Agent* was not a popular success. But within the history of popular fiction, it is that most unusual of literary artifacts: a failed popular novel that eventually became acclaimed as a "serious" novel. More than that, it helped to establish a tradition of its own, the ironic spy thriller, a novel devoted to the questioning of the game of espionage and the political systems that engage in it.
Section III
High Modernism in the Age of Detective Fiction
Chapter 5
Detective Fiction and Modernism

The Corpse in the Library or,
The Genteel Modernism of Agatha Christie

Earlier, in the "Preliminary Mappings" section, I referred to a hypothetical, unregenerate modernist critic. If I had to identify such a person, Edmund Wilson would be it. In "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd" Wilson put forward what may be regarded as the classic modernist case against the formal English novel of detection. The chief defect of detective fiction as Wilson sees it is that it fails to achieve any individuated level of characterization. Characters are not richly individualized, but mere cardboard figures shuttled hither and yon by the exigencies of an equally boring plot. Detection fiction, however, is marred by a number of other, scarcely less serious, literary defects — what he calls a lack of "good writing" "human interest" and "atmosphere" (Wilson 393). Wilson's attack culminates in the famous complaint which provided the essay with its title: "How can you care who committed a murder which has never really been made to take place, because the writer hasn't any ability of even the most ordinary kind to make you see it or feel it? How can you probe the possibilities of guilt among characters who all seem alike because they are all simply names on the page?" (393). What is most striking about this passage and the essay in general is not so much the content of the remarks as the tone in which they are made. The air of lofty superiority which accompanies the most sweeping generalizations here is reminiscent of F.R. Leavis,
especially in his attack on mass civilization in which he was wont to make remarks like "All this seems so obvious that one is diffident about insisting on it" (Mass Civilization 10) by way of producing supporting evidence for his claims. The similarities should not be surprising. Wilson, a "high" modernist, was much more sympathetic toward experimental modernism than Leavis or Lukács. But Wilson also had a great tradition in the works, although his included such Leavisite outcasts as James Joyce. Whatever their local differences of opinion about the value of this writer or that, both spoke from the vantage point of an unassailable, Olympian modernism which gave them sanction to dismiss whole literary traditions without having to bother to define such irksome notions as "good writing," "characterization," and "atmosphere." Implicit in Wilson's judgments is a "high" modernist set of literary standards against which Agatha Christie and almost every other detective fiction writer is measured and found wanting. This standard is suggested negatively, in terms of what detective fiction is not. Agatha Christie and her ilk are thus summarily relegated to the dustbin of literary history.

My intent here is merely to note that in assuming the mantle of the modernist high priest, Wilson speaks as an ideologue of modernism, and thus bases his claims on the unstable oppositions that we have seen to be characteristic of that literary formation -- Literature vs non-Literature ("Friends, we represent a minority but Literature is on our side" 397); Art vs kitsch, "there is no need to bore ourselves with this rubbish" 397), and so on. In repudiating detective fiction, Wilson displays his conviction that popular fiction and modernism are entirely different literary productions. Without submitting to Wilson's (untenable) value judgments, I wish to
suggest that the matter is not so clear cut: the formal English novel of detection is as modernist as its accredited "high" culture counterpart.

**Christie's Conservative Modernism**

One of the most consistent features of Agatha Christie's half a century worth of fiction is its conservative vision of modernity. Indeed, this aspect of her fiction is almost synonymous with the Christie name. Her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was set in Styles Court, a sprawling country estate in Essex, far from the drawing rooms and warrens of Conan Doyle's London. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was set in King's Abbott, a seemingly peaceful country village. Christie refined her portrait of the picture postcard English country village of St Mary Mead in *The Murder at the Vicarage*. All of these settings are variations on a pastoralism horribly violated, and then restored, by the mental acumen and moral agency of the detective figure -- most often either by the indomitable Hercule Poirot or the more modest but equally quick-witted Miss Marple. Of course not all of Christie's mysteries have this pastoral English setting. Many of them are set in very different locales, on trains for example (*Murder on the Orient Express*) or in other "exotic" locations (*Murder in Mesopotamia*). The more obvious pastoral settings express values implicit in all of Christie's fiction: a fondness for an orderly, circumscribed social world stratified by differences in manners. These gradations are always seen to be class-based. The modern, post-World War I industrial world, the rising strength of the lower middle class, the formation of a suburban mass society
existence with its all of its billboards and garishness, is noticeably absent in Christie. One of the few times this world obtrudes into Christie’s fiction comes in Curtain, which is in one sense a lament for the lost dignity and order of Edwardian England. Having come back to Styles, Hasting thinks to himself: "Styles St Mary was altered out of all recognition. Petrol situations, a cinema, two more inns and rows of council houses" (6). Whatever the location, the setting of the Christie novel is inevitably upright, proper, dignified, and English in an eternally Edwardian way. The Big House settings of her earlier fiction are simply the most obvious tropes for this ideology of England. Whether set in a country village or a country estate, Christie’s characters are always middle or upper middle class characters who at the very least have a parlourmaid. In Sleeping Murder, written during World War II, but not published until 1976, Gwenda, the twenty-one year old protagonist, has to make do with a parlourmaid and a part-time gardener; and everyone else visited either by her or Miss Marple for tea has one too. If one were to read off the social history of England from Christie’s novels, one would get a rather skewered view.

And yet in her conservatism and hostility to modernity (consistently reduced to petrol stations and sterile housing estates), Christie’s nostalgia for upper-class Edwardianism, if not her use of literary form, is similar to English modernism in the interwar years -- Evelyn Waugh’s Brideshead Revisited, Eliot’s The Waste Land, Ford Maddox Ford’s The Good Soldier and so on. While these canonical texts are generally more ambitious in terms of technique and social commentary than Christie’s fiction, they also display a longing for the same golden, pre-industrial pastoral existence that characterizes Christie’s work. Peter Miles and Malcolm Smith
have written of the poetry and fiction of this period that "In Britain, pastoralism was articulated historically to the myth of the pre-industrial Golden Age, a time of supposed harmony and progress. Time and time again, the village community is represented as a microcosm of the national community. In the interwar years, much of pastoral England was in fact being eaten up by developing suburbia, yet the myth only grew stronger ideologically as the physical reality began to fade"(40). Paradoxically, the pastoral element implicit within Christie’s fiction thus emerges as a distinctly modernist idealization of England, an England which exists in the popular imagination as a conflict-free, rural Acadia sustaining the values and traditions that define "English-ness."

And yet it is also possible that Christie’s fiction may be read as an implicit criticism of industrial modernism -- in the name of a romantic conservatism to be sure, but this possibility cannot be ruled out, especially in light of the ubiquitous identification in English literature of the country with life-sustaining values and of the city with corruption and entropy. Dickens used this country/city opposition as an effective mode of social critique throughout his fiction (I am thinking, for example, of the way in which the Maylie’s bucolic country retreat is explicitly contrasted with the dirt and vice of London in Oliver Twist); by contrast, I think Christie’s use of the pastoral tradition is much less politically oriented, and her criticisms of contemporary society more incidental and implicit than in, say, Dickens; ultimately, these factors delimit the extent to which her fiction can be read as social criticism.

There are other modes of criticism, however, and some of these are more directly related to the conventions of the formal English novel of detection. In The Pursuit
of Crime Dennis Porter suggests that detective fiction, *sui generis*, projects the moral law that binds a given society together and simultaneously evaluates that society:

Consequently, a crime implies the violation of a community code of conduct and demands a response in terms of the code. It always depends on a legal definition, and the law, as both Gramsci and Althusser make clear, is a key element of the superstructure in ensuring the reproduction of existing power relations in a society. As a result, in representing crime and its punishment, whether evoked or merely anticipated, detective novels invariably project the image of a given order and the implied value system that helps sustain it. By naming a place and by evoking however glancingly, the socio-economic order that prevails within it, they confirm, in fact, that there can be no transgression without a code, no individual crime act without a community that condemns it. (120-121)

In *Sleeping Murder*, as with most of her fiction, Agatha Christie is less concerned with rendering a social order in all its class variations than with exploring its "implied value system" and the effects of the criminal transgression on the individuals involved. Before I explore these values and mores further, it is useful to briefly outline the plot of *Sleeping Murder*. This mystery is concerned with the murder of Helen Kennedy Halliday, a murder which occurred some eighteen years before the beginning of the novel. Gwenda Reed, the step-daughter of Helen Halliday, was born in England, but because of the death of her parents, was raised in New Zealand by relatives. At the age of twenty-one, Gwenda returns to England, married to Giles Reed. She settles in a small white Victorian villa in the seaside resort town of Dillmouth. As she sets about decorating and renovating the house, odd things start happening. She begins to "remember" things about the house, despite the fact that she has no recollection of ever having lived there. Eventually, these vague memories coalesce in the shocking recollection of a murder which she
witnessed as a three year old child -- the murder of her step-mother, Helen Halliday. With the help of her husband, Giles Reed, and the inimitable Miss Marple, Gwenda sets about solving this murder in retrospect. She begins her search by soliciting the assistance of Dr. James Kennedy, the brother of the deceased. As she goes about her investigation, her search is complicated by the fact that she retains only a very partial image of the murder. Gwenda is the only witness, but she herself doubts her memory of the events in question. Gwenda and Giles Reed resolve that the best way of solving the mystery is to interview all of Helen Halliday's acquaintances. These consist mainly of rejected suitor's -- the staid solicitor, Walter Fane and the flashy entrepreneur, Jacky Afflick -- as well as the old house-parlourmaid, Lily Abbott. The investigation takes on a new meaning for Gwenda when she learns from Dr Kennedy that her father, Major Kelvin James Halliday, died in a mental asylum convinced that he himself had killed his wife. Events reach a climax when Lily Abbott Kimble is mysteriously murdered; shortly thereafter, an attempt is made on Gwenda's life. The murderer of Helen Kennedy Halliday, it turns out, was none other than her brother, Dr James Kennedy who was insanely jealous of his sister. In order to prevent her from moving away from Dillmouth, Dr. Kennedy killed Helen. To cover up his crime, he engineered the mental breakdown of his brother-in-law, Major Halliday. And in order to preserve his secret, he killed Lily, and attempted to kill Gwenda Reed too.

As this quick précis of the plot suggests, Christie's crimes are invariably the result of moral failure or individual pathology (Dr Kennedy is clearly deranged, and this for Christie serves as an adequate explanation of his motives); unlike the
American hard-boiled school of detection, there is in her fiction no sense of the environment as decisive, except in the matter of manners. Here class inevitably shows; here the "implied value system" is most evident. A good deal of the specific detail in Christie's work consists of her narrator's narrow observation --and evaluation -- of manners and behavior. The world of Christie's novels is always hierarchical, organized by a rigid adherence to middle class values and mores.

This can be seen in Chapter 16 of Sleeping Murder in which Miss Marple tries to pump Mrs Fane about her son's relationship with Helen Kennedy, who at that point is only suspected of being the victim of foul play. In this passage Mrs Fane reminisces about Helen Kennedy:

A most unsuitable girl -- as seems always to be the way. Oh, I don't mean an actress or anything like that. The local doctor's sister -- more like his daughter, really, years younger -- and the poor man with no idea how to bring her up. Men are so helpless aren't they? She ran quite wild, entangled herself first with a young man in the office -- a mere clerk -- and a very unsatisfactory character, too. They had to get rid of him. Repeated confidential information. Anyway, this girl, Helen Kennedy, was I suppose, very pretty. I didn't think so. I always thought her hair was touched up. But Walter, poor boy, fell very much in love with her. As I say, quite unsuitable, no money and no prospects, and not the kind of daughter one wanted as a daughter-in-law. Still, what can a mother do? (164)

There is much irony here, most of it directed at the prejudiced Mrs Fane. In a more general sense, though, this passage is paradigmatic of Christie's evaluative realism. The object of Christie's irony is not so much Mrs Fane's rather mercenary material criteria for deciding on the suitability of her daughter-in-law, but her judgement, indeed her judgmental attitude toward Helen. As it turns out, Mrs Fane's judgement is entirely inaccurate. The "poor" doctor turns out not to be so helpless after all: the reader learns later that Dr Kennedy murdered his sister out of jealousy. What
Christie is undercutting, then, are Mrs Fane's ill-founded moral judgments on Helen Kennedy's character, and not her entire world-view, as it were. As Miss Marple says at the end of the novel: "I think, myself, that she [Helen Kennedy] was a perfectly normal young girl who wanted to have fun and a good time and flirt a little and finally settle down with the man of her choice -- no more than that" (285). At the heart of this passage then is a critical evaluation of a certain kind of gossipy moral condemnation.

Modernist Heresy: Ambiguous Language in Detective Fiction

This points up something intrinsic to Christie's fiction and to a greater or lesser extent, the formal English novel of detection in general. While Christie's language is less witty than Dorothy Sayers's for instance, it is much more ambiguous, capable of bearing any number of different interpretations. Because of this, the reader can never be certain, at least not until the end of the novel, as to the signified of her signifiers. This is of course in keeping with the narrative structure of the genre, whose function is to throw each character's motives into suspicion. Most of the time, this effect is achieved by ambiguous description. In Chapter 22, for instance, Gwenda and Giles Reed are waiting for Lily, the Halliday's former house parlour maid, to keep an appointment at Dr Kennedy's house. At this stage, neither Gwenda nor Giles suspect that Dr Kennedy is the murderer but they wait for Lily in the hope that she might shed some light on the mysterious disappearance of Helen Kennedy, Gwenda's step-mother, some eighteen years previous. So, while the reader
might suspect that the doctor is the villain of the piece, he has no way of knowing that Dr Kennedy has just killed Lily Kimble in order to prevent the disclosure of what he thinks is damning evidence. As time goes by, the Reeds and Dr Kimble (for different reasons) grow increasingly restive. It is within this context that Christie describes Dr Kennedy’s behavior: "He walked restlessly up and down the room. His face was lined and haggard" (235). It is natural enough that he should be restless -- as far as the reader and the Reeds know, he has been made anxious by the tardiness of his guest. The first clause may portend some skullduggery, but again, there are other seemingly natural descriptions within the novel that could be read in an equally sinister light. The second clause of the description, however, does seem to suggest something sinister. Why should Dr Kennedy’s face be "lined and haggard" unless he has been involved in something untoward? And yet, it is also possible that the strain visible in his face is due merely to the stress related to the mysterious disappearance of his sister nearly two decades ago.

The language of Christie’s novels appears to be transparent, but in actuality it is quite opaque. The reader never knows for certain what is being signified. This linguistic ambiguity -- which is often taken to be one of the definitive characteristics of modernism -- arises out of the fact that meaning in fiction is contextual, but in Christie’s fiction the reader never knows the full context. As Volosinov and Bakhtin contend, to understand a verbal utterance it is necessary to know the extraverbal context of the utterance. They argue that there are essentially three factors that comprise the extraverbal context of the utterance: 1) the common spatial purview (an understanding of the physical setting); 2) the interlocutor’s
common knowledge and understanding of the situation (what is jointly known); 3) their common evaluation of that situation (their shared attitude toward the situation) (Freudianism 98-99). The ambiguity of Christie’s language, then, stems from the reader’s uncertainty in relation to the last two factors mentioned by Volosinov and Bakhtin -- not only does the reader not know that which is "jointly known" and felt by the characters in a detective novel, but, as the example of Dr Kennedy indicates, frequently the reader doesn’t even know what a single interlocutor or character truly knows and feels about a given situation. This is not necessarily "bad"; this uncertainty adds to the suspense of the novel, and thus may be regarded as an indispensable ingredient of detective fiction. Indeed the structure of the genre is largely determined by the detective figure’s reconstruction of the "extraverbal" situation. Once this is known, the meaning of the key utterance or utterances is understood and the crime, then, typically becomes susceptible to resolution. In Sleeping Murder, the key enigmatic utterance is Mrs Halliday’s statement, overheard by Lily, "I’m afraid of you" (152). Once Mrs Marple works out who Helen Halliday was speaking to, in other words her "interlocutor," she is able to understand the utterance, and is able then to effectively solve the crime. While language may seem referential, limpid, and clear in the formal English novel of detection, this surface is deceptive. Cut off from its extraverbal situation, every signifier is capable of having an almost infinite number of signifieds, and it is only when the detective figure is able to reconstruct the extraverbal situation to a specific utterance that meaning can be conferred upon it. The process of interpretation is thus a convention of detective fiction. In "The Hippocratic Smile: John le Carré and the Traditions of the Detective
Novel," Glenn W. Most proposes a taxonomy of the English and American traditions of detective fiction based on the differences he sees between the different attitudes toward the interpretation in the formal English novel of detection and the American hard-boiled school. Whereas the Americans "are caught up in the uncertainties of the activity of the interpretation itself, for which a final and valid result may be imagined but can never be confidently predicted," the English "presuppose the certainty of a correct reading," with the result that their fiction is fixated on the "joy of result" (350). While Most's argument is convincing in many respects, it leaves out any consideration of the role of the reader in the interpretive process. Most is right on insisting on the English tradition's ultimate assurance in the interpretive process, but this assurance is complicated by the deceptive simplicity of the language in this genre, and the various interpretations they give rise to in the reading process itself. Ambiguity in language and in the interpretive process thus have a much greater role than Most suggests.

It may be said that all this puts the reader of the formal English detective novel at a distinct disadvantage, which of course it does. But the more important point is that the act of reading this particular sub-genre is more complex and ambiguous than has previously been thought. In one sense, the reading of this sub-genre may be regarded as paradigmatic of reading fiction in general inasmuch as it requires an act of participation, of sifting and winnowing of motives, character and circumstance, typical of the activity engaged in by all readers of fiction. Ultimately of course, too, readers engage in an analysis and evaluation of these fictitious circumstances. No doubt the reader's evaluation of the narrator's evaluation of
contemporary manners and mores constitutes one of the main pleasures involved in reading domestic fiction. The tradition of domestic fiction, from which the formal English novel of detection descended, was made internationally famous by Samuel Richardson in the eighteenth century, and to this day attracts a predominantly, though not exclusively, female readership. Christie's fiction not only taps into the conventions of domestic fiction -- most notably in its interest in domestic life and evaluation of manners -- but it also managed to capture its latter-day readership. In *Reading by Numbers* Ken Worpole situates the type of fiction produced by Christie in the years after World War I in terms of this changed, but still recognizable, readership:

After the First World War a new formula within the genre of detective fiction emerged -- the country house murder. This is clearly to do with the way in which the reading public was changing from a magazine or yellow-jacket buying public into a public or commercial library borrowing public. The 1919 Public Libraries Act created the Country Library system which brought library facilities to a much wider proportion of the British people than before -- particularly those living in country districts. During this period, however, the private library systems, such as Boot's libraries and others were still growing -- and were often sited in small places with a largely female clientele... It is not surprising, therefore, if a detective story form emerged which had a rural and domestic setting, was more genteel and set amongst a better class of people. The country house murder was also a novel of manners, etiquette, fashion, and occasionally sexual passion, all subjects which were at the time thought the customary province of women readers"(48-49).

This readership expanded dramatically with the production and distribution of popular fiction in the post World War I era. In 1930s Allen Lane began the paperback revolution by launching the first series of Penguins, carried by the Woolworth chain. This series included popular writers like Christie and Sayers, as well as more highbrow authors. While the cheaper prices of the Penguins widened
the social range of the reading public, and thus added other reader formations to
this readership, there is considerable evidence that women still constitute the primary
readers of this type of crime fiction. Part of Christie’s phenomenal success, then,
seems to consist in her combination of ratiocination and Jane Austen-like sensitivity
to class and manners; part of her success seems to consist in her projection of an
idealized England, an England of bucolic country villages and country houses
disturbed by nothing more vexing than the occasional, ungentlemanly murder. And
part of her success appears to be due to her ambiguous use of language, which in
the detective novel, has the effect of involving the reader to an unusual extent in
the interpretive function of the narrative.

Unstable Identities

Most of the elements I’ve discussed so far in relation to Christie’s fiction could be
taken to be strategic means for the reinforcement of an essentially conservative
textual ideology. And indeed Christie’s valorization of middle and upper middle
class society and mores, her resolute individualism, her nostalgia for an Edwardian
type of domesticity, and her remarkable exclusion of social conflict (in Christie’s
world, all working class people are happy domestics and all women are happy
homemakers) from her fiction would seem to substantiate this view. And yet there
is another aspect to her fiction which I think forces us call into question an
equivalence between her fiction and a purely conservative ideology. Christie’s fiction
is obsessed by the question of identity. Indeed, part of Christie’s skill consists of
her incorporation and adaptation of this interest to the requirements of the "Whodunit" sub-genre. The most basic conventional requirement of this type of fiction is that it calls into question the identity of every individual within the circumscribed boundaries of the community in which the crime takes place. While the legitimacy of the law may not be in question, as it often is in the hard-boiled tradition, or even the possibility of a final, and accurate interpretation of the events leading up to the crime, the identity of the murderer is always in question since it could plausibly be just about anyone. Thus the formal English novel of detection operates on the premise that the individual’s claim to a certain identity is false. The appearance of the well-spoken, urbane, law-abiding bourgeois subject often turns out to be a mask, disguising another, more sinister identity. Thus Christie and other practitioners, in using highly conventional settings and characters, show -- however fleetingly -- the conventional nature of identity itself. While on one level they reaffirm the identity of the subject, on another they show that appearances are not necessarily commensurate with reality, that in fact identity is neither as stable nor as natural as it seems to be. In this, the formal English novel of detection reveals a congenital similarity to one of the cardinal tenets of radical modernism: namely, the rejection of the bourgeois claim to a stable ego, consistent with its perception of itself.

Taking different lines of attack, Marx, Freud and Nietzsche all sought to demonstrate that the ego’s sense of self identity was essentially constructed and if not then illusory, then ideological. Marx’s attempt to develop of a theory of ideology, Freud’s development of the theory of a divided ego and forms of
treatment for some of its most painful afflictions (psychoanalysis), and Nietzsche's deconstruction of all forms of system based on assumptions of identity stand as landmarks in any geography of modernism. In diluted form, many of these tenets became accepted facts of experimental modernism, and it is one measure of their ubiquity that the questioning of identity should become a convention in a popular genre such as the formal English novel of detection. This is not to say that Christie's view of the subject can be wholly equated with the view of the divided subject articulated in different ways by Marx, Freud and Nietzsche: for them, identity is a highly problematical notion, whereas for Agatha Christie there exists the assumption of an essential identity. Nevertheless, there is in Christie's fiction a fascination for split identities which is similar to one of the main characteristics of the modernist world-view.

It may be objected that while identity is problematized for a time in this type of fiction, it is problematized only to be confirmed more powerfully at the end of the novel: the identification of the murderer ultimately serves to confirm the identity and efficacy of the detective hero. There is some truth in this, but conventionally, ideologically and dramatically, this sub-genre works by simultaneously questioning and then affirming identity. Only by dramatically questioning the claims of the suspects to be who they claim to be, can the detective figure resolve the crime and lift the cloud of suspicion which has fallen on the innocent -- and yet the questions about motives and character that have arisen in the course of the inquiry always serve to throw into question the claims of the innocent to be exactly who they claim to be. There is, then, within this sub-genre always an unresolved tension, a
tension necessary to the generation of suspense concerning the identity of characters within the novel.

Agatha Christie's *Sleeping Murder* dramatizes this point well. The problem of identity is compounded in this novel because the "sleeping murder," or the murder which Gwenda thinks she witnessed as a child some eighteen years previous, causes her to question the integrity of her identity. When Gwenda hears the fateful lines from the *Duchess of Malfi*, "Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle: she died young" she becomes terrorized because for some unknown reason they recall the vision of a strangled woman. As she says to Miss Marple:

I was back there -- on the stairs, looking down on the hall through the bannisters, and I saw her lying there. Sprawled out -- dead. Her hair all golden and her face all -- all blue! She was dead, strangled, and someone was saying those words in that same horrible, gloating way -- and I saw his hands -- grey, wrinkled -- not hands -- monkey’s paws ... it was horrible, I tell you. She was dead... (33-34).

Wondering whether she actually did witness this bizarre death or if it is merely the product of her deranged mind, Gwenda begins to question her own sanity. Thus in *Sleeping Murder* the solution to the mystery involves more than the classical exoneration of the innocent -- for Gwenda it becomes also the key to understanding her psyche, understanding whether or not she is sane or insane. *Sleeping Murder* is unusual in the extent to which it is concerned with the possibility of insanity, but it is an interesting -- and little remarked upon aspect -- of the formal English novel of detection that insanity nearly always figures as part of the atmosphere or the mental landscape of this type of fiction. Gwenda’s fear of insanity stems from the dread that her father, Major Halliday, may have killed her stepmother and that murdering is somehow congenital or genetic within her family.
Solving the mystery of Helen Halliday's disappearance and Gwenda's violent childhood recollection thus become part of one single heuristic process. Interestingly, in *Sleeping Murder* this process is structurally identical to the classical psychoanalytic method in which the patient must return to the source of the blockage in childhood before he can hope to achieve any relief from the neurotic symptom. Indeed, chapter 10 of the novel is entitled "A Case History" and while it ostensibly details the peculiar circumstances surrounding Major Halliday's strange delusion and death, it is also Gwenda's case history. For until she can uncover a satisfactory explanation for her father's behavior in relation to her stepmother and for the circumstances which gave rise to her macabre childhood recollection, her claim to her identity, and even her sanity, is in question and doubted by no one more than herself. Indeed Agatha Christie's language and narrative resembles nothing so much as a dream, or in Freudian terms, the manifest content of a dream. At this level, motive, event and character exist for both the reader and the detective figure as a kind of text, as cyphers or representations of a latent content whose logic as yet remains unknown and whose job it is for the detective to decipher. As Miss Marple says: "It really is very dangerous to believe people. I never have for years" (291). The job of the detective figure is thus roughly analogous to that of the practicing psychoanalyst: to read phenomenon in terms of a hidden pathology which, once brought to light, confronted and articulated, ultimately helps to resolve the neurotic symptom. In the case of the formal English novel of detection, the detective figure's identification of the murderer has the ideological effect of extirpating the diseased agent (the murderer) and thereby confirming the body politic
in its sense of its own collective moral and political decency. This is because Christie’s murderers are always actuated by moral failure (greed, lust, avarice, etc), sins which are the result of consciously-made decisions, or else occur because of mental or emotional derangement. In any case, none of these causes call into question the justice of the current social and economic arrangements which are characteristic of her settings. Christie is interested in moral and behavioral evaluation; she is not interested in political criticism.

While the whole structure of the formal English novel builds up to and climaxes on the detective figure’s revelation of the murderer, this closure, as I have argued, is never ideologically complete in its assertion of the integrity of identity and the ideality of the human community. In constructing a credible "Whodunit," the detective writer is of necessity required to dramatize the deceptiveness of identity, its capacity for dissimulation and deceit, the fact that the human personality can never be assumed to be identical with outward appearance. This hermeneutic of suspicion is never completely eradicated by the triumphant disclosure of the villain; the casting of suspicion has already compromised the identities of many "innocent" characters, as well as the notion that the quasi-Edwardian society of Christie’s fictional world can conduct itself harmoniously. Thus if Christie’s fiction is fixated on order and stability, it is also obsessed by disorder and instability, both psychic and social. Even as it affirms the legitimacy and indeed, the superiority of modern bourgeois existence and the stability of the bourgeois subject -- like most experimental, "radical" examples of literary modernism -- the formal English detective novel is fascinated by disorder, by the cracks in the facade.
Even as it employs commonsense, empirical methods to find the murderer, the sub-genre asserts the inadequacy of empiricism as a guide to human behavior. The tacit message of this genre -- that all is not what it seems -- contradicts other messages conveyed in the imagery of idyllic country villages and orderly country estates that all is what it seems, and indeed that all is well. Writing of the detective fiction of a somewhat earlier time, Walter Benjamin sees this tension as a foregrounding of a contradiction always implicit in modern bourgeois existence:

The bourgeois interior of the 1860's and 1870's, with its gigantic sideboards distended with carvings, the sunless corners where palms stand, the balcony embattled behind its balustrade, and long corridors with their singing gas flames, fittingly houses only the corpse. "On this sofa the aunt cannot but be murdered." The soulless luxuriance of the furnishings becomes only true comfort only in the presence of a dead body. Far more interesting than the oriental landscapes in detective novels is that rank Orient inhabiting their interiors: the Persian carpet and the ottoman, the hanging lamp and the genuine Caucasian dagger. Behind the heavy, gathered Khilim tapestries the master of the house has orgies with his share certificates, feels himself the Eastern merchant, the indolent pasha in the caravanserai of otiose enchantment, until that dagger in its silver sling above the divan puts an end one fine afternoon, to his siesta and himself. This character of the bourgeois apartment, tremulously awaiting the nameless murderer like a lascivious old lady her gallant, has been penetrated by a number of authors who, as writers of "detective stories" -- and perhaps also because in their works part of the bourgeois pandemonium is exhibited -- have been denied the reputation they deserve. (65)

If we allow for a less exotic taste in furnishings, much of what Benjamin claims is applicable of Christie's fiction. Just as her settings are not as consistently oriental as the description above would suggest, so too does the tension in her fiction rarely approximate "bourgeois pandemonium." Yet, as we have seen, Sleeping Murder in its quiet, English understated way suddenly, if only briefly, suggests as much. Thus, in the drama with which the formal English novel of detection suggests the instability of identity and human community, and the intensity with which it affirms
both in its denouement, this sub-genre resembles nothing so much as the canonized English conservative modernism produced in the interwar years.

**Hard-boiled Modernism**

Modernism, as we have seen, has always sought to identify itself by distinguishing itself from popular fiction. Popular fiction, the argument goes, is commercial; it is superficial, shallow, trivial and aesthetically impoverished. It is found, typically, in the best-seller racks at drug stores, supermarkets and newspaper stands. Modern literature, on the other hand, is non-commercial: it is not made for a mass audience and is not sold in these places because it is too difficult and therefore lacks the wide audience that popular fiction commands. Accordingly, modern literature has to be sought out by the discriminating reader at bookstores and libraries. Few people would dispute that *Finnegan's Wake* is harder to find than *The Big Sleep* and fewer would argue that Chandler's novel is more "difficult" than Joyce's, but critics and readers who maintain that popular fiction is commercial (i.e degraded) and modern literature is not, as we have seen, not only run into the same fallacies and categorical judgments that disfigure much of the critical and literary thinking of modern literature, but in accepting the autonomy-of-art ideology, they also ignore the fact that in the modern world art has always been bought. As Andreas Huyssen observes:

> The irony of course is that art's aspirations to autonomy, its uncoupling from church and state, became possible only when literature, painting and music were first organized according to the principles of a market economy. From its beginnings the autonomy of art has been related dialectically to the commodity form. The rapid growth of the reading public and the increasing capitalization of the book market in the later 18th century, the commercialization of music culture and the development of a modern art
market mark the beginnings of high/low dichotomy in its specifically modern form. (17)

Even on purely commensensical grounds, however, this variation on the anti-popular fiction argument is difficult to sustain. In Britain at the moment Virginia Woolf's novels sell almost in the best-seller range: are they now to be excoriated for their mass appeal? The high/low dichotomy which became institutionalized in modernism does indeed exist -- but only at the level of ideology. This is not to denigrate the force of ideology, for it is the attitudes, values and ideologies behind the discriminations that critics, professors, publishers and others make that help to determine the life-span of a literary production in the public sphere, and ultimately whether or not it will be formally institutionalized as a full member of the canon.

Hammett has always occupied an uncertain position within the literary canon. While his work has generally been relegated to a kind of second tier status thought to be appropriate to "genre" fiction, because of its stylistic sophistication and existential atmosphere it has attracted its share of literary admirers. And although Hammett's work predates that of Hemingway, critics often praise it for its stylistic similarity to Hemingway's minimalist fiction. Ultimately, however, it is misleading to read Hammett's fiction as a pale reflection of "high" modernism. Hammett's modernism, and the modernism of the hard-boiled school, is not based on a repudiation of mass culture, but on an embracing of its possibilities. The distinctiveness of Hammett's fiction consists of its recuperation of many dominant modernist themes and techniques in a realist form which was historically and institutionally residual, but which Hammett made contemporary through his command of the American language. In the process Hammett virtually produced the
hard-boiled detective genre, which was a distinctly American genre. Hammett's modernism is thus different from the European modernism rooted in the avantgarde, but it is a modernism rooted in a deeply-felt response to the modern urban American world of the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike the avantgarde in Europe, Hammett did not reject the artistic forms of the past; instead, he transformed an exhausted form into a distinctively new genre, a genre with its own distinctive language and world-view. As Raymond Chandler testified in his famous essay "The Simple Art of Murder," "Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not with hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare, and tropical fish. He put these people down on paper as they are, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for those purposes" (Haycraft 234). While Chandler down-plays Hammett's stylization of ordinary language, his comments do suggest the transformations he made in the detective story genre. It is thus ironic that although Hammett's fiction was not regarded as serious in his own time, it succeeded in reaching the mass audience the European avantgarde coveted, but could never reach.³ Hammett was a modernist in his response to the post world-war society he observed and criticized, and his work displays many similarities to other modernists, but he was, characteristically, a modernist on his own terms, an unorthodox modernist writing for pulp magazines, just as he was an unorthodox and independent-minded Marxist, democrat, and citizen.

If, in general terms, crime fiction exists as a response to the anxieties produced by the modern, industrialized, urban environment, it attempts to mediate that anxiety
by producing re-assuring versions of the relations between the individual and society. As I have argued in earlier chapters, Poe sought to resolve his distaste for a democratic, industrialized America in his detective fiction by creating a detective figure whose independence, superiority, and omniscience ensure his freedom from the demands of any kind of affective community. Dupin is thus outside society, but capable of resolving its most perplexing mysteries. Sherlock Holmes represents another version of the empowered detective figure, but one whose function resides in affirming, not rejecting, the industrial society for which the landscape of London, in all of its labyrinthine complexity is the most obvious symbol. Christie’s work, like Poe’s, expresses a desire to eliminate the modern landscape, but unlike Poe, her protagonists are not alienated from society but are staunch members of society, guardians almost of its order and propriety. Hammett’s protagonists -- the Continental Op, Sam Spade, Ned Beaumont et al -- generally exist on the margins of society and while they are for the most part isolated and estranged from it, and its values and political systems, their interest as characters derives from their connection, antagonistic as it may be, with bourgeois society.

Hammett’s fiction thus is part of the tradition of crime fiction which grew out of and responded to the urban, industrial moment of modern history. Part of a general culture of modernism which has its most recognized representatives in the work of "high" modernists, Hammett’s detective fiction similarly explores what it means to be modern. Unlike many modernist writers, however, Hammett does not try to convey the meaning of this experience by accentuating subjective consciousness, but instead he evaluates the social and political forms modernity took in the early
decades of the twentieth century. In *Red Harvest* he analyzes the gangland violence that consumes the industrial town of Personville, otherwise known as "Poisonville", a town which as its name suggests, is supposed to be representative of any middle American town. In the following passage, the urban blight of Personville objectifies the diseased social relations of the town:

> The city wasn't pretty. Most of its builders had gone in for gaudiness. Maybe they hadn't been successful at first. Since then the smelters whose brick stacks stuck up tall against a gloomy mountain had yellow-smoked everything into uniform dinginess. The result was an ugly city of forty thousand people, set in an ugly notch between two ugly mountains that had been dirtied up by mining. Spread over this was a grimy sky that looked as if it had come out of the smelters' stacks. (3)

In one sense, the rest of the novel is an elaboration of this passage. In *The Maltese Falcon* the deceit and mistrust which erodes all social relations, even relatively non-political ones like the one between Sam Spade and Brigid O'Shaugnessy, come under intense scrutiny; and in *The Glass Key* official politics have become indistinguishable from the actions of gangsters; Senator Henry, it transpires, is responsible for the murder of his own son. As Steven Marcus noted, Hammett's fiction calls into question some of the most fundamental distinctions by which bourgeois society operate:

> The respectability of respectable America is as much a fiction and a fraud as the phony respectable society fabricated by the criminals. Indeed, he unwaveringly represents the world of crime as a reproduction in both structure and detail of modern capitalist society that it depends on, preys off, and is part of. (xxiv)

After Hammett, this skepticism toward the self-representations of the powerful, and their claim to respectability, becomes a convention of the hard-boiled poetic, and can be found in Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Ross Macdonald as well as in
the work of more recent practitioners of the genre such as Chester Himes and Sara Paretsky.

Thus, while in one sense Hammett's protagonists are as alienated from modern urban "civilization" as are D.H. Lawrence's, in another sense they are deeply identified -- and identify themselves -- with it. It is almost impossible to imagine Sam Spade or the Continental Op working outside the city. For the Continental Op the city is the locus of corruption and vice, just as it is for Sam Spade and Ned Beaumont. And while all of these protagonists feel they have a duty to rectify these ills, all of them, to a man, feel the attraction of the criminal life, not merely because of the lifestyle that the dirty money supports, but because they have grasped, as Marcus notes, that the facade of respectability that legitimate society puts up is also essentially a fiction. This is why all of these detectives adhere so tightly to their own personal codes of behavior. In a world where order and integrity inevitably give way to disorder and corruption, it becomes all the more necessary to have a stable code by which the detective figure can operate in this morally equivocal environment. As the Continental Op confesses to Dinah Brand in Red Harvest:

This damned burg is getting me. If I don't get away soon I'll be going blood simple like the natives...I've arranged a killing or two in my time, when they were necessary. But this is the first time I've ever got the fever. It's this damned burg. You can't go straight here. I got myself tangled at the beginning. When old Elihu ran out on me there was nothing I could do but try to set the boys against each other. I had to swing the job the best way I could. How could I help it that the best way was bound to lead to a lot of killing? (102)

For Hammett, unlike Poe, the possibility of mastering the city by means of a superior intelligence no longer exists; the city has now become dominant, and
threatens to crush the detective. In one sense, this motif signifies Hammett's fiction's similarity to the moment of modernity represented in literature of naturalism. And yet, Hammett's detective fiction cannot itself be considered wholly naturalistic in as much as a certain degree of human agency must be accorded to the detective figure in order for him to perform his job. That is, he can never be entirely defeated by his environment, for this would result in the abdication of his role as problem solver -- not to mention the fact that one of the most basic conventions of the hard-boiled genre is an active, physically vigorous protagonist who can give a punch as well as well as take one, as the occasion demands. Hammett's "naturalism" is tempered by a full-blooded individualism; or, alternately, it may be said that there is in his fiction an unreconciled tension between these two ideologies, one which stresses the efficacy of human effort, while the other stresses its ultimate futility. This tension or ambiguity in relation to the efficacy of human agency, this uncertainty about the potency of human effort in the face of what appears to be an increasingly dominant and determinate social reality, a determinacy represented in modern literature by its obsession with the metropolis as the preeminent locus of modern life in which everything is in a constant state of becoming and flux, propelled forward by the dynamic energies of capitalism, is but another sign of Hammett's fiction's modernism.

The detective figure's personal code, therefore, is as much a means of survival as it is an alternate mode of behavior, often almost indistinguishable from the less savory forms of behavior that the detective investigates. Ultimately the Continental Op and Sam Spade owe their highest allegiance to a workman-like devotion to a
sense of doing a job well; Ned Beaumont's allegiance, on the other hand, is based solely on his sense of personal loyalty to friends, and in particular, to Paul Madvig, one of the city's big political bosses. In this sense, the personal codes that structure the behavior of Hammett's detectives are as much a sign of the entropy that has overtaken the urban landscape of his novels as the corruption and deceit that they are paid to undo, for the circumscribed, violent, emotion-less lives they lead assert the ascendancy of the city over the individual. The Continental Op can work effectively in the war-torn city of Personville, but he cannot afford to have any kind of affective life, for this would leave him too vulnerable to danger. This is why he resists the blandishments of Dinah Brand, and partially why Sam Spade resists the pleas of Brigid O'Shaughnessy at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*. For the Continental Op, as for so many other heroes of American literature, the only solution -- and even it is unsatisfactory -- is for him is to flee the civilization represented by Personville.

In his famous essay on Hammett, Steven Marcus called attention to another modernist trait, what he called "the ethical irrationality of existence, the ethical unintelligibility of the world" (xvii). It could be argued that Hammett made this an intrinsic aspect of hard-boiled fiction in that he created a genre committed to the posing of questions. Irving Howe has argued that modernism as a literary formation can be defined in terms of its obsession with questions, unlike the Victorians (or the formal English novel of detection) which he sees as obsessed with answers. Like many high modernist heroes (and anti-heroes), Hammett's detective figures are obsessed with questions, questions that have more to do with the fundamental issues
of existence in the modern world in which, as Marx pointed out, "everything is pregnant with its contrary" rather than with the purely local problems of who killed whom with what.

In The Glass Key, for instance, Hammett grapples with institutionalized corruption as a social and political force in American society during the Depression. Hammett's exploration of the role of the individual in this society is complicated by his choice of protagonist. Ned Beaumont is the lieutenant of the political boss, Paul Madvig. As such, he participates in the manipulation of big-city politics that the Continental Op, for example, attempts to end in Red Harvest. The Glass Key resembles the novel of big-city politics as much as it does classical hard-boiled fiction. At the center of the novel is the political career of Senator Henry, who at the start of the novel, is running for re-election. The city's political boss, Paul Madvig, supports the candidacy of Senator Henry; in return, Madvig hopes to marry the Senator's daughter, Janet Henry. Paul Madvig's power and ascendancy is due in large part to the political acumen of his right-hand man, Ned Beaumont. When Senator Henry's son, Taylor Henry, is murdered, political tensions escalate in the city. While the Senator's opponents see an opportunity to discredit the incumbent, some of Madvig's henchman begin to betray their leader because they think that Madvig is the murderer. Madvig's troubles are compounded further when a rival gangster and ward-boss makes a bid to challenge Madvig's ascendancy. Ned Beaumont is made special investigator by the district attorney's office to get to the bottom of Taylor Henry's murder. In the end, surprisingly, Madvig admits to the murder but Ned doesn't believe him. Deducing that Madvig is only protecting
someone else, Ned then accuses the Senator of murdering his son, Taylor Henry. After trying to shift the blame on to Madvig, Senator Henry admits that he killed his son accidentally, while in a fit of rage. The novel ends with the departure of Ned Beaumont and Janet Henry, and the poignant acceptance of this relationship by Madvig, who remains loyal to Ned Beaumont despite the fact that Beaumont is leaving with the woman he loves.

Within hard-boiled detective fiction Beaumont is thus an unusual and complex character to have as a protagonist -- an amateur detective who sanctions political corruption at the same time that he uncovers more virulent forms than his own personal morality allows him to condone. In creating an obviously flawed detective in Beaumont, and in placing him in a situation that calls attention to a compromised social and political order, and the dilemma of the individual in that system, Hammett is able to question some of the most basic conceptions of morality at the same time that he destabilizes some of the most common assumptions about detective fiction. While Hammett's fiction doesn't offer any answers to the questions it raises, in one sense it doesn't matter, as Sinda Gregory observes:

Hammett's plots, then, and the overall structure of his novels satisfy genre conventions by answering the questions that must, by definition of the form, be raised (who is the murderer? how was it done, how was the solution found?) while at the same time they nullify through irony and paradox the validity of those answers. (14)

It is partly this open-endedness to his fiction, this refusal to yield to pat answers and easy solutions, that marks his work's affiliation with the ideology of modernism. Hammett brought detective fiction into the modern world, and not merely by seeming to be more realistic as Chandler believed, but by introducing this
ideology into the genre. In part, he achieved this by undermining some of the
oppositions typical of detective fiction. To paraphrase Gregory, Hammett not only
brought detective fiction to a new level of technical and artistic achievement, but he
also inaugurated the anti-detective novel: his fiction dissipated the binary oppositions
of detective/villain, good/evil, and order/disorder that characterized the rational
moralism of the formal English novel of detection (13). This ideology was
relativistic inasmuch as it did not subscribe to any absolute world view (except its
own -- another characteristic of modernist works) -- but it is not relativistic in
regard to the social reality it evaluates. In this matter, hard-boiled detective fiction
as a genre is critical, critical of civilization, of bourgeois law and property, and
ultimately of the ideologies which assert that there is an absolute distinction between
the criminal and the law-abiding citizen. Like any other fiction, hard-boiled detective
fiction is a linguistic construct; although it lays claim to being "realistic" it is no
more so than the classic English novel of detection. Both are regulated by the
demands of the genre, both are conventional (although they adhere to different
conventions), both are stylized versions of ordinary speech. Hammett’s fiction
pretends to use more ordinary English -- and indeed one finds registers of English
that one doesn’t find in Christie’s novels -- but these registers have been reworked
and tailored into a stylized version of lower-class speech. The tough-guy speech in
hard-boiled fiction, like the genteel diction of the classic English detective story, is
a literary representation of types of ordinary discourse, but there is nothing natural
about it. Take, for example, the famous first line of Red Harvest: "I first heard
Personville called Poisonville by a red-haired mucker named Hickey Dewey in the
Big Ship in Butte" (3). Few tough guys, or for that matter, novelists, have the sense of pace, slang, alliteration and syntactic control that Hammett demonstrates here. And while some critics argue that this sense of style gives his fiction the density and richness characteristic of modernism, a modernism which as Roland Barthes claimed in *S/Z* was distinctive in its being self-reflexive or "writerly" (scriptible), Hammett's style also is oriented "outward", toward an assessment or evaluation of society. It is to this role of language in his fiction that I now want to look at more closely.

**Hammett's Evaluative Realism**

Unlike the nineteenth-century classic realist novel, Hammett's fiction has very little description of external reality. Most of his fiction consists of dialogue, and it is through dialogue that Hammett establishes the outlook of his protagonists. The element of social evaluation in his fiction is thus mediated through language, the language of his protagonists. The judgments are never direct, but remain implicit and indirect. They are typically made in terms of the individual. Hammett's modernism is consonant with the notion of evaluative realism that Raymond Williams adumbrates in "Realism in the Contemporary Novel." To quote Williams again: "When I think of the realist tradition in fiction, I think of the kind of novel which creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons" (Williams, *Long Revolution* 277). Williams's theory of realism as a flexible mode of representation with many styles opens up new ways of seeing
Hammett’s fiction, indeed much of the American hard-boiled school of detection. My contention here is that Hammett’s fiction exists as a literary response to the moment of modernity in the twentieth century defined by urban capitalism; and while it is ideologically modernist, by availing of the negative capability of realism, his fiction is able to critique of the dislocations of modernity. Hammett’s fiction remains intellectually and emotionally compelling, however, because that critique is made "in terms of the qualities of persons" and is not imposed as an abstract, tendentious schema on the narrative; on the contrary, the critique arises out of the tensions within the narrative. As an example of Hammett’s evaluative realism, I offer the following passage from The Glass Key. The passage presents a heated exchange between Janet Henry and Ned Beaumont near the end of the novel:

She asked: "Why don’t you like Father?"
Because," he said hotly, I don’t like pimps."

Her face became red, her eyes abashed. She asked in a dry constricted voice: "and you don’t like me because --?"

He did not say anything.
She bit her lip and cried: "answer me!"

"You’re all right," he said, "only you’re not all right for Paul, not the way you’ve been playing him. Neither of you were anything but poison for him. I tried to tell him that. I tried to tell him you both considered him a lower form of animal life and fair game for any kind of treatment. I tried to tell him your father was a man all his life used to winning without much trouble and that in a hole he’d either lose his head or turn wolf. Well, he was in love with you, so--" He snapped his teeth together and walked over to the piano.

"You despise me," she said in a low hard voice. You think I’m a whore."

"I don’t despise you," he said irritably, not turning to face her. Whatever you’ve done you’ve paid for and been paid for and that goes for all of us." (585)
This passage represents both the emotional climax of the novel and the culmination of its social evaluation. At its most obvious, the scene discloses the rising sexual tension between Ned Beaumont and Janet Henry. This disclosure, interestingly, occurs at the same time as the reader learns the full extent of the corruption of city politics and its morally debilitating effects on the citizens, particularly the Senator. As it transpires, the Senator, the civic leader of the community turns out to be the most ethically base, for not only is he responsible for the murder of his own son, but he also was willing to kill Paul Madvig in order to protect his secret and his career. Thus, the emotional denouement and the moment of sharpest social criticism coincide in the Glass Key and are interdependent on one another.

Without the social criticism implicit in Beaumont's comments, the sexual confrontation would not be so charged, inasmuch as it lends the scene an emotional energy, an energy generated by Janet Henry's realization of the various forms of betrayal in her life: Senator Henry has betrayed his son by killing him; he also betrays his daughter by using her as bait for Madvig; conversely, Janet Henry betrays Paul Madvig and her own integrity by colluding in her father's plans. Janet's anger and frustration reaches its peak when she realizes the cost of these betrayals in terms of her own integrity and the lost integrity of her father. Similarly, without the romantic, emotional element represented by the confrontation between Ned and Janet, the political critique would be arid and abstract. The passage thus shows that Hammett achieves his evaluation of the "quality of a whole way of life" by indicating in fictional terms the way in which the political has perverted the personal. Part of this evaluation consists of a criticism of class relations, relations
which during the Depression assumed a more prominent character as divergences in wealth and class became more pronounced. Much of Ned Beaumont's criticism of the Henrys is rooted in his belief that they assumed an attitude of class superiority to Paul because he came from a lower class. As he says bitterly to Janet Henry: "I tried to tell him you both considered him a lower form of animal life and fair game for any kind of treatment" (585). It is significant that part of the criticism made of city politics and urban life in general in *The Glass Key* is made against the pretensions that are enabled by, and thrive in, a class-based society. This is significant because the criticism is made by a character who has wittingly participates in the manipulation of the political system, and who therefore cannot claim any moral ascendancy over anyone. In this sense, crime as such is not criticized. The notion implicit in Hammett's work that accounts for this is that crime is in one sense democratic and entrepreneurial: it can make those excluded by class society financially and politically as powerful as those who have benefitted by class division. Moreover, Hammett's complex moral vision grants criminals a kind of integrity: they may be criminals, but they don't pretend to adhere to ethical standards that they can't maintain. They thus have an honesty lacking in legitimate society which hypocritically condemns criminals and yet sanctions and participates in illegal activities ranging from the relatively minor (bootlegging) to the very serious -- the undemocratic manipulation of the political system by the business community, the underworld, the politicians and the police. By these standards, class society is both hypocritical and covertly criminal, but unlike the underworld it is not susceptible to change by the criminal-entrepreneur but maintains its identity and
power by seeing itself as morally superior, even while it punctiliously supports an inherently biased social order. Senator Henry thus stands as the most egregious example of this middle-class hypocrisy. In *The Glass Key*, as in Hammett’s other fiction, the detective figure navigates in this seedy, morally-equivalent environment. Yet environment in the hard-boiled detective story never translates into moral equivalences: the city may be the locus of crime, and may be run-down and shabby, but it is no more or less corrupt than the well-kept houses of the well-to-do, as the famous opening description of the Sternwood mansion in Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* attests. Hard-boiled fiction starts from the assumption that everyone’s point of view is a fiction or an ideology, and is particularly suspicious of bourgeois claims to represent a morally transparent order that the reader can take straight without having to read it as a fiction.

This hermeneutic of suspicion in hard-boiled fiction assails a central tenet of institutionalized high modernism: that is, the modernist work’s claim to be autonomous. Instead, hard-boiled fiction revels in its negative capacity, in its conventional tendency to evaluate the post world war I urban American experience of modernity. While it does not make any pretense toward documentary truth, it is oriented toward an evaluation of this reality, and this suggests that Hammett’s fiction does not see itself as a purely self-reflexive autonomous work of art, detached from the time and place of its production, but it sees itself as engaged with contemporary society, as a part of it. The dialogic nature of Hammett’s fiction thus goes against the grain of that brand of high modernist aesthetics which generally claimed an autonomous status for genuine modern art.
One of the most obvious ways in which Hammett’s work violates this precept of modernism is through his use of language. By incorporating slang, wisecracks and more colloquial, vernacular registers of English, Hammett not only extends and enlarges the creative possibilities of detective fiction and fiction in general, but he also showed the possibilities for writing in a modernist mode using the language of the streets. The language of Hammett’s fiction asserts the dialogic nature of his fiction, its relations to society. Far from being independent of society, Hammett’s hard-boiled fiction indicates the linguistic resources available in colloquial speech. Even the colloquial language in Ned Beaumont’s speech quoted above -- "I don’t like pimps" and "only you’re not all right for Paul, not the way you’ve been playing him" -- is asserting a kind of connection with ordinary life that some modernist writers, but many modernist critics, eschewed. Indeed this connection with lower and working class life, as well as with the criminal underworld, which is expressed in stylized version of those discourses, is used to make a political point. Tough-guy speech shows irreverence for authority at the same time that it establishes the hero’s disdain for bourgeois norms. So when Ned Beaumont labels Janet Henry’s father a "pimp," Hammett is establishing, among other things, Beaumont’s individualism: he is both uninhibited and independent in relation to authority. Hammett’s use of language thus contains a class element which Hammett uses to criticize class society. While the hard-boiled world is made up of lower-class criminals and crooks, Hammett uses their language to impugn the pretensions of legitimacy, morality and ethical behavior that characterize middle-class characters in his novels. Thus, the slang and colloquial language within Hammett’s fiction
exists as a marker between the "honest" crooks -- the class defined as criminal by bourgeois law -- and the "dishonest" crooks, which for Hammett includes virtually all of the middle classes.6

Unlike Poe, however, Hammett's language does not express a coherent vision of knowledge. There is for him no master epistemology such as rationalism which will allow him to solve the dilemmas he is presented with, partly because the problems he engages are not limited to the solving of a whodunit: a crime in hard-boiled fiction always signifies the presence of a wider, social or political malaise of which the corpse is merely the signifier. Ultimately, there can be no solution to a crime, because crime is not extrinsic to the system, but intrinsic, part of the system. Even if the detective discovers the identity of the murderer, the implications of the crime extend far beyond the matter of a mere corpse and are so endemic that they are, finally, intractable. If in the English formal novel of detection, the resolution of the crime exonerates to some extent society, in hard-boiled detective fiction the ending almost invariably suggests the whole-sale corruption of society. Individuals may be exempt, but the social order stands condemned. In The Glass Key, as with most hard-boiled fiction, society itself is essentially unknowable. Nothing is what it seems; everyone and everything is tainted in some way; every institution is compromised. Ned Beaumont's statement that "Whatever you've done you've paid for and been paid for and that goes for all of us" (585) is only the acknowledgement of this ineluctable fact of life in hard-boiled fiction. This is why the endings of Hammett's fiction often describe the departure of the detective figure from the city he has investigated. The only thing the hard-boiled dick knows for
sure is that you can run, but you can’t hide.

Another crucial difference between the English gentlemen-detective and the American hard-boiled detective is that the latter’s presence usually marks the recognition of the crime; indeed, frequently he is himself deeply implicated in the crime. By contrast, the gentleman-detective -- Hercule Poirot or Peter Wimsey, for example -- arrive at the scene of the crime long after the original crime has been committed and they set to work solving it, secure in the knowledge that ultimately intellect will triumph over evil. Rarely does his mere presence initiate a murder or set in motion a chain of effects which results in the crime that the novel will untangle. Even more rare is it to find that the gentleman-detective has involved himself sexually with another character. Yet casual liaisons of this sort are quite common in hard-boiled detective fiction -- while Sam Spade may not think it is good business practice to let Brigid O'Shaughnessy off the hook, he is not above sleeping with her. This might lead one to conclude that the sexual politics of the hard-boiled school diverge radically from the sexual politics of the classic English detective story, and in many senses this is true. But there are, however, startling similarities. One of the most striking of these is the empowered position of men in detective fiction.

With the exception of Nora Charles in The Thin Man, all of Hammett’s detectives are men. They are all capable, physically able, and tough (as well as sentimental). Some of them, like Ned Beaumont and Sam Spade are both intellectually and sexually vigorous. Their superiority does not arise primarily from their cleverness, although they are that too; rather, their superiority arises from the
fact that they have grasped fundamental truths about society that few other people do. Other people often know as much or more about this or that murder than the detective, but he alone sees the corpse as the signifying presence of institutionalized social corruption. He sees the crime not as a localized incident, but as a social phenomenon, implicating and involving every level of society. In short, they see ideology as myth.

On the other hand, when women are not sultry seductresses, they are supplicants, most often supplicants after knowledge: this is the subtext of the scene between Ned Beaumont and Janet Henry. Beaumont is not telling her here the identity of the murderer. The whodunit aspect is important -- he tells her of the identity of the murderer in a previous scene -- but more important than that is the scene above in which Janet seeks after a more comprehensive knowledge of her situation and her relations with others. Significantly, it is to Beaumont that she turns. At one level, then, this ending to the novel reaffirms a cultural stereotype -- that men are sexually, intellectually, physically superior to women. In terms of its sexual politics, then, Hammett's fiction may be read as conservative, or at worst, reactionary. And yet the ending of the novel contradicts this paradigm. Ned Beaumont's acceptance of Janet Henry not only contradicts the conventions of hard-boiled fiction, but it also violates a long-standing tradition in American literature. As Leslie Fiedler noted in Love and Death in the American Novel, there is in canonical American fiction a strong fear of women and male/female relationships. These relationships tend to be replaced by exclusively male relationships -- Huck Finn and Jim being the paradigmatic example. In this sense Hammett's gesture toward the possibility of a
positive heterosexual relationship between Beaumont and J. Henry is -- paradoxically enough -- radical, especially as Beaumont's acceptance of Janet means the end of what has been up until then his most intimate relationship, his friendship with Paul Madvig.

In conclusion, then, it is necessary to acknowledge that the sexual politics of the novel are contradictory, containing elements which range from the culturally stereotypical to the atypical. In The Glass Key, as this passage reminds us, Ned Beaumont rejects the suggestion that Janet Henry is a whore, and to this extent, he rejects the virgin/whore opposition that informs much hard-boiled fiction and much other fiction besides. Janet Henry may be culpable, but in this society, everyone else is too. Interestingly, Beaumont doesn't presume to judge Janet. He rejects the ubiquitous cultural assumption that a man has a right and a duty to pass judgement on the moral character of women. If the ending of The Glass Key is a reprise of the famous ending to The Maltese Falcon, it is clear that in the later novel Hammett has moved away from his earlier, stereotypical representations of women as treacherous seductresses toward a more complex exploration of the relationships between women and men, indeed women and society. In doing so, he not only entertained a generation, but he also enlarged our sense of the critical possibilities of modernism.
Chapter 5

Detective Fiction and Modernism

1. See Ken Worpole's Reading by Numbers: Contemporary Publishing and Popular Fiction for more on the way in which canonical writers can, from a marketing point of view, be regarded as "popular."

2. I am aware that this argument contravenes the notion that canonical literature achieves its status as a result of its own superior aesthetic qualities and has little or nothing to do with extra-literary forces. As evidence for my case that extra-literary forces do affect a text's fortunes in the world, I refer the reader to two essays by Richard Ohmann in Politics of Letters "A Case Study in Canon Formation: Reviewers, Critics, and The Catcher in the Rye (with Carol Ohmann)" and "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975."

3. For more on the failure of the European avant-garde to achieve any connection with a genuinely mass audience, see Andreas Huyssen's After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism.

4. See, for example, Dennis Porter's The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction, especially Chapter 7, "The Language of Deception."

5. See Ken Worpole's essay "The American Connection: The Masculine Style in Popular Fiction" in Dockers and Detectives for more on the liberating effects of hard-boiled fiction on contemporary English fiction.

Section IV: Postmodernism of Crime Fiction
Chapter Six
Agents and Human Agency in the Postmodern World

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory -- PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA -- it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable [of Borges'] today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but of our own: The desert of the real itself.

-- Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra"

Maps and Territories

For Baudrillard, the real is a palimpsest continually rewritten by simulacra. As such, it becomes indistinguishable from its infinite simulations. Indeed, with the notion of "the desert of the real" Baudrillard writes the death of history, for history likewise has entered the circuit of the hyperreal, in which the boundaries between the true and the false, the real and the imaginary, and the present and the past combine, and recombine, in a dance of signs, reducing all oppositions to an algebra of equivalence. Ironically, Baudrillard’s version of postmodernism is thus a totalizing one, but one which erases not only history, but the subject of history as well: "No more subject, focal point, center, or periphery: but pure flexion or circular inflection. No more violence or surveillance: only "information," secret virulence, chain reaction, slow implosion, and simulacra of spaces where the real-effect again comes into play" (273). In this respect, Baudrillard’s theory is very different from marxian
totalizing systems which have as their object the delineation of history.

Of all the so-called "popular" genres, espionage fiction is probably the most concerned with the constellation of issues raised by Baudrillard, and by much other postmodern theory. Often regarded as paranoic in structure, it is directly concerned with whether the real is knowable.1 The anti-heroic, ironic tradition of this genre, the tradition that I will concern myself with here, poses questions such as: can the real be differentiated from the models or simulacra that others have produced of it? In the covert world of espionage, what is truth and what is not? Is there such a thing as truth? Is there such a thing as external reality? If there is such a thing as truth, is it put in the service of the ethical? Can the real be signified "objectively", outside the codes that are the stock-and-trade of espionage? And most importantly, what are the limitations of, and possibilities for, constitutive human action within this postmodern, seemingly totalitarian world? Taking The Spy Who Came in from the Cold (1963) as my representative text, in what follows I shall explore the responses to these questions provided by John Le Carré's novel. Given that The Spy Who Came in from the Cold and the birth of postmodern theory are roughly contemporaneous with one another, it is not surprising that they should be concerned with similar issues. I shall offer a "map" of postmodernism, but it is not a "map" devised by simply imposing Baudrillard's theory onto the "territory" of the spy thriller; rather, what I hope to do is to articulate a "theoretical" understanding of postmodernism alongside a "fictional" understanding -- indeed we may want to refer to both as fictional and theoretical -- in order to generate a reading of The Spy Who Came in from the Cold as a postmodernist text. At the same time, I hope
to use this reading as a basis for a critique of some of the assumptions now
dominant in postmodern discourse. This "map" will necessarily be incomplete and
partial, necessarily fragmentary -- but contra Baudrillard, this seems to me to be the
nature of maps.

Vestiges of Empire

Unlike the modern espionage novel, the subject of the postmodern espionage novel
is not the threat posed to a nation by a foreign power or conspiracy, whether
internal or external, but the threat posed to individual freedom and action by an
increasingly determinate system of social relations and institutions. These systems of
incorporation have as their emblem the ubiquitous image of secret intelligence
agencies, huge covert bureaucracies with vast powers. Postmodern spy fiction thus
differs substantially from the modern spy fictions of Kipling, Conrad and their
successors. In Kim, for example, Kipling projects a vision of society defined by "the
Law," his version of a quasi-feudal Empire society held together by social
Darwinism. One of the distinguishing features of the modern spy thriller is that it
upholds this type of ideal principle; by contrast, the postmodern thriller tends to
avoid subscribing to ideals. The operating principle, instead, is expediency, no
matter what the consequences. The plot of The Spy Who Came in from the Cold
exemplifies this. Alec Leamas, the spy in the title, accepts the offer extended by
British intelligence, otherwise known as "The Circus," to participate in an intricate
plot to topple one of East Germany's most efficient spy masters, Mundt. Alec
Leamas is especially interested in helping to dispose of Mundt since Mundt destroyed the Circus’s spy networks in Berlin run by Leamas. As presented to Alec, the plan is to discredit Mundt by fabricating evidence which will make it appear to the East German intelligence organization (Abteilung) that Mundt has worked for the Circus for years for betraying secrets to the British. The hope is to convince Mundt’s already suspicious subordinate, Fiedler, that Mundt is a traitor. As deputy head of security in the Abteilung, Fiedler would have the power to convene a tribunal with the authority to try and depose Mundt. Alec Leamas’s role in this elaborate plot is to pretend to be a burnt-out, embittered, pension-less British agent who is prematurely put out to pasture, and as a result, becomes an alcoholic wreck. The idea is to use Alec Leamas as bait: the GDR’s spies in England will notice Alec Leamas’s decline, and as a former spy-runner, Leamas will possess many details about British intelligence operations in the GDR of interest to East German intelligence. Alec Leamas’s task, therefore, is to pretend to be a down-and-out who, out of necessity, becomes a traitor. The most important part of Leamas’s mission is to let slip certain details which will confirm Fiedler’s suspicions about Mundt, and will corroborate the frame-up of Mundt which the Circus already has in place.

Everything appears to go to plan. Leamas goes into a decline, and alienates his colleagues at the Circus. Very soon afterwards he is reduced to odd jobs. In one of them, he meets Liz Gold, a somewhat muddled, but warm-hearted idealist. Despite Alec’s knowledge of the dangers of the relationship, and his knowledge that Liz is a member of the British Communist Party, they become lovers. After a short time, Alec makes it known that he cannot continue the relationship and breaks it off. Liz
does not know about Alec’s involvement in espionage, but resigns herself to waiting in the hope that he will return. Shortly thereafter, he is accosted by a representative of the GDR, is propositioned, and eventually brought to a remote farmhouse in East Germany to be interrogated by Fiedler. Fiedler takes the bait, and uses the information provided by Alec to put together a case against Mundt. In the course of the trial before a tribunal of the Abteilung, Mundt turns the tables against his accuser, and by bringing in Liz Gold as a surprise witness, is able to establish that Fiedler’s charges are part of an elaborate scheme fabricated by British intelligence in order to discredit him. After the trial, in a flash of illumination, Alec realizes that all along he has been double-crossed by the Circus, used by them to protect Mundt, who is it turns out, is a highly valuable English double agent. The whole point of the scheme, it transpires, is not to destroy the former Nazi Mundt, but to strengthen his position by doing away with his suspicious deputy, Fiedler. Fiedler is arrested and after the trial Leamas and Liz Gold are surreptitiously brought back to a supposedly safe part of the Berlin wall in order to escape to the West. As Alec and Liz are scaling the Berlin wall, Liz is shot dead and falls back on the Eastern side of the wall. Alec has a chance to throw himself over the wall, to safety on the Western side, but instead he drops down to join Liz, thereby forcing the East German guards to kill him as well. Thus Alec has been double-crossed by both the East and the West.

As this quick outline suggests, by the time of the postmodern thriller, very little idealism persists; the ideals that sustained the Empire have been pretty thoroughly discredited. Alec was not only betrayed by Control -- and possibly Smiley -- but he
is also betrayed by Mundt, who apparently lured Alec and Liz to the wall with a promise of safe passage. Given Mundt's unsavory personality, this is not very surprising; what is surprising is that the morally "superior" English should willingly sacrifice the only characters with integrity -- Alec Leamas, Liz Gold, and Fiedler -- to save the murderer and former Nazi, Mundt. Or more precisely, it is intriguing that an English novelist, and a former intelligence officer at that, at the height of the Cold War should suggest that the techniques and subterfuge of the British are not any more pristine than those of their Communist counterparts. As the narrator remarks at the beginning of the novel: "Intelligence has only one moral law -- it is justified by results" (9). Much of the irony in the novel stems from its sense that the sacrifices made on behalf of the ruins of Empire are simply not worth the human cost. This awareness of the disparity between the high-flown rhetoric of Empire and the cost, in human terms, of maintaining the Empire goes back to Conrad, and extends with force into Le Carré's fiction. In the post-Suez Canal era of Le Carré, the British Empire has collapsed in everything but name, and indeed, has largely been subsumed into the American alliance. But to Le Carré, the British have lost even more than an empire; they have lost their ideals as a nation, hypocritical and self-aggrandizing though they may have been. The end of the novel thus forces the reader to read Control's claim, that the English behave on the world stage defensively, in a very ironic light. As Control says to Leamas early on in the novel:

Thus we do disagreeable things, but we are defensive. That, I think, is still fair. We do disagreeable things so that ordinary people here and elsewhere can sleep safely in their beds at night. Is that too romantic? Of course, we occasionally do very wicked things. (14)
Later, Control explains more explicitly:

I would say that since the war, our methods -- ours, and those of the opposition -- have become much the same. I mean you can't be less ruthless than the opposition simply because your government's policy is benevolent, can you now? He laughed quietly to himself. That would never do, he said. (14)

What is registered in Le Carré's novel is not only the end of the Empire, but also the end of any belief in the moral ascendancy of the Empire. As the quotations above suggest, the cynicism bred by the Cold War gives an ironic inflection to the ideals that sustained the Empire.

This loss of the sense of the moral ascendancy of Empire has its origin in the "disagreeable things" that the government does with more abandon in the post World War II era to both foreigners and English citizens. Whereas Conrad characterized society as anarchistic, lacking any sense of a shared social purpose or identity, and dominated by governmental and extra-governmental alliances, in The Spy Who Came in from the Cold this anarchy is no longer possible. In the postmodern world, that anarchistic energy has been subdued, channelled and contained. Real power has been consolidated, in this world, into two power blocs, two institutions -- the Circus and the East German Abteilung. Interestingly, this representation of world power does not correspond to the historical division of power in the post World War II era, in which the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. are the dominant powers; rather, the Cold War is cast in terms of the antagonism between Great Britain and East Germany, the chief allies, respectively, of the superpowers. Or more accurately, the historical conflict between the East and the West is cast in terms of the secret wars between the Circus and the East German Abteilung. Le
Carré’s dramatization of the Cold War suggests that power is indeed monolithic and corporate inasmuch as the superpowers are able to incorporate smaller, weaker countries into larger economic, cultural and political alliances. Yet, by centering his representation of the Cold War on the minor principalities of Great Britain and East Germany, Le Carré succeeds in conveying a sense of the life and political destinies of these two countries which also suggests that there is another dimension to the Cold War struggle, and other players in it, than just the superpowers. It is partly this sense of the international complexity of the Cold War that gives Le Carré’s novel its sense of authenticity.

In the case of both the Circus and the Abteilung, there is the facade of a government for the people -- in the case of Great Britain, this facade takes the form of a liberal democracy; in the case of the GDR, centralized, authoritarian Communism -- but for Le Carré, both political systems exist as window dressing for the secret intelligence agencies. For Le Carré, governmental politics are a fiction written by the intelligence world for the consumption of that country’s population.

In The Secret Agent Conrad projected a vision of a fractured society, riven by competing interests, a vision of a corrupt government and a divided community. Indeed, for him there is no genuine community. In The Spy Who Came in from the Cold just the opposite situation obtains. Le Carré’s novel projects a grotesque version of the "knowable community," for his community is incorporated, secretly monitored and regulated to a large extent by intelligence agencies of the state. Not quite Orwellian in the degree to which the state determines the actions of its citizens, Le Carré’s community nevertheless is all too knowable. Surveillance
enables the state access to the most intimate areas of human life — as the Circus’s cynical use of Leamas’s liaison with Liz Gold suggests. Within this monitored environment, the individual thus exists either in a state of tension and alienation from the claustrophobic, managed community around him, or else he exists in a state of ignorance. In either case, the options for individual or collective action are limited. This is as true in the West as it is in the East. Indeed, in the postmodern espionage novel, the community is no longer defined by the borders of the city, or even those of the metropolis: the community is now international. In this sense espionage fiction can be understood as an evaluation of the experience of modernity in its postmodern phase. The ceaseless change and transformation of social life characteristic of modernity found in espionage fiction gesture toward the international dimension of contemporary experience. Indeed, one might even say the breathless pace of the genre captures something of the speed and hyperactivity of the lives of urban dwellers in the age of information. At the same time, The Spy Who Came in from the Cold is able to comment on the capacity of the large corporate structures of the postmodern world to channel and absorb, or to seem to channel and absorb, the dynamic energies of modernity in order to maintain stability. For what any corporate body — for example, the intelligence bureaucracy — values above all is stability. Instability, not ideology, is the most dangerous character trait in the postmodern spy thriller. A Mundt can be renovated; an Alec Leamas, a Liz Gold, or a Fiedler cannot.

It is mistaken, therefore, to regard the postmodern spy novel as paranoic, for its suspiciousness as regards the motivation of action or behavior is not so much a
result of an internal conflict which is symbolically resolved by projecting it outside, onto external reality, (the classical Freudian definition of paranoia), but is in some sense a justifiable response to a postmodern environment in which Foucault's panopticon seems to be everywhere, an environment in which surveillance and monitoring are commonplace.2 Betrayal too assumes the dimensions of a complex moral problem: betrayal cannot be equated with treachery (as it was for, say, Kipling), for what is betrayed? If one political system is as ruthless as another, and if every political system regularly betrays the trust of its citizens by spying on them, betrayal then can be read as a moral act, insofar as it is a repudiation of a violated social contract between the individual and the government. But the difficulty with this view of betrayal as a moral act, as Le Carré shows, is that the traitor inevitably delivers his secrets to a power which is as morally bankrupt as the one betrayed. Thus the possibilities for moral action via betrayal are represented as also extremely problematic. As an author, Le Carré's solution to this dilemma is to symbolically "betray" Great Britain in his fiction by exposing the ways in which the state produces cover stories for its own amoral or immoral actions. He does not, of course, divulge state secrets, but by generating fictional models of the ways in which secret intelligence agencies operate, by exploring the tension between individual conscience and social duty, Le Carré is able to make the same point as the conscientious traitor -- but without having to alter his political allegiances. Le Carré uses the critical capacity of evaluative realism in his spy fiction to comment upon the political structures in the postmodern era that circumscribe individual action. That any form of realism should find its way into a postmodern text, seems
on the face of things to be anomalous at best, and anachronistic at worst. But as Fredric Jameson has suggested in "Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism," one of the characteristic features of postmodern art is its "aesthetic populism" (54). Eschewing the stigmatization of popular culture, postmodern literature takes whatever literary modes of representation and techniques it finds most suitable from literary history, regardless of conventional periodization or traditional valuation. Thus, along with more canonical literary traditions, the realm of popular culture is opened up for "aesthetic colonization" (67). In this sense, Le Carré’s opportunistic use of realism to evaluate a post-imperial, postmodern reality is in itself a quintessentially postmodern act.

Simulacra

Simulacra are models or discursive formations (political institutions, television, film, advertising, media, even human discourse), which produce and reproduce the real. For Baudrillard, once the production of the real is underway, it not only becomes indistinguishable from the model or production of it, but simulacra quite literally become the real: "truth, reference, and objective causes have ceased to exist" (255). In *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, nations no longer seem morally differentiated. No nation is politically superior than another. The model of the West which the Circus constructs initially seems different from the East, but this does not turn out to be the case. As Alec says to Liz at the end of the novel:

Oh Liz, he said desperately, for God’s sake believe me. I hate it, I hate it all, I’m tired. But it’s the world, it’s mankind that’s gone mad. We’re a tiny price to pay...but everywhere’s the same, people cheated and mislead, whole
lives thrown away, people shot and in prison, whole groups and classes of men written off for nothing. And you, your Party -- God knows it built on the bodies of ordinary people. You've never seen men die as I have, Liz...

The Circus is, as Alec learns, ultimately, no different from the Abteilung; the West structurally -- politically -- is no different from the East. Each political system is regulated and overseen by a massive intelligence conglomerates, and because these conglomerates are identical in method, aim and structure, these political systems are also, for Le Carré, homologous. The West is more affluent, and its people enjoy more freedom than people do in the East, but within the ideology of the novel, these obvious differences are not as decisive as the hidden structural similarities between the East and the West. Truth, reference, and objective causes are no longer absolute values in their own right in the postmodern thriller -- as they are for Ian Fleming -- but they are strategic values, easily disposed of, or changed, as need be. In the postmodern espionage novel, truth and objective cause are not impossible to ascertain, but they are often obscured, if not obliterated, by simulacra. Truth is always part of systemic simulation, part of systems of information and systems of disinformation. Alec Leamas, for example, ultimately figures out the real reason for his mission, but only having already committed himself to it; his original decision was based on the disinformation provided by high-ranking members of the Circus.

Much of the narrative complexity of the postmodern espionage novel stems from the difficulties the protagonist encounters in attempting to distinguish an event from the simulations made of that event, typically by intelligence agencies with a vested interest in concealing or transforming particular historical facts. The real, as Baudrillard claims, becomes one simulation among others; and the logical extreme
of this position is that the real is reduced to an effect of simulacra. This situation is
doubly ironic in *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold* inasmuch as Alec Leamas,
for most of the novel, takes the attitude that the East and the West are not
fundamentally the same -- only to find out that in some very basic ways they are.
Indeed, the "fact" upon which his whole involvement in the Circus's elaborate plot
depends -- that he is going after Mundt in order to avenge old scores -- turns out to
be a simulation of the truth, a generated truth as it were, designed to protect Mundt.
"Everything," Baudrillard says "is metamorphosed into its inverse in order to be
perpetuated in purged form" (266).

At the same time, the postmodern spy novel arrogates to itself a *demystificatory*
function. In this, it departs from those postmodern theories which collapse history
into, say, spectacle or simulacra. One of the conventions of this genre is that history
is being made elsewhere, away from the public proclamations of politicians and the
public laws and findings of governments and their committees. Thus the postmodern
espionage thriller differs from postmodern theory in several important respects. First
of all, it upholds the notion of history as a narrative of determination and exertion
against determination. Secondly, history is not seen as an ideal and changeless, but
rather it is seen as the outcome of human choice and action. However improbably,
this genre presents history as man-made, and hence susceptible to change. Third,
history is seen as made outside the public sphere, outside the realm of spectacle and
simulacra. I will return to these points in more detail shortly, but for the moment I
want to note that crime fiction is in this sense part of a larger formation of popular
culture which purports to give the reader or viewer a rare and uncensored glimpse
into the way history is really made -- as, for example, in supermarket scandal sheets, historical fiction, investigative reporting, t.v. "docudramas," biographies, political memoirs, etc. In the case of the postmodern espionage novel, events in the public sphere are regarded as either wholly fictitious, or else as staged manifestations of covert, non-public plans implemented by intelligence agencies. It thus exists as an attempt to locate and meditate on "real" history, and not simulacra. On the other hand, it acknowledges the difficulties of this effort in a world dominated by simulacra. In this world, the individual no longer knows his place; social, political, and personal relations seem fixed, but in fact are mercurial, fluid, and subject to sudden reversals. Although these reversals are experienced as changes, they are instead the manifestation of a deeper principle of social organization which, once revealed, demonstrates that the "reversal" is not a reversal at all but merely the logical result of a hitherto unknown principle. The postmodern espionage thriller thus typically depicts the transformation of the protagonist from a modernist into a postmodernist: Alec Leamas assumes that his relations to others are known and stable, and his actions proceed from this premise. His recognition is not incidental, but an observation on the nature of the determinant indeterminacy that typifies the postmodern world he occupies. He discovers, of course, that his assumptions are incorrect, that he has been set up by the Circus in order to save a more valuable operator. It may be objected that Leamas already suspected that everything was not above board in the first place. But he never suspected the scale of the deception. He never suspected, nor could he have, that the social, political and personal relations upon which he depended were either a sham, or else were
implicated in a vast scheme of plans over which he had no control. It is equally true that Leamas does, in the end, understand his position in relation to the forces around him, but his realization is not an epiphany which illuminates and affirms his place in the world, like the one that Kim experiences in Rudyard Kipling's novel -- rather, his epiphaniac moment is ironic. He realizes that his sense of his relations (with the exception of Liz) with others has been managed and illusory. His recognition that he has no place in the world becomes quite literal in his death at the end of the novel.

One of the most frequently remarked-upon features of postmodernism is its depthlessness, its affinity for surfaces rather than depth. In this sense Le Carré's "Quest for Karla" trilogy (Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy, The Honourable Schoolboy and Smiley's People) is the paradigmatic example of the depthlessness of postmodern fiction, in which the labyrinthine complexity of events is emphasized over the development of character. Interest in internal consciousness is not absent; indeed, it is a significant part of the interest of this genre. But usually, the state of mind of the protagonist has to be deduced from his behavior and action.

In one respect, as I have argued, this "depthlessness" is not true of the postmodern spy thriller: it attempts to assert the instability of appearances in favor of a hermeneutic of suspicion, a skepticism toward accepted truths, especially widely-accepted political truths. But the mode in which postmodern spy thrillers perform this analysis rejects modernist notions concerned with developing "centers of consciousness," and the valorization of internal consciousness in general as, for example, one finds in Ulysses. It is, instead, a mode sensitized to an analysis of
external behavior, to defining the possibilities for action in a world in which action is planned, routed and organized. And it is to these possibilities -- or impossibilities -- that we must now turn.

The Desert of the Real

What does Baudrillard mean by "the desert of the real"? Not the space formerly occupied by the real, and not the absence of the real -- for both of these notions imply the presence of the real. Rather, what Baudrillard has in mind is the loss of the real by the technologies of hypersimulation: "Illusion is no longer possible because the real is no longer possible" (266). Reality -- and illusion -- have been superceded by simulacra. In this account, as I have already noted, history too dissolves into simulation: diachrony endlessly recirculating within synchronic reality-effect machines. What exists is not an illusion, a pale reflection of a full-blooded existence somewhere else. What exists is simulacra: there is no going beyond it, for inside and outside have likewise collapsed, and have been co-opted into the surface world of simulacra. The real becomes for Baudrillard an antiquity, part of the montage of images which define the world of simulacra.

Reality is thus a "model of planned infallibility" (277); and socialization is "the process in which nothing will be left to chance" (277). Although Baudrillard would not use this vocabulary, the process he describes -- the complete organization of social life by monopoly capitalism -- corresponds very closely to marxian theories of fascism, such as those put forward by the Frankfurt School. Postmodern "reality"
expresses the fulfillment of fascist tendencies which are always extant within capitalism, but which are now dominant. Within this negative utopian vision, there is no possibility for "explosion" (revolution) only "implosion" (277):

a generalized deterrence of every chance, of every accident, of every transversality, of every finality, of every contradiction, rupture, or complexity in a sociality illuminated by the norm and doomed to the transparency of detail radiated by data-collecting mechanisms (277).

Indeed, this vision of contemporary existence negates any possibility for human agency -- individuals are not only objects of simulacra, but they are also simulacra. Resistance or even negotiation are impossible within this monolithic view of postmodern existence. Individual and collective action against these regimented, totalitarian conditions are impossible inasmuch as there is nothing, for Baudrillard, to react against. The interpellation of the subject by the technologies and discourses of simulacra is so complete that seeing beyond simulacra is impossible. Again, it is interesting to note the similarity of structure and emphasis between Baudrillardian postmodernism and the theories of the "administered society" advanced by members of the Frankfurt school. Like Baudrillard they too allow little space for transformative change.

The postmodern spy thriller, similarly, is fascinated by the monolithic organizations, institutions, and systems that regulate contemporary existence -- but unlike Baudrillardian postmodernism, it asserts the possibility of human agency. This possibility is not to be confused with the romantic individualism which typifies James Bond stories and films, in which the empowered individual meets and overcomes fantastic difficulties with effortless panache. The ideology of the heroic tradition of espionage fiction insists on the final triumph of the individual over the
forces arrayed against him, even though for purposes of suspense it is necessary that
the protagonist be endangered. In this sense, the modern heroic tradition of the
espionage novel differs from the vision of the individual presented by the type of
postmodern theory I have been examining: where one insists on the powerlessness
of the individual, the other insists on his Promethean power.

The postmodern spy novel, on the other hand, does not deny the determinate
capability of the agencies and forces that Baudrillard describes; what it does deny is
that these multi-national agencies totally determine every aspect of human existence.
While choices are narrowed and determined, they do exist in a way not allowed by
Baudrillard. In A Perfect Spy (1986), Le Carré attempts to trace the full range of
influences that lead a British spy to betrayal. As in The Spy Who Came in from the
Cold, social, political, and personal factors are determinate, but they do not
eradicate human choice and action. Indeed, in A Perfect Spy, Le Carré is interested
in delineating the subtle chain of choices, beginning in childhood, made by Magnus
Pym that ultimately led to his "betrayal." Alec Leamas’s life is determined and
regulated in ways he is unaware of -- ironically enough by a putatively "liberal
democratic" form of government -- but his life story is not only the story of co-
option and regulation and determination. He is indeed co-opted, but he also
participates in his own destiny. Leamas makes two crucial decisions. First of all, he
elects to involve himself in the Circus’s plan. Granted, he is unaware of its real
purpose and is deceived about his own role. But he is not without choice, he is not
coerced in the fascistic sense that Baudrillard claims is typical of postmodern life.
The second decision is equally fateful. At the end of the novel, while scaling the
Berlin wall, he decides not to throw himself over onto the Western side. This choice results in his death, but he could have saved himself. Despite all the manipulation and deception on the part of the Circus, Leamas probably could have survived. In the postmodern spy novel, then, contingency and choice have not been eliminated from the postmodern world. Indeed, as Graham Greene suggested in *The Human Factor* (1978), in the overdetermined, hyper-regulated postmodern world -- now the "natural" domain of espionage rather than the exotic setting favored by so many early espionage novelists -- it is the human factor which is decisive: all the other variables are known, and quantifiable.

It is thus possible to conceive of the postmodern espionage novel as one which posits a dialectical exploration of determination and human agency: the individual is depicted as determined by the corporate structures of postmodernism, but he is also depicted as capable of resisting these seemingly all-powerful agencies. This is not done without cost, as evinced by the fates of Alec Leamas, and Maurice Castle, the traitor in *The Human Factor*, who ironically gains a freedom in Moscow unavailable in South Africa and England, but at the cost of losing his family. Nevertheless, the individual is not seen as a stamped reproduction of state will. Unlike the vision of postmodern existence projected by Baudrillard, the individual retains some degree of autonomy. Because this tradition within the spy genre tends to focus on the friction between the individual and his government, and the cost of this conflict in human terms, the outcome for the protagonist is usually bleak. While the characteristic tone of this tradition of espionage fiction is tragic (or melodramatic), the eulogy is not merely for the individual, but for the social order as well, which, in one way or
another has betrayed the democratic contract between the individual and his
government.

In the postmodern espionage novel, what Baudrillard refers to as simulacra has as
its corresponding formulation the sense of "a wilderness of mirrors" in which the
real is obscured by the reflections or simulations made of it by different interests or
agencies, which, for the protagonist, are almost impossible to differentiate. Yet, in
the drama of distinguishing the simulation from the real object in question, the
postmodern spy novel sustains a concept of an objective, determinate reality and a
determined, but still active, human agency. In the conflict between the two, the
postmodern espionage novel also sustains a notion of history. In showing the
construction of history in fictional terms, the postmodern espionage novel attempts
to show that history is a fiction: fiction in the sense of being radically selective, but
also fictional in the sense that it is a man-made, constructed narrative which has its
own kind of truth. The desert of the real for this kind of novel is its
acknowledgement of the necessarily problematic attempt in finding a way out the
wilderness of mirrors, but in doing so, the postmodern spy novel also affirms the
notion of history, and the possibility of locating its political truths.

Territories and Maps

The intervention of the contemporary ironic spy novel in debates about the nature of
postmodern existence is necessarily problematic for a number of reasons, but I
would argue that its formulations are ultimately no more problematic than theoretical
formulations which dominate the debate. It is true that as fiction its formulations have to be interpreted, and recontextualized, in theoretical terms which tend to give little place to the formal properties of the genre. But this process of interpretation and recontextualization is also an inevitable part of engaging in the debate, if only because the debate is always in process, always changing, and never contained by any of the interventions which contribute to it. The debate about the nature of postmodernism is changing not only because the nature of postmodern reality is evolving, but also because the many developing perspectives on it to a greater or lesser extent shift the terms in which the debate is understood and thus conducted. It is in this sense that I claim that postmodern theories are also fictions of postmodernity. This is not to say that they are untrue because they are fictions -- rather, I am saying that the process of theorization relies, like the process of producing fiction, on selection and perspective. The process of theorization therefore is also a compositional one: the signs of "inner consciousness" have to be translated into conventionalized, semiotic systems or identifiable genres (understood in the widest sense of the word). The terms of translation in theory tend to be more discursive than most fiction (but not all), and there tends to be less translation in terms of characterization, setting and the exploration of the conflict between the two, but it is also true that much postmodern fiction reads like much postmodern theory and vice-versa, as anyone who has read Barthes and Borges can attest.

My aim here is not to follow the points of convergence, or divergence, between postmodern theory and fiction any further, but to simply note that the process of interpretation and composition are intrinsic to both. Having established this, I would
now like to read the fiction of postmodernism produced by Baudrillard in light of the fiction of postmodernism produced by Le Carré's popular novel. My assumption in doing so is that the postmodern espionage novel not only offers another perspective on the nature of postmodernism as a social phenomenon, but it also provides a basis for criticizing some notions about postmodernism now current. In what follows I will be relying on many of the points I have already established in relation to my discussion of The Spy Who Came in from the Cold.

While I believe it is useful to approach Baudrillard's work from the point of view of fiction, Baudrillard's work claims a very different status, the status of objective analysis. "The Precession of Simulacra," for example, presents itself as an analysis of the structure and experience of postmodern life. Baudrillard's work, I would suggest, is most problematic in terms of its elision of perspective. Baudrillard claims that the precession of simulacra has effectively destroyed perspective ("we are witnessing the end of perspective and panoptic space" 273). If this is true, from what position does Baudrillard himself write? The implied answer here would seem to be from the position of an already-interpellated subject position defined by simulacra. If this is the case, then it is clear that what Baudrillard is presenting in his theory is not so much analysis (for that genre of writing takes perspective and distance as its precondition), but an unmediated reproduction of the postmodern world -- what in other words might be called an unreconstructed version of it. In effect, what Baudrillard is offering is a reflection of the world of simulacra, a report on what it looks like. This, I believe, is the reason for his fetishization of capital, his tendency to see capitalistic relations as fixed and eternal. Baudrillard's is a
futurological world in the present dominated by commodified images and simulacra, a world in which the economic system is beyond control and human management. For Baudrillard, because the logic of capital is beyond human control, society is too: individuals are subjects to systems which dictate their lives. Man is seen as the objectified human residue of simulacra: nowhere is there any suggestion that he can gain control of capital, nowhere is there any suggestion that he can manage the simulacra systems that dominate his world. This fetishization of monopoly capitalism ultimately leads him to call into question reality itself: "It is now impossible to isolate the process of the real or to prove the real" (267).

This in turn leads to a contradictory way of conceptualizing power. Power is at once anthropomorphized and denied. In a characteristic sentence, Baudrillard writes that "Power, too, for some time now produces nothing but signs of its resemblance" (269). This is, of course, a personification of power, but a necessary one if Baudrillard's system is to be animated in any way. The problem with this theory of power is that it is a theory of non-power -- it is said to exist, it is sporadically endowed with agency and action, yet its motives are systematically unknowable, as are its beneficiaries. His notion of power is, therefore, as fetishistic as his conceptualization of social relations. Indeed, one implies the other: a notion of power as unknowable and mysterious is the inevitable corollary of any theory positing the impossibility of human management of economic and social systems.

There is, quite literally, no social differentiation within Baudrillardian postmodernism: no classes, no power blocs, no alliances -- just atomized monads existing, after a fashion, in a simulated environment. The question of who benefits
from power is not merely elided; it is denied. Since power has no discernable motive, there are no structural beneficiaries of it. After denying the existence of reality, history, the individual, human agency, and human-inspired change in social systems, the logical conclusion to this theory of postmodernism is the negation of the notion of power. Ultimately, this is what Baudrillard claims: "...power is no longer present except to conceal that there is none" (269). Like everything else, power is dissolved into the meta-reality of simulacra.

In the last analysis, (a phrase Baudrillard would not use), I believe that Baudrillard's conclusions follow from his rejection of perspective. Paradoxically, and most damagingly, this leads to a negation of everything except his own perspective. Baudrillard's theory, in other words, flounders on its own absolutism, its own quasi-totalitarian vision, and its own tacit privileging of the position of the intellectual observer. If the precession of the simulacra is as determinate and all-encompassing as Baudrillard suggests, how can Baudrillard stand outside it, analyze it, and make the discriminations he does? The logical conclusion to Baudrillard's theory is the complete penetration of human consciousness by simulacra. If this were the case, Baudrillard would be unable to take the distance he does in attempting to describe and analyze it.

Baudrillard's epistemological position, as exemplified by this valorization of the intellectual observer, is a rationalistic one: although his theory posits the complete subjugation of human consciousness by the social system, or its decentered remains, the theory confers upon the mind of the authorial observer a special status, an exemption from the domination of simulation which obtains everywhere else.
Reasoning, and not historically-based modes of analysis, is regarded as the source of all knowledge. Some of these features -- the death of the subject, history, and reality; the tendency to eschew historical detail and social analysis in favor of abstract reasoning; the fetishization of capitalistic relations and the contradictory affirmation and denial of power -- are motifs of postmodernist theory in general. Although Foucault's work, for example, is broadly "historical," and has a quite different emphasis from Baudrillard's, many of these features can be found in his analyses of the totalizing systems (prisons, mental asylums, sexuality, etc) which he argues have determined Western civilization since the eighteenth century. These postmodern theories have led to a problematizing of notions often assumed to be true in other theoretical discourses, and have stimulated re-thinking on virtually every level of theory. French postmodernist theory, in particular, has succeeded in revolutionizing contemporary notions of space and time. It is also sensitive, as few other intellectual formations are, to the pleasures, and the pleasure systems, produced by the postmodern society, as the work of Barthes, Debord and Deluze and Guattari attests. While these conceptual transformations (and my list is by no means complete), have been invaluable, the rejection of certain concepts, such as history, seems to me to be debilitating insofar as it leads to a loss of perspective: whether by simulacra, or by spectacle or by the panopticon, the subject is dominated by contemporaneity, quite literally lost in it. What is sacrificed is the analytical equipment by which contemporaneous experience can be placed in a historical context, analyzed and then, at least partly, understood. The death-of-history strain of postmodernism has to a very large extent internalized the totalizing
ideologies of late twentieth-century monopoly capital, which subliminally, and sometimes overtly, suggest that resistance and opposition are impossible. At least one current in postmodern theory, therefore, concurs with the world of monopoly capital in that incorporation into this rationalized world system is the only available option.

The postmodern espionage novel, as we have seen, takes a very different position. Its opportunistic use of perspective -- both the narrator's perspective on reality created in fiction, and more generally, the historical perspective on postmodern reality afforded by this mass cultural form -- allows it to make discriminations and evaluations which, as we have seen, some postmodernist theories, ironically enough, deny themselves from the outset. In its dramatization of the conflict between determination and human agency, the postmodern espionage novel suggests the primacy of history in human experience, and by dramatizing the making of this history, the genre does not so much offer a way of escaping from reality, as a way of returning to it through the heightened possibilities of narrative.
Chapter 6
Agents and Human Agency in the Postmodern World

1. In Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Culture, Jerry Palmer, for example, argues that as a genre the thriller is paranoid inasmuch as it offers a paranoid representation of the world. See especially Chapter Three, "Competition and Conspiracy: Paranoia as Ideology."

2. For more on Freud's theory of paranoia, see "On the Mechanism of Paranoia (1911)" in his collection of essays entitled General Psychological Theory. Also see his Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, esp 423-429. For an interesting discussion on paranoia in another genre identified as a "popular," see Carl Freedman's "Towards a Theory of Paranoia: The Science Fiction of Philip K. Dick."

3. For more on the unifying aspect of the spectacle, see Guy Debord's The Society of Spectacle.

4. For more on the way in which consciousness is constituted by signs, see V.N. Volosinov's Marxism and the Philosophy of Language, esp. Chapter 3 in Part I, "Philosophy of Language and Objective Psychology."
Conclusion: Postmodern Fictions of Crime

"Things did not delay in turning curious."

-- Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49

In this last part of my study, I would like to explore what it means to assimilate the large and heterogeneous concept of "postmodernism" to the equally vast literary territory occupied by "crime fiction." Although doing this subject justice would require a book-length study, I want to at least suggest an understanding of postmodern crime fiction within the theoretical framework I have established so far. Three questions seem central. What does it mean to refer to a body of writing as "postmodern crime fiction"? How does postmodern crime fiction treat the power-knowledge connection that has been such a dominant feature of detective and espionage fiction from Poe to Le Carré? And lastly, what is postmodern crime fiction's posture toward the real (or external reality)?

The text I will use as my point of reference is Thomas Pynchon's novel, The Crying of Lot 49. In one sense this is a problematical text to use as an example of a postmodernism, for its "difficulty" and density of language would seem to identify it with high modernism. As Richard Poirier has observed in The Renewal of Literature:

modernism is to be located as it commonly is -- in ideas about cultural institutions or structures of life -- but also in two related and verifiable developments discussed at several other points in this book: first, in the effort by a faction of writers to promote the idea that in twentieth-century literature difficulty is particularly necessary and virtuous, and second, in the connivance of readers, that the act of reading ought to entail an analogous degree of difficulty, attributable, again, to cultural dislocations peculiar to this century (98).
The Crying of Lot 49 meets this criterion -- in many passages, the reader is compelled to backtrack in order to locate the meaning of Pynchon's long, abstract, often strangely lyrical sentences. And yet, in another sense, Pynchon's novel is unmistakably postmodernist insofar as it attempts to violate some of the most widely-accepted tenets of modernist aesthetics. If, for the moment, we return to the most privileged of these tenets, namely, the modernist notion of the superiority of high culture over low (or mass culture), then The Crying of Lot 49, with its absorption of the hard-boiled California detective novel of Hammett and Chandler, at the level of form, transgresses this boundary. Another tenet of modernist aesthetics -- or at least one version of it codified by a "faction" of writers and critics -- that art and life are fundamentally opposed, and that art exists as a refined retreat from the banalities and crassness of modern existence (recall Wallace Steven's famous dictum that "Reality is a cliché from which we escape by metaphor"), is also abandoned in Pynchon's work. Some of the most lyrical passages in The Crying of Lot 49 are poignant reflections on the refuse and waste of contemporary American culture, the rusted cars and thrown-away mattresses that for Pynchon preserve the imprint of human use, and a whole way of life.

Is Pynchon's novel then "modernist" or "postmodernist"? It seems to me putting the question in this way is to create a false dilemma -- a dilemma which artificially forces the reader to choose between one set of formal characteristics and another, whereas in fact they co-exist with one another within the same text. The point I am making is that literary modernism is not a single literary formation with a single, universally agreed-upon tradition, but it is a field of writing (and reading) practices
which contains residual, dominant, and emergent elements. The early decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of various avant-garde movements -- movements such as Russian Constructivism, Italian Futurism, French Surrealism, and of course the Anglo-American movements, Imagism and Vorticism -- which sought to problematize more "realistic" or purely "representational" modes of artistic representation. Gradually, forms of these modernisms (in some cases, less radical forms than their avant-garde progenitors) became more dominant, and after World War II, once institutionalized within the academy and museums as the dominant artistic formation, collectively formed a dominant artistic aesthetic. As Huyssen notes, the avant-garde movements had as part of their agenda a transformation of bourgeois life, the making of a "life praxis" (7) in which art played a major role. The avant-garde's revolutionary impulse was thwarted by the rise of Nazism and the dislocations of World War II. Afterwards it was usurped by an established mass culture industry which, ironically, established a "life praxis," but one altogether different from the one imagined by avant-garde artists.

By the forties, then, a de-politicized form of modernism became the dominant literary formation; realism, institutionally speaking, became residual (even while unofficially it throve in the unsanctioned realm of mass culture.) Postmodernism can be partly understood as a reaction against this institutionalized culture of high modernism. Again, Andreas Huyssen's reading of modernism is apropos:

My argument, however, is that this [modernist] project has run its course and is being replaced by a new paradigm, the paradigm of the postmodern, which is itself as diverse and multifaceted as modernism had once been before it ossified into dogma. By "new paradigm" I do not mean to suggest that there is a total break or rupture between modernism and postmodernism, but rather that modernism, avantgarde, and mass culture have entered into a new set of mutual relations and discursive configurations which we call "postmodern"
and which is clearly distinct from the paradigm of "high modernism. As the word "postmodernism" already indicates, what is at stake is a constant, even obsessive negotiation with the terms of the modern itself (ix-x).

To a greater or lesser extent, most crime fiction is in this sense postmodern -- that is, in seizing upon the possibilities of a mass-culture genre, crime fiction allies itself to some degree with the destabilization of the dichotomies that typify high modernism. Crime fiction is postmodernist inasmuch as it assents to the paradigm, identified by Huyssen, which combines elements from modernism, the avantgarde, and mass culture.

Although different in other ways, Le Carré's espionage novels and Pynchon's _The Crying of Lot 49_ can thus be understood as emergent forms of postmodernism, but forms which necessarily contain elements of modernism. Since my argument is that modernism and postmodernism evolve out of the same cultural field, it is technically possible to argue that Poe's detective fiction is also postmodern, although I would see it as a proto-postmodernism. In this context, obviously the term postmodernism is more confusing than helpful. Yet I hope that it is clear that while I argue that these texts have emerged out of the same cultural field, I do not mean to suggest that they are formally identical. Different combinations of elements, and different kinds of discourse, distinguish Poe's work from Pynchon's even though they are both mass culture forms, both fictions of crime.

It has been my contention throughout that the conventions of crime fiction give novelists a particular way of exploring social relations (and social manners), the meaning of social laws (and what it means to violate them) and the ways in which these things affect human identity and the making of history. Postmodern crime
fiction also attempts to make these kind of connections, but it emphasizes the
difficulty of doing so in an environment of indeterminacy. Some crime novelists,
such as Ruth Rendell, write not so much "whodunits" as "whydunits," the focus of
attention being less on identifying the criminal than on the reasons why he
committed the crime. Typically, this leads to an exploration of the disturbed
consciousness of the criminal. Now the techniques used here are "modernist" in that
they are devoted to an exploration of a "center of consciousness." The mode of
representation often used is classic realism. But the form of a novel such as The
Lake of Darkness is a "whydunit," a transformation of the popular mass culture
"whodunit" formula. This combination of high and low cultural elements is typical
of postmodernism. Indeed, if we take mass cultural forms, such as the detective
story, with the seriousness that once was accorded to more approved forms (e.g. the
bildungsroman) as the characteristic postmodern gesture, then the work of Hammett
and Chandler can likewise be regarded as a kind of emergent postmodernism.

This theory of postmodernism is historical in the deepest sense, since it affords a
way of looking at literary formations as conjunctural and contradictory, composed of
a mixture of older (residual) and newer (emergent) elements. While maintaining that
some formations are dominant in any given historical period, my approach does not
hold with periodizations of literary history in which a single literary period is
identified with one mode of literary representation. This approach is a messier, less
schematic, way of looking at literature, but it is, I think, a more historically accurate
way of understanding it, particularly if one is interested in looking at the relations
between "high" and "low" literary production and the cross pollinations that have
benefitted both. There is an unfortunate sense, therefore, in which the terms of analysis distort or even betray the phenomenon they are meant to engage. "Postmodernism" as a compound term explicitly asserts the supersession of the experience of modernism, when what is really at stake is its persistence within a larger cultural field in which the presence of mass culture leads to new hybrid forms, and a new sense of modernity. Baudrillard's sense of the simulacra, and his theorization of the role of exchange value, Debord's exploration of the society of spectacle, and Foucault's totalizing systems, to me are valuable ways of coming to terms with this new space, if they can be recast as allowing for the possibility of subjectivity, as well as of resistance and transformation.

The social experience referred to in postmodernist literature is not then a superannuated modernity, but an intensified version of it. I am not saying that the modernity referred to, and evaluated, in high modernist literature is identical to that in postmodernist literature; the forms modernity takes are constantly changing. My position is similar to the vision of postmodernism Fredric Jameson maps out in "Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism," but not identical. Whereas Jameson sees postmodernist reality as dominant, I believe that it is emergent, still inextricably linked with the structure and experience of modernity. Jameson gives postmodernity a kind of internal cohesion or integrity. To my mind postmodernity is as yet an emergent formation, coexisting with modernity. Ultimately, this disagreement can be understood as a disagreement on determination. While Jameson gestures in "Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism" toward the necessity of preserving a sense of human agency, his use of French postmodernist
theoreticians such as Baudrillard and Debord suggests an attraction toward the type of totalizing systems which in theory make human agency impossible.

I use the term postmodernism to signify the presence of a transformative modernity, a modernity in which "everything [that] is pregnant with its contrary" creates the "postmodern" phenomenon such as spectacle and simulacra. Just as literary postmodernism is qualitatively different from literary modernism, and yet retains elements of the modernist impulse, so postmodernity is qualitatively different from Victorian and early twentieth-century modernity, yet it too retains the characteristic combination of disintegration and renewal that for Marx and countless other writers (novelists, poets and playwrights) defines the perplexing experience of modernity.1

This sense of living in contradiction, of living a contradiction informs The Crying of Lot 49. For Oedipa Maas, the clues might be clues -- or they might not be; she might be a detective, or she might just be a victim of a plot, or her own wild imagination; the Tristero system might be an underground rebellion against the centralized postal system, or it might just be a hallucination, or even a practical joke played on her by her dead ex-lover Pierce Inverarity. It is impossible for her -- and for us -- to know for sure. One signal characteristic of the more experimental current in postmodern crime fiction is, as I mentioned earlier, this extreme state of indeterminacy. In The Crying of Lot 49, as in Robbe Grillet's The Erasers, it is impossible to tell if there is a crime, who the criminal is (if there is one), what the clues are (if they even exist), or even what kind of rationality, or even irrationality, might be applied to the situation in order to resolve the protagonists state of doubt.
To paraphrase the epigraph quoted earlier, things do not delay in turning curious. The uncertainty suffered by Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade has intensified; indeed, has become the human condition. As the narrator in The Crying of Lot 49 says:

"Oedipa wondered whether, at the end of this (if it were supposed to end), she too might not be left with compiled memories of clues, announcements, intimations, but never the central truth itself, which must somehow each time be too bright for her memory to hold; which must always blaze out, destroying her own message irreversibly, leaving an overexposed blank when the ordinary world came back. (69)"

Oedipa figures in some sense as an Everyman (or fittingly, Everywoman) in this postmodern world -- the individual who is uncertain of how to read the signs given, and unsure of what they might mean.

Whereas for Poe knowledge is empowering, for Pynchon it is not. For Dupin and Holmes, in different ways, knowledge is a form of power for both the detective figure and the author. For Poe, rationalism is a means for the solitary genius's assertion of superiority over the mass of men; ultimately, a means of liberation from affective ties and society itself. For Conan Doyle, empiricism is used in the service of valorizing imperial values and society's existing class structure. Despite these differences, for both authors knowledge confers upon the detective figure a certain amount of power. In Conrad, and then in the hard-boiled school of fiction, this knowledge-power connection becomes more attenuated. Sam Spade or the Continental Op do come to understand the mysterious circumstances that involve them in their cases in the first place, but this knowledge is not liberating. Indeed, more often than not it reveals the corruption in civil society, and the affects and limits this corruption places on the individual, including the detective figure. Unlike Dupin, Holmes, or Poirot, hard-boiled detectives are not immune from the forces,
social or sexual, that entrap their clients. They too are caught up in the networks of intrigue in which their clients have become entangled. They can understand their situation, but this knowledge does not enable them to dominate it. While hard-boiled detectives pride themselves on their wit and independence, this knowledge is tempered by an awareness of the limitations within which they must operate. Ned Beaumont and the Continental Op in *The Glass Key* and *Red Harvest* choose to leave the city at the end of those novels; Sam Spade at the end of *The Maltese Falcon* elects to stay in San Francisco, but with a cynical awareness of the price he has to pay in doing so. In the age of monopoly capitalism -- a reality figuratively represented by the Personville Mining Corporation in *Red Harvest* -- this fiction represents choices as whittled down to leaving or resignation to a status quo defined by favoritism and graft. For Pynchon, the value of knowledge is even less certain, since its reliability is always in question. Knowledge is always contingent, always incomplete. Power exists, but it is impossible to locate and is not accessible by knowledge. The environment referred to in *The Crying of Lot 49* is a world of highways, motels, and the commercial bric-a-brac and waste of consumer capitalism, which is "less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts -- census tracts, special purpose bond-issue districts, shopping nuclei, all overlaid with access roads to its own freeway" (12). Pynchon's is an environment dominated by the determinacy of indeterminacy, a world, to echo Marx, in which "all that is sold melts into air."

This brings us to the last question: What is the posture of postmodern crime fiction to the real? Pynchon represents the extreme end of the spectrum, but the
attitude expressed in *The Crying of Lot 49*, to a greater or lesser extent, approximates that of most postmodern crime fiction. The real exists, but Oedipa Maas's difficulty lies in understanding and interpreting it. Indeed, in Pynchon's novel reality has a strange clarity to it. It is fantastic, surreal environment, bereft of the traditional markers that organize space in modern cities. Thus it exists, but as a cypher:

She drove into San Narcisco on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same, unexpected astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyph sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narcisco, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding (13).

Oedipa spends the rest of the novel searching for the "hieroglyph sense of concealed meaning" to the "outward patterns" that she sees. In the process Pynchon commits the reader to the same search. The sheer indeterminacy of the clues, and the ambiguity of Pynchon's language effectively forces the reader to become, alongside Oedipa Maas, a detective as well. Although neither Oedipa nor the reader learns the "central truth" (69) about the Tristero system, both learn a good deal about contemporary America. Pynchon's version of the anti-detective novel ultimately suggests that there is no final truth, no crucial clue that will tie together all the threads of Oedipa's life. The reality of the postmodern world is its indeterminacy, its mixture of kitsch and sophistication, its sadness and excitement,
its combination of uncertainties and ambiguities that have no final resolution, but which are expressed in a novel which offers the reader a self-guided tour through the weird landscape of postmodern America. Like all crime fiction, then, The Crying of Lot 49 takes as its subject the perplexing experience of modernity, an experience which finds one of its most resonant and mysterious moments at the end of the novel in Passerine's affirming gesture, "a gesture that seemed to belong to the priesthood of some remote culture; perhaps to a descending angel" (138).
Conclusion: Postmodern Fictions of Crime

1. Jameson seems to affirm this continuity (even if he denied it earlier) at one point in "Postmodernism, or the Logic of Late Capitalism" when he asserts:

   I have already pointed out that Mandel's intervention in the postindustrial involves the proposition that late or multinational or consumer capitalism, far from being inconsistent with Marx's great 19th-century analysis, constitutes on the contrary the purest form of capital yet to have emerged, a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas (78).

Jameson remains ambiguous on this point: much of the essay could be read as arguing that modernity and postmodernity are not continuous.
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PUBLICATIONS


CONVENTION PAPERS

1988  "Modernism, Imperialism, and Dialogism?" Speech Communication Association Convention (November)

208
1988
"Joyce and Dialogism: Politics of Style in *Dubliners* at the University of Tulsa Comparative Literature Symposium (March)

TEACHING INTERESTS
Twentieth-century literature; critical theory; popular fiction; third-world fiction; Victorian literature

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

1984-1990 **Louisiana State University**

1989-1990 Instructor: -- Composition,  
-- Introduction to Fiction

1984-1989 Teaching assistant: -- English Composition  
-- Advanced English Composition

1983-1984 **Dekalb Community College, Atlanta Ga.**

Adjunct Instructor: -- Composition and Rhetoric  
-- Introduction to Fiction

1981-1982 **University College Dublin**

Lecturer (part-time): -- Medieval English Literature  
Tutor (part-time): -- Twentieth-century  
British and American Literature

ACADEMIC SERVICE

1988 Graduate student representative, Freshman English Committee, LSU

1987 Graduate student representative, Graduate Committee on Critical Theory, LSU
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate: Jon Thompson

Major Field: English

Title of Dissertation: Modernism's Illegitimate Progeny: Fictions of Crime and the Experience of Modernity

Approved:

[Signatures]

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

[Signatures]

Date of Examination:

6 Oct 1989