

THE DISMEMBERMENT OF THE DETECTIVE

A notable aspect of contemporary fiction is the increasing importance acquired by the detective as a literary figure. From World War II up to today he has transcended a narrow role played in a narrow genre to become the symbol for man's existential quest and puzzlement in the face of mystery. If science fiction is the expression of our hopes and fears concerning the future of our technological society, the detective and a new form of literary detective fiction have lately become the expression of our hopes and fears concerning the present, since mystery is not only, too obviously, in the future but, more subtly, in the present. While science fiction lacks a character typical of the genre who may embody and possibly transcend its purposes, the detective novel thanks to the multifold aspects of its "ordainer"—the detective—has progressively risen to literary prominence through the apparently paradoxical negation of its original functions.

The Poesque detective was the epitome of man's rational explanation of mystery and violent deaths (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*), the nineteenth century positivistic exorcism of eighteenth century Gothicism; the contemporary literary de-

tective is covering an opposite role—the acceptance of mystery—as he is either unable to find a solution or finds an unacceptable one. It is the same as asking the astronaut (if the astronaut really were science fiction’s typical character) not to discover in the future about the future any longer and, thanks to this, to become more of an astronaut; the recent literary detective indeed managed to stop discovering in the present about the past (the mystery, the murder) and thus became more of a detective, actually a detective in tune with today’s perplexities about the scope and possibilities of human reason.

Existentialism’s stress on the limits of human reason and man’s necessary acceptance of the inherent absurdity of his life had a crucial influence on the recent inversion of the detective’s role in serious fiction. In the forties a character like Raymond Chandler’s Philip Marlowe became suddenly one of the literary expressions of the existential man and, along with Dashiell Hammett’s Continental Op, the first significant deviation from the stereotype British detective. Marlowe is no longer the detached and hyper-ratiocinative detective, he does always have feelings and a moral judgement for his clients; his detecting process is never easy and flawless, but painstaking, while the solution is often not especially rewarding for Marlowe himself, who gets to discover things he would have preferred not to discover (think of *The Long Good-Bye*). The dingy and violent metropolitan environment of Marlowe’s Los Angeles contrasts sharply with the “British microcosm,” a country house in which murder and detection are merely bloodless excuses for an entertaining “novel of manners” (e.g., Dorothy Sayers’ Lord Peter Wimsey stories). Marlowe’s solitary and shabby life, his long waiting in the anonymous office for a client, his dignity and personal moral code exerted in vain but consistently against an impersonal and unscrupulous society were considered “literary transpositions” of existential motives.

But existentialism was, in a general sense, responsible in those years of even more disruptive literary experiments on the detective fiction genre, such as the works of Borges, Gadda and, later, Robbe-Grillet.¹ In fact existentialism, the dramati-

¹ Jorge Luis Borges’ *La muerte y la brujula* (1942) narrates the story of a detective who reconstructs the clues left by an assassin and shows up in the

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zation of a human condition refusing any system or *telos*, lies behind that loose literary movement now identified as “postmodernism” which was rising at the end of the forties. Authors such as Gadda, Borges, and Robbe-Grillet had in common a postmodern sensibility as they all defied the mythical and psychoanalytical depth of modernist writings by stressing in their works the absence of a symbolic meaning, of a finality, of a “center.” The detective novel, solution-oriented and highly structured, is indeed a negation of postmodernist beliefs; it is thus no wonder if early postmodern authors asserted—perhaps unawares—their dissent from modernism by twisting the detective novel (which anyway had the merit of being anti-mythical and anti-psychoanalytical) into a total negation of itself. The detective novel, a reassuring “low” genre which is supposed to please the expectations of the reader, becomes the ideal medium of postmodernism in its inverted form, the anti-detective novel, which frustrates the expectations of the reader, transforms a mass-media genre into a sophisticated expression of *avant-garde* sensibility, and substitutes for the detective as central and ordering character the decentering and chaotic admission of mystery, of non-solution.

Anti-detective fiction is now a widespread literary phenomenon which includes, at different levels of involvement and awareness, writers ranging from Sciascia, Eco, and Calvino in Italy to Pynchon, Gardner, and Hjortsberg in the United States. For example, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) by Thomas Pynchon and *Falling Angel* (1978) by William Hjortsberg offer significant variations of the motives developed by anti-detective fiction.

In the anti-detective novel since the detective becomes a wider symbol—man looking for an answer to the mystery of his own life—either he loses some of his professional con-

place where he knows that the next murder should occur, only to be the victim; Carlo Emilio Gadda's *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de Via Merulana* (1946) describes the shabby routine of a police commissioner in Fascist Italy in the late twenties, a sexual murder, and the inability of the police to make sense out of the “awful mess;” Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommès* (1953) is the story of a detective who knows that a murder will be committed in a certain place at a certain time and gets there to prevent it, but then is himself the one who shoots the victim.

notations or clings pathetically to them, only to be even more dramatically defeated in his detecting effort. Thus Oedipa Maas, the protagonist of *The Crying of Lot 49*, is not the usual male detective, actually is not even a detective, but simply a Californian housewife who accidentally discovers (or believes she has discovered) a monstrous conspiracy. On the contrary, Harry Angel, in *Falling Angel*, is definitely the typical tough private eye, but his professionalism does him no good. The anti-detective as a common man (or woman) indeed also testifies to the distrust of the private citizen for society as a bureaucratic system in which the police often proves itself either ineffective or corrupt. His (or her) frequent discovery (or alleged discovery) of an evil conspiracy is bound to increase the general sense of uneasiness typical of anti-detective fiction. Although the conspiracy may be plotted particularly against the anti-detective (or paranoically seen as such by the anti-detective), it is basically a conspiracy against mankind (the loss of the soul in *Falling Angel*; the loss of communication in *The Crying of Lot 49*).

Before turning to analyze *The Crying of Lot 49*, a brief outline may be helpful for the readers who are not familiar with Pynchon's novel. Oedipa Maas receives a letter by which she is unexpectedly appointed as executrix of the estate of Pierce Inverarity, a tycoon with whom she had had a brief affair. As she tries to sort out Inverarity's tangled possessions, she meets a shady lawyer (Metzger), a theatre director (Driblette), an historian (Fallopian), an inventor (Nefastis), the member of a secret society of suicides who failed (the Inamoratus Anonymous), an old man in a nursing home (Mr. Thoth), and other people who seem to be all part of a conspiracy plotted to make her believe in the existence of a widespread secret mail network (the Tristero system) connecting all the outcasts of America for unclear purposes. The Tristero mail system has as a symbol a stylized muted post horn and the acronym W.A.S.T.E. ("we await silent Tristero's empire"). As Oedipa tries to find out about the Tristero, people around her disappear (Metzger), commit suicide (Driblette), go crazy (her psychotherapist; her husband Mucho, first a car salesman belonging to the N.A.D.A.—National Automobile Dealers' Association—then an alienated

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disk jockey addicted to LSD). A Jacobean revenge play, *The Courier Tragedy*, seems to give Oedipa a clue to unravel the Tristero mystery, as the version staged by Driblette contains some lines about Tristero which are not in the official hard-bound text containing the play. Later Oedipa discovers that Tristero was a Spanish nobleman who in the 16th century claimed “by right of blood” the European mail delivery monopoly, but in vain, and consequently started a long and merciless warfare against the official courier, Thurn and Taxis, until in 1849-1850 the last Tristero followers fled to America. The novel ends with Oedipa attending an auction in which there is reason to believe that a Tristero emissary will buy the lot 49.

Oedipa Maas finds herself involved and caught in an almost unwilling investigation. She cannot help seeing Tristero’s horns everywhere and making the relative connections; perhaps she cannot help seeing everything in terms of Tristero’s clues even when the clues are not there because, once the chain of detection has been started, she cannot abandon the quest for harmony and coherence. Mystery expects to be solved. It is linked with the detective’s subconscious and with his (or her) longing, repressed and battered in everyday life, for creativity.

Tristero is Oedipa’s “monstrous baby;” she does not want it, although its existence grows into her as she goes on collecting information by talking to men connected with it. But the men thin away, “take a walk” into the Ocean (Randolph Driblette—but is it really a suicide?), slack and die off in a nursing home (Mr. Thoth), hang up on her (the Inamoratus Anonymous), and she feels so nauseated and yet tied to “her creature” that she thinks she is actually pregnant. However, her pregnancy is not the result of fertility, a real one, but rather the effect, first, of her rejecting a sterile housewife routine and second, of the sense of void and desperation she experiences when she realizes there is no way to solve the mystery of Tristero: “That night she sat for hours, too numb even to drink, teaching herself to breathe in a vacuum. For this, oh God, was the void. There was nobody who could help her. Nobody in the world.”²

² Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, New York, Bantam Books, 1967, p. 128.

When the novel opens, she is “pregnant” with emptiness and lack of communication, ripe for attempting a change. Thus it is inevitable that her detective quest is going to be for communication. The quest for Tristero becomes “her creature” in a positive way when she hugs and helps an old sailor with D.T.’s. However, communication is of course a very ambiguous business, and Tristero’s ambiguous communication is projected even in the two lections of its name (Tristero and Tryster) recurring throughout the fiction. At first simply an alternative mailing system, Tristero turns out to be an indefinable and omnipresent entity. Sometimes it seems a bond of brotherhood among outcasts, aliens, desperate people, some sort of Salvation Army for the ones beyond hope; at other times it seems definitely diabolical, a murderous “octopus” which controls everything even more ruthlessly than the corporations of the establishment. The children chanting at night in Golden Gate Park “Tristoe, Tristoe [an adaptation of the word ‘Tristero’?], one, two, three, Turning taxi [an adaptation of ‘Thurn and Taxis,’ the postal courier fought by the Tristero?] from across the sea...”³ have something more ominous and devil-ridden in the perverted innocence of the tantalizing clue they offer to Oedipa than the swift and silent Tristero killers acting in *The Courier Tragedy*. If W.A.S.T.E. means “we await silent Tristero’s empire,” the question is what kind of communication that “silent” implies. Nothing appealing: perhaps annihilation, domination (empire), regression into darkness. A collusion with the Mafia is hinted in a shady transaction (GI men’s bones found at the bottom of a lake—Lago di Pietà—after World War II and processed to make a new cigarette filter) between Tony Jaguar, who belongs to *Cosa Nostra*, and a company connected with Pierce Inverarity, whose properties are all linked with Oedipa’s discovery of the Tristero. As an alternative mailing system probably related to the financial empire of a deceased tycoon, the Tristero constitutes along with it a “State within the State,” a conspiracy slowly taking over both the official mailing system and America itself. In fact Inverarity, by his real estate speculations, amassed so much property that

³ Pynchon, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

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to Oedipa he seems to have planned to take over the whole country.

Normally the detective finds out the truth through communication, by talking with suspects and witnesses, but here communication is the center of mystification. In her conversations with Fallopian, Driblette, Koteks, Nefastis, Thoth, Cohen, the Inamoratus Anonymous, Oedipa is perhaps hallucinating, trying to see something which is not there; she may be the victim of her attempt at creation, of her "growing obsession with 'bringing something of herself'... to the scatter of business interests that had survived Inverarity."⁴

Certainly there is a connection between Oedipa's detecting effort and her possible pregnancy ("waves of nausea... would strike her at random... she thought she was pregnant")⁵ as well as between her need to create and her involvement with the Inverarity estate. Ultimately, Oedipa is "pregnant" with Inverarity. In fact, by dying and by nominating her as executrix (out of a whim or a plot) he asked her to "recreate" him, to make him live again in her necessary detection. He passed on to her a legacy and compelled her to look into something, his assets, inextricably tangled with America and with the Tristero. Everything used "against" Oedipa, to make her believe in the Tristero, is owned by Inverarity; this everything is the American life style (colleges, skyscrapers, freeways, land, residential complexes), but reshaped and recreated according to the will of a man. By his legacy Inverarity passes on to Oedipa a painful knowledge; he hurts her, but makes of her an artist and a detective at the same time. In fact, she has to inject into the legacy her longing for communication (harmony) and to sort out its tangled assets as well. She is a particular kind of artist ("Shall I project a world?";⁶ she wonders) since she works on the material of another dead "artist," Inverarity, who tried to create through possession, while she tries to create through understanding. As Inverarity's creation is all outside (owning and transforming what he owns), Oedipa's is all inside. She

⁴ Pynchon, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁵ Pynchon, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁶ Pynchon, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

tries to create harmony through mental connections, cunning, gut feelings.

Oedipa tries to make things true by seeing through them, as Pierce Inverarity's name explains and "compels" her to do (to pierce = to pass through; *inverare* in Italian = to make true). From Everywoman laying her *lasagna*, she fulfills her existential quest and finally becomes Oedipa in a chronological reversion of the myth. She is first blind and then she "sees through;" she first gets her "father"'s legacy and then "kills" him by achieving an awareness and a human compassion (the episode of the old sailor with D.T.'s) that very likely Inverarity had not planned for her, if anything had actually been planned. Oedipa's compassion and potential for creation grow along with her new knowledge of the world. Her journey is from the N.A.D.A. of the car lots to the W.A.S.T.E. of the Tristero horn in the attempt to reach another lot, Lot 49. During the journey, meanings and communication get more and more ambiguous. While we easily know that N.A.D.A. (National Automobile Dealers' Association) is ultimately "nothingness," annihilation by consumerism and mechanical routine, we are in doubt about W.A.S.T.E., threatening and mystical at the same time. When we get to lot 49, the possibilities are even wider; they range from the gold rush prosperity of California's forty-niners to a lot with a number evocative of prison camps or of those car lots haunting Oedipa's husband, Mucho, who forgets them only when he becomes an LSD addict. The result is open-endedness, suspension of the solution; Oedipa the artist and the post-modern detective quits sizing up clues and accepts mystery as her story "ends" as it started, with five words which are also the title ("The auctioneer cleared his throat. Oedipa settled back to await the crying of lot 49."). Circularity emphasizes the fact that suspense remains; our only progress is that we finally know what the five words superficially mean, what the title means. Yet, we do not know what is (or if there is) the Tristero behind the crying of lot 49.

In *The Crying of Lot 49* there is a structural non-solution (Oedipa's growth to maturity and compassion). From a structural point of view the novel, at the end, leaves quite a few possibilities open. Actually, in *The Crying of Lot 49* the reader

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is tantalized by a proliferation of clues which lead nowhere. The novel disappoints the reader's expectations and "deconstructs" conventional detective fiction by denying its main characteristics: the denouement, the consequent triumph of justice, the detective's detachment (Oedipa goes as far as questioning her own sanity). The tension between the reader and the novel—namely, the tension from detection to solution—is increased in comparison with traditional detective fiction, since inconsequential clues are often much more tantalizing than the ones which eventually fall neatly into place.

In *The Crying of Lot 49* suspense is obtained by an over-richness of clues leading nowhere and by an interplay between the novel and the Jacobean revenge play in the novel. In fact *The Courier's Tragedy* sometimes "mirrors" episodes in the novel (the GI men's slaughter at Lago di Pietà corresponds to the slaughter of Faggio's Lost Guard in the play) and gives Oedipa a first historical evidence of Tristero's existence. The reader may even optimistically think that *The Courier's Tragedy* is the key to a solution; rather, the play, as a fiction within the fiction, supplies a metafictional dimension to the novel.

The Crying of Lot 49 remains in the realm of total illusion, open-endedness even more than "non-solution." Passing from it to *Falling Angel*, there is a shift from total ambiguity to no ambiguity at all, just plain irrationality. In fact *Falling Angel* is ultimately a "marvelous" novel, as it presupposes the acceptance of supernatural intervention (the devil); instead, *The Crying of Lot 49* leaves all the ways open. Any of the four possibilities Oedipa contemplates (the Tristero is real; she is hallucinating; the Tristero is only a plot mounted against her; she is fantasizing such a plot out of persecution mania)⁷ may be true, and none of them is "marvelous," that is, none of them implies the intervention of supernatural elements.⁸ Actually, Oedipa strives to reach a middle choice, to break down these binary either/or, saved/damned alternatives that the four possibilities give her, but, ultimately, she grows to maturity be-

⁷ Pynchon, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

⁸ Concerning this concept of the "marvelous" as a phenomenon that implies a supernatural intervention, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic, A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1975.

cause she cannot reach a middle choice. She learns to accept non-choice, the mystery, and to live with it: "Next day, with the courage you find you have when there is nothing more to lose, she [decided to attend the auction]."⁹

Thus Oedipa affirms herself as a human detective when she goes to the auction and faces a mystery which ranges from total mistake and defeat (hallucination, fantasy) to total truth and victory (the Tristero is real, or is a plot mounted against her), and the final destiny of her life, her search for harmony, remains as suspended and "eternal" as the open-endedness of her fiction and of the human condition.

William Hjortsberg's *Falling Angel* (1978) adds a fantastic dimension to anti-detective fiction by developing characteristics which exist subtly in *The Crying of Lot 49*, (1966) such as a demonic presence in the novel and a conspiracy possibly organized against the detective. Voodoo, black magic, inexplicable murders, and an interesting elaboration of the Oedipus myth and of the detective-criminal duality make this novel particularly entertaining and rich in surprises.

Hjortsberg attempts successfully to fuse two genres, the hard-boiled detective novel and the contemporary horror novel, which often deals with satanic cults and black magic (e.g., William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*, 1971; Stephen King's *Carrie*, 1974). Detecting process and black magic, "rational" and "irrational," clash and merge in *Falling Angel*, and the solution makes sense only if we accept an irrational premise: the devil exists and operates among us.

New York City provides a realistic and credible setting for both the hard-boiled detection and the black magic in which private eye Harry Angel finds himself involved as he tries to trace Johnny Favorite, a crooner who vanished during World War II. Significantly, the action ominously unfolds from Friday, March 13th, 1959, to, quite ironically, Palm Sunday, the 22nd: for Harry Angel no Christ triumphantly enters Jerusalem on Palm Sunday but, rather, the devil.

The man who wants Angel to find Favorite is the elegant Louis Cyphre, who stipulated a contract with the singer back

⁹ Pynchon, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

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in the early forties. Angel's nightmares and some clues cleverly planted through the novel prepare for the double revelation: the elusive Louis Cyphre is the devil, and Harry Angel is, quite unawares, the new identity of the idol of the early forties, Johnny Favorite. In a very Faustian way, the contract concerns Favorite's soul, which the singer sold to the devil for stardom, while the many murders in the novel are the devil's work.

Hjortsberg gives the game away much before the end through Angel's nightmares. The first is about a menacing double; in the second Angel is executed in a French revolution setting (Cyphre seems to betray a French origin) by a phonily smiling Johnny Favorite, and Cyphre is part of the "audience;" in the third Cyphre mauls and makes love to Angel's new girlfriend, Epiphany Proudfoot. In the fourth, "Louis Cyphre laughed and hurled the dripping heart of his victim high into the air. The victim was me."¹⁰ Angel suffers his last nightmare the night after having discovered Margaret Krusemark, Favorite's long-time fiancée, murdered in her apartment, her chest slashed and her heart "resting in the basin of a tall bronze Hellenic tripod."¹¹ Other significant hints are that Angel remembers "only blurred snapshots from the past," namely, that he was an adopted child (like Favorite), was wounded as a soldier in World War II, went through shell shock and amnesia, was hospitalized and subjected to intensive plastic surgery (like Favorite). On New Year's Eve of 1942 he was in Times Square, just after he had been released from the army hospital. In the last pages of the novel we learn what happened that night in Times Square. Favorite picked up Angel, drugged him in a bar, killed him, fed the corpse to dogs, and, after a black magic ritual, ate Angel's heart, which was supposed to make him gain possession of Angel's soul. Through a new soul, Favorite thought to get out of his deal with the devil, "drop out of sight when he had a chance and resurface as the soldier."¹² However, luck (the devil?) did not assist Favorite. Drafted and sent to World War II, he was wounded and went through

¹⁰ William Hjortsberg, *Falling Angel*, New York, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1978, p. 196.

¹¹ Hjortsberg, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

¹² Hjortsberg, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

shell shock and plastic surgery just as the dead Harry Angel did; amnesia made him forget his identity and his new soul. His fiancée, Margaret Krusemark, and her father Ethan, a wealthy shipowner who practiced black magic, took him out of the hospital where he was, at least physically, recovering, and on New Year's Eve of 1943 dropped him in Times Square, where he had picked up the soldier Harry Angel exactly one year before. Times Square was the last place Harry remembered before Favorite drugged him; it was also the last place Favorite himself remembered since, being under shock and having the soldier's soul, at that point he was also the soldier, Harry Angel. Margaret and her father left him there, deeming it the best way to have the transmutation of souls fulfilled in a total switching of identities, and naively hoping that the devil would not recognize Favorite, who had at that moment both a new soul and a brand-new face. The contrived corresponding memories of Times Square (even the name of the place is symbolic) and of their actually similar pasts blurred in the confused mind of Johnny Favorite-Harry Angel, who on New Year's Eve of 1943 saw the lights on in the Crossroads Detective Agency office and "played a hunch which led [him] to... a job which [he] never left."¹³

The fact that the reader can guess relatively easily, through the nightmares and other hints, that Angel and Favorite are the same person and Cynhre is the devil tells us that an opaque detective plot was not Hjortsberg's main preoccupation in writing the novel. One could even consider *Falling Angel* a spoof, a crafty parody of hard-boiled and horror novels and nothing more. Rather, I would say that Hjortsberg uses a detective plot to bring out some elements implicit in conventional detective fiction and, even more, in anti-detective fiction: the existential quest, the duality of detective and criminal, the concept of time, the Oedipus myth, and the latent irrationality of the genre. He enforces these characteristics by playing them against a "satanic" metropolitan environment, which supplies the detective quest with an unsettling dimension absent in the metropolitan environment *tout court*, typical of the conventional

¹³ Hjortsberg, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

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hard-boiled detective novel.

Hjortsberg innovates the hard-boiled tradition by energizing it with magic. The existential quest typical, for example, of Philip Marlowe's investigations becomes here quite a literal and original one: Harry Angel looks for someone who assumed his existence—his identity and his soul—by eating his heart; he actually looks for himself, he must solve the crime of his own existence. In *Falling Angel* the detective and the criminal are the same person, but this is a doomed chase because neither the pursuer nor the pursued ever exist at the same time: when Favorite was a famous singer, Harry Angel as we know him now (the soul of Angel and the “brand-new face” of Favorite) could not possibly have existed; and when the Harry Angel we know is looking for Favorite, the singer no longer exists: his face has been disfigured by war and reshaped by plastic surgery and his soul is the one of Harry Angel. In his investigation, Angel goes back in time, in the attempt to find his quarry, from 1959 to the early forties, but time and magic have ironically changed the man he is looking for into himself. In *Falling Angel* there is no free time; all Angel's actions are doomed by what has already happened (the transmutation of souls) and by the fatal joke the devil is playing on him (at the end of the novel Angel is accused of the devil's—Cyphre's—four murders). Besides, the action in *Falling Angel* has already happened, it is all a first person narration (Angel's) written in the past tense; and according to what we can infer by the ending of the book, it may very well have been written by Angel serving time in an up-state prison for the devil's four murders. Angel is doomed as his story opens, in its two very first lines: “*It was Friday the thirteenth and yesterday's snowstorm lingered in the streets like a leftover curse.*”¹⁴

The sense of an irremediable past, whose sins are dooming the present, and the problem of duality are both connected with the use of the Oedipus myth in the novel. In the early forties Favorite's mistress, Evangeline Proudfoot, a black sorceress from Harlem, bore Favorite a daughter he never knew about, Epiphany, who herself became a voodoo priestess. Wickedly

¹⁴ Hjortsberg, *op. cit.*, p. 1. (The italics are mine).

enough, chance (or devil's plans) lead Angel to contact Epiphany and fall in love with her. Oedipus killed his father and committed incest with his mother; here Favorite killed Angel, assumed his identity and soul, and through them came to make love to his own daughter. In the last page of the novel, Angel rushes home to find out that Epiphany has already been murdered by Cyphre and, of course, he is framed for the devil's killing.

In *Falling Angel* the satanic plot allows something that would not otherwise be possible: a transmutation of souls, which is the source of the existential quest, of the game of doubles, of the concept of time in the novel, of the adaptation of the Oedipus myth. These themes, usually latent in detective and anti-detective fiction, are made explicit and crucial thanks to the "satanic spring" of the plot, which ultimately produces an original version of the by now conventional hard-boiled detective novel. Even the hectic and shabby metropolitan setting typical of the hard-boiled school acquires in *Falling Angel* new and unsettling connotations, thanks to the satanic atmosphere: a voodoo ceremony in Central Park at night, a black mass in an abandoned subway station, sadistic murders. New York City certainly has potential for all this, and Hjortsberg plants satanism quite craftily in an environment which responds very well to it. Also the calculated vulgarity of some lines in the novel contributes to reproduce the squalid and brutal New York setting, in which Angel must operate, and goes along with violence and satanism in the plot.

What remains in doubt for Oedipa in *The Crying of Lot 49* is certainty in the case of Angel: he is indeed the victim of a complex and sophisticated setup which has been fabricated just for him. Like Oedipa, Angel has hunches about his investigation being a setup ("Or else it was a setup. An act meant for me to catch.")¹⁵ Yet he finds it hard to explain how such an effort can be meant only for one person. But a promised soul is to the devil what a Thurn and Taxis courier is to Tristero: something on which he has a claim. Angel-Favorite's soul belongs to the devil by a stipulated pact, the postal monopoly belongs to Tristero "by right of blood":¹⁶ any single effort, no matter how

¹⁵ Hjortsberg, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

¹⁶ Pynchon, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

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disproportionate, is symbolic for the eventual takeover of the whole.

In *Falling Angel* Cyphre, as a client paying Angel to trace Favorite, seems to have the same “starting role” that Pierce Inverarity has in *The Crying of Lot 49*, as he nominates Oedipa his executrix and thus compels her to disentangle his assets and to run into the Tristero. Cyphre is one of the incarnations of the devil, as perhaps Pierce is one of the “incarnations” of the Tristero, which certainly has a satanic connotation.¹⁷

Both Harry Angel and Oedipa Maas experience the same bewilderment in the face of a “puzzle” they optimistically thought solvable by logic and cunning, by the rules of classical detection, but which instead reveals itself as a “conspiracy” going far beyond the rational reach of a single human being. Tristero and Cyphre play cat and mouse with the two detectives. After a nightmarish night in San Francisco during which she discovers Tristero post horns all over the city, Oedipa feels defeated and must admit that she was an “optimistic baby [who] had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hide-bound cops’ rules, to solve any great mystery.”¹⁸ And private eye Angel, who eventually decides to kill his client and ambushes him at the exit of the elevator which he had seen him entering, finds the car empty. The rationality of the detective method proves inadequate as it confronts conspiracy and satanism.

Oedipa must reluctantly believe in the underground world

¹⁷ As in *The Crying of Lot 49*, names have in *Falling Angel* self-mocking and symbolic meanings: Angel is no angel, the combination of tough private eye and black magic priest (Favorite); the name also ironically implies that his identity is related to his soul. Johnny Favorite, alias Jonathan Liebling, is a favorite, a pet of his audience, a phony public image with an ugly personality behind the facade. Lucifer himself was God’s *favorite*, the *angel* he loved the most before his fall from Grace. The Crossroads Detective Agency implies that the life-roads of Angel and Favorite intersect and become one. On New Year’s Eve 1943 the first act of the doubled Favorite-Angel is in fact to ask Ernie Cavalero, the agency owner, for a job. Louis Cyphre (whose name in the novel is spelled in different ways—Cypher, Cipher, Cyphre—like Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49*) has a very significant name as well, since cipher means zero and, as Cyphre himself says, “zero [is] the point intermediate between positive and negative, is a portal through which every man must eventually pass.” (p. 177). Cyphre is Angel’s “portal” from “neutrality” (zero) to damnation.

¹⁸ Pynchon, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

of the Tristero system, as Angel must accept the existence of the devil; yet the symbolic ranges of their acceptances and what they derive from them are quite different. Oedipa learns about communication and human compassion, grows to self-awareness, ultimately learns about America; Angel's knowledge of the devil is instead completely private and destructive. It is no accident that the novel's epigraph is from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and reads: "Alas, how terrible is wisdom when it brings no profit to the man that's wise!" In comparison, the scope of *The Crying of Lot 49* seems wider than that of *Falling Angel*, whose final and direct satanism is necessary to prop the whole plot of the novel. *Falling Angel*'s irrational ending does not seem to achieve that ambiguous symbolic spectrum present in the suspenseful last page of *The Crying of Lot 49*, in which everything can still happen. Suspense does not come in *Falling Angel* from a "proliferation of clues" as in *The Crying of Lot 49*; rather, it is of the conventional kind, and follows the hard-boiled fiction's traditions. What is not conventional is the satanic "explanation" at the end of the novel, because it is rationally unacceptable. While Oedipa until the end thinks that perhaps she is "out of her skull"¹⁹ and has been fantasizing about the Tristero, Harry Angel does not question his sanity; the devil exists. He passes from disbelief to belief after the elevator episode and Epiphany's murder. We may question his sanity ourselves or think he overlooked something, yet the elements that he gives to the reader do not allow any possible alternative. In fact, he tries everything to find a logical explanation for Cyphre's disappearance from the elevator; he even searches the cables up on the roof of the car and throughout the whole building; Cyphre is simply not there.

The final message of *Falling Angel* remains one of innovation of the hard-boiled conventions through a satanism in which we can believe only in strictly fictional terms. But satanism, just because we do not believe it *per se*, also subverts, by the irrational solution it proposes (which is ultimately a non-solution), the rationality we expect in a novel that until the end "follows the rules," that is, has a disturbing but logical plot. In other

¹⁹ Pynchon, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

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words, *Falling Angel* is an anti-detective novel, as it frustrates the reader's expectation by proposing a solution he cannot rationally accept. In his study on the fantastic as a genre,²⁰ Todorov makes a distinction between the "uncanny" (the apparently unexplainable phenomenon that is explained at the end of the fiction in rational terms) and the "marvelous" (the truly unexplainable phenomenon that can be explained only by supernatural intervention). *Falling Angel* falls into the second category and is especially mocking because, as one senses the "solution" in advance (Favorite is Angel, Cyphre is the devil), one thinks it is too easy, and expects in vain a final "turn of the screw" which would not rely on a supernatural explanation and thus would not break the old British detective novel rule: "No Chinaman [magic] is allowed."

However, the plot has no flaw but its conclusions, that, in the case of a second reading, must become its premise if the reader wants to enjoy the novel. In fact *Falling Angel*, to be really appreciated, requires that "leap of faith" which Kafka asks from us at the beginning of his metaphorical stories. After that, everything runs smoothly. Just believe that Gregor Samsa (*Metamorphosis*) one day woke up and discovered he had turned into a man-sized insect during the night and, after that, you will have no trouble; everything will be *real* and *logical*. Just believe in the devil, and *Falling Angel* will be a perfect novel.

As we have seen, in anti-detective fiction mystery is the issue. The mystery can be the devil's conspiracy to snatch the soul of the detective (*Falling Angel*), or a larger conspiracy, involving all the outcasts of society and still, perhaps, run by the devil (*The Crying of Lot 49*). The detective's sanity is tested in all these cases: the detective may be a housewife bound in routine, mental sterility, who tries desperately to "project (imagine?) a world" in order not to go crazy; or he may be a tough city sleuth who, because of some disconnection in his logical process and some "drowning in atmospheres," ends up believing in the devil.

Why are writers led to anti-detective fiction? In this century man has passed from the assumption that the mystery of the universe is explainable through science to the acceptance of the

²⁰ Tzvetan Todorov, *op. cit.*

mystery, as the progress of science automatically raises further mysteries and the gap between the known and the unknown increases rather than being filled. Yet, as the detective in anti-detective fiction goes from the attempt to solve the mystery to the hope to accept and endure it, she or he always discovers something (pleasant or unpleasant) about herself or himself (Oedipa, Angel), because the mystery begins inside the detective and the solution of the private mystery is the first step toward a solution (a non-distortion) of the mystery outside, reality.

What is the future of anti-detective fiction? We saw how it gives life to a “fiction of possibilities,” while conventional detective fiction always ends up being a “fiction of certainty.” Until a decade ago anti-detective fiction could easily be considered the postmodern exploitation of a subgenre, the product of that typically *avant-garde* process which absorbs and regenerates literary “pariahs.” Now, the process appears more articulate, drawing not only from an *avant-garde* revaluation of low genres, but from an awareness that the only possibly vital fiction today is allusive fiction, a fiction of potentialities. The time for easy affirmation seems long gone. Anti-detective fiction denies what the reader is accustomed to expect, justice and a happy denouement, and tantalizes and confuses him by proliferating clues and by non-solution.

It should be clear by now that good contemporary fiction and anti-detective fiction are for the most part the same thing, and contemporary fiction is the ultimate exploitation of “cheap” nineteenth-century detective fiction. Any recent good novel which holds the attention of the reader through suspense, undermines his expectations, and offers a revelation (often unpleasant) is largely drawing on anti-detective fiction’s techniques. These techniques are in turn the inversion of detective fictional techniques, that is, the postmodern negation of the centeredness and reassurance typical of the genre. In turn the detective novel, which existed in seeds much before Poe catalyzed it (think of *The Newgate Calendar*, of the Gothic tales, of Voltaire’s *Zadig*), is the vital core of man’s rational exorcism of the mystery of life through evocation of the unexplainable and its subsequent explanation.

The years during and after World War II proved a funda-

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mental turning point in the Western world: man gives up his pretense for reassuring and explainable mystery and does not any more expect to “solve” it (existentialism, *nouveau roman*). The popular current of detective fiction, after the zenith reached by the best examples of the hard-boiled (Hammett, Chandler), degenerates again into mass media and trash fiction, while the intellectual current represented by the old-fashioned British mystery, Agatha Christie-style, seems to have by now become a literary dead end. It is saved by what it still epitomizes, which is fictional order, tightly structured plot, centralization—in other words, all that postmodernism denies. So it is chosen as the perfect genre to be subverted and “decapitated” (that is, deprived of a solution) by the postmodern imagination and, paradoxically, the apparent dead end is turned into a new life by the wreckage of the formula. In fact the most important literary movement now visible, the ironic, intellectual fiction of Borges, Pynchon and Calvino is the ultimate result of the apparent *cul-de-sac* of the old-style British mystery. Thus the Poesque rules, codified in the British mystery, once severed from the “genre-centralization” and subsumed into the “free circuit” of literature, have proved to be still vital and capable of new and original combinations.

We have here a sort of cyclical situation which can be summarized this way:

1. Seeds of detective fiction anterior to Poe are part of man's needs for reassurance and explanation of mystery, that is, closely connected with life and death, basic concerns of the human mind.
2. Poe catalyzes and codifies the irrational and rational attitudes toward mystery in his new invention, the detective story, in which the rational explanation of the mystery supersedes the exorcism of mystery through “irrational” reevocation (typical, for example, of the Gothic tales).
3. The intellectual and popular currents interact in detective fiction and one dominates the other according to the moral and social concerns of each epoch (e.g., Victorian morality and positivism: stereotyped and puzzle-like British detective fiction).

4. Postmodernism does the contrary of what Poe did one hundred years before: it decentralizes, deconstructs the old rules, which had already been undermined by the hard-boiled school and Naturalism. The “detective fiction machine” is subverted (*The Crying of Lot 49*), at times even totally pulled apart and used piece by piece (any good fiction taking advantage of some detective novel techniques such as mysterious death of a character, suspense, an unreliable narrator, the search for a mysterious object—think, for example, of John Hawkes’ *The Blood Oranges*). One may go so far as to say that whenever there is an unreliable narrator (and in contemporary fiction there is almost always an unreliable narrator), there is potential or actual anti-detective fiction, that is, a fiction which in an original way exploits and subverts conventional detective novel techniques. In fact detective fictional rules, precisely because severed from the “genre-centralization,” are restored to fiction in general and become the ground on which authors may write literary detective fiction. Thus, paradoxically, contemporary literary fiction is the result of the wreckage and decentralization of the “low” detective novel’s code. Largely, any good contemporary fiction is basically an anti-detective fiction, the ultimate “grinding” (inversion or even “pulverization”) of the Poesque rules.

5. We go back to the beginning. The detective and detective-like concerns are no longer constricted within a set of rules (Poe). Anti-detective fiction restores and assimilates them to twentieth century man’s acceptance of the non-logical in everyday life. Once decapitated by the non-solution, detective rules no longer epitomize a genre but a contemporary attitude toward life as a mystery to be accepted. This will be so until these rules are eventually subsumed, reinterpreted, recycled (codified?) by a new epoch, a new attitude toward life and its mystery.

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