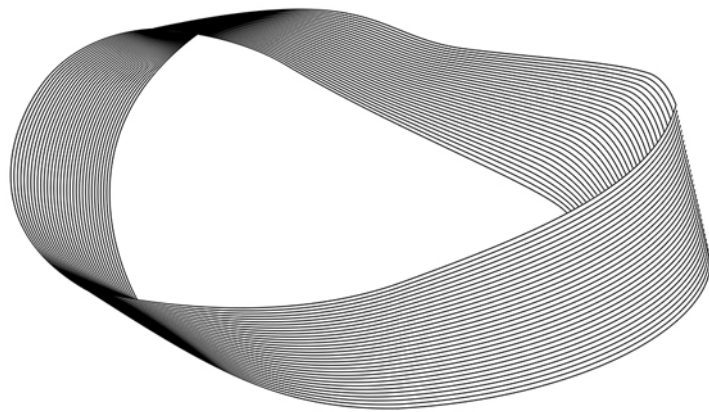


# **‘Truth Detectives’**

## The Philosophy of Metaphysical Detective Fiction



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Möbius strip (see *Molloy*)  
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## Abstract

Metaphysical detective fiction is a rarefied sub-genre that appropriates formal aspects of popular detective stories to explore metaphysical ideas. Works that constitute this form of fiction use these aspects to pose philosophical questions about existence: about subjective experience, about identity, and about our relationship with reality. In particular, these narratives immerse the detective in a world constructed from elements of the Gothic and mystery genres, to challenge our understanding of meaning and notions of ‘truth’, raising more questions than they attempt to answer.

Mapping the genre from Poe to Pizzolatto, this thesis identifies Kafka’s *The Trial* as a key precursor to Borges’ “Death and the Compass” (1942), Nabokov’s *The Eye* (1930), and Beckett’s *Molloy* (1951), in terms of the exploration of the metaphysics of identity. In addition, *The Trial* is used as a meta-text to examine the disruption of ordered reality in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Robbe-Grillet’s *The Erasers* (1953), and DeLillo’s *Players* (1977). Auster’s exemplary novel *City of Glass* (1985) is then read in the context of Poe’s “William Wilson” (1839) and “Man of the Crowd” (1840), and interpreted alongside a close reading of Beckett’s *Molloy*. Finally, Nic Pizzolatto’s *True Detective* (2014) is identified as the most recent example of metaphysical detective fiction, marking a translocation from page to screen, into contemporary popular culture. This thesis defines the parameters of a (sub-)genre that evades categorisation, and conducts a detailed exploration of metaphysical detective fiction as a contribution to philosophy.

## **Statement of Certification**

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Research at Macquarie University. I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and that I have given fully documented reference to the work of others. The thesis has not previously, in part or in whole, been submitted for assessment in any formal course of study.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'M' followed by a long horizontal line.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my appreciation and gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Paul Sheehan, for his critical insights and tireless support. When I had doubts, his mentorship made a world of difference. Also, my thanks go to my uncle Bruce Williams, for lending his expert eye in proof-reading each chapter. Any omissions or errors that remain are mine alone.

This thesis is dedicated to my beautiful mother Carolyn, who inspires me every day to approach all things with the combined faculties of reason and imagination.

## Introduction

The search for truth defines detective fiction. In classical detective stories this search begins with a question and ends with an answer. Metaphysical detective stories provide no answers, and in doing so, question the nature of ‘truth’. Although the popular genre of detective fiction may initially appear to be worlds apart from the philosophical inquiry of metaphysics, experience and interpretation are central to the processes that define each pursuit. The detective combines the mental faculties of reason and imagination to reveal the ‘truth’; the philosopher also pursues ‘truth’ through a comparable process of identification, interpretation, analysis and synthesis. Metaphysicians are concerned with the phenomenon of subjective experience, in terms of both identity and the self, with an interest in the nature of reality and the essence of objects. Through an examination of the interaction between internal and external spheres, these philosophers attempt to explain the extension of the apparently transcendental mind into the extracranial world, and the influence of objects on phenomenal experience. Neither philosophers nor neuroscientists<sup>1</sup> have been able to explain the problem of interaction with complete certainty, which has deep implications for detective stories that purport to find the ‘truth’ of the world through intellect alone. From the resulting crisis of meaning has emerged the genre of metaphysical detective fiction, a genre that challenges assumptions about identity and reality, and questions the nature of ‘truth’.

Before entering into a discussion of the metaphysical detective genre that is the focus of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge the widely accepted origin of the classical genre with which it engages. From Edgar Allan Poe’s preoccupation with mystery and the macabre

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent discussion of the neuroscientific study of the causal interaction between mind and brain see Smith and Whitaker, especially chapters 8, 14, 15, and 18.

emerged the literary detective, who brought order to the chaos of the Gothic universe. In three short stories, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rôget” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844), Poe defined the form and style of thousands of subsequent works of detective fiction. Referred to by Poe as “tales of ratiocination”<sup>2</sup>, the phrase neatly describes the interplay of reason and imagination used by the detective to identify, analyse and synthesize information with the aim of solving a crime.

The first specialist critic of detective fiction, Howard Haycraft, describes Poe’s ratiocinative trilogy as a reconciliation of the divide between mind and body: the ‘physical’ first tale, the ‘mental’ second, and the third, a balance of these two insufficient styles (11). In “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” we find perhaps the earliest theorization of the mind of the detective: the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, who combines “the creative” and “the resolvent” of the “old philosophy of the Bi-part soul” (144). At present there is no consensus amongst Poe’s annotators as to what the ‘Bi-part soul’ is: Stuart and Susan Levine acknowledge that “no one seems to be able to explain exactly what Poe means” (153). However, in “The Purloined Letter”, Poe revisits the split self when Dupin describes the criminal, Minister D\_\_\_\_, as being “both poet *and* mathematician” (217). The structure and content of these stories problematizes the divide between mental and physical, detective and criminal, order and chaos. As a result, it is possible that the tales of ratiocination represent Poe’s attempt to reconcile opposing views on the transcendental duality of body and mind, and the rational materialist preference for empirical evidence of physical reality.

Structured around the assumption that appearances conceal the hidden ‘truth’, the archetypal detective story asserts that the ratiocination process can decipher and unravel the mystery of existence. The highly intelligent, rational, and yet empathetic protagonist, the

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<sup>2</sup> Letter to Phillip P. Cooke, August 9, 1846.

layered complex enigmas, and the eventual sense of resolution, are evidence of the belief that no aspect of reality is beyond the scope of human comprehension. Michael Holquist equates this with Thomas Aquinas' philosophy:

The detective, the instrument of pure logic, is able to triumph because he alone in a world of incredulous men, holds to the Scholastic principle of *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, the adequation of mind to things, the belief that the mind, given enough time, can understand everything. There are no mysteries, there is only incorrect reasoning. (141)

In response to this belief, the metaphysical detective story constructs a chaotic world from elements of the Gothic, forcing the detective to engage with philosophical problems via a crime that resists resolution.

### **Taking Aim: Restoring order to chaos, and chaos to order**

Detective fiction has been regarded as a 'disposable' genre, stories structured around puzzles considered to be merely entertaining diversions. For this reason, it has rarely been taken seriously by scholars and theorists outside a specific area of genre studies. However, embedded in the field is a sub-genre that raises some of the most persistent philosophical questions: What is the nature of consciousness? What is the relationship between subjective and objective features of existence and reality? And how can meaning or 'truth' be located in a world beyond phenomenal experience? The purpose of this thesis is to classify a genre that evades categorisation, a difficulty arising from the complex and chaotic blend of genre conventions. In addition, this study seeks to explore the potential contribution of the genre to the study of phenomenology and ontology, two sub-disciplines of metaphysics that investigate these philosophical questions in terms of the phenomenon of subjective experience, the nature of being, and the essence of objects. Although fiction may not be able to provide the quantifiable



answers required by science or philosophy, it does present an opportunity to explore the implications of these questions for our own understandings of identity and reality.

Destabilising the methods of analysis and interpretation developed by Poe's ratiocinative trilogy and perpetuated by detective fiction for more than a century, the metaphysical sub-genre combines elements of various genres that contradict the logical and linear narrative of classical detection, undermining and overwhelming the detective. In doing so, authors explore the crisis of meaning arising from the unanswered questions posed by metaphysicians; principally, by interrogating the notion of a unified Self through divided detectives with multifaceted identities, and shattering the illusion of a reality that conforms to anthropocentric structures of time and space. The genre explores the connection between detectives and authors through processes of investigation that reconstruct the narrative of a crime. Linking the detective with the author trivialises the process of revealing 'truth' through narrative, highlighting the subjectivity of texts and language, and our flawed perceptions of reality. The genre also suggests a correlation between the detective and the philosopher, as they share a mutual interest in the interpretation and understanding of external and internal worlds. Again, by making the connection between detective and philosopher, the genre suggests that the pursuit of 'truth' is futile. If meaning exists, it is beyond the reach of detective, author, *and* philosopher.

### **The scope of the investigation (Casing the joint)**

Although Poe is credited as the original architect of the detective genre, at least four precursory works have been identified: E. T. A. Hoffman's *Das Fräulein von Scuderi* (1819), Voltaire's *Zadig ou le Destinée* (1747), William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1599-1602), and in ancient

mythology, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* (429BC)<sup>3</sup>. These texts do not explicitly identify the protagonist as a detective; however, each begins with crime, follows an investigation, and concludes with varying degrees of resolution. A metaphysical search is especially evident in the cases of Hamlet and Oedipus, where the 'detective' considers problems of identity and reality in search of an origin and the purpose of his existence. Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis, there is an argument to be made for the metaphysical detective as necessary *precursor* to Poe's ratiocinator.

Prior to the publication of Poe's original trilogy, two earlier stories approach the process of detection from a metaphysical perspective: "William Wilson" (1839) and "The Man of the Crowd" (1840). The relationship between these earlier stories and more recent works of metaphysical detective fiction will be examined below. With regard to their connection to Poe's later works, it is clear that the author is combining elements of the Gothic with a more structured, rationally oriented narrative of detection. For example, J. Gerald Kennedy argues that frequent critical focus on the idiosyncratic stranger of "The Man of the Crowd" has "obscured the real conflict" between the narrator's analytic view of human experience and the subjectivity of his fascination with the stranger (186). The "would-be detective" falls short of the investigative capabilities of Poe's ratiocinator Dupin, due to the narrator's inability to "maintain a critical detachment" as his "rational mode of cognition is steadily undermined by irrational impulses" (188). These irrational impulses signify an element of the Gothic creeping into a mystery tale about a pseudo-detective, blurring the lines separating the Gothic from crime, mystery, and detective genres.

Observing the differences between Gothic and detective genres, Britta Martens suggests that the investigator of detective fiction "systemizes and professionalizes" what

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<sup>3</sup> See Lee 63-74; Scaggs 9-13; Sims xvi-xvii; Bloch 32-52; and Priestman (1991) 16-25.

appears to be “a more random process of detection by a character who is usually directly affected by the secret” in the Gothic (217). Capitalising on the inception of a police force responsible for crime control, Poe established a genre that provided the opportunity to express growing social anxieties regarding the institutions of law and order. In each of his three stories, Poe engages with the potential advantages of individual action beyond the confines of the judicial system, drawing on elements of the Gothic as inspiration for his narratives of investigation. Poe ended his brief spell of detective fiction with “The Purloined Letter”, even as the genre continued to develop over the course of the century. Charles Dicken’s *Bleak House* (1858), Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868), and Emile Gaboriau’s *Monsieur Lecoq* (1869), are just a few examples of classical detective fiction that continued Poe’s legacy. In 1887, Arthur Conan Doyle published the first Sherlock Holmes chronicle, “A Study in Scarlet”, followed by “The Sign of Four” (1890), and *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892). Although Holmes has become the prototypical European detective, inspiring a vast body of scholarship, Conan Doyle’s works do not engage with the metaphysical problems that Poe’s earlier tales suggested, and thus will be excluded from this thesis.

The American ‘Golden Age’ of detective fiction refers to the period of the 1920s and 1930s. During this time, the genre evolved into various strands, described by Martin Priestman as the ‘whodunit’, the *noir* thriller, the anti-conspiracy thriller, and the detective thriller<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Priestman (1998) defines the terms as follows: The ‘whodunit’, first seen in Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue”, is “primarily concerned with unravelling past events”, with the major plot focus on the “static” detection process of the present (1). The *noir* thriller is largely present action, in which the protagonist operates outside the law (34). The anti-conspiracy thriller has some crossover with spy fiction, and involves a protagonist who is confronted by a conspiracy of criminals, and who often does not have the support of crime control institutions (43). Finally, the detective thriller is some combination of the ‘whodunit’ and these other styles, in which there is a past crime to be untangled and the detection process involves present action (51).

Typically, these works were published as paperback novels and as short stories in pulp magazines, composed to be read and discarded. One such magazine, *Black Mask* (1920-1951), was first to publish many who would go on to become prolific authors of hardboiled detective fiction<sup>5</sup>. As Erin Smith discusses, these publications were “cheaply produced escape literature designed to be thrown away once read” (204). W. H. Auden expresses this sentiment in his essay “The Guilty Vicarage”: “If, as sometimes happens, I start reading one and find after reading a few pages that I have read it before, I cannot go on” (1). Priestman believes that it is the disposability of detective stories that has led to the limited scholarship on the genre. Although he is writing in the late 1990s, no sustained critical objections to his claims have been made in the years since. Despite being “a form which is often meticulously clever on many narrative and stylistic levels”, “how can a text be held up as a shining example of plot, or indeed of anything related to the final outcome (such as character or stylistic ambiguity), when it is a cardinal sin against the form to reveal...what that plot or that outcome actually is?” (1998, 6).

Metaphysical detective fiction is not susceptible to the problem posed by critical analysis that reveals the solution, and it is around this period that we can start to see the sub-genre diverge from its classical counterpart. Major contributors include Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov, Samuel Beckett, Thomas Pynchon, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Don DeLillo, and Paul Auster; writers who have mobilised the methods of modernism, postmodernism, and poststructuralism to approach detective fiction from a new philosophical perspective. Rather than following the rules of classical detective fiction<sup>6</sup>, which advocate that the detective be of sound mind and the mystery be solvable within the scope of human rationality, metaphysical detective fiction subverts these rules to perplex and challenge the reader, robbing us of the

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<sup>5</sup> Authors including Dashiell Hammett (*Red Harvest*, 1929), Raymond Chandler (*The Big Sleep*, 1939), and Ross MacDonald (*Blue City*, 1947).

<sup>6</sup> See Huntington Wright, 1928.

satisfaction of narrative closure. Unlike the classical genre, metaphysical detective fiction often requires rereading to understand the full extent of the transgression from familiar conventions, and its contribution to the literary canon.

### **Walking the beat: Analysis, synthesis, interpretation**

As early as 1941, Haycraft coined the term ‘metaphysical detective story’ in his analysis of G. K. Chesterton’s “Father Brown” mysteries (76). However, in its original application, the term ‘metaphysical’ denoted a religious concept that has since been secularised in contemporary philosophy. Moving away from religious influence, William V. Spanos described the ‘anti-detective story’ in his existentialist critique of causality, and the destabilisation of positivistic structures in detective fiction (154). Later, Dennis Porter refined the term in his chapter “Antidetection”, applying it to the work of Henry James, Kafka, Robbe-Grillet and Borges in terms of the way these texts undermine the familiarity of the detective genre (24). Spanos and Porter see the metaphysical genre in opposition to its classical counterpart; the style and narrative structure employed by the latter is consistently undermined in the former, creating challenges (and frustrations) for the reader.

Continuing with a focus on the opposition between the two genres, some critics have taken a theoretical approach to their critical analysis. Patrick Brantlinger, for example, adopts Derrida’s theory of the metaphysics of presence to describe ‘deconstructive mysteries’ that use absence to construct narrative meaning, in particular Kafka’s *The Trial* and James Purdy’s *The Nephew* (24). Kevin Dettmar, drawing on Spanos’ work, argues that these texts should not be considered as detective stories at all, and instead suggests the term ‘postmodern mystery’ (63). In his work, he attempts to trace the progression of this genre from Sherlock Holmes to James Joyce’s “The Sisters”, making reference to Borges, Nabokov, Beckett, and Umberto Eco along the way. However, Dettmar’s term shifts the focus from the detection process that is essential

to the sub-genre, and the use of ‘postmodern’ has limited applicability to works composed during a specific period, or containing particular literary traits.

While these scholars have focused on the negation of classical rules of detective fiction, others have preferred to examine conventions that have been introduced by the metaphysical sub-genre. John T. Irwin describes ‘analytic detective fiction’ as having a “self-reflective concern with their own search for meaning”, a definition that includes a metafictional aspect and suggests a philosophical interpretation (27). Elana Gomel advances the ‘ontological detective story’ in her research, looking at the “hermeneutics of secrecy” in both science fiction and detective mysteries, exploring themes of the apocalypse and utopia (345). Returning to the ‘anti-detective story’, Joel Black narrows the definition of the term: “a hermeneutic mode that nevertheless reveals anti- or even post- hermeneutic features” (79). Both Gomel and Black draw on the philosophical methodologies of ontology and hermeneutics to approach these works, in combination with their close textual analysis and genre studies methods.

Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney continue this philosophical interpretation of the genre, reviving the term ‘metaphysical detective story’ in the context of a secular understanding of metaphysics. I apply Merivale and Sweeney’s term ‘metaphysical detective fiction’ here because it is the most comprehensively described, and explicitly invokes a philosophical way of thinking in its description of the genre. Merivale and Sweeney identify the following characteristics:

(1) The defeated sleuth, whether he be an armchair detective or a private eye; (2) the world, city, or text as labyrinth; (3) the purloined letter, embedded text, *mise en abyme*, textual constraint, or text as object; (4) the ambiguity, ubiquity, eerie meaningfulness, or sheer meaninglessness of clues or evidence; (5) the missing person, the ‘man of the crowd’, the double, and the lost, stolen, or exchanged identity; and (6) the absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation. (3)

Under this definition, metaphysical detective fiction adopts some aspects of the classical style, only to subvert or transcend their traditional use in order to make philosophical claims about the nature of truth, meaning, knowledge, identity, and reality. I also suggest that the genre removes the detective from the ordered universe typical of the classical style, substituting elements of other genres to create a reality that evades and discredits the ratiocination process. Each of these characteristics has contributed to the selection of appropriate texts, and facilitated the further discussion of the implications of a genre that blurs boundaries and challenges its readers to consider metaphysical questions.

Alongside these literary scholars, a handful of philosophers have contemplated the formal procedures of crime and detective fiction. Josef Hoffman's book *Philosophies of Crime Fiction* identifies writers of crime and detective fiction who have engaged with philosophical texts, and philosophers who have written directly about crime and detective fiction. The evidence provided here supports the argument that the genre of detective fiction should be considered as a philosophical discourse. For example, Lacan's "Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"" analyses Poe's story through the psychoanalytic concept of repetition automatism in which the subject compulsively repeats and re-enacts internalised social structures (39). Lacan's reading also inspired Derrida, in "The Purveyor of Truth", to undermine Lacan's approach and give preference to his own method of deconstruction (31).

While Lacan and Derrida have focused on the work of Poe exclusively, other philosophers have approached the genre more broadly. In her lecture, "Aristotle on Detective Fiction", Dorothy Sayers uses elements of Aristotle's *Poetics* to analyse the formal procedures and conventions of detective fiction. Robert Zaslavsky discusses the hard-boiled detective genre as an expression of Kantian morality in his paper "Kant on Detective Fiction", also referring to Thomas De Quincey's article "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts".

Looking at the genre through an Oedipal lens, Ernst Bloch's essay "Philosophical Views on the Detective Novel" reveals his understanding of philosophical methods, which consist mainly of guessing, revealing, and reconstructing. Finally, in his essay "The Philosophy of Crime Novels", Gilles Deleuze writes:

In the old conception of the detective novel, we would be shown a genius detective devoting the whole power of his mind to the search and discovery of the truth. The idea of 'truth' in the classic detective novel was totally philosophical, that is, it was the product of the effort and the operations of the mind. (81)

If, as these philosophers seem to be suggesting, there is an argument to be made for the philosophical process involved in classical detective fiction, the search for 'truth' in a world that reflects metaphysical questions will certainly have implications for the study of philosophy.

### **Forensics: Meaning to be made**

As thinking and reflecting individuals, we are, perforce, concerned with the nature of subjective experience in terms of knowledge and truth, and with our relationship to the physical world around us. As a discipline, philosophy approaches this problem with abstract ideas and analysis, attempting to reconcile our intuitions of the world with reality and to explain the extension of our minds into the physical realm. As a genre, detective fiction formalises this process; the detective's pursuit may be read as a kind of philosophical inquiry into the nature of the real, of the self, and of the relationship between the two. Detective fiction has the potential to call into question the idea of 'truth', and the possibility of any kind of knowledge. The study of detective fiction is a rewarding way to explore the relationship between philosophical ideas and their emergence in fictional narratives.



In the classical detective story, the existence of an autonomous and agential identity is taken for granted with the same certainty borne out by René Descartes' famous dictum *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). These prototypical texts portray a reality that reflects positivistic structures: time and space function within a deterministic framework making causal connections between actions and events, and objects may be measured by empirical analysis. However, metaphysical detective stories undermine these structures with philosophical questions raised by phenomenology (the study of consciousness in relation to phenomena and appearances) and ontology (the study of reality, being and existence in terms of the composition of objects and their relations) (see Smith, Hofweber). In the metaphysical detective story, detectives become philosophers in their attempts to disentangle the complexities of existence, but their hope of discerning the 'truth' of their place in the world is shattered by the uncertainty of both external and internal worlds.

There is at present only limited scholarship on the specialised area of metaphysical detective fiction. By examining this genre in close detail, mapping its development over the past century, locating its highpoint, and most contemporary example, this thesis will describe the valuable contribution of the metaphysical detective story to fictional representation of our understanding of ourselves and our world. Metaphysical detective fiction raises questions that continue to intrigue and challenge authors, philosophers and scientists alike. Although the genre does not provide definitive answers, it effectively expresses the anxiety that drives our pursuit of knowledge and 'truth', informing and drawing on other genres and disciplines to construct narratives in response to these seemingly intractable problems.

### **Modus operandi: A logical and linear progression**

The first chapter will build on existing literature, applying Merivale and Sweeney's method to a series of works by various postwar authors – some of which have previously been identified

as transgressing the classical genre, and others which have yet to be considered. Beginning with Franz Kafka's *The Trial* (1925) as a thematic and structural precursor, I then examine Borges' "Death and the Compass" (1942), Vladimir Nabokov's *The Eye* (1930), and give a preliminary reading of Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* (1951), in the context of an interrogation into the nature of identity. I will then consider Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), Alain Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers* (1952), and Don DeLillo's *The Players* (1977), in terms of their destabilisation of the notion of an intelligible reality through the structures of space and time, and the essence of objects. Although these texts may appear to resist the conventions of detective fiction, this chapter establishes the breadth of a genre that frequently adapts conventions beyond its own delineation.

In the second chapter, I look more closely at these characteristics and the way they function within Paul Auster's novel *City of Glass* (1985) – a novella that deploys conventions of the classical genre, explicitly discusses the phenomenon of detective fiction, and employs philosophical modes of inquiry to approach metaphysical questions. This chapter will also draw on Poe's earlier stories, "William Wilson" and "The Man of the Crowd", to suggest that Poe was engaging with an early version of the metaphysical detection process prior to creating the seminal ratiocinative trilogy. Returning to *Molloy*, this chapter then examines Auster's and Beckett's deconstruction of the mind/body duality evident in classical detective fiction, arguing that both authors are engaging with the philosophical movement away from Cartesian conceptions of identity and reality. Auster explores the relationship between author/detective, reader/detective, author/criminal through multiple embedded texts, textual self-consciousness, and a philosophical anxiety about the nature of 'truth'.

The third and final chapter will follow the metaphysical detective story into the twenty-first century, shifting from page to screen and examining contemporary genre conventions in

the context of a narrative that expresses social and philosophical concerns. The first season of novelist Nic Pizzolatto's *True Detective* (2014) sets itself apart from standard televised crime drama and detective thrillers through its novelistic style, Southern Gothic *mise-en-scène*, and philosophical language. In this way, *True Detective* resonates with the pulp tradition as well as being self-consciously literary, becoming part of a growing field of 'broadcast literature'. The narrative follows a complex timeline, and the fictional world oscillates between familiarity and uncanny monstrosity, all the while emphasizing the importance of place. In addition, Pizzolatto's use of elements both natural and supernatural to create the fictional world of *True Detective* harks back to Poe's Gothic fiction and tales of ratiocination. As an example of metaphysical detective fiction, *True Detective* problematizes many of the conventions of the classical genre to create an often alienating and fractured narrative that challenges viewers to consider philosophical notions of being and the world.

If classical detective fiction has, to date, received only limited academic attention, this is in all likelihood because it is perceived as consisting purely of puzzle-based, disposable texts lacking the depth necessary for scholarly consideration. Metaphysical detective stories, by contrast, are more complex and multidimensional. Authors of these stories have mobilised the forms and structures of numerous genres to engage with the philosophical inquiry of metaphysics, in order to simultaneously express a sense of anxiety about meaning and existence, and the problems arising from a pursuit of 'truth'. This thesis aims to clarify the complexities of the metaphysical detective genre and reveal the valuable influence philosophy has had on detective fiction; in doing so, it also suggests that philosophers might have something to gain from an interest in the genre.

# Chapter 1

## The Worlds of the Metaphysical Detective

Detective stories are a narcotic which distorts the proportions of life and so stands the world on its head. Detective stories are always concerned with the solution of mysteries which are hidden behind extraordinary occurrences... Everyday life is the greatest detective story ever written. Every second, without noticing we pass by thousands of corpses and crimes.

– Franz Kafka, c. 1918

Poe's original trilogy gave rise to a new epistemology through the ratiocinator, whose subjective experience granted unique access to knowledge of the world. In response, authors of metaphysical detective stories created a chaotic external world beyond the reach of the investigator, and brought disorder to the unified internal Self. This chapter explores the thematic exploration of the internal world (identity) and the external world (reality) in metaphysical detective stories of the twentieth century, mapping the connections between six essential texts. However, to begin this exploration it will be necessary to discuss the work of Franz Kafka, in particular his novel *The Trial*<sup>7</sup>, as a fundamental precursor of the genre. Although Kafka never published a work explicitly identifiable as detective fiction, the metaphysical sub-genre echoes elements of his writing that express the fractured identity of the protagonist and the problematic nature of reality.

*The Trial* articulates a variety of structures that have been co-opted by authors of metaphysical detective fiction. Kafka's novel includes the doubling of the 'detective' and the

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<sup>7</sup> All references pertaining to primary texts will be included as in-text parenthesis, with an abbreviated title and corresponding page number.

‘criminal’ (in some cases, detective, criminal and victim), the inversion of the causal relationship between the crime, the criminal’s arrest and the detective’s investigation, and the Kafkaesque absurdity of the interaction between internal and external worlds. Kafka’s novel serves as a lens through which to interpret Borges’ “Death and the Compass”, Nabokov’s *The Eye*, and Beckett’s *Molloy*, in terms of the exploration of the metaphysics of identity. *The Trial* also offers an opportunity to examine the disruption of ordered reality in Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, Robbe-Grillet’s *The Erasers*, and DeLillo’s *Players*. Together these texts define the parameters of the metaphysical sub-genre, transposing conventions of the classical detective story to challenge our perception of the true, essential Self and destabilise our experience of reality.

Unlike conventional detective stories, *The Trial* begins with the arrest of its protagonist Josef K., who is accused of a crime that is never revealed. Throughout the novel, K. continues with the rote rituals of his everyday life; the arrest appears to have little effect on his personal freedom, aside from creating a constant sense of anxiety around the crime and his uncertain future. The accused ‘criminal’ then becomes a would-be ‘detective’ in the increasingly impotent and desperate ‘investigation’, as the characters with whom K. engages are either unable or unwilling to offer assistance. K. relies on the judicial system to find the truth, a system that at best appears incompetent and at worst corrupt. His guilt, however, is never established – though neither is his innocence. The novel concludes with the anti-climax of K.’s death at the hands of court-appointed executioners, even as the investigation fails to resolve the mystery of the crime.

The lack of resolution in *The Trial* drastically alters the reader’s experience of the ‘detective’ story. Relying on the structural convention of a split narrative, classical detective fiction follows the primary story of the investigation that reveals the secondary story of the

crime<sup>8</sup>. Each is essentially the antithesis of the other; the order of the primary cleansing the chaos of the secondary through the restorative resolution. This dual narrative mode creates a sense of doubling, and implies a causal relationship between the crime that precedes the investigation and the process of detection that establishes the ‘truth’ and enacts justice. The causality of classical detective fiction is thus evidence of a deterministic view of space and time, in which each event has a necessary cause and effect in a larger chain of events. By convoking a world in which spatiotemporal moments are logically and linearly connected, classical detective fiction depicts reality as a unified and intelligible whole.

Kafka’s novel inverts the causality of the classical detective story by opening with the apprehension of the criminal, who then undertakes an ‘investigation’ in order to reveal an unknowable crime. *The Trial* adheres to spatiotemporal determinism, but reverses the causal relationship between the arrest and the investigation, defying logical connections between events. Although *The Trial* precedes Derrida’s theory of the ‘metaphysics of presence’ by many decades, it is useful for interpreting the significance of Kafka’s subversion of the primary / secondary narrative mode outlined above<sup>9</sup>. For Derrida, metaphysics of presence describes:

The enterprise of returning ‘strategically’, ‘ideally’, to an origin or to a priority thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex... (236)

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<sup>8</sup> The primary and secondary narrative split described here should not be confused with Todorov’s classification of the crime as “first” story and the investigation as “second” which refers to the causal order in which the two events take place (42-45).

<sup>9</sup> For further reading on Derrida and Kafka see Derrida’s “Before the Law”; Brantlinger 25; Pelikan Straus 383-388; Götz chapters 2 and 4.

By establishing the 'ideal' in the presence of the primary narrative and revealing what is absent or 'corrupted' in the secondary narrative, classical detective stories perpetuate the Western hierarchical dichotomy of presence as focus and absence as derivative. Kafka's novel sets the precedent for the metaphysical detective genre by undermining this binary opposition; where the plot of the classical detective story finds its origin in the crime, the latter's absence in *The Trial* creates a void of uncertainty in the secondary narrative that gradually subverts and eventually subsumes the primary narrative.

The dual narrative mode of *The Trial* reflects another kind of doubling, in which detective and criminal possess aspects of the same identity. Opening with K.'s waking up, and ending with his death, the narrative becomes synonymous with K.'s life story (Brantlinger 34), splitting his identity into primary 'investigatory' and secondary 'criminality'. K. is never explicitly described as a 'detective', but the burden of proof falls on him to uncover the 'truth' of the crime – the process of detection offers K. potential absolution. The absence of the crime creates a world beyond the text; the absurdity of *The Trial* lies in the inaccessibility of this external world that contains the necessary information to solve the mystery. If the text is identical to K.'s subjective experience, an internal world divided by the duality of detective and criminal, the world outside the text becomes a representation of an unintelligible external reality. And yet as both 'criminal' and 'detective', neither aspect of K.'s identity is capable of unravelling the mystery of the crime due to the limited interaction between internal and external worlds. In *The Trial*, Kafka has laid a foundation for the development of the metaphysical detective story, in which the protagonist need not identify himself explicitly as a detective and the world of the text evades investigation and resolution.

## Identity parade: Borges, Nabokov, Beckett

The tale of ratiocination is perhaps the most effective literary form to approach a metaphysical investigation of subjective experience. Using Poe's technique, authors of metaphysical detective stories have continued to develop a genre that echoes Kafka's portrayal of the interaction between mind and world. In his short story "Death and the Compass", Jorge Luis Borges reworks the structure of Poe's story "The Purloined Letter" to undermine the preference for absolute rationality and the belief in a logical, ordered universe. The protagonist, Detective Erik Lönnrot, believes himself above all else to be "a pure thinker, an Auguste Dupin" (*DC* 1), but his hubris leads him into a labyrinth of false clues and hidden meaning created by the criminal, Red Scharlach. Maintaining the doubling of hyper-rational protagonist and identically clever adversary, Borges reverses the resolution with a victorious criminal and a detective whose mania for reason is the cause of his defeat.

Unlike Kafka's K., Lönnrot believes he has complete knowledge of his own sense of identity, and is less concerned with finding the 'truth' than he is with identifying a problem worthy of his intellect. Scharlach creates the illusion that objects in the external world are linked by the 'truth' of the crime, when in reality the network of meaningful associations exists only in Lönnrot's mind. By doubling criminal and detective, Borges suggests, "The killer and the slain, whose minds work in the same way, may be the same man" ("Commentaries" 269). A point further evident in their charactonyms: Lönnrot combines the Swedish *lön*n (secret) and the German *rot* (red) to form 'the secret red', and Red Scharlach, a variant of red scarlet, becomes 'the doubly red' (Irwin 42). A figuration familiar to metaphysical detective fiction, the illusion of the external investigation is in reality an internal analysis of the relationship between the identities of criminal and detective. The detective / criminal binary of Poe's "Purloined Letter" is thus reversed: the criminal governs the detective's mind and chaos prevails over the restoration of order.



Lönnrot's final words recall the image of the labyrinth and pose a riddle for the criminal and the reader: "[I]n your maze there are three lines too many ... I know of a Greek maze that is a single straight line. Along this line so many thinkers have lost their way that a mere detective may very well lose his way..." (*DC* 78). The ancient symbol of the labyrinth, referred to in Grecian, Egyptian, and Christian mythologies<sup>10</sup>, is present throughout Borges' oeuvre<sup>11</sup>, but the single-line maze referred to here suggests a Möbius strip representing both the inner struggle to find the centre of the self, and the futility of the desire to find a centre of meaning in the external world (Irwin 47). Borges has expressed his suspicion that "there is no universe in the organic, unifying sense inherent in that ambitious word" and that "it is doubtful that the world has a meaning" (*Other Inquisitions* 104; *Labyrinths* 187). The 'ambition' to which Borges refers, in which the manifold of phenomenal experience is reduced to a singular arbitrary word, is evident in the arrogance exhibited by Lönnrot's desire for elaborate intellectual hypotheses regardless of inaccurate representation of reality. The detective's capacity for reason furnishes him with the delusion that the world conforms to a logical order, but when the veil is lifted and ordered reality disintegrates, a crisis of identity is awakened in a detective defined by his aptitude for certainty.

Like Kafka and Borges, Vladimir Nabokov adopts a version of the detective / criminal doubling in combination with the primary / secondary narrative split to express a crisis of identity. It occurs in his novella *The Eye*; as Nabokov explains, "[T]he texture of the tale mimics that of detective fiction but actually the author disclaims all intention to trick, puzzle, fool, or otherwise deceive the reader" (*TE* iv). *The Eye* is, nevertheless, perhaps Nabokov's most obscure text (Roth 2) and, despite being the first example of unreliable narration in his

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<sup>10</sup> For a comprehensive study on labyrinths see Reed Doob's introductory chapter, and for 'textual labyrinths' see chapter 7.

<sup>11</sup> For example, see Borges' collection of short stories and essays *Labyrinths* (1962).

work, has received little academic attention (Johnson 394). The unreliable first-person narrator has arguably greater implications for detective stories than for other genres that make no claim to 'realism'. In *The Eye*, the primary narrative is the elaborate fantasy of a mad narrator imposed on the world, undermining our reliance on the 'objective' and autonomous detective to resolve the trauma of the crime. This metaphysical detective story uses the authority of the detective to challenge the assumption that the rational mind is capable of accessing the essential meaning or 'truth' of the external world.

Believing his suicide attempt to have been successful, the narrator creates and maintains the delusion that reality is being constructed posthumously via the residual powers of his imagination. Through observation of other characters – in particular Smurov – he realises that not only is he alive, but that he and Smurov are one and the same. The imagined reality of *The Eye* is the "sinner's torment in the afterworld"; the narrator's "tenacious mind cannot find peace until it manages to unravel the complex consequences of his reckless terrestrial actions" (*TE* 23). Here Nabokov provides a clue for the reader: the narrator substitutes self-reflection with a fixation on Smurov, suggesting that the investigation is actually a form of self-analysis. The narrator is not a detective in the conventional sense, nor is Smurov a criminal; rather, the primary investigation uncovers the identity of the protagonist as his imagined reality disintegrates to reveal the secondary mystery of Smurov. As in *The Trial*, and (metaphorically) in "Death and the Compass", 'detective' and 'criminal' are one and the same. *The Eye* collapses the boundaries between the two figures, between time and space, and between life and death; the 'death' of the narrator is the necessary catalyst for the narrative split into primary and secondary. When Smurov's identity is revealed, both narrator and split narrative are made whole.

A sense of identity that incorporates the chaos of the external world can also be found in Samuel Beckett's novel *Molloy*. Divided into two sections, narrated by two separate characters, it may seem that Beckett is more concerned with division than with connection. It soon becomes apparent, however, through the style of narration and the doubling of narrators, that conscious experience is essentially an emergent – and contingent – property of the physical world. The first section follows Molloy, documenting his wanderings toward finding his mother (his origin) and disentangling his own identity (his centre). The second is narrated by Moran who has been charged with finding Molloy, and his investigation causes the internalisation of the knowledge of his counterpart. This structure places the secondary narrative before the primary narrative, such that the novel may be read more logically in reverse, destabilising the patterns of causality that conventional detective stories promote. In doing so, Beckett creates a world in which the physical precedes the intellectual, and each narrator suffers from a crisis of self in reaction to the invasive chaos of his reality.

Beckett challenges the Cartesian conception of mind-body dualism, through the dependence of his narrators' mental states on the degradation and collapse of their physical bodies. Molloy is the decrepit wanderer, making his way through the labyrinth of his identity towards a centre that holds out no promise of resolution or revelation. And Moran's process of detection comes to a halt with the deterioration of his body, gradually becoming a reflection of Molloy. In his analysis of the novel, Hugh Kenner speculates that perhaps "a Molloy is simply what a Moran turns into when he goes looking for a Molloy" (65). We might replace 'Molloy' with criminal and 'Moran' with detective to suggest that the metaphysical detection process of identification is also a process of metamorphosis into criminality. Indeed, the same statement could also be applied to Kafka's *The Trial*, Borges' "Death and the Compass" and Nabokov's *The Eye*. There is much more to be said about the relationship between Beckett's *Molloy* and

the texts explored in this chapter, with regard to both identity and reality; accordingly, it will be revisited in the context of Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, the focus of the next chapter.

### **Beyond the one-way mirror: Pynchon, Robbe-Grillet, DeLillo**

Some scholars believe that the first detective to become a criminal in pursuit of the 'truth' was Sophocles' Oedipus, the protagonist of *Oedipus Rex*. In the Ancient Greek tragedy, Oedipus discovers the truth about his identity through methods of investigation and interrogation, eventually revealing that he is responsible for the 'crime'. John Scaggs argues that Sophocles' play contains "all of the central characteristics and formal elements of the detective story, including a mystery surrounding a murder, a closed circle of suspects, and the gradual uncovering of a hidden past" (11). *Oedipus Rex* is also a play about fate: Oedipus is unable to escape the prophecy, and his tragic end represents a version the detective story in which certain properties of the world that are beyond the control of the individual determine all possible outcomes of actions and events. Immersing the detective in a world of agential 'objects with agency' that lie outside his control is an essential aspect of the metaphysical detective story.

Drawing on elements of the Oedipus myth, Thomas Pynchon's novella *The Crying of Lot 49* explores the interaction between the experience of the 'detective' and an object in the investigation that appears to have agential qualities. The protagonist, Oedipa Maas, uncovers a conspiracy of mail distribution that is somehow connected to the deceased estate she has inherited, and is drawn into the investigation by an image that reappears at every interval. Although Maas is not explicitly identified as a detective, recurrent references to the Oedipus myth suggest that Pynchon's novella is in some way intended to be read in the context of detective fiction. The mysterious, labyrinthine world that becomes Maas's reality explores the interaction between the mind of the detective and the clues and evidence that surround her. Unlike *Molloy*, self-knowledge lies at the centre of this interaction.

The narrative is driven by the symbol of the muted post horn, an image that exerts increasing power over the protagonist's interaction with reality. When Maas first encounters the symbol, she recreates its image in her notebook drawing "a loop, triangle and trapezoid thus" (CL49 38):



In the act of recreating the image of the post horn by her own hand, Maas begins her internalisation of the conspiracy that unfolds, and subconsciously becomes an agent of the symbol's dispersal<sup>12</sup>. The investigation reveals the post horn to be a symbol derived from the Thurn and Taxis postal service coat of arms, which appears to have been appropriated by the secret underground mail network of the Tristero (or Trystero). The *mise en abîme* of historical significance is further inflected by the Trystero's presence in *The Courier's Tragedy*, a fictional play appropriating Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Encountering the image everywhere she goes, it is never clear whether the post horn of the Trystero is part of a web of conspiracies, a cruel joke being played by her deceased ex-lover, or the paranoid hallucination of her deteriorating mind.

Despite the theoretical potential of the 'pure thinking' detective, Maas exhibits an awareness that her pursuit of 'truth' in the Trystero labyrinth may be influenced and controlled by the external objects that invade her conscious experience. She was "optimistic...like the private eye ... believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops' rules, to solve any great mystery" but the "night's profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication, was their way of... immobilizing her" (CL49 100-101). Like Moran in

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<sup>12</sup> Later, in Chapter 2, the significance of recreating objects in texts as they appear in the world will be further examined in Auster's *City of Glass*.

*Molloy*, Maas's investigation has physical effects, "all these fatigued brain cells between herself and the truth" (CL49 74); the ratiocination process is made obsolete by the limitations of the interaction between mind and world. Once only a symbol, the Trystero becomes an antagonist: "Power, omniscience, implacable malice, attributes of what they'd thought to be a historical principle, a Zeitgeist, are carried over to the now human enemy" (CL49 136). As an agential object, the Trystero is responsible for the beginning, the duration, and the end of the detective's investigation, and it becomes a unifying presence for the spatiotemporal narrative, signifying the overwhelming power of a belief in the essential meaning or 'truth' of reality.

This 'essence of meaning' is central to the aesthetic mode of literary realism to which classical detective fiction belongs, a genre that attempts to portray a "faithful representation of reality" (see Campbell). In his novel *The Erasers*, Alain Robbe-Grillet combines elements of detective fiction with *nouveau roman* anti-realism to undermine the literary tradition that supports a deterministic interpretation of reality and endorses absolute objective meaning. As the sub-genre's most assiduous advocate and practitioner, Robbe-Grillet describes the *nouveau roman*'s rejection of reality 'as it is' as being characterised by ambiguous points of view, precise descriptions of the physical world, fragmented time-lines, and a self-reflexive narrative style that provides a more authentic representation of our alienating experience of the world (*For a New Novel*, 1989).

*The Erasers* adopts the ludic qualities of detective fiction, coupled with the *nouveau roman* rejection of realism, to invite readerly participation in the metaphysical detection process. In a note to the first edition of the novel, Robbe-Grillet writes: "The subject is a definite, concrete, essential event: a man's death. It is a detective story event – that is, there is a murderer, a detective, a victim. In one sense their roles are conventional... But the ties which bind them only appear clearly once the last chapter ends" (*E* rear cover). The narrative spans a

24-hour period that begins and ends with a murder – the same murder. Detective Wallas arrives in an unfamiliar city to assist with the investigation of a series of crimes, including the murder of Daniel Dupont. Only the criminal, Garinati, is aware that Dupont escaped and is now in hiding. Perspectives shift fluidly in the style of the *nouveau roman*, particularly between characters expressing theories about the crime. The incompatibility of these theories with actual events leads Wallas to liken the detective process “more to delirium than to reasonable conjecture” (E 178). Like Maas, Wallas begins to realise the futility of the ratiocination process and is at times unable to differentiate reality from illusion.

The city is constructed as a labyrinth with Wallas imprisoned at the centre, forced frequently to interrupt the investigation by asking marginal characters for directions, and distracted by an obsession with architecture and intersections. Sound “bounces back and forth against the walls... which amplify it still more, multiply it, reflect it, baffle it”, making words transform “into a gigantic oracle, magnificent, indecipherable, and terrifying” (E 200). Wallas escapes from the labyrinth momentarily each time he pauses to find the perfect eraser: “[A] soft, crumbly gum eraser that friction does not twist but reduces to dust; an eraser that cuts easily and whose cut surface is shiny and smooth, like mother-of-pearl” (E 126). Garinati is also fascinated by the architecture of the city: he stares at the mechanical bridge, knowing that he would only need to insert one small, hard object into “the essential gears to stop the whole system” and he recalls the “the cube of grey lava” he noticed at the crime scene (E 211). Detective and criminal are connected by the doubling of eraser and grey lava cube – both mundane objects given power by the meaning assigned to their ‘essence’, and each signifying an opportunity for escape from the prison of the text.

But there is no escape from the patterns of reality, and the detective struggles to determine whether the seemingly connected crimes are evidence of a conspiracy, or are simply

coincidence, and thus completely meaningless. As in *The Crying of Lot 49*, the conspiracy is interwoven with allusions to the Oedipus myth: the stationery shop visited by Wallas exhibits a painted *ekphrasis* in the window that combines elements of ancient Greek architecture with objects from Dupont's home; and the manufacturer of the perfect eraser is known only to have central letters "di" (E 126) – perhaps Oe-*di*-pus (Dubois 105). Like Oedipus, Wallas falls into the tragic trap, responsible for the crime he is trying to solve. The detective's *carte d'identité*, which "shows him the face that once was his", is compared with his reflection in a mirror (E 252). The *mise en abyme* reflects Wallas' fragmented identity, as the detective becomes both victim and criminal. The conclusion of Robbe-Grillet's *The Erasers* recalls the endings of Borges' "Death and the Compass", Nabokov's *The Eye*, and Beckett's *Molloy*, as detective and criminal become one in the struggle to reveal the secret conspiracy, shattering expectations of reality and the fragile margin between order and chaos.

Conspiracy, real or imagined, is a recurring theme throughout metaphysical detective fiction, as it represents simultaneously the esoteric world and the potential power of other minds to manipulate and control the detective. Alongside the *nouveau roman*, literary postmodernists objected to the realist conception of reality 'as it is', by using similar techniques of pastiche to complicate genre conventions. Don DeLillo manipulates various elements of the crime thriller, mystery and detective fiction in his fifth novel *Players*, exploring the boredom associated with mundane reality, and positioning the 'detective' within the mechanics of the conspiracy. Witness to a shooting, and lured into the conspirators' company, Lyle Wynant applies his analytical mind and keen powers of observation to become an amateur detective and double agent, whilst remaining an accessory to the terrorist plot.

The ratiocinative process is reduced to mere entertainment, engaged in response to Wynant's dissatisfaction with his ordinary life. Indulging in games of detection involving



observation, memory, and analysis, “the notion of a police interrogation was part of the mental concept” (P 45) driving his investigations. In the first section of the novel, Lyle expresses a desire for order. Checking his pockets compulsively, “a routine that required no conscious planning yet reassured him... of the presence of his objects and their locations” (P 26), Wynant’s sense of control is affirmed, even as the apparent permanence of objects underwrites his connection to the external world<sup>13</sup>. For Wynant, “rules, standards and customs” are “part of a breathtakingly intricate quest for order and elucidation, for identity among the constituents of a system” (P 28). The illusion of order is facilitated by the amateur detection process in which Wynant focuses on the symmetry of the city and its inhabitants, developing his philosophical view of space and time: he declares, “It’s metaphysical” (P 50 & 58).

However, the second section of the novel exploits Wynant’s ratiocinative capabilities, and the ‘detective’ becomes embroiled in the conspiracy he uncovers. The tedium of everyday existence appears to have become institutionalised: “police inefficiency,” “Kafkian lawyers,” and “cops...yawning” in courtrooms alienate Wynant from the processes of law and order. Conspirators manipulate his investigation to their own ends, with evasive, nonsensical, and contradictory information, until the central figure, J. Kinnear, invites the detective to replace the victim of the shooting. Wynant is unable to resist “the appeal of mazes and intricate techniques...the suggestion of a double life” (P 100), and like Detective Lönnrot in *The Erasers*, his misdirected rationality results in his defeat. We are left with a vanishing protagonist: “Inwardness spiralling ever deeper. Rationality, analysis, self-realisation” (P 210), and a reality that resists ratiocinative interpretation: “A universe structured on such coordinates

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<sup>13</sup> Molloy also finds comfort in counting a series of stones in his pockets in Beckett’s *Molloy* (66-69).

would have the merits of substance and familiarity” (P 211). The world of *Players*, however, resists such structuring and has neither substance nor familiarity, neither essence nor meaning.

In this chapter I have distinguished between literary works that explore philosophical problems of identity, and those that are concerned with the nature of reality. This distinction is, of course, problematic, but the overlap between the discussion of these themes is a reflection of the complex interaction between internal and external worlds. Blurring the boundary between the identities of detective and criminal – and, by implication, good and evil, order and chaos – is fundamental to the characterisation of the metaphysical detective. In the first section, I have argued that Kafka’s protagonist is criminal first, then investigator; Borges’ detective appears to be the intellectual double of the criminal he pursues, but is defeated by the superior adversary; the detective’s mind is split by the trauma of suicide in Nabokov’s novel, and his investigation results in the convergence of two identities; and Beckett’s detective’s mind is reduced to his deteriorating physical form.

In the second section, the world of the text collapses the distinction between imagination and reality, drawing on a range of genres and mythologies to create a fictional universe in which the essence of objects becomes meaningless. As we have seen, the world of Kafka’s novel is beyond the reach of his protagonist. The problematic interaction between individual and reality continues for Pynchon’s detective, who is controlled and manipulated by a symbol that invades her subjective experience; with the labyrinth-like city of Robbe-Grillet’s novel that ensnares the detective, the cube eraser uniting detective and criminal through their mutual desire to escape; and the conspiracy of DeLillo’s terrorist plot that lures the detective away from the order of mundane life. Moving on from texts that outline the metaphysical detective genre, the next chapter will examine Paul Auster’s novel *City of Glass* (1985). Auster

continues the tradition of the metaphysical detective story, drawing on a range of genres to create a text that introduces metafictional aspects to bridge the gap between fiction and reality.

## Chapter 2

### Nothing Was Real: Author as Detective in Paul Auster's *City of Glass*

Classical detective stories may imply philosophical questions about the interaction between mind and world, but they take for granted the existence of essential meaning and 'truth'. The metaphysical detective story confronts and interrogates the assumption that the narratives we construct to understand the world have a necessary connection to any inherent meaning. Combining elements of the genre addressed in the previous chapter, Paul Auster's *City of Glass* connects detective with author, using their authority to challenge the belief that the rational mind is capable of accessing the essential meaning of the external world. The novel is the first of Auster's *New York Trilogy*, followed by *Ghosts* (1986) and *The Locked Room* (1987). Each novel is connected by similar themes, working loosely within the framework of detective fiction; the latter two texts, however, become increasingly abstract and difficult to categorise. *City of Glass* maintains a close relationship with the classical genre through the detective protagonist and a version of the primary / secondary narrative split, while also constructing a world that reflects the chaos of the metaphysical sub-genre. In doing so, Auster's novel undermines the very possibility of fictional representation of reality and obliges us to consider the arbitrariness of narrative construction.

Auster's protagonist, Daniel Quinn, is an author of crime fiction who assumes the role of detective after receiving a mysterious phone call. Peter Stillman Junior requires the services of a private investigator to follow his recently released criminal father, Peter Stillman Senior, attempting to avoid a potentially fatal interaction<sup>14</sup>. The mystery that drives *City of Glass* is the

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<sup>14</sup> Peter Stillman Junior will be referred to as Peter, and Peter Stillman Senior as Stillman for the purpose of clarity throughout this chapter.

Stillman enigma: a man who emerges from a crowd, wanders the streets, and eventually disappears into the city. Unable to make sense of the object of his investigation, Quinn's mental and physical wherewithal gradually diminishes, eventually vanishing altogether. Throughout the text, multiple implicit and explicit intertextual references suggest Auster's engagement with genres beyond the detective story, situating the detective in a world impervious to ratiocination constructed from elements of mystery and Gothic fiction. Through his protagonist, Auster undermines the notion of a unified self that is capable of limitless understanding, and creates a world that discredits the illusion of logical and linear anthropocentric structures. *City of Glass* calls into question the artifice of fiction and its relationship with reality, situating the reader in a position of uncertainty.

The first section of this chapter explores Auster's notions of identity through the superposition of criminal / detective / author, and reality through a self-reflexive narrativity and multiple layers of intertextuality. The second section draws connections between Auster's novel and Poe's short stories "William Wilson" (1839) and "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), restoring Gothic elements to detective fiction, and identifying the 'detective' as a figuration of the *flâneur*. Finally, *City of Glass* is read in the context of Samuel Beckett's *Molloy*, focusing on their shared interest in correlating authors with detectives and situating their protagonists in labyrinths of uncertainty. Indeed, *The New York Trilogy* has been described as a reworking of Beckett's *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (see Connor, Varvogli), each author using the metaphysical detective story to explore philosophical questions about existence and 'truth'.

### **Sign of three: Detection, authorship and narrative construction**

Confounding every possible distinction between fact and fiction, *City of Glass* effectively subverts the classical detective story's claim to realism. The layers of textual significance, the

doubling and tripling of individual characters, and the philosophical reflections of spatiotemporal forms and identities, define Auster's engagement with the genre of metaphysical detective fiction. Auster's primary concern is with language; specifically, with the movement from simple signifying words and writing to transcendent metaphysical meaning and eternal truth. As he has expressed, "It's through stories that we struggle to make sense of the world" (Auster and Hutchisson, 46). *City of Glass* explores this notion, placing the author in the role of the detective to question the capacity of narratives to access the absolute 'truth' of existence. As the (mostly) omniscient narrator makes clear in the opening paragraph: "The question is the story itself, and whether or not it means something is not for the story to tell" (*CoG* 3). This warning suggests from the outset that the reader of detective fiction who seeks coherence in the narrative will be disappointed. By foregrounding its own narrativity, the story acknowledges its infinite subjectivity in relation to all other texts, modes of discourse and audiences, undermining the authority of detective, author, and reader.

In *City of Glass*, the language of analysis and explanation is severed from the essential meaning associated with reality by a protagonist who desires to escape from the world. Before the deaths of his wife and son, Daniel Quinn was a well-published poet, essayist and translator. Their passing undermined his sense of self, and he began writing detective fiction under the pseudonym William Wilson to facilitate his withdrawal from the public sphere<sup>15</sup>. However,

Quinn knew nothing about crime. He had never murdered anyone, had never stolen anything ... had never met a private detective, had never spoken to a criminal. Whatever he knew about these things, he had learned from books, films, and newspapers. (*CoG* 7)

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<sup>15</sup> The connection between Quinn's false identity and Poe's short story of the same name will be addressed in the following section.

Like Auster, Quinn is not interested in expressing a faithful representation of reality. Quinn's novels merely appropriate and reflect other texts, further removing him from reality by creating a *mise en abîme* of textuality in which the real world has only a distant relationship with the text.

The most overt metafictional interjection is the mysterious phone call intended for 'Paul Auster of the Auster Detective agency'. Quinn's pseudonym enabled his withdrawal, but through his novels he is able to maintain a connection with reality: whereas William Wilson "remained an abstract figure", Quinn's protagonist, Detective Max Work, "had increasingly come to life" (*CoG* 6). The call for Detective Auster presents an opportunity for Quinn to put Work to work; to co-opt a 'real' identity giving agency to his fictional detection process. Further solidifying the implication of connecting Auster the author with Auster the detective, and Quinn the author with Quinn the detective, the narrator explains:

The detective is the one who looks, who listens, who moves through this morass of objects and events in search of the thought, the idea that will pull all these things together and make sense of them. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable. The reader sees the world through the detective's eye, experiencing the proliferation of its details as if for the first time. (*CoG* 8)

Through detective work (Detective Work), Quinn maintains a physical presence in the world; for Quinn, fiction is more real than reality. This recalls Borges' suspicion that the morass of objects and events cannot be unified to create meaning, and the tribulations of Detective Lönnrot, who was punished for his ambitious pursuit of 'truth'. If the detective and the author are interchangeable, the author is guilty of the same hubris; the world of the metaphysical detective story destroys the individual who claims to be able to rationalise it.

Sharing his initials with Don Quixote, Quinn's susceptibility to fantasy is paralleled with the protagonist of Miguel de Cervantes' original tale and with Borges' short story "Pierre

Menard, Author of the *Quixote*". When Quinn eventually meets the fictional Auster, he discovers that he is also an author, not a detective. This Auster is writing an essay entitled *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha*, and Quinn notes that Cervantes' major achievement is the insistence that the events really happened. Auster agrees, stating that "the book after all is an attack on the dangers of the make-believe" (*CoG* 98). Coinciding with the beginning of the investigation, Quinn purchases a red notebook to record his findings – writing his initials on the front - but does not realise that he is also chronicling the dangers of the imagination by documenting his impersonation of the detective. The narrator of *City of Glass* claims to be providing an accurate account of Quinn's experiences based on the red notebook; the novel thus becomes the 'real story' of a fragmented work of pseudo-non-fiction. Author and detective represent two parts of a whole, each responsible for constructing a narrative around events and objects in a vain attempt to make their fictional worlds 'real'.

The request for Auster came from Peter, the "puppet boy" who was denied language by his theosophist father (*CoG* 18). Connecting the author-detective with the victim, Quinn's "triad of selves" is described as consisting of various elements of an artificial identity: "Wilson served as a kind of ventriloquist, Quinn himself was the dummy, and Work was the animated voice that gave purpose to the enterprise" (*CoG* 6). Quinn breaks the cardinal rule of the detective - to maintain disconnected objectivity - by developing a personal connection with the case. His deceased son was also named Peter, connecting him with Stillman the father as well as the son: Quinn realises, "We are both Peter Stillman" (*CoG* 18). Quinn first looks for Stillman in the Columbia library, as both detective and criminal are authors. Stillman's book, *The Garden and The Tower: Early Visions of the New World*, is a divided whole; using both fiction and non-fiction, Stillman manipulates representations of reality through layers of intertextuality and language.



The doubling of detective and criminal, in whom the apparently opposing roles are metaphorically reflected and interconnected, is made stranger by the criminal's exact doppelgänger, which indicates a more literal, and supernatural, interruption to the structured narrative of the detective story. Locating the criminal at Grand Central Station, Quinn encounters two Stillmans at the centre of the labyrinthine station:

There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake. Whatever choice he made – and he had to make a choice – would be arbitrary, a submission to chance. Uncertainty would haunt him to the end. (*CoG* 56)

Recalling the fatalism of *Oedipus Rex* and Pynchon's *Crying of Lot 49*, the doppelgänger embodies Auster's version of a universe governed by fate. Rather than present a world in which the detective controls the movement of the plot, *City of Glass* combines random chance with doubt and despair to foreshadow the detective's demise.

For thirteen days Quinn follows the first Stillman. Quinn could “do no more than observe, write down what he saw in the red notebook, hover stupidly on the surface of things” (*CoG* 59). Stillman's history does not help Quinn understand that “the facts of the past seemed to have no bearing on the facts of the present” (*CoG* 67). Events appear to have no relation in time, so Quinn attempts to locate causality in space by mapping Stillman's movements in his notebook:



Through a process of inductive inference, Quinn determines that Stillman is writing ‘THE TOWER OF BABEL’ – a myth from the Book of Genesis portraying the hubris of man and the destructive power of God. But it is not the story of Babel that terrifies Quinn; like Pynchon’s *Oedipa Maas*, it is the vastness of meaning he associates with the image. Writing from front to back following his horizontal movements, the notebook has become Quinn’s reality. But now the tower has invaded his text, a vertical movement that creates a crossroad, effectively doubling the pathways of the textual labyrinth in which he is trapped.

Having gained nothing from his investigation but a terrifying map, Quinn breaks the detective / criminal barrier to interrogate Stillman. Setting aside the Auster identity, he introduces himself first as ‘Daniel Quinn’, prompting Stillman to express admiration for the name (“It flies off in so many little directions at once” (*CoG* 74)). At a later interview Stillman has forgotten Quinn who is now introduced as ‘Peter Stillman’. Stillman believes Quinn is his son – “[P]eople change, don’t they? One minute we’re one thing, and then another another” (*CoG* 84) – but still warns Quinn:

“Lying is a bad thing. It makes you sorry you were ever born. And not to have been born is a curse. You are condemned to live outside time. And when you live outside time, there is no day and night. You don’t even get a chance to die.” (*CoG* 85).

Quinn is a liar. He has lied about his name many times, and about being a detective. As an author, Quinn is also a ‘liar’, having written novels without ever having experienced the world of the detective first hand. Stillman’s warning foreshadows his disappearance, and Quinn’s disintegration:

Quinn was nowhere now. He had nothing, he knew nothing, he knew that he knew nothing. Not only had he been sent back to the beginning, he was now before the beginning, and so far before the beginning that it was worse than any end he could imagine. (*CoG* 104)

Anything outside the notebook is beyond the narrative, in an abyss of nonexistence. The remainder of the novel documents Quinn's descent into the void, living on the street for months until finally finding Peter's house vacant and empty. Making his way to the smallest, darkest room, Quinn slowly fills in the remaining pages of the notebook – which has now become synonymous with his life, as the impending trial had for Josef K.: "This period of growing darkness coincided with the dwindling of pages in the red notebook. Little by little, Quinn was coming to the end" (*CoG* 131).

*City of Glass* is a novel that explicitly appeals to the authority of metanarratives from fictional, Biblical, mythological, and historical texts. The novel begins with Quinn reading Marco Polo's *Travels*, from which he quotes:

We will set down things seen as seen, things heard as heard, so that our book may be an accurate record, free from any sort of fabrication. And all who read this book or hear it may do so with full confidence, because it contains nothing but the truth. (*CoG* 6)

An echo of this can be discerned in the penultimate chapter, in the narrator's opening interjection:

The account of this period is less full than the author would have liked. But information is scarce, and he has preferred to pass over in silence what could not be definitely confirmed. Since this story is based entirely on facts, the author feels it his duty not to overstep the bounds of the verifiable, to resist at all costs the perils of invention. (*CoG* 114)

*City of Glass* undermines the authority of authors and texts by immersing the detective in a world created from elements of incompatible genres, drawing on multiple intertextual narratives to produce an infinitely regressive *mise en abîme* of subjectivity. Auster uses the detective to challenge the notion of a unified self, and the power of the mind to contain and explain subjective experience. Like all metaphysical detectives Quinn meets his end at the

centre of a labyrinth of uncertainty, the outcome of a reality that does not conform to the conventions of a ratiocinative detective story.

Auster's *City of Glass* achieves a new level of sophistication and playfulness within the tradition developed by the authors discussed in the previous chapter, combining elements of Kafkaesque absurdity, a 'criminal' who might be a mere fragment of the deteriorating detective's imagination, doubling and doppelgängers, ancient mythos, cryptic signifiers, self-reflexive narration, a labyrinthine city and the inexorable momentum of a conspiracy. As a compendium of metaphysical detective fiction tropes, *City of Glass* engages with the range of philosophical questions that have arisen from previous works simultaneously, providing no absolute answers or resolution. The failure of Auster's author-detective to explain the inexplicable is perhaps a more accurate portrayal of human experience than the classical detective story in which reason prevails. At stake is not just the resolution of the Stillman mystery, but the demonstration of the power invested by the rational mind in constructing narratives that express the essential 'truths' of being and existence.

### **Poe's legacy: "William Wilson" and "The Man of the Crowd"**

Metaphysical detective stories combine Poe's exercises of ratiocination with elements of the Gothic and mystery genres to reassert the presence of horror and chaos. Although the metaphysical detective story was not fully realised until after 1925 when Kafka laid the foundations, Poe appears to have anticipated the genre even before he created his tales of ratiocination. Auster's appropriation of the doppelgänger's ominous presence in "William Wilson" and the reverie of the *flâneur* from "The Man of the Crowd" suggest an awareness of both the extent of Poe's influence over the classical genre and its metaphysical response.

Auster's protagonist attempts to play the role of the ratiocinative detective, but has mistaken his unsolvable mystery for a classical detective story. The connection is established explicitly in the first entry of Daniel Quinn's notebook:

...what is it that Dupin says in Poe? "An identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent." But here it would apply to Stillman senior. Which is probably even worse. (*CoG* 40)

The quote is taken directly from Poe's "The Purloined Letter", in which the supreme ratiocinator Dupin is able to defeat his nemesis Minister D\_\_\_\_\_ by matching and then exceeding his opponent's mental abilities. Although Quinn is sure that his narrative is not a story but "a fact, something happening in the world" (*CoG* 40), his only knowledge of crime and detection has come from other stories. Without first-hand experience Quinn is equipped only with the tools of fiction, and playing by the rules of the detective genre requires his identification with the intellect of Stillman – a criminal and a madman. As we have seen in Borges' version "Death and the Compass", even playing by the rules can lead to the detective's demise, and Quinn gradually descends into the insane world of the Stillmans.

The first of Quinn's many names is William Wilson, a pseudonym under which he publishes his mystery novels ("[H]e had taken on the name of William Wilson. Quinn was no longer that part of him that could write books" (*CoG* 4)). In Poe's tale of the same name, William Wilson is also a pseudonym used to recount the tale of a doppelgänger who haunts the narrator. The first line of Poe's story, "Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. The fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation" (WW 626), may be simplified as: 'My name is William Wilson. That is not my real name'. Both Peter and Quinn offer the same contradictory introduction; all three characters are unreliable, yet honest about their dishonesty.

My name is Peter Stillman. That is not my real name. (*CoG* 17)

My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name. (*CoG* 40)

These echoes provide clues to Quinn's mistaken belief that his story belongs to the ratiocinative tradition. For Poe's narrator and for Quinn, the pseudonym 'William Wilson' becomes an external representation of the self, closing the gap between internal and external worlds.

In Poe's tale, William Wilson drives the narrator into madness, but for Auster he is Quinn's attempt to return to reality. Trying to think of the "life he had lived before the story began", Quinn recalls the name William Wilson, remembering the Mets' centerfielder Mookie Wilson, "a promising young player whose real name was William Wilson" (*CoG* 129). In Quinn's mind, the two William Wilsons cancel each other out, erasing them from existence. By the end of Poe's tale, it is clear that the second William Wilson is not a separate person, but the projected image of one aspect of the narrator's self; in destroying the double, the narrator destroys himself. In *City of Glass*, William Wilson is part of the game, a game of baseball and a game of hide-and-seek. The cancelling out of the William Wilsons coincides with Quinn's fading from existence; he vanishes, and the mystery is never solved.

The unsolvable mystery is the theme of Poe's next story "The Man of the Crowd", in which an unnamed narrator follows an enigmatic stranger through the streets of London until he vanishes into the crowd. The tale begins with the narrator seated alone in a coffee shop, watching the crowd outside the window. Observing the "tumultuous sea of human heads," he "regarded with minute interest the innumerable varieties of figure, dress, air, gait, visage, and expression of countenance" (*MotC* 475-476). As has been noted by numerous critics<sup>16</sup>, Auster

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Johinke 119-132; Merivale 104-112.

has inserted his own version of Poe's "Man of the Crowd" into *City of Glass*, beginning with Quinn inside Grand Central Station:

Soon the people were surging around him. There were men and women, children and old people, teenagers and babies, rich people and poor people ... fat people and thin people, tall people and short people, each one different from all the others, each one irreducibly himself. (*CoG* 54)

In Poe's story, one stranger, "a decrepid [sic] old man, some sixty-five or seventy years of age" with an idiosyncratic expression absorbs his whole attention: "He was short in stature, very thin, and apparently very feeble. His clothes, generally, were filthy and ragged" (*MotC* 479). The description closely resembles that of Stillman: "He was tall, thin, without question past sixty, somewhat stooped... he wore a long, brown overcoat that had gone to seed" (*CoG* 55). Stillman is Quinn's 'man of the crowd'; from the moment Poe's narrator and Quinn meet the object of their investigations, they obsessively follow the decrepit old men through the streets, avoiding their gaze while maintaining intimate distance, mirroring their movement and pace to the point where – like Moran in *Molloy* – one begins to resemble the other.

The four men's movement through the streets recalls Charles Baudelaire's notion of the *flâneur*, the anonymous observer of modern urban life who wanders the streets becoming one with the city; as an artist, poet and philosopher, "his passion and his profession are to become one flesh with the crowd" (795). Franz Hessel, founder of the German *flânerie* tradition, has described the process as "a kind of reading of the street, in which human faces, shop fronts, shop windows, café terraces, street cars, automobiles and trees become a wealth of equally valid letters of the alphabet that together result in words, sentences and pages of an ever-new book" (40). And for Walter Benjamin, "no matter what trail the flâneur may follow, every one often will lead him to a crime" (41). The idle, wandering *flâneur* has been described as a detective reading and writing the narratives of the streets (Brand 79), while also being implicated in the inevitable criminality of urban life (McDonough 101).

The *flâneurs* of Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" and Auster's *City of Glass* embody wanderer, detective, criminal and author in their reading of the urban world. In the tale of ratiocination, the *flâneur*-investigator reassures the reader that the increasingly chaotic modern world may still be conquered by human reason. Where Poe's story offers "a critique of the *flâneur*'s methods of representing modern cities" by shielding the reader "from all potential sources of anxiety" (Brand 79, 92), Auster's novel reintroduces the threat of chaos with the disintegration of the *flâneur*-detective, suggesting that the ordered universe of the classical narrative is a naïve illusion. The elements of "William Wilson" and "Man of the Crowd" in *City of Glass* demonstrate the close relationship between Poe's mysteries and his ratiocinative trilogy, undermining the claim that reality can be accurately described in fiction. Where Dupin restored order to the chaotic world, William Wilson is destroyed by his own hand, and the man of the crowd leaves the narrator "absorbed in contemplation" (MotC 481), having pursued a text "that does not permit itself to be read" (MotC 475). In similar fashion, for the detective of *City of Glass*, "it was as though he had melted into the walls of the city" (CoG 117).

### **Chasing the centre: Beckett and Auster**

Paul Auster first met Samuel Beckett in the early 1970s (Auster 2005), and has described the experience as having a profound influence on his writing: "I was in a sense crushed by Beckett. It took me a while to get out from under the burden of Beckett" (Auster, Feldman and Nixon 16). *City of Glass* is Auster's first published novel, and as a long-time reader of Beckett's work, similarities are present in his literary voice and engagement with such things as meaninglessness, silence, darkness and decay, coupled with an often crude sense of humour. In particular, Beckett's *Molloy* may be read as an influential antecedent for *City of Glass*. Each work is the first of a triptych of interdependent novels, and both *City of Glass* and *Molloy* adopt characteristics of the detective genre to explore metaphysical questions.



Beckett's novel is divided into two parts, the first a chronicle of the experience of Molloy, and the second Agent Jacques Moran's report of his pursuit of Molloy. Each section hints that the respective characters are both narrators and authors. Molloy has taken his mother's place, alone in a room, and a man comes every Sunday:

He gives me money and takes away the pages. So many pages, so much money. Yes, I work now, a little like I used to, except that I don't know how to work any more ... When he comes for the fresh pages he brings back the previous week's. They are marked with signs I don't understand. Anyway I don't read them. (*M* 3)

And Moran's report ends almost the way it started, "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows" (*M* 87, 170), but "It was not midnight. It was not raining" (*M* 170). Both narrators are unreliable: Molloy either cannot or does not read, he works but does not know how to work, and perhaps also writes without knowing how or what he writes; by the end Moran is not sure if he understands language at all, and his report concludes with a contradiction that calls into question the opening sentence, and by implication the report itself.

If, as *City of Glass* suggests, authors and detectives are interchangeable, *Molloy* is the narrative of two almost-author almost-detectives, one of whom is the 'criminal' object of the other's investigation. Daniel Quinn, like the narrator of Nabokov's *The Eye*, expresses the desire to become an all-seeing eye: "[B]y reducing himself to a seeing eye, he was able to escape" (*CoG* 40). Molloy only has one seeing eye, and this is sufficient for him to feel outside of the world: "...of my two eyes only one functioning more or less correctly, I misjudged the distance separating me from the other world..." (*M* 45-46). The narrator of *City of Glass* emphasizes the connection between the 'eye' as a signifier for detective, author, and self:

Private eye. The term held a triple meaning for Quinn. Not only was it the letter 'i,' standing for 'investigator,' it was 'I' in the uppercase, the tiny life-bud buried in the body of the breathing self.

At the same time, it was also the physical eye of the writer, the eye of the man who looks out from himself into the world and demands that the world reveal itself to him. (*CoG* 8)

Moran escapes the world through his mind's eye and like Quinn, his investigation begins with a sense of the labyrinth he is about to enter:

I wandered in my mind, slowly, noting every detail of the labyrinth, its paths as familiar as those of my garden and yet ever new, as empty as the heart could wish or alive with strange encounters. (*M* 101)

New York was an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps ... it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well. (*CoG* 4)

The ratiocinator must be capable of such acute analytical and imaginative skill that he may visualize objects and events 'as they are', while also maintaining detached objectivity. But Moran's mind internalizes the image of Molloy, "Perhaps I had invented him, I mean found him ready made in my head" (*M* 106); in Moran's mind, Molloy "sought refuge near the centre" (*M* 108). Both Quinn and Moran are on a quest to find the centre; for both 'detectives', the 'criminal' represents the centre of the self (the criminal as a double) and the centre of meaning (the protagonists fall between the cracks of words and language).

Trapped somewhere in the centre of the labyrinth of uncertainty, Quinn's pursuit of Stillman has caused the decay of his body and mind to reflect the 'criminal':

He had turned into a bum. His clothes were discoloured, dishevelled, debauched by filth. His face was covered by a thick black beard with tiny flecks of grey in it ... It had been no more than a matter of months, and in that time he had become someone else. (*CoG* 121)

By the end of his report, Moran has also become a reflection of the pursued Molloy:

I had not shaved since the day my son brought back the bicycle from Hole, nor combed my hair, nor washed, not to mention all the privations I had suffered and the great inward metamorphoses.  
(M 157)

Neither Quinn nor Moran resembles the person he was prior to the investigation; their obsession with locating the criminal in pursuit of the centre has consumed and nearly destroyed every aspect of the self. Author becomes detective becomes criminal, a cycle which repeats itself in the infinite Möbius strip of the metaphysical detective story.

Molloy and Moran also bear resemblance to both Peter Stillmans, Peter's mechanical voice echoing the ramblings of Molloy, and Moran projecting his ideal self onto his son. As in *City of Glass* with the generational Peter Stillmans, Moran shares his name with his son: "His name is Jacques, like mine. This cannot lead to confusion" (M 87). It of course does lead to confusion, where individual identities are conflated, such that the boundaries between distinct objects are blurred to become one. Like Stillman, Moran believes that silence is the key to eternal truth:

Not one person in a hundred knows how to be silent and listen, no, nor even to conceive what such a thing means. Yet only then can you detect, beyond the fatuous clamour, the silence of which the universe is made. I desired this advantage for my son. (M 116)

The 'truth' of the universe is something to be 'detected' by ordering chaos with silence. In *City of Glass*, Stillman believes that he can reveal God's language by forbidding his son to speak. However, Molloy must give voice to the chaos of his conscious experience, speaking in broken sentences and confused phrasing, as Peter does as an adult. Molloy asks himself questions to stay connected to reality, "so that I might believe I was still there" (M 44).

The words engraved themselves for ever on my memory, perhaps because I understood them at once, a thing I didn't often do ... A defect of the understanding perhaps, which only began to vibrate

on repeated solicitations, or which did vibrate, if you like, but at a lower frequency, or a higher, than that of ratiocination, if such a thing is conceivable, and such a thing is conceivable, since I conceive it. (*M* 45)

Beckett refers to Poe's ratiocinative process as a 'vibration' to indicate the physicality of mental faculties. Where Poe's concept suggests the mind of the detective operates beyond the average individual, Beckett reduces the detective to mediocrity, by showing that ratiocination exists only in a fragmentary sense within the physical limitations of the mind. By conceiving of something, Molloy believes he can make it real.

The protagonists of *Molloy* and *City of Glass* vanish into darkness, chasing the centre in futile attempts to locate meaning and the self that lead, despite their efforts, to disintegration and destruction. During the night Stillman vanishes from the hotel and leaves no trace, and Quinn gradually dissolves into nothingness in the empty rooms of Peter's vacated apartment. Molloy ends in a ditch on the edge of a dark forest, and Moran concludes at the beginning in an perpetually recursive circle. Identity and reality are labyrinths of uncertainty, in which every turn creates an infinite number of passageways, only one of which may be chosen and which gives no promise of resolution. Beckett and Auster both use the detective story to signify the end of the rational mind and the illusion of a world that lends itself to empirical analysis. The implication is that for detectives, authors and philosophers, the process of examining and understanding our subjective experience in relation to an objective world is problematic at best, most likely impossible, and at worst, suicidal.

Auster's *City of Glass* is the high point of the literary tradition of metaphysical detective fiction. Combining aspects of Poe's mystery stories and exercises in ratiocination with elements from Beckett and other authors outlined in the previous chapter, Auster directs the metaphysical detective story to its ultimate end: the destabilisation of metanarratives that attempt to make

sense of the world, and the author's authority as the origin of meaning. Although this chapter has examined only *City of Glass*, the remaining novels of Auster's *New York Trilogy* continue with a metaphysical exploration of the detective story, presenting a detective who *reads* evidence to gain knowledge of the crime, and in doing so *authors* a narrative in an attempt to elucidate the event. In each case, the detective becomes ever more removed from reality, attempting to maintain connections with the external world through textual relationships. In *Ghosts*, the second part of the trilogy, the 'detective' protagonist Blue is "a devoted reader of *True Detective*" (G 143), the first true-crime magazine that emerged during the golden age of detective fiction; as the narrator says, "the old tools strengthen Blue in his handling of reality" (393). This magazine shares its title with Nic Pizzolatto's television series *True Detective*, the subject of the next chapter, which continues the overlaying of detective and author whilst also implicating the philosopher.

## Chapter 3

### Illusions, Delusions, and the Poetics of Place in Nic Pizzolatto's *True Detective*

On every side of me stretched a bleak and desolate expanse of plain, covered with a tall overgrowth of sere grass ... A few blasted trees here and there appeared as leaders in this malevolent conspiracy of silent expectation ... Over all the dismal landscape a canopy of low, lead-coloured clouds hung like a visible curse. In all this there were a menace and a portent – a hint of evil, an intimation of doom.

– Ambrose Bierce, 1886

With the advent of cinema, the translocation of the classical genre from page to screen prompted a radical transformation of the flourishing detective figure. Initially, however, the adaptability of the existing literature was inhibited by the difficulty of reconciling a largely cerebral plot with the largely visual form<sup>17</sup>. Capitalising on the invention of sound in 1926, directors and screenwriters introduced the most popular literary detectives to film and television (Maloney 45). In the United States during the 1930s, negative attitudes towards law enforcement inspired the portrayal of police officers as ineffective and comical, but the Cold War increased the focus on competent police procedurals during the 1940s, and the detective as 'American hero' continued through to the 1950s<sup>18</sup>. A ratings system was developed in the 1960s, and reduced censorship yielded an increase in cinematic violence requiring the creation

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<sup>17</sup> The first silent 'detective' film, Louis Feuillade's serial *Fantômas* (1913-14), focuses on the actions of the criminal rather than the detective's investigation.

<sup>18</sup> For further reading on American detective film and TV see McCaw, especially chapter 1; and Delamater and Prigozy 83-84.

of the ‘vigilante cop’<sup>19</sup>. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, in reaction to feminist and Civil Rights movements, traditional white male dominance was perpetuated by the American police ‘action hero’ (see Gates). More recently, the 1990s introduced the criminal profiler, combining changing perspectives on masculinity with new psychological approaches to crime solving, signifying a contemporary reworking of Poe’s literary ratiocination process.

This brief introduction to the history of detective cinema cannot do justice to the extent of the transition from literature. However, it does demonstrate the adaptability of the evolving genre. Crime and detective fiction are perhaps the most popular form of the most widely consumed cultural medium; Mary Evans believes “it is possible to predict that every day, on every television screen throughout the world, there is some version of the crime or detective story” (10). For this reason, it is important to consider the fundamental role these fictions play in popular beliefs about the capacity of the rational mind to comprehend a chaotic world of criminality. Although there have been various subversions of the classical structure,<sup>20</sup> explicitly philosophical metaphysical detective fiction has yet to become an established presence on the small screen, likely as a result of the complexity and apparent inaccessibility of the sub-genre.

The first example of televised metaphysical detective fiction is Nic Pizzolatto’s *True Detective: The Long Bright Dark* (2014).<sup>21</sup> Outside Erath, Louisiana in 1995, Dora Lange’s

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<sup>19</sup> See, for example, *Bullitt* (1968), *Coogan’s Bluff* (1968), *Dirty Harry* (1971), and *The French Connection* (1971) (see Gates).

<sup>20</sup> Some examples include Mark Frost and David Lynch’s idiosyncratic *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991); Bruno Heller’s *The Mentalist* (2008–2015) which recalls the modality of Poe’s “Purloined Letter” and Borges’ “Death and the Compass”; the author/detective protagonist of Andrew Marlowe’s *Castle* (2009–); the vigilante criminal of James Manos Jr’s *Dexter* (2006-2013); and the detective/criminal duality of Bryan Fuller’s *Hannibal* (2013–2015).

<sup>21</sup> As an anthology series, the second season *True Detective: The Western Book of the Dead* (2015), has no direct connection with the first.

corpse is found in a burned cane field. Wearing a woven crown adorned with antlers, she has a spiral painted on her back and has been posed as if in prayer beneath a large, solitary tree. After connecting this murder with multiple missing women and children, revealing a potential serial killer, detectives Martin ‘Marty’ Hart and Rustin ‘Rust’ Cohle identify a suspect and believe they have solved the case. Seventeen years later, another body is found in similar circumstances and the former police officers, now private detectives, are called in to assist. The primary and secondary narratives are split between police interviews in 2012 and the investigation of 1995. When the two timelines converge, Hart and Cohle reunite to find the ‘true’ criminal, discovering a network of violent and perverse individuals who have been concealed by institutionalised corruption.

First I consider Pizzolatto’s construction of the fictional world, in terms of culture, landscape and temporality. Through the Southern Gothic *mise en scène*, various locations across the Louisiana landscape become almost like living characters, evoking the American ‘unconscious’— mysterious, grotesque, and horrifying. The fragmented timeline reinforces a metaphysical notion of time as an infinite abyss, as corruption extends beyond the police force and into political and spiritual institutions. *True Detective* seems to suggest that to confront reality is to encounter a “world where nothing is solved” (*TD* 5:20:43). Then I examine the identities of the two protagonists, Hart and Cohle. Seemingly in opposition, it is revealed that they are complementary, interconnected and interdependent. Both men suffer from a deep fear of uncertainty that results in a crisis of identity. Hart and Cohle transcend their role as detectives, first becoming ‘authors’ and then ‘philosophers’; in questioning the belief in the spatiotemporal exterior world, the detective must also question the existence of the interior world, the mind and the self.



### **Time is a flat circle: Culture, landscape and temporality**

Answering the question ‘Is the South still Gothic?’, Nick Pinkerton describes the American South as “a place of hospitality that borders on the pathological”, “home to ... one of the great, most fecund musical traditions”, “where, even in this hectic era, the sweetness of life has not been altogether forgotten” (46). But the South is also in many ways defined by a history of racial violence and fundamentalist religiosity, with an amalgam of Christianity, Voudon and Santería<sup>22</sup>. Louisiana’s communities are divided by race, class, ideology – and by the landscape itself. The southern coastline is one of the fastest disappearing areas in the world (Boesch et. al. 1-3). Swampland and marshes surround fields and woodlands; and murky rivers and bayous penetrate the alluvial landscape, flowing from polluted navigable waterways. The decaying and disintegrating environment of the American South becomes an ideal place to situate the metaphysical detectives, plagued by a sense of evil contained in the earth.

A focus on the grotesque in the American South has become a genre of its own, in the guise of ‘Southern Gothic’<sup>23</sup>. Peggy Dunn Bailey links Gothic texts that “encode obsessive preoccupations with blood and inheritance, religion, sexuality, and sacred place” with American realism, “marked by a complex and frightening relationship between religious intensity and violence, especially violence within the family” (425). In recent years, post-Hurricane Katrina, the Southern Gothic is gradually establishing a presence on the small screen, due to its unique ability to combine elements of the real trauma of Southern history and

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<sup>22</sup> These West African syncretic religions have provided inspiration for Southern Gothic writers not only because they involve occult practices of “vengeance by proxy (voodoo dolls), suspended animation (zombification), and *gris-gris* (talismans)”, but also because they embody the cultural Otherness associated with ‘darkness’ and supernaturalism (see Young).

<sup>23</sup> Originally coined by Ellen Glasgow in 1935, ‘Southern Gothic’ describes the work of William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, Harper Lee, and Cormac McCarthy, among others.

culture with the apparently supernatural menace of the landscape<sup>24</sup>. Pizzolatto adopts a Southern Gothic *mise en scène* to immerse the detectives in a space that encircles and almost devours them, creating a metaphysical detective story that uses place to question the nature of reality and existence.

The petrochemical swampland of Louisiana becomes a stage for the criminal to play out his fantasies. The first episode opens in twilight, with the silhouette of a hulking person carrying a hessian sack, moving through long grass towards a large tree. The sound of insects is interrupted by crackling fire, cutting to a long-shot of the river and grasslands with flames on the horizon. The scene evokes the series subtitle: ‘the long bright dark’, suggesting simultaneously the sinking landscape and sweltering Southern heat (see figure 1).



*Figure 1*

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<sup>24</sup> Alongside HBO’s *True Detective*, this trend can be seen in the same channel’s *Treme* (2010-2013) and *True Blood* (2008-2014); in Sundance TV’s *Rectify* (2013–); in FX’s *Justified* (2010-2015) and the third and fourth seasons of *American Horror Story* (2011–); and in select episodes of AMC’s *The Walking Dead* (2010–).

Arriving at the crime scene in 1995, the detectives find Lange's body beneath the tree and Cohle begins to 'read' the clues:

It's fantasy enactment, ritual, fetishization, iconography. This is his vision. Her body is a paraphilic love map ... An attachment of physical lust to fantasies and practices forbidden by society ... This kind of thing does not happen in a vacuum. I guarantee this wasn't his first. (*TD* 1:10:38)

Cohle combines the sexual perversion of Freudian paraphilia with John Money's notion of the 'lovemap', which describes the neural templates that help link sexual preference with childhood trauma (xvi-xvii). Here the terms work together to transform Lange's body into a text<sup>25</sup>. Lange has been reduced to the exterior image of the criminal's interior world, and the 'vacuum' is the idea that private desires emerge from a public culture that permits and even fetishizes violence. Mark Seltzer describes this phenomenon as 'wound culture': "The public fascination with torn and open bodies ... a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound" (1). Although Pizzolatto is "not interested in serial killers or serial killer stories" (see Pizzolatto and Dekel) the criminal is a symptom of a broader cultural problem, in which the realms of public and private, individual and community, self and other, converge with the violent erasure of boundaries.

The tree represents the intersection of these boundaries, while also mirroring the fountain of life, and the web of arteries that comprise the human nervous system, becoming iconic of a haunting sense of place (see Pizzolatto). Cohle returns to the scene in 2002, finding a lattice wreath in the location where Lange's body was found (see figure 2).

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<sup>25</sup> For a study on the form and function of Lange's corpse see Stapleton (2014).



*Figure 2*

The image of Cohle staring into the darkness at the centre recalls the series tagline, “Touch darkness and darkness touches you back” and echoes Nietzsche’s dictum: “Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself. And when you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you” (Horstman and Norman 69). In pursuit of the criminal, the detective must focus his mind on the ‘darkness’ of criminality so intensely that he risks being corrupted and subsumed by it.

At each crime scene the detectives find lattice pyramids that resemble the woven wreath, believed to be artefacts of Voudon and Santería. With each location marked by Louisiana’s racial history, the Reverend Tuttle, leader of the ministry and religious education organisation, exhorts them to treat the crimes as ‘anti-Christian’: “[T]here is a war happening behind things” (*TD* 1:50:56), he says. A photograph of Lange surrounded by five masked men on horses participating in the “annual winter festival” (*TD* 7:14:04) foreshadows Cohle’s later suspicion that the killer belongs to a network of paedophiles protected by the Christian elite. Each year in rural Louisiana, the *Courir de Mardi Gras* celebrates the final day before Lent,

and is one of the only occasions that masks and hoods are permitted (see Silman). Later, the five men in the photograph are mirrored by Hart's daughters playing with their dolls (see figures 3 and 4).



*Figure 3*



*Figure 4*

Although the girls have not directly experienced the ‘darkness’ that consumed Lange, the Louisiana culture of secrecy and deviancy seeps in, tainting the purity of the family. Hart and Cohle ‘touch darkness’ in their search for the criminal, and their lives are ‘touched back’ in return. The detectives are responsible for protecting the innocent and finding the ‘truth’, but without Hart’s support under the weight of a corrupt police force, Cohle is suspended from the investigation.

Concealed by corruption and masked by ‘darkness’, the criminal’s mythos draws on genres beyond Gothic and detective fiction. Lange’s incarcerated ex-husband connects the clues, and provides a suspect, Reggie Ledoux:

He said that there’s this place down south where all these rich men go to devil-worship. He said that they sacrifice kids and whatnot ... Something about someplace called ‘Carcosa’ and the ‘Yellow King’. Reggie got this brand on his back, like in a spiral. He says that’s their sign. (TD 4:4:5)

‘Carcosa’ and the ‘Yellow King’ are part of a pre-existing mythology, appropriated by Pizzolatto, at the tail end of 150 years of horror and ‘weird fiction’<sup>26</sup>. H.P. Lovecraft popularized the genre in the 1920s; however, weird fiction originated in the same topos as detective fiction, with Poe (see Joshi). Weird fiction combines an “atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces” with the “malign... laws of nature” that govern the internal world of the mind “which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos” (Lovecraft 4). Elements of horror and weird fiction pervade the narrative, further blurring distinctions between genres and the boundaries between mind and body, self and other, private and public.

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<sup>26</sup> Carcosa was first conceived in Ambrose Bierce’s short story, “An Inhabitant of Carcosa” (1891), about an ancient, mysterious and accursed place. The term was used more extensively by Robert W. Chambers in his short story collection *The King in Yellow* (1895).

Despite the apparent significance of the mythology, the spiral is the more essential icon for *True Detective*, and for the metaphysical detective story. In his analysis of Borges' labyrinth motifs, L. A. Murillo describes the simplest representation of the labyrinth: "[A] coil, a swirl", a symbol that "has been identified with the magical powers that man has aspired to possess and to control" (259-260). Found painted on Lange and eventually branded on Ledoux, Cohle describes the spiral 'insignia' as "some kind of archetype" (*TD* 3:46:23). In Jungian psychology, 'archetype' refers to any highly developed and archaic image that derives from collective unconscious (Jung 42); a symbol that represents a mutual private space that manifests in public, analogous to Seltzer's 'wound culture'. With the discovery of another corpse bearing the spiral pattern at Lake Charles in 2012, the detectives realise that the original crime was never solved, and so the investigation begins again.

When Errol Childress is identified as the 'true' criminal, he is inscribing the spiral into the landscape on a lawnmower, and the branding is revealed on his back. As we see in the final episode, in a full-scale reconstruction of the crime scene lattices, Childress has created 'Carcosa' in a labyrinth of underground tunnels. Cohle follows him into the darkness, with Childress' voice echoing around him: "This is Carcosa ... Come die with me, little priest" (*TD* 8:31:54). In search of the 'truth' the detective is recast as the 'little priest', performing the role of both purifier and sacrifice. Upon reaching the centre, Cohle has a vision of a monstrous vortex: the battle between light and dark is embodied in the cosmic spiral and the 'eye' of the storm (see figure 5).





*Figure 5*

Childress bursts from the darkness, piercing Cohle's torso with a dagger and raising him into the air. Hart arrives in time to shoot Childress, and together the detectives defeat the criminal, but are left bloody and broken under the night sky.

The sense of victory is tempered by a philosophy of time that reflects the spiral, and that underpins the entire narrative: "Time is a flat circle. Everything we've ever done or will do we're gonna do over, and over, and over again" (*TD* 5:20:47). During the 2012 interviews, Cohle explains:

You ever heard of something called the M-brane theory, detectives? ...in this universe, we process time linearly, forward, but outside of our spacetime, from what would be a fourth-dimensional perspective, time wouldn't exist ... Everything outside our dimension, that's eternity, eternity looking down on us. Now, to us, it's a sphere, but to them it's a circle. (*TD* 5:32:21)

In physics, fundamental M-theory unifies all other superstring theories, and although it is largely unknown, it suggests "the number of dimensions in spacetime are not fixed concepts but fluid entities that shift with our point of view" (see Schwarz). This theory, too complex to



describe in full here, provides Pizzolatto with a framework to undermine both the detective's and the viewer's understanding of reality<sup>27</sup>. Cohle continues:

In eternity, where there is no time, nothing can grow. Nothing can become. Nothing changes. So death created time to grow the things that it would kill, and you are reborn, but into the same life that you've always been born into. I mean, how many times have we had this conversation, detectives? Well, who knows? When you can't remember your lives, you can't change your lives, and that is the terrible and the secret fate of all life. (*TD* 5:32:21)

Infinitely recursive space and time reflects the spiral motif, removing the detective's sense of agency with a deterministic philosophy. In the final episode, Childress discloses: "I have very important work to do. My ascension removes me from the disc and the loop. I'm near final stage. Some mornings, I can see the infernal plane" (*TD* 8:4:25). The criminal is outside the 'disc and the loop' of space and time, like Stillman's accursed liar in *City of Glass*, in a sphere beyond internal and external worlds. Reinforcing the circularity of the narrative, the 'infernal plane' recalls the fiery horizon of the first episode. However, the circle does not restore the world to the order that previously existed, and the chaos of the criminal's sphere becomes an eternity of darkness and death.

### **The Detective's Curse: The 'I' in the 'Eye'**

*True Detective* is concerned with the illusion of selfhood, reconstructing the identities of the detectives by connecting who they were, who they are, and who they will become. Breaking the convention of the lone metaphysical detective, the partnership between Hart and Cohle is both a realistic representation of modern police procedures and a way of expressing the plurality of identity underpinning the correlation between detective, criminal, author, and

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<sup>27</sup> See Doyle and Foyle for further reading on "quantum narratives" in *True Detective*.

philosopher. *True Detective* conceals and reveals the ‘truth’ simultaneously; split between the perspective of each detective and the filmic narrative, the discord between the various focalisers creates a sense of discontinuity and disjunction that informs Pizzolatto’s philosophy of subjective experience.

Hart and Cohle are interviewed separately, pictured with drastically different appearances, emphasizing a tension resulting from opposing ideologies and unresolved conflict. Their names are charactonyms that provide a sense of their personalities and history. Hart is the ‘heart’ of the partnership. On the surface he is a family man with a clearly defined sense of Christian morality, respected by his colleagues and personable with the community. But Hart is virile and volatile; when his masculinity is threatened, his temper turns violent. Cohle, by contrast, is a self-described pessimist<sup>28</sup>. His ‘cold’ exterior is symptomatic of his dark past (as black as coal), and the trauma has caused the oxidation of his ‘soul’. Although each detective appears initially to conform to nominative determinism (the notion that a person’s name determines their potential), their opposing attitudes are actually complementary. Hart’s choices counter his beliefs, and Cohle’s cynicism disguises his sentimentality; their divergent actions reflect a sense of identity that is defined by self-contradiction.

The narrative shifts between (primary) 2012 interviews and (secondary) 1995 investigation. At the original crime scene, Hart and Cohle appear as mirror images of each other, both wearing the Louisiana State CID uniform. Their difference is revealed in their approach to Lange’s corpse: Hart in the style of the hardboiled detective, Cohle engaging in a more ratiocinative process. Known for documenting his findings in a ledger, Cohle is introduced in Hart’s interview as the “Tax Man” (*TD* 1:2:20), a name with biblical origins<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> For a reading of *True Detective* in the context of philosophical pessimism see Shipley.

<sup>29</sup> Luke 18:9-14, “The Story of the Tax Man and the Pharisee”.

that also echoes the epithets of infamous serial killers. Despite clear signals that Cohle is now a suspect, Hart's 1995 warning should be considered: "You attach an assumption to a piece of evidence, you start to bend the narrative to support it, prejudice yourself" (*TD* 1:11:00). Hart is making a subtle connection between detection and authorship by acknowledging the investigative process as one of narrative construction. This same connection is made by Auster in *City of Glass*, generating an aporia in which the detective is responsible for finding the 'truth,' but the author cannot be trusted.

As the (apparently) reliable narrator, Hart becomes the 'author' of the 'true' story of Cohle the 'criminal'. But gradually the visual narrative departs from his account of the investigation. Hart is seen lying to his wife, and when his affair is revealed he explains that it was "for the good of the family" (*TD* 2:15:18). He reflects:

Did I make some mistakes? Yes. You know the detective's curse? Solution was right under my nose, but I was paying attention to the wrong clues. (*TD* 4:15:22)

Perhaps the detective's curse is not just the inability to see what is right in front of him, but more specifically the inability to identify the 'truth'. Even with the benefit of hindsight, Hart still is not able to identify his 'true' failure: he is living in 'bad faith' (see Perez). This concept, developed by Jean-Paul Sartre, describes the inauthentic identity that results from personal freedom being constrained by false societal values: "In bad faith it is from myself that I am hiding the truth" (49). Therein lies the paradox, Hart must know the 'truth' of his identity to be able to conceal it so carefully. He skilfully constructs a narrative that permits his freedom, while maintaining the illusion of Christian morality that absolves him of responsibility and provides him with a false sense of certainty.

When the detectives depart the crime scene, in 1995, Hart attempts to restore order through religious dialogue with Cohle. The latter, however, does not share his faith. The crucifix in Cohle's apartment represents "a form of meditation":

I contemplate the moment in the garden, the idea of allowing your own crucifixion ... I think human consciousness was a tragic misstep in evolution ... We are things that labour under the illusion of having a self, this accretion of sensory experience and feeling, programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody when, in fact, everybody's nobody. (*TD* 1:18:00)

The opposition between the two detectives is placed in parallel with the metaphysical conflict between religion and philosophy. Drawing on Nietzsche and Schopenhauer,<sup>30</sup> Cohle's combination of nihilism and anti-natalism hints at deep-seated self-doubt. While religion provides Hart with certainty, for Cohle, regardless of whether or not reality is 'real', the Self is an illusion and subjective experience is meaningless. Although sceptical, and even cynical, about religion, when asked why he works as a homicide detective, Cohle recites a version of Corinthians 12:14-15: "The body is not one member, but many. Now are the many, but one of the body". As he explains, "I was just trying to stay a part of the body now" (*TD* 2:39:48). Like Daniel Quinn, detective work strengthens Cohle's connection to others and to the world.

Since the death of his daughter Sophia<sup>31</sup>, Cohle has struggled with substance abuse, PTSD, insomnia, and 'chemical flashbacks', intensified by the neurological phenomenon of synaesthesia. Cohle explains the latter as a "hypersensitivity" in which "one sense triggers another sense" (*TD* 37:00): colours, forms, tastes and smells appear to his senses without

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<sup>30</sup> For an extensive study on the relationship between the ideas of these philosophers see Janaway, especially chapters 1, 4, 7, and 8.

<sup>31</sup> This may be read as another charactonym, implying that Cohle has substituted his daughter with *philo-sophia*.

physical presence in the external world. In episode three, aptly titled “Seeing Things”, Cohle’s growing obsession with the case causes him to hallucinate; looking out over the horizon, he perceives a flock of birds forming the shape of the spiral (figure 6).



*Figure 6*

In the first episode, Cohle’s synaesthesia reacts in response to the landscape: “I get a bad taste in my mouth out here. Aluminum, ash, like you can smell the psychosphere” (*TD* 1:18:30). And again later in the final episode en route to Childress’ home:

COHLE: That taste.

HART: What?

COHLE: Aluminum, ash. I’ve tasted it before. (*TD* 8:25:55)

Despite claiming that he “could always tell what was real or what wasn’t” (*TD* 2:55:28), Cohle admits that there were times when he thought he was “mainlining the secret truth of the universe” (*TD* 2:56:37). Although his mental faculties appear to be compromised, synaesthetes

such as Cohle express a belief that the ‘disorder’ augments their experience of reality<sup>32</sup>. Compensating for the limitations of a single sense by unconsciously enhancing it with another, synaesthetes are perhaps more capable of mediating the interaction between internal and external worlds than others without the ‘disorder’.

Simultaneously Cohle is portrayed as incapable of providing an objective, empirical interpretation of reality, and uniquely equipped to access a metaphysical sphere of knowledge. When Hart becomes aware of the ulterior motives of the interviewers, he laughs, “Well, if you two talked to Rust, you weren’t getting a read on him. He was getting a read on you” (TD 5:47:50). Cohle refers to his ability to ‘read’ people as “negative capability”. Coined by poet John Keats, the term describes the artistic ability to perceive the depth of possibility in the world and people: “being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (see Keats). From the detective’s use of the term we can infer a connection to Poe’s ratiocinative process that combines the reasoner’s analytic mind and the poet’s creative imagination. Simulating the desires of Nabokov’s narrator and Auster’s detective Quinn, Cohle practices his ‘negative capability’ by reducing himself to the reflected image of his eye in a mirror cut to size (see figure 7).

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<sup>32</sup> For a comprehensive study on synaesthesia including interviews with synaesthetes see van Campen, chapters 1, 8, and 10.



*Figure 7*

In doing so, Cohle acknowledges the inaccessibility of his own consciousness and the alienation from his self. The eye represents the centre of the internal subject, and the mirror becomes the threshold of the external world, in all its unintelligibility and mystery. In the third episode, “The Locked Room”, Cohle describes the illusion of the Self as:

...a dream that you had inside a locked room; a dream about being a person, and like a lot of dreams there's a monster at the end. (*TD* 3:55:40)

In Poe's first detective story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, the ‘locked room’ describes a mystery in which an impossible crime is committed: “Both doors leading from the rooms into the passage were securely locked, with the keys inside” (156). There is no ingress or egress from the ‘locked room’ of the mind, and for Cohle, the ‘monster’ is the monstrous realisation that there is no self, no centre, nothing to guarantee either value or meaning<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Auster's *City of Glass* has also been read in the context of the ‘locked room’ of the Self, see Shiloh chapter 10.

Episode three concludes with the first image of the criminal ‘monster’ Ledoux, standing in the scrub at the edge of the woods, heavily tattooed, wearing only a jockstrap and a gas mask, wielding a machete. To locate Ledoux, Cohle (re)assumes his undercover identity ‘Crash’ and returns to his criminal self. Although detective work appears to give Cohle a sense of purpose, as Crash he gains the freedom associated with wild criminality, and perhaps also with a closer proximity to death. In the first extended scene of unbroken action, Cohle enters the labyrinth of the housing projects in a tracking shot that follows him through bungalows, around corners, across streets, through scrub, and over fences, the tension heightened by sounds of gunfire, shouting, police sirens, and a helicopter overhead (see Fukunaga and MacInnes). In pursuit of the monstrous criminal at the centre, the detective loses control of the surrounding chaos. Indeed, he is almost destroyed by the erupting conflict between two opposing criminal factions and a police force oblivious to his presence.

Drawing the criminal out from hiding, Hart and Cohle reveal Ledoux’s location and close in on their suspect. Shifting back and forth from 1995 and 2012, the story is split between the detectives’ voices and the unfolding visual event. Hart begins: “I’ll tell it the same way that I told the shooting board and every cop bar between Houston and Biloxi. You know why the story is always the same? Because it only went down the one way” (*TD* 5:9:03). But the visual narrative departs from the detective’s accounts, revealing a drastically altered version of events in which Hart is shown killing the unarmed, handcuffed suspect. Cohle instinctively responds by firing an automatic weapon into the surrounding woodland, manufacturing evidence and altering the crime scene. Through the voiceover of the interview, Cohle takes control of the narration, ‘authoring’ a narrative to conceal the truth; the detective becomes the ‘author’ to protect the (other) detective who has become the ‘criminal’.



Killing Ledoux effectively concludes the investigation, but with the discovery of the Lake Charles murder, Cohle and Hart realise that he was not the ‘true’ criminal. After exiting the interviews, the detectives restore their partnership to honour their ‘debt’: “A man remembers his debts [...] We left something undone” (*TD* 7:3:25). Cohle is referring to a fault in the universal equilibrium of good and evil; the detectives were responsible for maintaining order, and instead they contributed to the chaos and allowed it to persist. The ‘detective’s curse’ returns in the final episode with Childress’ lament: “It’s been weeks since I left my mark. Would that they had eyes to see”<sup>34</sup> (*TD* 8:4:20). The restored partnership and shared investment in repaying their ‘debt’ provides the detectives with a clarity of sight that marks their metamorphoses into ‘true detectives’ and enables the identification and destruction of the criminal.

Again the victory is a pyrrhic one, shattered by the realisation that Hart and Cohle had encountered Childress during the investigation in 1995, and by the vastness of the criminal network that lies beyond their reach. *True Detective* concludes with Hart and Cohle outside the hospital, under the night sky, musing over the philosophical dichotomies of life and death, good and evil, and light and dark:

COHLE: It’s just one story. The oldest. ... Light versus dark.

HART: Well, I know we ain’t in Alaska, but it appears to me that the dark has a lot more territory.

COHLE: ... you’re looking at it wrong, the sky thing.

HART: How is that?

COHLE: Well, once, there was only dark. If you ask me, the light’s winning. (*TD* 8:54:05)

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<sup>34</sup> Childress’ words are an echo of contemporary theologian Frederick Buechner’s sermon: “If we only had eyes to see and ears to hear and wits to understand, we would know that ... The Kingdom of God is where we belong” (149).

Returning to a biblical metanarrative, this final episode, entitled “Form and Void”, recalls Genesis: “The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” (1:2). Hart and Cohle have switched roles: Hart has become the cynical pessimist, and Cohle is hopeful for the first time. The two are bound together – by their profession, their partnership, their shared secret, and their ‘victory’ over evil (even if it comes at an exorbitant cost). For Pizzolatto, the metaphysical detective story enables the portrayal of the interconnectedness between seemingly opposing forces of good and evil, light and dark, detective and criminal, Hart and Cohle, author and philosopher.

In the tradition of the metaphysical detective story, the apparent victory of the individual is overshadowed by the ‘menace and portent’ of the infinite abyss of the external world. *True Detective* examines temporality and place from a position of uncertainty, and in doing so instils a sense of self-doubt in the protagonists. And just as the tradition explores connections between detective and author through processes of detection that reconstruct the narrative of a crime, Pizzolatto suggests a correlation between detective and philosopher, as they share a mutual interest in the interpretation and understanding of the world. The combination of elements of detective story, Southern Gothic, and ‘weird fiction’ creates a universe in which the detection process becomes impotent and impossible. To varying degrees, both Hart and Cohle experience a sense of anxiety about a ‘truth’ that either lies just out of reach, or does not exist. Their fear manifests in cognitive dissonance and contradictory actions: Hart sympathises with Christian religiosity, but numbs his fear with alcohol, male-bonding and extra-marital affairs; Cohle is radically sceptical about such things as spirituality and selfhood, while also expressing a deep sense of moral responsibility and a burden to discover the ‘truth’. But if the actual or real are only phenomenal forms in the detective’s mind, ‘truth’ becomes only partial, even trivial.

As we have seen in the first section of this chapter, the landscape almost becomes an agent that expedites the criminality of corrupt institutions, and time is fragmentary and infinitely recursive, evoking the mystery and horror that arises from the detectives' uncertain existences. Indeed, the Southern Gothic setting simultaneously exoticises and demonises the culture and landscape of Louisiana. Fetishizing the dysfunction, misfortune, and trauma of the community, *True Detective* explores traditions that are hidden but preserved, with violence concealed by the corrupt institutions of law, politics and religion. The question posed by all detective stories, 'Who is the criminal?', is thus refigured as: 'What kind of culture creates such perverse criminality?' As always, the metaphysical detective story does not provide any definite answers.

## Jurisdictions: Towards a Conclusion

In the same letter that Poe first described his detective stories as “tales of ratiocination”, he asks: “[W]here is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unravelling? The reader is made to confound the ingenuity of the supposititious Dupin with that of the writer of the story.”<sup>35</sup> Here Poe is articulating a scepticism about the circular reasoning of detective fiction, in which the author is credited with the genius of the ratiocinator who merely deciphers a puzzle designed for him to solve. Again connecting author with detective, Poe expresses the deceptive paradox of a genre that claims to represent reality ‘as it is’ by presenting a contrived world that panders to the belief that the rational mind can understand *anything*. The fallacious idea that ‘truth’ may be located in a world constructed by the author collapses when reality does not conform to the necessary structures of order and logic. As this thesis has shown, metaphysical detective fiction reveals the spiralling chaos of reality that the classical genre seems determined to conceal.

The questions that arise from metaphysical detective fiction are founded in our universal curiosity about the nature of consciousness and our experience of the world. How, for instance, can we understand the interaction between the apparently transcendental mind and the physical objects of reality? How can any form of interpretation or analysis yield meaningful information from such a problematic interaction? Beginning with the acknowledgement that these questions align with some of the most persistent and challenging areas of philosophical inquiry, this investigation suggests that the sub-genre is perhaps the most important example of fictional engagement with the metaphysical exploration of identity and reality. As we have seen, the sub-genre extends across time, cultures, and languages, implicitly and explicitly

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<sup>35</sup> Letter to Phillip P. Cooke, August 9, 1846.

appropriating formal aspects of classical detective fiction to undermine and challenge notions of absolute or eternal ‘truth’. In doing so, metaphysical detective fiction undermines the power invested in detectives, authors and philosophers to construct narratives where reality and invention can be clearly delineated, and where lies can be recognised and exposed, in an attempt to understand existence and convey objective meaning.

Returning briefly to the assertion that metaphysical detective fiction offers a contribution to ontology and phenomenology, the sub-genre problematizes the interaction between mind and world, calling into question important philosophical propositions. In their systematic investigation of the meaning of existence and the nature of appearances, these areas of philosophy frequently assume the existence of an extracranial world that conforms to mind-dependent constructs. While classical detective fiction requires the existence of such a coherent external world, the metaphysical sub-genre explores the implications should this premise prove untenable. ‘Reality’ may contain concrete objects but, if so, they exist in a field of sense, and within this field manifold perspectives become equally valid. By interrogating the detective’s ability to identify the ‘truth’, the metaphysical sub-genre reminds us that it is important not to overestimate our capacity to know the totality of the universe and to consider the arbitrariness of human conventions and language.

This thesis has focused on contributions to the sub-genre made throughout the past century, from Kafka’s *The Trial* to Auster’s *City of Glass* and, most recently, Pizzolatto’s *True Detective*. By limiting the discussion to works published after Poe’s tales of ratiocination, the parameters of metaphysical detective fiction described here may be interpreted as a retroactive response to the epistemological certainty conveyed by the corpus of classical detective stories. However, by including Poe’s earlier stories “William Wilson” and “The Man of the Crowd” in the analysis of Auster’s paradigmatic novel, and by making brief mention of an origin that may

include *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex*, I hope to have conveyed the potential for further research into the long history of metaphysical detective fiction that predates Poe's ratiocinative trilogy. There is also a further opportunity to explore the contribution of female authors and detectives to the sub-genre, perhaps beginning with Pynchon's *Oedipa Maas*, to examine the relationship between gender and the privileging of reason to the detriment of other mental faculties.

By stripping 'truth' of any absolute or eternal significance, and by collapsing the boundaries that define genres, the metaphysical detective story represents a liberation from the confines of reductive notions of certainty and creates a space for the portrayal of a multiplicity of meanings, realities, and identities. When the classical detective identifies the criminal, the investigation ceases; when everything hidden is revealed, when every enigma is resolved, when we believe we have found the truth, we stop searching. As in the detective story, once authors, and philosophers have described what has happened, we give up looking for any deeper explanation. Metaphysical detective fiction encourages a perpetual search for meaning by asking questions without answers. In doing so, we are compelled to consider their implications for our own experience of reality, and encouraged to engage in philosophical inquiry that may otherwise be beyond our reach.

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