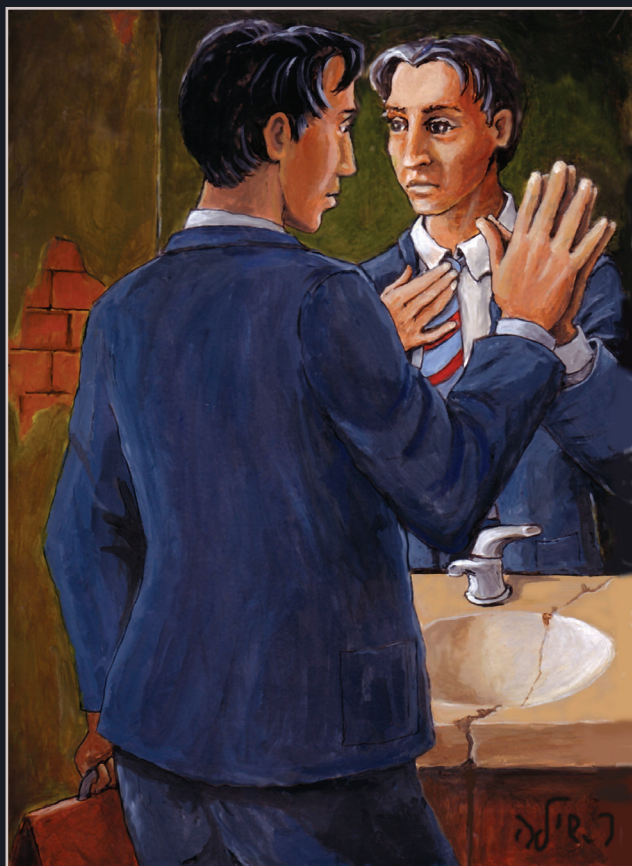


PETER LANG



The Double, the Labyrinth and the Locked Room

Metaphors of Paradox in Crime Fiction and Film

ILANA SHILOH

Traditional detective fiction celebrates the victory of order and reason over the senseless violence of crime. Yet in spite of its apparent valorization of rationality, the detective genre has been associated from its inception with three paradoxical motifs—the double, the labyrinth and the locked room. Rational thought relies on binary oppositions, such as chaos and order, appearance and reality or truth and falsehood. Paradoxes subvert such customary distinctions, logically proving as true what we experientially know to be false.

The present book explores detective and crime-mystery fiction and film from the perspective of their entrenched metaphors of paradox. This new and intriguing angle yields fresh insights into a genre that has become one of the hallmarks of postmodernism.

ILANA SHILOH received her Ph.D. in American literature from Tel Aviv University, where she taught detective fiction in the Department of English. Her previous book, *Paul Auster and Postmodern Quest*, has gained critical acclaim.

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New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
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for Richard

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
Prologue	
The Deconstruction of Reason in Poe's Tales of Ratiocination	11
Part One—The Double	25
Chapter One	
The Double	27
Chapter Two	
Existential Doubles: Dashiell Hammett's <i>The Maltese Falcon</i>	37
Chapter Three	
Subversive Doubles: Patricia Highsmith's <i>The Talented Mr. Ripley</i>	57
Chapter Four	
False Doubles: Christopher Nolan's <i>Memento</i>	77
Part Two—The Labyrinth	87
Chapter Five	
The Labyrinth	89
Chapter Six	
Avatars of the Labyrinth:	
Jorge Luis Borges's "Death and the Compass"	97
Chapter Seven	
Justice as a Labyrinth: The Coen Brothers'	
<i>The Man Who Wasn't There</i>	111

Chapter Eight	
The Book as a Labyrinth: Mark Danielewski's <i>House of Leaves</i>	119
Part Three—The Locked Room	149
Chapter Nine	
The Locked Room	151
Chapter Ten	
The Locked Room of the Self: Paul Auster's <i>The New York Trilogy</i>	159
Epilogue	167
Endnotes	171
Bibliography	175
Index	183

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Introduction

The detective story, like John Travolta, has made a comeback with a vengeance. Not that it has ever been unpopular, but in the past it was certainly disreputable. Whereas its early historian, Howard Haycraft, described the genre as a “frankly non-serious entertainment form of literature” (xi-xii), and its devoted practitioner, Dorothy Sayers, admitted that “[i]t does not, and by hypothesis never can, attain the loftiest level of literary achievement” (quoted in Haycraft 13), this is no longer the critical attitude today. For one, the hierarchy of “lower” and “higher” forms of fiction ceased to be tenable; so too have clear-cut distinctions between genres. This postmodern egalitarianism is most strikingly demonstrated by the shift in the status of the crime mystery, which has progressed from the margins of respectability to the heart of the literary canon. Narratives of violence, crime and detection are no longer relegated to the ranks of pulp fiction or B movies. Goddard, Wim Wenders and Robert Altman have scripted and directed thrillers; Nabokov, Robbe Grillet and Borges have written detective stories, or rather, have made deliberate use of the detective story paradigm.

But what, exactly, is this paradigm? We would intuitively tend to equate the detective story with the crime mystery, or at least with a crime mystery investigated—and solved—by a sleuth. But there is no critical consensus on this point. There are as many definitions and delineations of the genre as there are literary theoreticians dealing with the subject. In his pioneering study *Murder for Pleasure* (1941), Howard Haycraft distinguishes between the detective story and its “cousins” in the crime family. Although stories of crime, mystery, and even deduction have existed since the earliest times, he acknowledges, they could not be defined as detective fiction. The reason for that is simple enough. “There could not be detective stories,” argues Haycraft with logic appropriate to the genre, “until there were *detectives*” (5). And as Gilbert reminds us in his “Introduction” to *The World of Mystery Fiction*, the detective profession is a formal, organized system for the exposure and apprehension of criminals; as such, it has not been in existence for more than 150 years (vii). But although he seems to adopt his predecessor’s view of the

2 *The Double, the Labyrinth and the Locked Room*

detective story as a distinctly modern development, Gilbert sidesteps the pitfalls of terminology by referring to “mystery” rather than “detective” fiction in the title of his anthology.

While critics tend to agree that the inception of the genre has to be historically circumscribed, its defining contours still remain debatable. In *Fiction, Crime and Empire*, Thompson employs the loose label “crime fiction” to denote all the genres and subgenres that concern themselves with violation of the law (3), whereas Symons, in *Bloody Murder*, systematically distinguishes between the crime novel and the detective story, according to parameters of plot, detective, method, clues, characters, setting, social attitude and puzzle value (182–4). The two kinds of books, insists Symons, are really not the same article with a different label; they are inherently different. This difference grows out of their authors’ divergent aims: while “the crime novelist tends to make the story secondary to characters, the detective story writer concentrates on the puzzle to the exclusion of reasonable behavior” (185).

Symons’s classification essentially draws on Todorov’s “[The] Typology of Detective Fiction,” although his terminology is different. In his now classic paper, Todorov makes a distinction between the whodunit and the thriller along the lines suggested by the Russian Formalists’ notions of *fabula* and *sujet*. The *fabula* is the story, what has happened in life; the *sujet* is the plot, the way the author presents the story to us. In the whodunit, where the *fabula* is the story of the crime and the *sujet* the story of the investigation, the two paradoxically co-exist side by side. But they are not of equal importance: the story of the crime is suppressed to foreground the story of the investigation. Todorov makes an argument that will be later taken up by Brian McHale: the detective story is an essentially epistemological genre (McHale 9). The detective—the protagonist of the whodunit—does not act. He learns. He is not involved in physical altercations with the criminals, because the crime was over before he arrived. His sole activity is the pursuit, and the acquisition of knowledge.

In the thriller, suggests Todorov, the situation is reversed. The account of the crime takes over the account of the investigation, and the two stories converge. The sleuth is physically (and most often emotionally) involved in the solution of the mystery, and his involvement changes the course of events. Far from being aloof and invulnerable, in the manner of Dupin or of Sherlock Holmes, the private eye, or “Continental Op,” is kicked, flung about and often beaten within an inch of his life. As noted by other theoreticians (see, for instance, Grella, Hall, and Jameson), this subgenre no

longer resembles an intellectual puzzle; rather, it can be affiliated with the adventure story or the courtly romance.

While using different terms, Haycraft, Todorov, Symons and Gilbert make similar distinctions and refer to the same authors in their discussion of the various subgenres. Their basic typology is binary, tracing a dichotomy between “classic” detective fiction, initiated by the American Edgar Allan Poe, but taken up chiefly by British writers, such as Doyle and Christie, and the “hard boiled” American variant, whose chief proponents are Chandler, Hammett, and Ross Macdonald. This demarcating line overlaps with geographical and historical distinctions: the whodunit embodies the pure detective story formula, as practiced in Britain by the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, whereas the “hard boiled” label refers to the school which flourished in the United States between the 1920s and 40s.

The dichotomy between classic detective fiction and the hard boiled American version is also traced in Malmgren’s *Anatomy of Murder: Mystery, Detective and Crime Fiction* (2001). Malmgren’s criteria of classification are twofold: the nature of the fictional world and the implied treatment of the sign. Mystery, argues Malmgren (referring to classic detective fiction), takes place in a centered, rational world, grounded in laws of cause and effect. In this kind of world there is a necessary (i.e., motivated) relationship between deeds and intentions, making it possible to deduce one from the other. The idea of motivation applies not only to behavior but also to signification. In mystery fiction, the detective’s success depends on the correct deciphering of clues, and such a hermeneutic endeavor can take place only in “a pre-Saussurian world in which the relation between signifiers and signifieds is not arbitrary” (15).

This is not the case in detective fiction—Malmgren’s term for the American hard boiled variant. Here, the investigator’s dispassionate deduction is replaced by the “hunch,” by the intuitive powers of the irrational self. The detective’s self is as irrational as the world in which he operates. This world, to quote George Grella, “is an urban chaos, devoid of spiritual and moral values, pervaded by viciousness and random savagery” (Grella 103, Malmgren 71). The chaotic nature of the fictional space extends to the relationship between the signifier and the signified. That is to say, a character’s behavior does not point to his motives; the perceived chaos of experience does not conceal an underlying meaningful pattern. *City of Glass*, Paul Auster’s metafictional novella, poignantly renders the detective’s frustration at this state of affairs:

He had always imagined that the key to good detective work was a close observation of details. The more accurate the scrutiny, the more successful the

4 *The Double, the Labyrinth and the Locked Room*

results. The implication was that human behavior could be understood, that beneath the infinite façade of gestures, tics and silences there was finally a coherence, an order, a source of motivation. But after struggling to take in all these surface effects, Quinn felt no closer to Stillman than when he first started following him. He had lived Stillman's life, walked at his pace, seen what he had seen, and the only thing he felt now was the man's impenetrability. (*The New York Trilogy* 67)

The New York Trilogy memorably illustrates and comments on the latest generic development: the "anti-detective" or "metaphysical" detective novel. The term was originally coined by Haycraft and later adopted by theoreticians such as Holquist and Merivale. According to Holquist, the metaphysical detective story adopts the "method" of the detective novel but not its "*telos*." He contends that "postmodernists use as a foil the assumption of detective fiction that the mind can solve all: by twisting the details, just the opposite becomes the case" (173). Merivale defines this postmodern variant as "a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective story conventions [...] with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing" (2). The metaphysical detective story, in short, simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the genre, using its conventions and formal properties to subvert its underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions.

The evolution of detective fiction—from the classic, British school, through the hard boiled, American sub-genre, up to the metaphysical, postmodernist version, seems to suggest a gradual departure from the basic paradigm's extreme rationality, from the optimistic assumption that the mind, given enough time, can solve all. But I would like to suggest that the formal properties of the detective story have subverted its ontological and epistemological premises ever since its inception, commonly attributed to the three tales composed by Edgar Allen Poe in the mid-19th century: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Mystery of Marie Roget," and "The Purloined Letter."

As admirably observed by Haycraft, Poe had "swiftly, and in the brief compass of only three slight narratives, [...] foretold the entire evolution of the detective romance as a literary form...In fact...nothing really primary has been added either to the framework of the detective story or to its internals since Poe completed his trilogy" (11–12). Three of these "internals," which have in time become the defining characteristics of mystery fiction, are the subject matter of the present book.

In this study I explore crime fiction and film from the perspective of three literary conventions—the double, the labyrinth and the locked room. All three were introduced by Poe in his detective trilogy as well as in earlier tales which anticipated the trilogy, such as "William Wilson" and "The Man

of the Crowd.” Each one of the three exists as a physical element of the fictional world, but at the same time lends itself to a wealth of metaphorical interpretations. And each element encodes a paradox, or an insoluble contradiction.

As the concepts of the double, the labyrinth and the locked room are discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, at this point I will confine myself to introducing them summarily, eliciting their metaphorical potential, and highlighting their paradoxical aspect.

The notion of the double, or *doppelgänger*, refers to the existence of two individuals of such striking physical resemblance as to be each other’s mirror images. This is the focus of “William Wilson,” in which the protagonist/narrator believes himself to be persecuted to death by his hostile double. “William Wilson” is not a detective story, but “The Purloined Letter,” which also involves doubles, is. In this tale Poe formulates the dictum that has become the golden rule of fictional and real-life detectives ever since: “the identification of the reasoner’s intellect with that of his opponent.” Identification does not imply shared identity; it pre-supposes an initial difference. But as the success of the investigation is contingent on the detective projecting himself, in an imaginative leap, onto the criminal mind, the difference between the investigator and the perpetrator is gradually obliterated. This confusion obviously poses an ethical problem, which is intensified, in “The Purloined Letter,” by the suggestion that Dupin can anticipate Minister D.’s train of thought and action because the two are fundamentally similar. Not only are the Minister and Dupin doubles (or, as suggested by some critics, even the same person), but the detective is also split within himself. He is conceived by Poe as a “Bi-Part Soul,” a “double Dupin—the creative and the resolvent.”

Personal identity, suggests Paul Ricoeur, is defined by four aspects: continuity, permanence in time, numerical identity, and qualitative identity (122). In other words, each individual experiences himself as stable and consistent over time, unique, identical to himself only and different from everybody else. Poe’s conception of his fictional detective and of the relationship between the detective and the culprit subverts all aspects of real-life and narrative identity. Dupin is a divided self, not identical to himself, but identical to another, his criminal adversary. The idea of *der doppelgänger* (and its correlative, the split self) thus problematizes both the notions of identity and of difference. The double paradoxically embodies two concepts that cannot be logically reconciled—sameness and separateness.

The labyrinth is not listed in Haycraft’s inventory of detective fiction conventions that were introduced by Poe. Yet Poe used the spatial figure of

6 *The Double, the Labyrinth and the Locked Room*

the maze in two tales that foreshadow the three detective tales: “William Wilson,” to describe the physical setting of the protagonist’s obsession, and “The Man of the Crowd,” to convey the meanderings of the pursuer and the pursued. The figure of the labyrinth has in time evolved into one of the central tropes of the detective genre, especially in its postmodernist versions. As pointed out by Penelope Reed Doob, the labyrinth is an inherently ambiguous construct (1). It presumes a double perspective: those imprisoned inside are disoriented and terrified, whereas those who view it from outside or from above admire its structural sophistication and artistry. Labyrinths thus simultaneously embody order and chaos, clarity and confusion, unity (a single structure) and multiplicity (many paths).

When we associate the labyrinth with confusion only, it may evoke the mystery of the crime, the chaotic aspect of clues and evidence, the detective’s bewilderment or the meanderings of associative thought. But because of its basic ambiguity, the paradigm of the maze offers an apt metaphor for the presumed dualism of the world of detective fiction. It conveys the philosophical underpinning of the analytic detective story: the belief in the existence of order, causality and reason underneath the chaos of perceived phenomena.

If the concept of the double has a primarily human reference, and the labyrinth evokes a spatial construct, the conundrum of the locked room alludes to a logic-defying situation. As mentioned earlier, in the first acknowledged detective tale, Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), Dupin is called to investigate the murder of a mother and a daughter whose mutilated bodies are found in a hermetically sealed room. Since Dupin’s problem-solving strategy is logical deduction, which does not allow for the co-existence of two conflicting facts (nobody can enter or exit a room locked from inside, yet a murder has been committed in such a room), the first fictional detective concludes that one of the elements of the puzzle must be misleading. And so it is. Dupin discovers a broken nail in one of the window sashes, which not only explains the perpetrator’s way of entry and escape, but also suggests his very nature—an orangutan. In this Ur-text of the detective genre, the mystery is only apparent. The image of the locked room thus originally epitomized the genre’s basic ontological and epistemological assumptions, the belief that, to quote Holquist again, there are no mysteries, there is only incorrect reasoning (157). Perhaps more than any other element, the locked room convention has in time become a salient characteristic of the genre, but its purport has been gradually transformed, to signify the inverse of its original implication, the impossibility of a rational solution.

Classic detective fiction is characterized by other conventions, which in time have become fossilized and parodied (the obtuseness of the police; concealment by means of the ultra obvious; the solution by surprise and so forth). But the motifs of the double, the locked room and the labyrinth are distinguished from other characteristics of the genre in that, as physical elements, they share certain formal properties which allow for a wealth of metaphorical and theoretical implications. These properties include circuitousness, imprisonment (locked room and labyrinth), repetition, recursiveness (double and labyrinth), and complexity, disorientation (double and labyrinth). The attributes abstracted from these traditional elements of detective fiction run counter to the genre's presumed celebration of logical reasoning, a mode of thought characterized by linearity, uni-directionality, clarity and unequivocality. This contradiction could be settled by the claim that the first cluster of formal properties pertains to the mystery, whereas the second one pertains to the solution. But that is not the case. In "The Purloined Letter" Dupin ultimately gains the upper hand because he is the Minister's double. This characterization, together with the suggestion that the deductive process requires imagination as well as reasoning, associates mystery not only with the crime but also with the solution.

All three motifs further problematize the process of reasoning in that each one of them embodies an inherent contradiction. Occidental thought, as extensively argued by Derrida and the theoreticians of deconstruction, is logocentric, and logocentricity relies on binary oppositions, such as good/evil or true/false. Paradoxes conflate the opposition inherent in the last pair of concepts by logically proving as true what we empirically know to be false.

The three motifs that are the subject matter of the present study are not paradoxes in the strict sense of the term, because they do not represent logical arguments. But their nature is paradoxical, because they subvert the foundation of logic in the very process of apparently re-affirming it. Dupin outwits his adversary by means of "ratiocination," yet the ultimate success of his investigation is due to an element of doubling that defies reason. The labyrinth is a teleological construct so designed as to thwart all attempts to successfully reach the *telos*. The locked room is impenetrable space that has been penetrated; and whereas in Poe's original tale this paradox is only deceptive, functioning as both the trigger and the emblem of the powers of deduction, in contemporary detective fiction it has been transformed into the epitome of the limits of logic.

All paradoxes involve a contradiction, but not all contradictions are paradoxical, so that a contradiction becomes the minimum prerequisite of a paradox. What transforms a contradiction into a paradox, suggests Biletzki,

is our intuitive response that the contradiction is unavoidable and that it cannot be settled one way or the other (15). She divides paradoxes into two main categories. One category includes syllogisms—deductive arguments consisting of two premises and a conclusion—in which two reasonable premises lead to an absurd conclusion, a conclusion invalidated by our experience of the world (i.e. the case of Achilles and the turtle). Another category is that of two properly constructed arguments, involving reasonable premises and a proper method of deduction, which still lead to two contradictory conclusions. In either case, the unsettling effect of paradoxes is due to the fact that they are arrived at by the legitimate means of logical reasoning, that they represent logic turning against itself.

Perhaps the most salient attribute of paradoxes is their circular, self-reflexive nature. This circularity may be seen in the classical liar's paradox, whose many variations may be reduced to the underlying assertion "This statement is false." Such an assertion would be false if true and true if false; it leads to an endless loop. Circularity, or self-reflexivity, is also one of the most salient characteristics of detective fiction.

So far I have discussed the double, the labyrinth and the locked room in the context of detective fiction. But as acknowledged by most critics, detective fiction is not just one literary genre among many. The detective story may be seen as the paradigm of all narrative and the process of deduction as representative of all hermeneutic effort. One of the main reasons for the genre's privileged status in contemporary critical discourse is the perception of an intimate connection between detection and the processes of reading and writing. "The detective," writes Auster in his metafictional novella, "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 of these things together and make sense of them. In effect, the writer and the detective are interchangeable" (*City of Glass* 8). So are the detective and the reader.

If the world of the detective novel revolves around a triad of fictional characters—the investigator, the criminal and the victim, the extra-textual space is marked by an intimate bond between the detective, the writer and the reader, who mirror each other in their common pursuit of making, or discovering, meaning. This pursuit is subverted by the ontological and epistemological implications of the double, the labyrinth and locked room, images that cast doubt on the existence of absolute truth and the possibility of knowledge. The tension between the detective story's traditional elements and its tacit metaphysical assumptions lies at the core of this present study.