Detective Fiction and the Ghost Story

The Haunted Text

Michael Cook

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Detective Fiction and the Ghost Story
The Haunted Text

Michael Cook
To Lottie, Chloe and Monty and the future they represent
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Preface

This book has had a long gestation; to be honest, it has probably lain dormant in my unconscious for a good part of my adult life, from the moment I first read *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. So, to see this idea become a reality is something of a milestone for me. I have been in love with detective fiction and the ghost story all my life, and although I always considered them utterly discrete, having written these pages they now seem to me to be natural partners. Writing is necessarily a solitary profession, especially for a lone researcher like me, so I sometimes envy those who have daily access to academe and the opportunity to exchange mutual criticism. There are, however, consolations; my home is surrounded by what Kipling called ‘immutable’ hills, and while they are not quite the ‘forbidding moor’ haunted by Holmes, they offer considerable solace and inspiration to the creative mind.

I would like to record a word of appreciation to my favourite critics who have done so much for detective fiction: to Clive Bloom, whose work I so admire and for his faith in my first book which set me on my literary path; to Stephen Knight, whose books never fail to provoke and stimulate; to Michael Dirda for the wit, truth and elegance of his writing and to the much missed Julia Briggs and Michael Cox for their knowledge and insight into the ghost story. I would also like to express my gratitude to all at Palgrave Macmillan who continue to show interest in my work. I am aware that there is a selfish streak to all writers and am very conscious that this manifested itself in our household to an extreme degree over the last year while the book took shape. So, my eternal thanks must go to the long-suffering Jenny, who has unselfishly interrupted her own professional and academic work to help, read and criticize my labours way above and beyond what one could reasonably expect. My daughters, Hannah and Naomi, have also been invaluable, using their respective expertise to help with the production. Finally, because the germ of this project grew out of a childhood obsession, I would like to dedicate it to my grandchildren, Lottie, Chloe and Monty and Giga Bun as yet unborn – this book is for them.
Introduction

In his 1944 novel, *The Case of the Gilded Fly*, Edmund Crispin interrupts what is a conventional detective story set in St. Christopher’s, a fictitious Oxford college, to embark on a Jamesian ghost story. In true Monty James style and the oral tradition, as the assembled company of detectives and academics sit around, one of the dons suddenly launches into a spooky tale concerning the history of the college. The narrative, which has elements of James’s ecclesiastical stories, ‘The Stalls of Barchester’ (1911) and ‘An Episode in Cathedral History’ (1919), concerns the martyrdom of a student from the sixteenth century for his support of the Reformation. While the college chapel is being altered, a stone with the inscription, *cave ne exeat*, ‘don’t let it get out’ – a singularly Jamesian sentiment – is found; this disturbance releases the ghost of the martyr who seeks out the current organist and murders him. The original organist had been the leader of those who persecuted the martyr.¹ This remarkable passage appears to have no bearing upon the plot of the detective story at all; aside from the collegiate and ecclesiastical setting and the obvious reference to James, the whole exercise seems gratuitous. When I read this, it was the casual audacity of such an intervention that was so striking; there was, it seems, no barrier to interrupting a detective story in this way. My surprise was heightened by the fact that this *coup d’éclat* occurred in the midst of the most formulaic and, by common consent, exclusive of narratives that is the conventional detective story. This easy conjunction raised an intriguing question about the nature of detective fiction, suggesting an underlying affinity with the ghost story.
Further investigation to ascertain whether this was a consistent practice throughout the genre proved to be revelation. The reading of detective fiction from the perspective of the supernatural became the genesis of this book.

Approaching the detective story from an unfamiliar quarter helped to overcome what threatened to be an insurmountable barrier – the apparent antithesis between the two genres. On the face of it, a comparison is not a promising prospect. As the late Julia Briggs has put it in what seems a direct refutation of the rational detective story, ‘Perhaps the symbolic meaning of the ghost story most consistently exploited was the most obvious one – its rejection of materialism in all the different guises such rejection has taken over the last century and a half.’\textsuperscript{2} According to Briggs, the ghost story thrived in the late Victorian and Edwardian period because it constantly glanced back to a less sceptical age before scientific advances had dispelled some of the spiritual relationships which man had with nature. If we contrast this with M. R. James’s view that ‘The detective story cannot be too much up-to-date: the motor, the telephone, the aeroplane, the newest slang are all in place’, the perception, if not the reality, is of two incompatible forms.\textsuperscript{3}

But this provenance had no other effect on my reasoning than to make for more curiosity. At the centre of this was the sense of irony that came through: that two narratives with seemingly such divergent objectives should enjoy a common source, that of Gothic and Sensation fiction. At one level, this might be explained away by viewing detective fiction as a response to the wild excesses of the Gothic, by bringing order to a universe hurtling out of control. Convenient though this idea maybe, however, it seems only a partial explanation. What really ignited my interest was the proposition that the ghost story was not merely to be held up as an antithesis, but was actually a building block of the detective fiction narrative itself. This proposition when refined sees the imagery, language and thematic history of both forms as inextricably bound together; this became the central thesis of the ensuing pages.

Whatever the validity of my reasoning, one premise seems clear beyond any reasonable conjecture: that detective fiction and the modern ghost story, as do other forms, owe their origins to the flowering of Gothic fiction in the second half of the eighteenth century. As Clive Bloom has wisely reminded us, ‘Other genres owe much
to gothic concerns and neither detective fiction nor science fiction can be separated from such an association." Looking back, it is easy now to recognize many of the stock constituents of detective fiction which emanated from Gothic literature; the remote and mysterious castle transformed into the country house milieu; secret passages and imprisoned victims which led to the idea of locked room mysteries; the murderous villain, the threatened heiress, the consequences of inheritance and crimes of every kind; all these and more eventually found their way into detective stories. But the Gothic novel also contained other more intangible elements. When Horace Walpole published his 1764 novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, sub-titled in its second edition, *A Gothic Story*, he was interested in creating a new set of atmospherics born of a *mélange* of romantic literary pleasures and a desire to give expression to extreme emotions and fanciful terrors. By the time Matthew Gregory Lewis's lurid tale of monastic debauchery, black magic and diabolism, entitled *The Monk*, arrived in 1796, the Gothic novel was beginning to lapse into parody and extreme forms of melodrama. Most importantly for these pages, Lewis's text included unashamed supernatural elements, notably spectral nuns, amid a portrayal of depraved monks, sadistic inquisitors, and a scurrilous view of the Catholic Church.

From such texts as *The Monk* emerged the modern ghost story. Sir Walter Scott, one of its pioneers in the short story form, produced three early examples that set many of the standards for the future: ‘Wandering Willie’s Tale’ (1824), a short passage of his Jacobite novel *Redgauntlet* in the Waverley series, was followed by ‘The Tale of the Mysterious Mirror’ and ‘The Tapestried Chamber’ (both 1828). These stories are full of what were by now recognizable Gothic themes; haunted rooms, spectral ancestors and mysterious houses. Scott’s contribution is important because, not only did he set down subject matter which would be copied over and over again, but the short story form became a template for much early supernatural fiction, including that of Hoffmann, Poe, Hawthorne and collections such as Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Gothic Tales*, dating from 1852. Crucially, alongside the full length detective novel produced by Wilkie Collins, Anna Katherine Green and Gaboriau, the detective story also adopted the truncated form widely. Thus, both forms shared a common structural heritage, which became in turn, informed by both the Sherlock Holmes and Father Brown series. It was not until the golden age of
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the detective story that the novel length story became the norm, and only then because of the cultural shift which overtook the genre. Increasing codification, including the rules of fair play, the arrival of pulp paper production and a vastly increased readership demanding full length stories, may have changed the market requirements, but, as we shall see, the thematic contact with the supernatural story remained.

Popular genres are atavistic in nature, and the detective story is no exception. This arises from its verifiable origins; as a result, we have little difficulty in reading their history and placing the latest examples in the context of their predecessors. This veneration of the older body of texts is related, I suggest, to the spirit of innovation, a homage to the irresistible attraction of a new birth. Generic creation is inevitably a break with the past; this is not to say a severing with past artistic movements, but certainly a fracture which both takes art in a new direction and transforms the latent effects from its predecessor. But although this is clearly the case with ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, which Poe called ‘something in a new key’, he was already engaged in a domestication of the Gothic story in his Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque. This scaling down of the Gothic extravaganza in length, scope, characters and setting led to an intense concentration on a much simpler plot. So, while the new detective narrative was an innovation, it nonetheless was infused with the atmosphere of his wider fiction.

So engaged have writers and critics become with the novelty of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ and others in the formative stage of the genre, that something akin to a haunting takes place on all who follow in these footsteps. One should be wary of oversimplifying this process with the label of influence, but as Harold Bloom has expressed in the second edition of his classic account, The Anxiety of Influence, ‘Influence is a metaphor, one that implicates a matrix of relationships – imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological’. To a certain extent, detective fiction expresses itself through the medium of a collective memory to which all its writers are subject; although this phenomenon is omnipresent, it is often repressed. But all writers work under its shadow, and occasionally it surfaces to dramatic effect. For the sake of clarity, it is possible to illustrate this haunting textual presence with an example which spans virtually the whole history of detective story. Paul Auster, in the first of his New York trilogy
of metaphysical detective novels, *City of Glass*, creates the character of Quin, who is a writer of mystery novels and has taken to writing them under the name of William Wilson:

Because he did not consider himself to be the author of what he wrote, he did not feel responsible for it and therefore was not compelled to defend it in his heart. William Wilson, after all, was an invention, and even though he had been born within Quin himself, he now led an independent life. Quin treated him with deference, at times even admiration, but he never went so far as to believe that he and William Wilson were the same man. It was for this reason that he did not emerge from behind the mask of his pseudonym.  

In the struggle to shake off the associations of the past, Quin expresses the neurosis felt by many writers in this medium, the long shadow of the founders reflecting Barthesian ideas about authorship and the nature of writing itself. The choice of the name William Wilson is, of course, doubly ironic; it both evokes the creator of the detective genre and the spectre of obsessive haunting. Poe’s tale of a mysterious double whose presence looms over William Wilson is employed by Auster as a metaphor for the way Poe’s work itself stands over the canon of detective fiction. To write a detective story, a locked room mystery, a tale of ratiocination, is to inhabit a world that is constantly looking back over its shoulder.

But if the detective story has haunted itself throughout its life, it too, has been the subject of a haunting by the supernatural tale. Haunting in this sense is a presence, not a discrete entity, but something inherent in detective fiction itself which at times even becomes an explicit component of the narrative. It is precisely because the detective story retains its Gothic inheritance, an example of the genre’s tendency to acquire a diverse textual history over a long period, that it has been open to the themes of the ghost story. This collective presence is why this book is sub-titled, *The Haunted Text*. Besides Poe, both Dickens and Wilkie Collins were deeply interested in both forms of fiction; Collins, in particular, is credited with writing the first full length English detective novel, *The Moonstone* (1868), which owes much to the sensation novel.

It is worth pausing here to consider the contribution that the sensation novel made to detective fiction during its heyday of the
1860s and 1870s. Although its often lurid subject matter was a direct legacy from the Gothic, sensation literature distinguished itself from other contemporary genres, including the Gothic novel, by setting these themes in ordinary, familiar and often domestic settings. Its particular focus on crime and its consequences gave it a distinctive air, which Lyn Pykett has noted:

The sensation novel drew on a range of crimes, from illegal incarceration (usually of a young woman), fraud, forgery (often of a will), blackmail and bigamy, to murder or attempted murder. Formally sensation fiction was less a genre than a generic hybrid. The typical sensation novel was a catholic mixture of modes and forms, combining realism and melodrama, the journalistic and the fantastic, the domestic and the romantic or exotic.8

There is an echo here of Poe's own domestication of the Gothic; Dickens actually made the oxymoronic remark about *The Moonstone* that it was 'wild yet domestic', where the narrative narrows to a concentration on a particular criminal incident and its consequences, thus paving the way for detective fiction to emerge as a recognizable and discrete form.9 After all, it is a short step from the perpetration of a crime to a narrative preoccupied with its solution. The critical point here is that both Poe and Collins's work stand at the intersection of Gothic, sensation and detective fiction crucially carrying forward elements of the fantastical and supernatural into the new form. In *The Moonstone*, for instance, at the formative stage of English detective fiction, is a book inculcated with the language of the supernatural. The description of the Shivering Sands, for instance, is a pure Gothic nightmare:

[...] The most horrible quicksand in the shores of Yorkshire. At the turn of the tide, something goes on in the unknown depths below, which sets the whole face of the quicksand shivering and trembling in a manner most remarkable to see [...] A lonesome and horrid retreat, I can tell you! No boat ever ventures into this bay. No children from our fishing-village, called Cobb's Hole, ever come here to play. The very birds of the air, it seems to me, give the Shivering Sands a wide berth.10
Quite apart from its remote setting in a singularly ghostly landscape, the deadly presence of the Shivering Sands in particular never fails to raise a shudder; the central plot of the theft of the diamond, too, has distinctly unworldly resonances. Franklin Blake has been given laudanum surreptitiously by the physician, causing him to act in a strange manner. He has effectively been turned into a ghost. Collins was well aware that the setting of a crime was often a place where ghosts occur, and, like many ghosts, Blake becomes the guardian of a coveted artefact, a singled-minded being who for a brief moment has dismissed all other considerations of his worldly life. In ‘The Terribly Strange Bed’ (1852), Collins even managed to write a putative locked room mystery which combined elements of both detection and the fantastic. So popular was this that the idea of a murderous bed was first copied by Weatherby Chesney as ‘The Adventures of an Engineer’ (1898) and by Joseph Conrad in ‘The Inn of the Two Witches’ (1913). We shall now see how this use of apparent spectral forces to create an atmosphere of mystery would become a staple of the detective genre.

In the context of this book, Ann Radcliffe’s novels, above all _The Mysteries of Udolpho_ (1794), make a critical contribution, one which was to be used again and again by detective fiction writers. Radcliffe developed the technique of the explained supernatural, in which every seemingly supernatural intrusion is eventually traced back to natural causes. In _The Mysteries of Udolpho_ for instance, the mysterious, ghostly occurrences experienced by Emily St. Aubert turn out to be entirely bogus. The robbers who had been using part of the chateau to hide their ill-gotten booty were ‘haunting’ the rooms to scare away anyone who might discover them and their secret. This trope of the transitory plot, disproved by the substitution of a rational explanation, made the novel socially acceptable by rooting the plot in the reality of the everyday. As Fred Botting has suggested:

> Apparently spectral events are similarly explained after they have excited curiosity and terror over extended sections of the narrative. The use of suspense characterises Radcliffe’s technique. Involving readers, like the heroines, in the narrative, the use of suspense encourages imaginations to indulge in extravagant speculations. The rational explanations that are subsequently offered, however, undercut the supernatural and terrible expectations and
Detective fiction and the ghost story bring readers and characters back to eighteenth-century conventions of realism, reason and morality by highlighting their excessive credulity. While extremes of imagination and feeling are described in the novels, the object is always to moderate them with a sense of propriety.\(^\text{11}\)

It is not difficult to see from this where detective fiction gained its reputation for innate conservatism. Radcliffe’s innovation became one of the detective story’s most recognizable devices. Not only does the transitory plot enable a false trail to be laid, but its subsequent overturning allows a return to the supposedly rational world of the status quo. As the detective story grew in stature and quantity, many writers began to use this device, facilitated no doubt by the growing number who also produced ghost stories as part of their output. Poe, Wilkie Collins, Conan Doyle, Christie, Dickson Carr, Margery Allingham, Edmund Crispin and Susan Hill are among many others who have written in both forms. The ghostly plot device materialized as regularly deployed red herrings; so, the overcoming of evil and anarchy, as exemplified by the supernatural tale, became a powerful and reassuring victory for the forces of logic to achieve. Robert Barr’s ‘The Ghost with the Club Foot’ (1906), Ernest Bramah’s ‘The Ghost at Massingham Mansions’ (1923), one of the tales from *The Eyes of Max Carrados*, and Chesterton’s ‘The Ghost of Gideon Wise’ (1926), in *The Incredulity of Father Brown*, are all examples of how this idea was exploited. Nor was it confined to the short story; some of Christie’s most celebrated novels turn on the supposed presence of the supernatural. As Maurizio Ascari has rightly argued:

> Like Doyle and Chesterton before her, Christie reduced the supernatural to the subsidiary role of transitory explanation, but at the same time she also exploited it to conjure up an ominous atmosphere of mystery that lures the public into reading and is progressively cleared away by the investigation.\(^\text{12}\)

In *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931), *Endless Night* (1967), *Hallowe’en Party* (1969) and *Sleeping Murder* (1976), all the plots contain an element of the supernatural or at least the suggestion of it. In *The Sittaford Mystery*, this is manifest by a sèance which becomes central to the plot, but not for the reason apparent at the beginning of the novel.
The scene is tea at Sittaford House on Dartmoor; the guests include Captain Trevelyan’s long-standing friend, Major Burnaby. All six people present decide to play a game of table-turning, and during this séance, at 5.25 pm, a spirit announces that Captain Trevelyan has just been murdered. Two and a half hours later, just before 8 pm, in the middle of a blizzard, Major Burnaby arrives at Hazelmoor, Captain Trevelyan’s house in Exhampton. When nobody answers the door, he fetches the local police and a doctor. They enter the house and find Captain Trevelyan’s dead body on the floor. It transpires that Major Burnaby is the killer; he engineered the table movements during the séance to make the ‘spirit’ convey the message that Captain Trevelyan had been murdered. Instead of walking the six miles in two and a half hours after the séance, he went to his own house to put on skis, and skied the distance in about ten minutes. There are also other intriguing nods towards *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. One of the characters, ‘Freemantle’ Freddy, is, like the unfortunate Selden, a convict who has escaped from Dartmoor Prison, while Rycroft is a naturalist, the counterpart of Stapleton. A final touch is a direct reference to Conan Doyle’s interest in spiritualism, when a character suggests, ‘That séance business was queer too...I’m thinking of writing that up for the paper. Get opinions from Sir Oliver Lodge and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and a few actresses and people about it.’

This somewhat flippant reference should not be allowed to obscure the fact that Conan Doyle’s espousal of spiritualism is of profound importance to this book. The conviction he held was no mere passing fallacy but a deeply held belief which even supplanted his religious faith, as Chapter 3 recounts in some detail. The reason for such interest is because Conan Doyle, the man, stands as a metaphor for the way in which the supernatural inhabits the texts of detective fiction. The fact that the most celebrated of all detective story writers, creator of intensely logical puzzles and a man of science should embrace the idea of the ghost so fully is as eloquent an argument for the propositions contained here as one could wish to make. Although Conan Doyle, like Christie, also made use of the supernatural device, this resided alongside his absolute confidence in the metaphysical world, and the power it possessed was constant. In an essay entitled ‘A New Light on Old Crimes’ he once wrote, ‘Psychic science, though still in its infancy, has already reached a point where we can dissect many of those occurrences which were regarded as
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inexplicable in past ages’, which aligns his beliefs with the science of forensic investigation and highlights the proximity of the supernatural with detective fiction, in his own mind at least.\(^{14}\)

The infusion of ghost story rhetoric for dramatic effect may be illustrated, too, by some of the descriptions of landscape to be found in the detective story. Here again, the influence of the Gothic is readily apparent, and again the work of Radcliffe is pre-eminent. Radcliffe, for instance, used the description of landscape to record the change of Emily’s transition from the picturesque and peaceful La Vallée on ‘the pleasant banks of the Garonne’\(^{15}\) to the ‘darkness of these tall woods’\(^{16}\) surrounding Udolpho. The representation of mood by a particular landscape was a favourite trait of melodramatic prose, as it not only set the overall tone for a particular scene, but it also conveyed the disposition of the characters involved. So apart from the neat trick with the séance, *The Sittaford Mystery* (published as *The Murder at Hazelmoor* in America) is of interest because it draws on the memory of the genre specifically by its parallels with *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Certainly the setting of Dartmoor, which Christie knew well, and the Gothic atmosphere arising from the suggestion that supernatural phenomena might be involved, provide a suitably mysterious setting for one of her most vivid dramas. In Chapter 4, we will witness the way in which Conan Doyle had already exploited the glowering moorland of Dartmoor to reflect both mood and a sense of mystery and antiquity in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Because of the nature of such landscapes in our historic imagination, the wild setting of moorland and remote places almost supplies its own language of mystery and foreboding, but in the case of more tranquil country, supernatural inferences may be used to ironic effect. Throughout its history, and certainly in the golden age, the manicured face of the English countryside has been turned into a place of sinister happenings; this is particularly affecting because the setting itself appears as the polar opposite of what is implied. This counter-intuitive approach was mastered by Christie, Sayers and many others who turned idyllic villages such as St. Mary Mead into places of menace and death. Margery Allingham, as a writer of ghost stories, often infused her detective stories with supernatural language, evident in this passage from her 1931 novel, *The Gyrth Chalice Mystery*: 
The underlying horror which seems always to lurk somewhere beneath the flamboyant loveliness of a lonely English country-side in the height of summer, a presence of that mysterious dread, which the ancients call panic, had become startlingly apparent. The plot itself ends up involving nearly all the elements of detective fiction’s associated genres: an international crime ring, gypsies, a ghostly spectre in the woods, a witch’s spell, a mad horse, a woman with a whip, a secret room and a perilous climb down a tower. Again, the provenance of this idea can be traced to Conan Doyle, who in ‘The Copper Beeches’ has Holmes state famously, ‘The lowest and vilest alleys of London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful country-side.’ Here the form of supernatural language with its inherent discourse of misrule and anarchy is used to relay a deep anxiety about a seemingly untroubled world. It is a world which owes much to the fanciful and pleasing terrors of Gothic fiction.

* * *

I should make a few remarks on structure. I decided not to write a comprehensive history of the relationship between the two genres. The primary reason for this was that I wanted to capture essences rather than a pell mell canter through vast numbers of titles. This could only be achieved by the in-depth textual analysis of key stories and thereafter applying the results to a wider horizon as seemed appropriate. My objective was not to apply a theory to the whole of detective fiction as being constructed entirely through its relationship with the ghost story, but to indicate that the latter had, nonetheless, been a considerable influence in its development. My preference has always been to analyse in some depth what the author actually wrote rather than sweeping historical contexts; I have often mused that the joys of textual analysis must be akin to the pursuit of a particularly complex case or the discovery of a Musgrave treasure. While I would hesitate to go as far as Roland Barthes did in his dissection of Sarrasine, I have found that the revelations hidden away in the detail of the texts I am studying to be most rewarding, hence my approach in this current book. The next decision to be made was how, in the limited space available, to produce meaningful comparisons
between the texts. After much thought, I took the thematic route, a decision which inevitably meant that a careful selection process needed to be undertaken. The consequences are that what follows is not comprehensive, it does not purport to be, but is representative of a relationship which surprised me by its profundity the more I delved into it.

The final choice to be made was the historical scope of the book. It seemed to me that a reasonable starting point would be the age of Conan Doyle and M. R. James, when the volume of stories and authors in both genres started to increase exponentially. This I determined would be, to a certain extent, a moveable feast; it would be foolish in the extreme to write a book such as this without some recognition of important early figures as Sir Walter Scott, Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins and Sheridan Le Fanu. These writers provide key points of reference for so many texts that came after them, and their stamp can still be found on stories produced today. I would, therefore, best describe the finished article as a series of connected essays and case studies, of which, I hope, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Finally, a brief word about the objectives of the book; I hope *The Haunted Text* will be a useful addition to the continuing debate about detective fiction. As such, it builds on recent works such as Maurizio Ascari’s splendid *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational*, by examining one key aspect of the detective story’s narrative and revealing how the supernatural has helped shaped its destiny. To my mind, the ghost story must now stand as one the key building blocks of this ‘counter-history’.

One word of caution; the practice of textual analysis necessitates the discussion of plots, so in many cases I do reveal the details of a story. My advice is to read these texts before embarking on this book. In nearly all cases this, will not be a hardship!
1
Detecting the Ghost

We must never assume that which is incapable of proof. (G. H. Lewes (1817–78), *The Physiology of Common Life* (1859))

The scene that greets Watson on his return to Baker Street at the start of ‘The Naval Treaty’ (1893) captures the essence of the emerging detective story in the *fin de siècle*:

Holmes was seated at his side-table clad in his dressing-gown and working hard over a chemical investigation. A large curved retort was boiling furiously in the bluish flame of a Bunsen burner, and the distilled drops were condensing into a two-litre measure...He dipped into this bottle or that, drawing out a few drops of each with his glass pipette, and finally brought a test-tube containing a solution over to the table. In his right hand he had a slip of litmus-paper.

‘You come at a crisis, Watson,’ said he. ‘If this paper remains blue, all is well. If it turns red, it means a man’s life.’ He dipped it into the test-tube, and it flushed at once into a dull dirty crimson. ‘Hum! I thought as much!’ he cried.¹

Not only did the Sherlock Holmes stories spark a phenomenal rise in the popularity of detective fiction, but they caught the *zeitgeist* by exhibiting distinct modernist tendencies. The fact that Holmes turns part of his consulting rooms into a laboratory and solves crimes through the medium of science would be perfectly understandable
to the majority of Conan Doyle’s readership. After all, science was truth; more and more, it was becoming associated with solutions to the intractable problems of the world, it enabled that which was hidden to be seen, and that which was unknown to be recognized. This was the age of steam, of the discoveries of Marie Curie, of Edison and Bell; it is not surprising, therefore, that a genre which mirrored the actions of science became the popular literature of the time and Holmes, as Samuel Hynes has said, ‘was the apotheosis of late-Victorian materialism: a brilliant, confident, scientific know-it-all, continuously sought after by persons with problems [...] and always able to provide them with rational solutions.’  

Such was the challenge laid down to other popular genres, not least the ghost story, to respond in an age when more and more the veil was being lifted on age-old mysteries. The response was a new kind of story featuring the psychic detective, which built on the ties that already existed between the two genres, as Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert have observed:

[...] It was not uncommon for elements of the mystery story and tale of detection – the sowing of clues, criminous motivation, final explication – to be combined with a supernatural denouement – as in Wilkie Collins’s ‘Mrs. Zant and the Ghost’ (1885) or M. R. James’s ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’ (1904), in which the unravelling of clues in true Holmesian style leads the curious Mr. Somerton to the hidden treasure and its terrifying guardian. Such fusion produced another sub-genre, the story of psychic detection, with sleuths such as E. and H. Heron’s Flaxman Low, Algernon Blackwood’s John Silence, and W. Hope Hodgson’s Carnacki pitting their wits against a variety of supernatural opponents. The close relationship between the ghost story and tales of mystery and detection is emphasized by the satisfying fact that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of the most famous detective of them all, also wrote supernatural stories [...]  

The immediate precursor of this psychic detection was Sheridan Le Fanu’s, Dr. Martin Hesselius, a physician with an interest in the occult. He appears in a collection of five short stories under the title In a Glass Darkly, first published in 1872, the year before Le Fanu’s death. The stories are presented as selections from the posthumous
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papers of the occult detective Dr. Martin Hesselius, who only appears in the first story, ‘Green Tea’. The second, ‘The Watcher’, and third, ‘Mr. Justice Harbottle’, are revised versions of previously published stories; of the last two, ‘The Room in the Dragon Volant’, is not a ghost story, but an adventure mystery, and the fifth, the celebrated vampire story, ‘Carmilla’, are long enough to be called novellas. In truth this collection is an artifice; Le Fanu created Hesselius as a framing device to make the collection appear homogenous, so each story has an introduction purporting to be by him, tacked on to the original text.

Although In a Glass Darkly does not contain that element of detection which marks out later texts, it does introduce into the prologue of the supernatural tale an objective element of scientific inquiry:

In a rough way, we may reduce all similar cases to three distinct classes. They are founded on the primary distinction between the subjective and the objective. Of those whose senses are alleged to be subject to supernatural impressions – some are simply visionaries, and propagate the illusions of which they complain, from diseased brain or nerves. Others are unquestionably, infested by, as we term them, spiritual agencies, exterior to themselves. Others, again, owe their sufferings to a mixed condition. The interior sense, it is true, is opened; but it has been and continues open by the action of disease.4

The ‘inner sense’ referred to by Le Fanu is the inner eye; the theory being that for most of the time human beings perceive the world through the outer eye, so that the predominant experience is the external environment which surrounds us. If, however, the inner eye is opened, this allows visions of a spiritual world denied by conventional consciousness so that all manner of apparitions are experienced. These ideas originate from Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–772), a Swedish scientist, philosopher and theologian and, supposedly, a Christian mystic, whose ideas were a significant influence on Le Fanu’s writing. Although Swedenborg had a prolific career as an inventor and scientist, he also experienced dreams and visions. This culminated in a ‘spiritual awakening’, in which he received the revelation that he was appointed by the Lord to write Arcana Cœlestia (The Heavenly Doctrine, 1749) to reform Christianity. According to the
Arcana Cœlestia, the Lord had opened Swedenborg's spiritual eyes, so that from then on he could freely visit heaven and hell and talk with angels, demons and other spirits. In 'Green Tea', Hesselius believes that the catalyst for the unleashing of the monkey which terrorizes Jennings is the green tea he takes regularly unsealing his 'inner eye' and opening the way to the haunting. Swedenborg's book is even cited on the power of demons:

When man's interior sight is opened, which is that of his spirit, then there appear the things of another life, which cannot possibly be made visible to the bodily sight.

By the internal sight it has been granted me to see things that are in the other life, more clearly than I see those that are in the world. From these considerations, it is evident that external vision exists from internal vision, and this from a vision still more interior, and so on.⁵

Despite these tales lacking the essence of detection, they are an important step on the road to the work of the Herons, Blackwood and Hodgson. They establish that the source of these psychic disturbances in ghost stories lies in the functioning of the mind and, crucially, that this is a measurable phenomenon which science is capable of monitoring.

If the Hesselius tales were essentially ghost fiction with a dash of pseudo-scientific thought, then the arrival of the Flaxman Low stories saw a genuine fusion between the detective story and supernatural fiction. They were the product of Hesketh V. Prichard and his mother, Kate, under the pseudonyms E. and H. Heron, and first published in Pearson's Magazine between 1898 and 1899. Later in 1899, a book version of the collected tales emerged. Flaxman Low is an example of the Corinthian male figure featured strongly in fin de siècle popular fiction; as Anthea Trodd has observed, ‘this was a period when the voice of the masculine ruling class was particularly dominant in the culture’.⁶ In this respect, he mirrors the image of Holmes as both a man of action and one capable of profound rational thought. When Low is introduced in the first story, ‘The Story of the Spaniards, Hammersmith’, it is as a psychic researcher and detective, but we are left in no doubt as to his all-round calibre, too; a man who is ‘scholarly' and ‘athletic' and who had distinguished himself
in both fields at Oxford. The introduction to the stories has already prepared us for the character of Low; he is the ‘first student’ in the study of psychology to tackle ‘the elucidation of so-called supernatural problems on the lines of natural law.’ Low’s advice to his friend at the beginning of the case might be the prescription for a detective story, ‘... Suppose we deal with this affair as it stands, on similar lines, I mean on prosaic, rational lines, as we should deal with a purely human mystery.’ A plea which is echoed by Holmes’s own reproof to Watson in ‘The Abbey Grange’ (1904):

Your fatal habit of looking at everything from the point of view of a story instead of as a scientific exercise has ruined what might have been an instructive and even classical series of demonstrations. You slur over work of the utmost finesse and delicacy in order to dwell upon sensational details which may excite but cannot possibly instruct the reader.

When Low arrives, he has pointedly come from a case in Vienna, a reminder that this was the era when the ‘psychic’ sciences were emerging. Freud himself struggled for much of his life to gain recognition for psychoanalysis, and Low moves to justify the fledgling study of psychic research by endowing it with a respectable provenance and a venerable heritage; ‘psychology is unfortunately a science with a future but without a past, or more probably it is a lost science of the ancients.’

Low is called in by his friend Houston to investigate a haunting at a house called The Spaniards, which the latter has inherited. The house was built by a former inhabitant of the West Indies called Van Nuysen, who had later married Houston’s great Aunt. Although the two had been estranged Houston’s aunt had returned to live with Van Nuysen as his health declined, but she was mysteriously found dead in bed one morning. Shortly afterwards, Van Nuysen himself disappeared. Since then, successive tenants have reported a bladder-like apparition haunting the house, particularly in the room where Houston’s aunt slept. Low proceeds to solve the case, using the methods he has laid out. He occupies the haunted room and is nearly smothered by the hideous ghost but escapes with valuable empirical evidence as to its likely cause. Low reasons that Van Nuysen contracted leprosy in the West Indies murdered Houston’s aunt and
lived as a recluse until he died of the disease. The bladder was one of his feet contorted by the disease, swathed in linen. Low suggests that the reason the ghost walks is that the body is still on the premises – the house is demolished, and the skeleton of a leper is found.

The fin de siècle was also a time when interest in the occult and the supernatural was increasing fuelled by the exotic stories and practices from all parts of the empire. Not all of this attention was positive, however, and fear of foreigners was rife. The idea of the retributive ghost as a metaphor for empire and the threat from overseas is one to which we shall return. So, ‘The Story of The Spaniards’ addresses both these concerns by virtue of the fact that the Van Nuysen’s leprosy, the cause of all his subsequent woes, originates from the West Indies. The form of the detective story narrative with its formulaic structure of crime – investigation – solution seemed the ideal place in which to submit the irrational to the rational rigours of a genre where explanation was the very key. This produces a text where problems are resolved by the apparent logic of ‘psychological’ rationale. One of the recurring features of the psychic detective’s craft as represented by the Herons, Blackwood and Hodgson was an attempt to explain the mysteries of the supernatural world by association with an analytical approach. Despite being called ‘ghost stories’, the Low stories invariably involve a crime, usually murder, which requires a solution; so the mechanism of the detective story remains intact until the dénouement. But what do we make of Low’s aping of the detective art? Sarah Crofton has suggested that Low’s deductions have a fatal flaw:

There is a deliberate anticlimactic irony to this resolution. By excavating the body to prove his leper hypothesis, Low ends the haunting. Yet the skeleton, for all its scientific ticket, can prove nothing of the crimes that took place in the house. Neither Low’s near death at the hands of a ghost, nor the murder of Mrs. Van Nuysen, which Low believes is the root of the mystery, can be reconstructed from Van Nuysen’s skeleton alone.¹²

Placing the ghost story within the detective narrative will lead inevitably to a hiatus in the chain of inference, because the possibility that supernatural fiction could construct such a flawless chain of logic is negligible. In A Study in Scarlet, Holmes memorably states:
From a drop of water [...] a logician could infer the possibility of an Atlantic or a Niagara without having seen or heard of one or the other. So all life is a great chain, the nature of which is known whenever we are shown a single link if it [...] By a man’s finger nails, by his coat sleeve, by his boot, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, by his shirt cuffs – by each of these things a man’s calling is plainly revealed.\textsuperscript{13}

Holmes here articulates one of the cornerstones of the classic detective narrative: the backward progression of logic from effect to cause. What the detective universe asserts is that all problems can be explained by the solution of a chain of clues which lead back to the original crime; this relies on the tangible presence of such a trail, which can always be read.

As Dupin says in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, when attempting to read the clues left by the intruder, ‘I proceeded to think thus – \textit{a posteriori}.\textsuperscript{14}’ In the Flaxman Low stories, however, the same construction produces a very different \textit{modus operandi}; as Crofton suggests, the process involves a leap which is unaided by the chain of clues as they stand. To infer a homicidal spectre from a diseased skeleton without any confirmatory evidence clearly indicates the play of licence. Not that such hypotheses are absent in detective fiction, but they are invariably charged with the burden of proof. An example of this staple of the genre occurs at the end of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’; Dupin finds a small piece of ribbon at the scene of the crime, and from this he deduces that a Frenchman from a Maltese ship was at the scene, something he calls ‘guesses’:

\begin{quote}
I do not know it... I am not sure of it. Here, however, is a small piece of ribbon, which from its form, and from its greasy appearance, has evidently been used in the tying the hair in one of those long \textit{queues} of which sailors are so fond. Moreover, this knot is one which few besides sailors can tie, and is peculiar to the Maltese.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

These deductions lead him to place an advertisement which includes these ‘guesses’ to entice the sailor to come forward and prove Dupin’s assertions.

At first glance, the flawed logic of ‘The Story of The Spaniards, Hammersmith’ might seem a failed attempt to invest the story of
psychic detection with an authority that logical determination might give. But this would be to miss the interpretation of these works at a deeper level; the psychical detective story could never hope to make supernatural ideas fit within such an artifice. More likely, its partial compliance, the broken chain of clues, challenges us to make a judgement about the validity of the metaphysical propositions it contains. This may not be as difficult a task as it seems. Much of our everyday lives rely on the forging of conjecture: the adoption of religious belief, the confidence in a future as yet unknown and the faith in science whose discoveries frequently beg more questions than answers. This balance between knowledge and supposition, while inhabiting its structures, offers an alternative universe to the prescribed detective narrative where knowledge always morphs into certainty. It challenges the reader to ponder: which of these alternatives describes the world in which I live? Poe, himself, made that decision by abandoning the ratiocinative detective story after just three attempts recognizing the absurdity and impossibility of a world based entirely on the principles of logic alone; one which excluded the presence of instinctual behaviour and the consideration of metaphysical ideas. As early as 1840, he had anticipated the narrative limitations that a text based solely on ratiocination might provide, arguing that man ‘perpetually finds himself [...] decrying instinct as an inferior faculty, while he is forced to admit its infinite superiority, in a thousand cases, over [...] reason.’ From this, it is clear that Poe sees instinctual behaviour as an important counterbalance to the application of pure logical thought; so, ironically, the implication is that the inference of a ghost from a skeleton may indeed carry as much weight as the most logical chain of argument one could construct.

Whilst the investigations of Low seem more visceral in nature, Algernon Blackwood’s *John Silence*, first published in 1908, on the other hand, displays, as David Punter has suggested, ‘the operation of fear within and upon particular minds’. In a Blackwood story, we enter an alien universe where the ordinary laws of science do not apply, a place where man is seen as inherently vulnerable confronting forces over which he has little control. It is not merely a darker facet of human existence, but a discrete world where forces barely understood by the human psyche hold sway.
Both Julia Briggs and Maurizio Ascari have drawn attention to the fact that *John Silence* is closer to the figure of Holmes than either Low or Carnacki. This assertion, at first sight, seems rather a puzzling one, and a superficial physical comparison would scarcely endorse this view. As Briggs acknowledges, ‘Silence’s “speaking brown eyes” seem to contrast sharply with those cold grey eyes of Sherlock Holmes, and his bearded features with the latter’s lean clean shaven looks [...]’. Yet, in two stories, ‘A Psychical Invasion’ and ‘The Nemesis of Fire’, more profound similarities appear. In ‘A Psychical Invasion’, Silence we learn is a ‘man of independent means’, ‘free-lance’, and like Holmes, ‘he only accepted unremunerative cases, and cases that interested him for some very special reason.’ These are distinct resonances with Holmes, and Low for that matter, whose motivation it seems is the uniqueness of the case and the utilization of his special psychical gifts. Like Holmes, he pronounces that a logical approach to his investigations is the best method, but interestingly it is a variation of backward construction as practised by Holmes and Dupin. Silence proceeds from effect to cause ‘to examine the causes, and then the results would so easily slip into place and explain themselves.’ This approach is governed by the premise that in Blackwood’s stories, the question of the *existence* of the supernatural world is not in doubt; Silence investigates in order to isolate the particular psychic disturbance involved. The ‘cause’ he searches for, he knows to be unfailingly supernatural, but the core of his work is to find the specific catalyst for such disturbances.

Thus, his approach in ‘A Psychical Invasion’ is essentially a medical one; he examines the ‘patient’, a certain Felix Pender, and produces a diagnosis. Rather than follow tangible clues and trace them to a cause or event, Silence listens to the ‘symptoms’ that Pender outlines and makes a judgement, so it is these which supplant clues in the chain of logic normally found in the conventional detective story. Pender is a writer of humorous literature who has experimented with cannabis because of its ability to induce ‘torrential laughter’ so experiencing the effect of his work from another perspective. He will not say where he obtained the drug, which adds to the feeling that his whole story is a case of addiction that has got out of hand. The cannabis has had a devastating effect, his writing has dried up, and he suffers bouts of manic laughter accompanied by the haunting
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presence of an evil woman. Pender’s predicament is very similar to that of the Reverend Jennings in ‘Green Tea’, and Silence’s diagnosis reflects the same reasoning expressed by Hesselius:

Due entirely to the drug overdose [...] action upon your psychical being. It rendered you ultra-sensitive and made you respond to an increased rate of vibration. And, let me tell you, Mr. Pender, that your experiment might have had results far more dire. It has brought you in touch with a singular class of Invisible, but of one, I think, chiefly human in character.22

Silence proposes to test his diagnosis, not for validity note, but ‘to ascertain the character of the forces, of this strange personality that has been haunting you.’23 So, the psychic doctor, unlike his detective counterpart, triggered by the tangible presence of the substance cannabis and its likely effects, deals in the line of abstract association to bring about a resolution of the problem.

But Silence is no mere theoretician; his proposal is to move Pender out of his house and to submit himself to the mercy of the ghost in the hope that it ‘may exhaust itself through me’.24 He mirrors the habit of Holmes, who uses unorthodox methods to assist him, and decides to take with him his faithful pets, Smoke the cat and Flame the collie. Animals, he argues, are endowed with clairvoyance, something only rarely found in human beings. he believes that cats, who also feature in another Silence story, ‘Ancient Sorceries’, possess a special quality of psychic perception, while the dog, although not as sensitive, has fostered Smoke since kitten days, and the two have forged a symbiotic bond. The climax of the story brings reconciliation in the manner of a conventional detective narrative; Silence undergoes the night vigil in the haunted house, a familiar enough trope in both genres, where it frequently heralds the dénouement of the narrative. Sir Walter Scott’s ‘The Tapestried Chamber’ is an early example of the menace of an evil presence concentrated within a confined space, to be confronted through the course of a long night of terror. Interestingly, the detective story had already adopted this practice likening the confrontation with a ghost as similar to the unmasking of a criminal. The ordeal that Silence undergoes is reminiscent of those undertaken by Holmes in ‘The Speckled Band’ (1892) and ‘The Empty House’ (1903). The language is strikingly
similar and bears comparison. First Silence waits for the spirit in darkness:

As the night wore on the silence grew deeper and deeper, and only at rare intervals he heard the sound of wheels on the main road a hundred yards away [...] The echo of pedestrian footsteps no longer reached him [...] The night, muffled by fog, shrouded by veils of ultimate mystery, hung about the haunted villa like a doom. Nothing in the house stirred.  

In ‘The Speckled Band’, Holmes and Watson await the arrival of the snake:

How shall I ever forget that dreadful vigil? I could not hear a sound, not even the drawing of my own breath, and yet I knew that my companion sat open-eyed, within a few feet of me, in the same state of nervous tension in which I was myself. The shutters cut off the least ray of light, and we waited in complete darkness. 

And again, as the pair stalk Colonel Moran in ‘The Empty House’:

In the silence we stood together in the darkness and watched the hurrying figures who passed and repassed in front of us. Holmes was silent and motionless [...] 

The essence here is that both Silence and Holmes, as supposed men of science, must submit themselves to the empirical test as a means of verifying their theories; they are challenged, respectively, by psychical and physical forces which they have divined from the exercising of their own particular powers of reason. The psychic doctor, like the detective, stands or falls on the accuracy of his ‘diagnosis’; he has now entered the bold new world where exposition is the natural consequence of inquiry.

There is a coda to the story. Silence is able to identify the woman who is responsible for the possession of Pender’s psyche as ‘a woman of singularly atrocious life and character who finally suffered death by hanging, after a series of crimes that appalled the whole of England’. After searching the records of the Newgate Calendar, Silence produces a woodcut of the woman which matches the
pencil drawing that Pender has made of his tormentor. As Ascari suggests:

The ending of the story reveals its close ties to crime fiction. As if by ‘magic’, Silence is able to show Pender a pencil drawing of the female figure who haunted him, but there is nothing hocus-pocus about this revelation [...].

This revelation has the whiff of neat resolution about it, a device usually reserved for the detective story where the tying up of ends and the restoration of order are de rigueur. The woman’s history ties the story to an ancient story of criminality which, as a result of Silence’s intervention, has been laid to rest.

The third case in the Silence series, ‘The Nemesis of Fire’, is entirely constructed around detective fiction’s narrative structure. This story, arguably one of Blackwood’s finest, has such a close affinity with the detective model that it may be read as if it were a Holmesian story. I have already referred briefly to the structure of the classic detective story in this chapter, but for the sake of clarity this analysis will be in three parts, beginning with the story of the crime, or as in this case, mystery; then the investigation, in which the investigator attempts to solve the clues to the mystery and, finally, the resolution where the investigator attempts to solve the mystery with the information gained from the investigation. In some instances, this last phase may result in reprising the circumstances which led to the mystery in the first place. In the past, I have found it has been necessary, in certain texts, to preface the story of the mystery/crime with a thematic introduction. This will be familiar to readers of detective fiction. It is present, for instance, in the very first modern detective story, ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ (1846), where ratiocination is demonstrated by Dupin before the plot itself begins. Holmes actually produces one on the same subject in A Study in Scarlet. The purpose is to foreshadow a key theme of the plot and, because the structure of the detective story requires a concentration on the crime itself to the exclusion of all else, it fixes the point of the narrative. So, in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, Dupin displays his extraordinary powers of deduction to make it seem that he is reading his companion’s mind, powers he will use to great effect throughout the story. ‘The Nemesis of Fire’ begins with just such an introduction.
Silence and his assistant, Hubbard, are on a train bound for the home of Colonel Wragge in response to his letter requesting help. It is a familiar scene; the preliminary to an investigation when the two protagonists speculate as to the likely nature of the mystery before them. The striking resemblance to a Holmes story is even present in the merest detail; as Silence tells Hubbard that Wragge ‘heard of me, you see, through Captain Anderson [...] you remember that Indian obsession case’, we are reminded of the many times in the Holmes canon that reference is made to unpublished cases. The story is already taking the shape of an adventure story as Silence has requested that Hubbard bring his gun, albeit with blank cartridges, in the same way that on countless occasions Watson has armed himself with his service revolver. Attention turns to the letter from Wragge; we are not privy to the precise contents, but from Hubbard’s comments it is clear that the writer, a strong-minded soldier, has been severely upset by events and needs urgent help.

The letter is an opportunity for Silence to exercise his psychic powers, which are the counterpart of Holmes’s own skill in deduction and analysis. It is an object to be examined and understood, something from which to draw conclusions; in short, it is that mainstay of the detective, a clue, the first such in the story. It is reminiscent of the letter sent by Percy Phelps in ‘The Naval Treaty’, from which Holmes elicits that it has been written by a woman, and one ‘of rare character’, too, as proxy, a fact that excites Holmes’s interest in the case. Silence has never met Wragge but brings to bear psychometry, his occult power to divine the properties of things through contact, to obtain a feeling for the case. The result of his handling the letter is an ominous warning, ‘Something very serious is amiss there [...] Some one – not himself, I gather, – has been meddling with a rather dangerous gunpowder.’ The thematic introduction has yielded its first hint as to the nature of the case before them. This is soon expanded when Silence asks Hubbard to express his own feeling about the letter, in particular whether he, like the doctor, can glean anything from his contact with it. At first, Hubbard is unable to offer anything but eventually he sees ‘flashes of light’ that ‘group themselves into globes and round balls of fire’. He follows this by articulating a sense of heat, heat that is ‘uncomfortable’ and ‘oppressive’, something which Silence says is ‘important’. Such is the preciseness of this conversation, its extraordinary nature, that
most readers of detective fiction would recognize that the narrative will feature fire as its main thematic device. This much may be interpreted without any reference to the title of the story; as with Dupin, it is the use of Silence’s special gifts and his pointed remarks which foreshadow events. As this gloriously Holmesian scene draws to a close, Blackwood adds a final nod in the direction of the Great Detective; Silence assumes the character of his name and seems to descend into a brown study. Julia Briggs recognized, too, the connection to Holmes and the significance of it all:

When Silence, having dropped a few sinister hints and shown him the letter that has summoned them, then lapses into a brooding silence in his corner of the railway carriage, the shadow of Baker Street seems to fall heavily over the story.34

This effectively ends the Thematic Introduction, but not the story of the mystery/crime; we have learnt to look out for fire, to recognize the extreme nervousness of an otherwise worldly soldier, the possibility of danger, hence the ‘precaution’ of the gun, and, most of all, the very special attributes that Silence will bring to bear on the case. The narrative now proceeds to outline the strange events at the Manor House.

When Silence and Hubbard arrive at their destination, they are greeted by Colonel Wragge and learn that, apart from the staff, the house is occupied just by him and his wheelchair-bound sister. The pair notice that the house exudes the same enervating heat which surrounded the letter sent by Wragge. The Colonel tells them that he inherited the house some twenty years ago on the death of his brother, but his career as a soldier prevented him from taking possession until a year ago. His sister used to keep house for his brother when he was in England, but he, too, spent much of his time abroad, amassing a large collection of items which now fill the house. The laundry, a small detached building near the house, was turned into a museum so that some of the collection could be kept together. Silence mentions the heat and suggests that the cause lies outside the house, something which amazes Wragge with its accuracy. At this point, Silence says, ‘Merely my impression [...] If you pay attention to impressions, and do not allow them to be confused by deductions of the intellect, you will often find them surprisingly, uncannily,
accurate. This is a recital of the Holmesian mantra that impressions and theories, while valid, are to be kept apart from inferences which are a direct result of the evidence which presents itself. It is the first of several examples in which Silence expounds a theory or a suspicion before submitting it to the rigour of investigation. Later, he even uses the language of Holmes when describing his habit of anticipating another’s thoughts: ‘It’s merely a little elementary thought-reading.’

Wragge tells them that his brother and his keeper were found dead, smothered, it seems, the former with a scorched face. Their deaths had occurred within the vicinity of the mysterious Twelve Acre Wood, which runs close to the ground of the house. Since that time, the area has been the subject of many strange tales with the appearance of strange lights, and impromptu fires breaking out; it is a place where animals and other wildlife will not go. Just lately, fires have affected the house, particularly in Miss Wragge’s ground floor room, and the laundry, while scorch marks have been found on the house wall. Wragge’s account brings an end to the first part of the story, and the stage is set for Silence’s investigation proper to begin.

As the investigation begins, it is clear that Silence has already formulated a theory in his mind. He announces, ‘I am beginning to see light in this extraordinary affair’ and mysteriously whispers ‘Egypt [...] Egypt’ to Hubbard before they retire to bed. In the true tradition of the conventional detective, he imparts just enough of his knowledge that will mystify those around him, while retaining his position of omniscience in the narrative. Silence’s inspection of Twelve Acre Wood creates some excitement as a spirit escapes and causes panic and leads to Miss Wragge leaping from her wheelchair and running to escape its path. Fires break out in the wood, the laundry and the house and, enigmatically, Silence judges the spirit to be a ‘fire-elemental’ and without further explanation suggests they come up with a plan of action. Silence is now clearly taking charge of events; he continues to hang to most of his superior knowledge, retaining credibility by the slow release of information:

I mean that the intelligent force behind these manifestations has realized that some one is busied bout its destruction [...] I cannot give you at this moment [...] a lecture on the nature and history of magic, but can only say that an Elemental is the active force
behind – whether earth, air, or fire, – it is impersonal in its essential nature, but can be focused, personified, ensouled, so to say, by those who know how – by magicians if you will – for certain purposes of their own, much in the same way that steam and electricity can be harnessed by the practical man of this century [...] They are the basis of all magic and it is the motive behind them that constitutes the magic ‘black’ or ‘white’.39

This is a highly significant passage. It seems, at first sight, that the analogy of Silence’s craft with the harnessing of steam and electricity is a casual reference, but, in fact, it strikes at the core of the John Silence text. The story reads as a parody of the Promethean myth, only this time the catalyst is meta-physical. In the Middle Ages, the notion, put about by the often-discredited practices of alchemy and other would-be sciences, that power could be controlled and made to serve the needs of man, had been met with hostility from many quarters. But since the Industrial Revolution, this scepticism had been eroded by the phenomenal advances made by science and technology, which had changed the face of Britain. What had seemed like magic to many for hundreds of years now became an everyday reality; so, what better comparison to draw with the ‘science’ of psychical investigation than the ‘miraculous’ powers of steam and electricity? We have already noted that when the John Silence stories appeared, Freud, too, was endeavouring to establish his own ideas; what Blackwood appears to be doing is to argue that what is unknown, beyond our comprehension, is precisely the same position which obtained for many of the practical sciences in the previous hundred years.

Silence adds that they are up against not one but two forces, because the Elemental can only operate in this way when at the behest of another enraged, intelligence directing its movement. What happens next brings us into the borders of science and ancient ritual; it is the kind of practical ghostbusting more akin to Carnacki than Silence, as we shall see. The Doctor proposes to capture the Elemental by giving it form through the performance of an ancient blood ritual. Silence, Hubbard and Wragge fill a bowl with pig’s blood and await the arrival of the Elemental in the laundry; first Wragge is possessed, and a form appears, and from this Silence now knows the nature of the figure behind the mystery. The Investigation phase is now over, and the resolution of the mystery beckons.
Wragge’s brother had brought back from Egypt a mummy of an important priest which was protected by a Fire-Elemental as guardian. To escape the torment created by the demon he buried the mummy in Twelve Acre Wood also creating a tunnel between the wood and the laundry. Silence discovers the tunnel in the wood and the three protagonists crawl along its remaining length until they find the buried mummy. It seems that it is incomplete, the ‘scarabeus’ gem which adorned its throat has been removed. Just as they are examining this they hear something approaching in the tunnel; fearing that they are trapped they are relieved to see the figure of Miss Wragge, who, in a dramatic moment of revelation, has come to return the gem which she removed many years ago. This act of restoration, which brings about the death of the old lady, is the final act in the drama; the mummy exacts vengeance for the violation of its being, and Silence pronounces that the ‘disturbance’ is over.

The solution to the mystery, the fact that the removal of a sacred artefact has been at the root of all the events at the Manor House, brings the final confirmation of the story’s debt to detective fiction. Cessation of the threat from the mummy and its Fire-Elemental protector is dependent on the return of the gem, in the same way that the restoration of order is an integral part of the detective story. Since its early days, detective fiction has consistently reflected the taboo surrounding the theft of certain items; the very first English detective novel, Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*, concerns the seizing of the sacred yellow diamond from the holy city of Somnauth. The theft becomes a symbol of the whole mechanization of Empire, the violation and appropriation of that which is taken by force. This gives particular weight to the prescient words right at the end of the novel as the stone is restored to its original position: ‘You have lost sight of it England, and (if I know anything of this people) you have lost sight of it forever.’ It seems that the loss of such trophies is a warning about the advisability of such cavalier behaviour, rather in the same way that M. R. James’s tales hold salutary lessons for those who would meddle in things they should not. Sometimes not even restoration is necessary to assuage the guilt of such a crime; in *The Sign of Four* (1890), Jonathan Small throws the Agra treasure into the Thames grudgingly because, if he and his fellow looters cannot have it, then ‘no living man has any right to it’. The effect is the same, of course, and so is the moral, that tainted goods, especially those
stolen from abroad, and part of Empire at that, always come at a price. So, in ‘The Nemesis of Fire’, Egypt, with its history studded with the looting of its antiquities, supplants Empire, and the supernatural becomes associated with the idea of retribution, a theme which will recur in the coming pages.


The key feature of the Carnacki tales is the way in which scientific and traditional methods of investigation are employed together as a means of explaining the phenomena encountered by the investigator. The stories are keen to show that the supernatural manifestations that he encounters have been subject to rigorous scientific scrutiny, so Carnacki seeks ‘tangible’ evidence in order to draw to draw his final conclusions, which reveal that the haunting is either real or bogus. Carnacki uses all sorts of paraphernalia; lamps, trip-wires and even a wire cage are all deployed at various times in conjunction with extensive deployment of cameras. In ‘The Thing Invisible’, for instance, a chapel attached to an Edwardian manor house contains an ancient, cursed dagger that has just apparently murdered someone of its own accord. It transpires, however, that the somewhat demented elderly gentleman of the manor house has armed an ancient trap that guards the altar: a spring mechanism designed to fling the dagger when the altar gate is opened. Carnacki
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uncover the truth because of a subtle difference between the ‘before’ and ‘after’ photographs of the altar’s cast iron metalwork. He also uses a specially sensitized ribbon to register unearthly sounds, which acts as a primitive tape-recorder.

As a counterbalance to this ‘technology’, Carnacki also enlists the help of more traditional methods. Hodgson invented several rituals and ancient texts that feature in the stories; Carnacki uses, for instance, a fictional ancient text, the ‘Sigsand Manuscript’ as a resource to protect himself against supernatural influences. Carnacki refers to ‘Aeiirii’ and ‘Saiitii’ manifestations, the latter being more dangerous and capable of overcoming Carnacki’s protective devices, and several rituals, including the ‘Saamaaa Ritual’, with its mysterious ‘eight signs’ and ‘unknown last line’ invoked in ‘The Whistling Room’ by a mysterious power. There are references to even more arcane fictional works, including the ‘Incantation of Raarnee’, but no further elucidation is provided in the stories.

But perhaps the best-remembered instrument at his disposal is the fictional ‘Electric Pentacle’, supposedly invented by Carnacki himself. The device, a parody of early twentieth-century electronics, consists of a series of wires and glowing vacuum tubes. The idea, like the traditional magical pentacle, also used by Carnacki, was to protect the investigator against malign ghosts or other spiritual manifestations. In ‘The Gateway of the Monster’, where Carnacki barely escapes with his life, the electric pentangle protects him from an all-night attack by a giant hand and proves crucial in disarming the associated ‘luck ring’, which he takes into the pentangle with him.

The Carnacki stories were written at a time when forensic science was beginning to make a considerable impact on the nature of detection and, accordingly, its fictional portrayal. This was the era when what Ronald Thomas has called the ‘devices of truth’ were emerging, and it was becoming increasingly possible to glean the truth from crime by the use of the sciences; the first ‘lie detector’, for instance, was adapted from medical instruments such as the Marey Sphygmograph in 1895 by Cesare Lombroso. Many other innovations date from this period; in 1894 fingerprinting was introduced by the police in London, and in 1910 Albert Osborn published a book, echoing Holmes’s deductions in ‘A Case of Identity’ (1887) concerning the individuality of typewriter text, and the extraordinary leaps made by photography meant that criminal records were greatly enhanced.

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The challenges of this technology and its stark revelations of truth, hitherto hidden from human consciousness, posed considerable questions for supernatural fiction. For authors such as the Herons, Blackwood and Hodgson, the opportunity to adorn their stories with the kind of validity that new techniques had brought to the detective story seemed too good to miss. So, in the Carnacki stories we experience a mixture of ancient and modern methods. One of the inevitable consequences of such modus operandi was an apparent air of objectivity; as well as portraying ‘real’ ghosts, the stories record a number of bogus hauntings which are entirely the product of contrived human activity. By portraying the false with the supposed ‘genuine’, it attempted to raise the credibility of the supernatural, allying supernatural texts with modernist objective thought. But there are, of course, problems with this approach; the objectivity is seen only to work where the presence of the ghost is disproved, which still requires a leap of faith to believe in the supernatural. This is a natural consequence of the attempt to apply the laws of logic to the concept of metaphysics.

This dilemma is very ably demonstrated in ‘The Horse of the Invisible’. According to Hisgins family tradition, any first-born female will be haunted by a ghostly horse during her courtship, and we join the narrative when, for the first time in seven generations, there is a first-born female, Mary. Mary’s fiancé, Beaumont, has just suffered a broken arm after an attack by a mysterious assailant. Hoofbeats are heard in the night, but no horse is seen. Carnacki sets up the electric pentacle around Mary’s bed and the hoofbeats are heard again during the night, but nothing else happens. The following evening, hoofbeats and neighing are heard in the grounds, and Mary is heard screaming. Carnacki rushes out with his camera and snaps a picture but sees nothing after the blinding flash. Beaumont is struck on the head, but not badly injured; he claims that he has seen an enormous horse’s head.

The next day, Carnacki takes Mary around the house, snapping photographs to see whether any manifestation can be seen on film. On one of the developed photographs, however, an enormous hoof can be seen. Although the night again passes uneventfully the next morning, hoofbeats and neighing can be heard in what seems a direct assault by the invisible horse. Carnacki and Mary’s father attack the apparition, and as a light is brought they discover a rejected suitor,
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Parsket, wearing an enormous costume horse head and hooves. As they interrogate Parsket, hoofbeats are again heard in the house, and this time it is not a trick; Parsket dies of fright.

Carnacki is able to expose the fake haunting without too much difficulty, but what seems to be beyond rationale, beyond the capacity of the detective story structure to reveal, is the intangible idea of the ghost. ‘The Horse of the Invisible’ is emblematic of much of the work of the Herons, Blackwood and Hodgson, in that supernatural fiction is viewed through the lens of a genre which had moved to embrace the modernist scientific agenda; more particularly that all mystery is capable of reduction to a level of common understanding. This incursion of the detective story has led critics to argue that such an approach robbed the ghost story of its spontaneous ability to depict the unknowable. Of Carnacki, H. P. Lovecraft had this reaction:

We here find a more or less conventional stock figure of the ‘infallible detective’ type – the progeny of M. Dupin and Sherlock Holmes, and the close kin of Algernon Blackwood’s John Silence – moving through scenes and events marred by an atmosphere of professional ‘occultism.’

Practically, this disquiet can be traced back to the incompatibility of ratiocinative investigation and metaphysics; and although these group of texts left their mark in such works as Dion Fortune’s The Secrets of Dr Taverner (1926), Margery Lawrence’s Number Seven, Queer Street (1945) and Joseph Payne Brennan’s The Casebook of Lucius Leffing (1973), as a sub-genre it never threatened to supplant the classic ghost story.

In conclusion, I see the texts of the psychic detectives as a consecration of a bond between the forms of detective fiction and the ghost story which had been implicit since the emergence of both from Gothic and Sensation literature. While we can read it as an attempt to legitimize the debate about psychic phenomena by subjecting it to ‘scientific’ scrutiny, it may also be seen as a back projection of the contemporary detective story. This latter view presents a picture of a genre on the rise swept forward by the incipient revolution of forensic science and a new kind of detective. However, this would not necessarily be a seamless transition; already by 1910, Chesterton’s Father Brown had become the antithesis to Holmes, as one critic has
put it, ‘unscientific, unbrilliant and unnoticeable’. A concomitant reaction was being propagated, too, by M. R. James, who felt that ‘Flaxman Low is most ingenious and successful, but rather over technically ‘occult’. It seems impertinent to apply the same criticism to Algernon Blackwood, but *John Silence* is surely open to it." James’s revival of the classic ghost story would, in any event, imply that such inquiry was very far from advisable, dangerous even, as Chapter 2 will demonstrate.
Presently he fell upon his knees in the pit, and burying his naked arms up to the elbows in gold, let them there remain, as if enjoying the luxury of a bath. (Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Gold-Bug’)¹

In Poe’s ‘The Gold-Bug’, (1843) the main protagonist, William Legrand, is bitten by a bug he has discovered on Sullivan’s Island, South Carolina. Eventually, the half-crazed Legrand uses the insect as a means to uncover the lost treasure of Captain Kidd, the infamous pirate. The story involves the use of cryptography with a detailed description of a method for solving a simple substitution cipher using letter frequencies. Although the discovery of the treasure restores Legrand’s fortunes, the heart of the story is the obsession induced by the pursuit of the hoard. Even after the treasure has been found, Legrand seems as interested in demonstrating how he broke the cipher, which seems to be the focus for his mania, as in the pecuniary reward it brings. The title, in fact, is a neat play on words; although Legrand is physically bitten by the bug, it is also a reference to his mental state.

As Howard Haycraft has observed, ‘Though the story is often included amongst the short list of detective stories by Poe, “The
Gold-Bug’ is not technically detective fiction, because Legrand withholds the evidence until after the solution is given. 2 ‘The Gold-Bug’ neither is a detective story nor qualifies as a supernatural tale, but it borders both forms in its depiction of the obsession of inquiry and the strange unworldly details of its plot. In this chapter, I will feature two stories which explore the themes of inquiry, ciphers, codes, and buried treasure in Poe’s text and which are steeped in its Gothic traditions: Conan Doyle’s ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ (1893) and M. R. James’s ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’ (1904) from his first collection, Ghost Stories of an Antiquary. My interest in these texts is twofold: to investigate the way in which each story adopts certain narrative and structural characteristics of the other’s genre, and to reveal how the quest for treasure through inquiry becomes a search for differing truths in both genres. By doing so, it will demonstrate how these ideas are bound up with a sense of the past and the part this plays in the narrative. In featuring these particular stories, I make no claim that the presence of the former has necessarily influenced the latter. It is, of course, possible that James may have been motivated or even influenced by Conan Doyle’s story when writing ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, but certainly my research reveals no such connection. Much more important is the way that both these exemplary texts possess a natural engagement with one another in form, content, and theme, which informs the relationship between detective fiction and the ghost story.

The preliminary pages of a Holmes adventure are often suggestive, as I pointed out in Chapter 1; before the narrative proper begins, Conan Doyle often makes oblique references to a key aspect of the ensuing story. In ‘The Musgrave Ritual’, the thematic introduction alerts us explicitly and directly, via the untidy habits of Holmes, to the subject of paper; Watson rails at the amount of debris which Holmes leaves lying around, the result of the detective having a ‘horror’ of destroying documents relating to old cases. 3 This foreshadows the importance of both the old parchment document containing the ritual and the existence of Holmes’s past cases that even Watson knows nothing about. Critical responses to the detective story have often referred to the exclusive nature of its narrative structure; little extraneous material penetrates the story of the crime and its solution, so the thematic introduction is one way to direct our attention to the story’s central subject.
In the story of the crime in ‘The Musgrave Ritual’, the first thing that strikes us is the use of two narrators, unusually both Watson and Holmes. In fact, ‘The Musgrave Ritual’, and ‘The Gloria Scott’, Holmes’s first ever case, which also appeared in 1893, are the only two which have this construction. As to the remainder, all but four stories are narrated by Watson; two in the Case Book collection are narrated entirely by Holmes himself, ‘The Blanched Soldier’ (1926) and ‘The Lion’s Mane’ (1926), and two others are written in the third person, ‘The Mazarin Stone’ (1921) and ‘His Last Bow’ (1917). ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ is clearly a very early case, the date of the action has been put as 1889 by some critics.

The narration in ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, too, is of interest, related by a narrator who has relied on the evidence of the main protagonists for his information. This is a method used by James in other stories, most notably in ‘Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad’, which retains enough distance from the action to give the text a detached, measured style, in keeping with the scholarly milieu. James begins the story, as Michael Cox has suggested, ‘audaciously’; the reader is plunged immediately into the arcane world of scholarship and presented with an opening paragraph entirely in Latin. 4 Like ‘The Musgrave Ritual’, these brief opening lines predicate the importance of arcane documents, and the tract in question is being translated by an antiquarian called Somerton. James could easily have skipped the obscurity of the Latin screed and presented the translated version at the beginning; but, no, this is a self-conscious attempt to give expression to a scholarly world. This we should not take lightly; often in James, the presence of ancient texts is the trigger that awakens terror from seemingly the most innocent source. In particular, this threat frequently arises out of the past; something once disturbed has the power to create untold consequences. This was James’s ‘new’ kind of ghost story; the scholar’s heuristic inquiry, in stories such as ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, ‘Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook’ (1905), ‘The Tractate Middoth’ (1911), and ‘Casting the Runes’ (1911), not only calls into question the advisability of reawakening long-dormant forces but questions the very purpose of inquiry itself. In these stories, the opening up of texts reveals an almost entirely malign world which is normally just beyond our perception.

James passes swiftly on to the presentation of the puzzle. The translation of this passage tells of a hoard of gold hidden by an Abbot
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Thomas in 1529 at Steinfeld Monastery in Germany. It goes on to hint at the likely preoccupation of the narrative, a puzzle concerning Job the patriarch, John the evangelist and Zacharias the prophet. These three, the wording says, hold the key to the whereabouts of the treasure, and as the Abbot had a ‘great window’ created, adorned with figures, the likelihood is that the clues are to found there. Intriguingly, he also had a well built in the yard of the Abbot’s lodgings and endowed it with elaborate carvings. We learn that Somerton has already seen a window of sixteenth-century Germanic design in a private chapel in this country, where many such continental windows have been relocated, each of the three figures possessing a mysterious inscription. Somerton quickly resolves to decamp to Germany with his manservant, William Brown, and look for the treasure. As with Holmes, we are in that rarefied atmosphere of the independent, privileged classes; Somerton is an amateur, ‘a man of leisure’ with a ‘manor house’ and a ‘confidential valet’ thus and enough time on his hands to pursue his own personal interests.

Thus, the first part of ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’ is brought to an end. The impression has been one of a mystery-setting exercise; as Michael Cox says, James ‘introduces elements of the Holmesian detective story’ and, with a backward glance to ‘The Gold Bug’, produces one of the earliest supernatural tales to feature a code. The story of the crime rematerializes as the story of the mystery, and so the way has been prepared for the investigation phase; revealingly James actually refers to Somerton as an ‘investigator’ when he decides to pursue the mystery. The only moment of unquiet is the consideration of Somerton’s motives; James has already provided ample evidence of the antiquarian’s erudition, so we might conclude that, as a man of learning, he is driven by the highest ideals of inquiry; as David Punter has said, ‘The protagonist is moved not by greed or ambition but merely by intellectual curiosity’. Such is the single-minded nature of this obsessive undertaking that he turns his investigation at Seinfeld into a clandestine affair, not telling the church authorities. Like Holmes, he works alone.

So far, James has given no hint of the supernatural in the narrative, although he does record that Somerton is ‘haunted’ by gossip surrounding the ‘enigmatical answer’ given by the Abbot to questions as to the whereabouts of the treasure, ‘[...] with a laugh: Job, John and Zechariah will tell either you or your successors.’
He sometimes added that he should feel no grudge against those who might find it.' But in this early part of the story, James is more concerned with the laying of clues for his putative detective to follow than invoking the spirit world. In fact, the three clues possessed by the figures in the window, which Somerton has already seen, are phrased in a similar terse and enigmatic way to the Musgrave ritual itself; Job: ‘There is a place for gold where it is hidden.’ John: ‘They have on their raiment a writing which no man knoweth.’ Zacharias: ‘Upon one stone are seven eyes.’ The puzzle is set.

Just as the ancient Latin document proves to be a catalyst for the plot in ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, by both exciting Somerton’s interest and initiating an investigation, so it is in ‘The Musgrave Ritual’. Holmes’s contrary response to Watson’s lament about the state of the rooms is to fetch a large tin box from his bedroom, with which he tempts Watson by telling him that it contains records of his early cases. Holmes runs through the old documents until he alights on something he describes as ‘a little recherché’; this is the first hint that the case which Holmes is about to relate is of an unusual kind. It recalls Poe’s use of the word ‘outré’ to describe the character of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ with its outrageous plot and echoes of a bygone age. Language of this kind is reserved for that select group of stories in which the narrative which seems to take them beyond the conventional puzzle story into a far more shadowy world. Such cases include inter alia, ‘The Speckled Band’ (1893), The Hound of the Baskervilles (1902), and ‘The Sussex Vampire’ (1924). The beginning of ‘The Speckled Band’, for instance, has a similar preface; we learn of Holmes:

 [...] Working as he did rather for the love of his art than for the acquirement of wealth, he refused to associate himself with any investigation which did not tend towards the unusual, and even the fantastic [my italics].

Recherché then suggests that ‘The Musgrave Ritual’, with its arcane rituals, ancient houses, buried treasure, and mysterious death, belongs to those ‘fantastic’ Holmes’ stories, which seem constantly to be on the threshold of the supernatural, what might be called the Holmesian Gothic.
From a small wooden box, Holmes produces ‘a crumpled piece of paper, an old-fashioned brass key, a peg of wood with a ball of string attached to it, and three rusty old discs of metal.’ He declares that they are the only reminders he has of the Musgrave Ritual, and responding to Watson’s question about their importance, he states significantly that not only do they have a history, but ‘they are history.’ This reaffirms the idea that the past, as predicated in the thematic introduction will play a pre-eminent part in the story. In fact, at every turn in ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ leads back in time; not only does the case predate Watson, but all its circumstances have the patina of age. Reginald Musgrave is an old college acquaintance of Holmes whom he has not seen for four years; he is from one of the ‘very oldest families’ in the kingdom; in ‘Western Sussex... Hurlstone is perhaps the oldest inhabited building in the county’; even Musgrave himself has ‘something of his birthplace’ which clings to him and, not least, there is the ancient ritual itself. All this unashamedly historical rhetoric adds to the feeling that the story is displaced from the mainstream of the canon; Conan Doyle might almost be setting the scene for a Jamesian ghost story rather than a detective story.

Despite the modernist tendencies of detective fiction during the fin de siècle, some of which were discussed in Chapter 1, the preoccupation with the past in ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ should not altogether come as a surprise. While the plotting of a detective story might indicate progressive ideas, James himself said, ‘The detective story cannot be too much up-to-date: the motor, the telephone, the aeroplane, the newest slang, are all in place there’, but by contrast, its narrative structure can appear conservative. The fundamental reason for this apparent disjunction is that the detective story is invariably concerned with a past event, the crime. But in ‘The Musgrave Ritual’, plot and narrative are consonant with one another. The clue to Brunton’s disappearance and death lies ultimately in the distant past of Hurlstone and the Musgrave family; in order to progress the plot, narrative must regress.

Holmes’s recounts how the story begins with the visit by Musgrave to his rooms in Montague Street. Musgrave recounts the strange behaviour of his butler Brunton, which has resulted in the latter’s dismissal. Brunton, a former school teacher, who has been with the family for twenty years, is a formidably intelligent and accomplished individual as well as possessing a striking physical presence. It seems
he is something of a lothario, especially so since he was widowed. Having become engaged to Rachel Howells, the second housemaid he then threw her over for Janet Tregellis the daughter of the head gamekeeper, leaving his former paramour in a distressed state. But the reason for Brunton's departure happened as a consequence of his being caught by Musgrave examining private family papers, one of which turns out to be an ancient manuscript containing the Musgrave ritual. Musgrave is minded to sack him on the spot but relents and gives him a week's notice instead, but after two days Brunton disappears, and despite extensive searches he is nowhere to be found. Howells becomes hysterical at the loss and is inconsolable, and then she herself vanishes a few days later. Her trail leads to the edge of the lake in which is found a linen bag containing pieces of old rusty metal and some discoloured glass. It appears that Howells may have flung this into the lake in her disturbed state.

These events are baffling in the extreme. Holmes looks for a central mystery which may draw the disparate facts together; he alights on the strange Musgrave ritual to which all Musgraves have to submit when coming of age. It is in the form of a 'catechism', but no one has ever been able to decipher its meaning:

Whose was it? His who is gone.
Who shall have it? He who will come.
[What was the month? The sixth from the first.]
Where was the sun? Over the oak.
Where was the shadow? Under the elm.
How was it stepped? North by ten and by ten, east by five and by five, south by two and by two, west by one and one, and so under.
What shall we give for it? All that is ours.
Why should we give it? For the sake of the trust.

This rubric is reminiscent of the habit that James adopted of using portentous lines in order to heighten mystery and expectation. The whistle which Parkin finds in 'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad' has the inscription: 'Quis est iste qui venit' – Who is this who is coming? The purpose of these lines is to be a spur to further inquiry, with the promise of discovery. Parkin, beguiled by curiosity, cannot resist the desire to blow the whistle and discover what happens.
The use of the term ‘catechism’ by Conan Doyle here is highly significant. Close examination reveals a much more complex history; one which makes the use of this religious form here more than a little ironic. Conan Doyle claimed in his autobiography that he had remained an agnostic from the time he received his medical degree in 1881 until his conversion to Spiritualism in 1916; he studied and was attracted to the teachings and practices of Spiritualism from as early as 1880. In 1917, he made the final break with Catholicism when Rome pronounced itself as opposed to Spiritualism and brought to a conclusion something which had been de facto for much of his adult life. At Stonyhurst, the young Arthur would have been expected to memorize large parts of the Catholic Catechism, which in part is ritualistic, where some of the questions and responses are prescribed. Owen Dudley Edwards has suggested how the Musgrave Ritual might have emerged from Conan Doyle’s exposure to the rites of the Catholic Church at school:

The ritual would seem to have been inspired from a much deeper call than Stuart lore, however divine the Stuart claims. The Roman Catholic Eucharist asserts transubstantiation of the Host into the Body of Jesus Christ [...] this recalls the Last Supper at the subsequent death of Jesus by Crucifixion, together with His subsequent Resurrection [...] forty days on Earth with no fixed location and Ascension into Heaven. The form of the Catechism would have described these things specifically. It would not have been in the words of the ritual [...] but the votary would think of the Roman Catholic Church as ‘His Who is gone’.24

Conan Doyle commandeers the form of the sacred to portray the secular. The detective story is used to burlesque the religious rite by supplanting it in favour of another arm of the state’s authority, the monarchy. For Conan Doyle, too, the Roman Catholic Church was ‘gone’, and in Memories and Adventures, he would come to admit that he had a ‘deep distrust of ritual and form and sacraments’.25 From the same volume, it is evident that Conan Doyle’s agnosticism has distinct parallels with the dynamics of detective fiction itself, railing against what he saw as blind faith:

I must have a definite demonstration, for if it were to be a matter of faith then I might as well go back to the faith of my fathers.
Never will I accept anything which cannot be proved to me.
The evils of religion have all come from accepting things which cannot be proved.\(^{26}\)

Here lies the paradox of Conan Doyle’s beliefs; while he rejects a central tenet of Catholicism, that faith in the metaphysical be at the centre of one’s life, this does not preclude a conviction that the spirit and the ghost are manifestly ‘real’. In *The Edge of the Unknown* (1930), he records how he finds it incomprehensible that episodes from the Bible describing miracles can be taken as fact, and yet those which we experience ourselves directly are invariably treated with suspicion. Conan Doyle is particularly concerned to cite what he regards as ‘verified’ cases of haunting which confirm his belief in the supernatural; he recounts a case he calls ‘The Ghost of the Moat’, which concerns the haunting of an ancient moated grange in Sussex, called Groombridge. The story concerns the death of a servant of the house, an ostler, who was pushed into the moat and drowned. In addition to the obvious points of connection with ‘The Musgrave Ritual’, an old house with a moat, a Sussex location and the death of a servant, Conan Doyle uses this example to make the point that this ghost, like many others, is what he calls ‘earth bound’. This binding has a particular significance for Conan Doyle: ‘All authentic tales where spirits linger, earth-bound because they appear to be worried over earthly things, concealed treasure, lost documents, or other such matters, come into this category [...] [my italics].’\(^{27}\) The subject matter of ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ clearly puts the story within the purview of the ghostly narrative as defined by Conan Doyle. This, of course, is implicit rather than explicit, but, as the text progresses as a detective story, more and more we begin to read its nuances with ghost fiction in mind, too.

So, we may begin to draw a parallel between Conan Doyle’s own search for spiritual truth and the inquiry on which Holmes is engaged. Conan Doyle’s clever manipulation of the word catechism with its overtones of inquiry, of question and answer, can be read on two levels. Conan Doyle’s experience of catechetics was a search which ended in disappointment, ultimately what was to be a failure of faith in the divine. For the detective, on the other hand, the catechism is a metaphor for his principle task, to investigate, to ask questions and obtain answers. These are answers which will lead him,
unlike Conan Doyle, to truth, not spiritual, but temporal. When combined with the formulaic nature of the detective story, it is easy to see inquiry as some kind of ritual performance, in the manner of the Catholic catechism, a part of the narrative to be undergone in order that resolution can be obtained.

The first news we receive of Somerton's German adventure is distressing; the local parson, Gregory, receives an urgent summons from Brown to come to Steinfeld as his master is in deep shock. Gregory duly obliges and arrives at the inn, where Somerton and Brown are staying to find the scholar in a highly anxious state. Somerton asks Gregory to go with Brown the next morning and replace something - he cannot bring himself to say what - and until this has been done, he does not feel able to talk about the cause of his nervousness. Ominously, Somerton advises Gregory to lock his door in the meantime; but during the night, Gregory hears 'a fumbling about the lower part of his locked door'.

Only once the deed is done, and the trio are on their way back to England, do we hear Somerton's account of what happened in Steinfeld. At this point, the narrative voice changes; the original narrator, we might assume as James, has clearly been relying on the testament of others: 'I labour under a grave disadvantage as narrator of this story in that I have never visited Steinfeld myself'. From this moment, the remainder of the story is told in Somerton's 'voice', presumably as recalled by Gregory and Brown. This extended displacement of the narrative from the point of action underlines a fundamental trope in James's ghost stories. Reference has already been made to the urbane sense of detachment; this latest device adds even more weight to a feeling of scholarly abstraction in the writing, so much so that, as ghost stories, they read more and more like intellectual inquiry. Although the effect of this approach is to convert storytelling into a painstaking cerebral exercise, it does have the effect of throwing the shock moments into stark relief. The intrusion of the supernatural world into the ordered world of the antiquary becomes the focus of attention and easily the most memorable passage in each of the stories. As David Punter has noted, 'If his characters are not very interesting, complex or even concrete, this is precisely because he does not want them to form a veil between us and the terror'.

We now enter the investigation phase proper. Somerton recalls how he cracked Abbot Thomas's code, before travelling to Steinfeld,
by using the wording on the inscribed scrolls carried by the three figures in the window. Job’s scroll tells him that there is gold to be found, St. John’s hints at hidden writing, which he discovers by scraping away an ugly and somewhat incongruous black border to their vestments. Somerton soon realizes that the third of the inscriptions, on Zechariah’s scroll, ‘Upon one stone are seven eyes’ applies to a particular stone in situ with the treasure, and armed with all the facts he has gleaned from his studies, he proceeds to decipher the message left by Abbot Thomas. Each figure has a row of thirty-eight letters, which written out clearly point to a cipher of some sort. Somerton deduces that each figure, Job, St. John, and Zacharias holds up one, two, and three fingers, respectively, in their right hand. Somerton therefore, applies this to the rows of letters by missing out every other letter in the case of Job, two for St. John, and three for Zacharias. This cracks the code into a legible sentence in Latin, which when translated reads:

Ten thousand pieces of gold are laid up in the well in the court of the Abbot’s house of Steinfeld by me, Thomas, who have set a guardian over them. Gare à qui la touche.31

The revelation of the Abbot’s secret is significant for two reasons; the ‘very large quantity of gold’ has now become a precise sum. Much has been made of Somerton’s erudition, and we have been beguiled into thinking that his pursuit of the treasure is purely scholarly. If the first reference to the nature of the treasure made us wonder at the motive behind Somerton’s interest, the second, with its promise of untold wealth, would seem to raise the question more directly. But such doubts are soon dispelled as we hear the satisfaction that Somerton has gained from cracking the cipher left by the Abbot. Somerton’s immersion in the puzzle follows the pattern set by Holmes and by Legrand in ‘The Gold Bug’; a significant number of pages in all three stories are devoted to the process of unravelling the ciphers and codes that they contain, leaving little room for doubt as to where the focus of the narrative lies.

Holmes’s narration moves swiftly through the investigation to a conclusion; he is convinced that the answers to all three mysteries, the ritual and the disappearances of Brunton and Howells, the maid, are all connected. The very afternoon of their meeting sees Holmes
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and Musgrave at Hurlstone; before even alighting from the dog cart which brings them to the house Holmes ascertains the position of the two trees involved in the ritual. The oak still stands and Musgrave has the measurements of the now felled elm. Using a fishing rod as a ‘substitute’ for the elm, Holmes is able to extrapolate the figures to arrive at the correct point of the shadow. When pegging this spot, he notices that marks nearby indicate Brunton’s presence, which confirms that they are on the right trail. After following the pacing, and being prompted by Musgrave as to the meaning of ‘and under’, they find the entrance to a chamber in a cellar. The scene that waits in the vault under the cellar could be from a Gothic novel. Brunton, who has been dead for some days, is squatting slumped forward with his arms embracing a box.

Holmes then introduces the final part of the narrative structure, the solution. Uncharacteristically much of this is surmise; he opines that Brunton had the help of Howells in the escapade and suspects, but cannot prove, that she knocked away the wooden support of the stone slab to condemn Brunton to his fate, as revenge for his faithlessness. The treasure is discovered in the mere into which Howells probably threw it. Her fate is never discovered. The treasure is revealed as no less than the lost crown of England held at Hurlstone by the loyal Sir Ralph Musgrave in readiness for the return of Charles II as king.

Brunton’s death, closely followed by the discovery of the crown, forms the solution part of the conventional detective story, but, unusually for Holmes, there are loose ends concerning the maid Rachel Howells which are never resolved. In fact, although Holmes has solved the catechism, like Conan Doyle himself, it does not provide him with all the answers. He does not have the ‘proof’ which Conan Doyle sought and, as a consequence is left haunted by the spectre of the maid. Did she murder Brunton? Or was his death an accident? Did she, as Holmes surmises, slip out of the country, never to be seen again? But rarely is the classic detective story concerned about consequences; what is at issue here is a solution to the central puzzle, the Musgrave ritual itself. Once the detective has pronounced upon this, we are not concerned with contingencies that arise beyond this revelation – so court cases, the fate of the remaining characters and the ripple effect of exposition are secondary. Even the future of an important artefact as the ancient crown of England is explained
away in one sentence, which tells us that after some argument it is to remain at Hurlstone.

By way of contrast to the increasingly powerless Somerton, Holmes assumes an autonomous role in the Musgrave investigation; his position is reinforced by ‘legitimacy’, but even he is following in the footsteps of Brunton who has already solved the ritual’s riddle. In the conventional detective story, the detective is invariably possessed of a power over the text, and he or she is invested with the responsibility of solving the central mystery, something which they do almost without exception. This is a matter of control. Unlike Somerton, Holmes operates from a position of strength and familiarity; the detective is the trope by which the narrative reaches its predestined conclusion. Somerton, by comparison, is entirely at home with the deciphering of obscure Latin texts; his theoretical prowess is just that; he becomes utterly disconcerted by the confrontation that arises from it. One striking feature of both stories is way that the man-gets-treasure theme is reversed; in both cases, it is the treasure that gets the man. The curious attitude of Brunton in death seems ironic; his embrace of the treasure is a pyrrhic victory. This ghastly tableau is an acknowledgement of his fate and what has brought him to it, he clings to the one thing that is the object of his desire. Somerton, on the other hand, suffers the embrace of the guardian; he has been frightened into the recognition that to keep the treasure would mean certain death.

Somerton’s encounter with ‘guardian’ in the well as he pulls out the bag containing the ‘treasure’ is one of the most unnerving moments of terror in all of James’s fiction. Whatever grabs Somerton is never entirely clear, although James does tell us of a grotesque toad-like carving on the well head, but it is this sheer vagueness of the jolt, the unknown assailant, that seems to add to its effectiveness. The bag which he hauls out of the hole ‘put its arms round my neck’ and ‘legs or arms or tentacles or something clinging to my body.’ When he returns the bag for Somerton, Brown sees the apparition of an old man, presumably Abbot Thomas, looking down the well laughing at the spectacle unfolding below. The label by the creature on the wellhead reads ‘Depositum custodii’ – ‘keep that which is committed to thee.’ As with ‘The Musgrave Ritual’, Somerton’s fate also has decidedly religious overtones. The scholar’s pursuit can be seen as a metaphor of the search for religious truth. The prophets and
priests in the window hold the key to enlightenment to two kinds of treasure; in their lives they were advocates for the word of God, but in this manifestation they also hold the key to the whereabouts of the Abbot’s gold. What interests Somerton is the solution to the secular puzzle, not the desire for faith. The wages of committing this sin on holy ground is to experience the terror of the guardian. It is no coincidence that it is the rector, a man of God from Somerton’s local church, who rushes to his aid and replaces the treasure and restores equilibrium.

The confrontation, in both stories, gives an interesting insight into the moral imperatives in both stories. Brunton’s motivation for pursuing the ritual would seem to be personal gain based on the premise that the ‘catechism’ is the key to a treasure of some importance. But Brunton is also a man of some intelligence and his pride in cracking a centuries-old mystery where generations of Musgraves, his social superiors, have failed will boost his pride. Coupled with the fact that he is also a womanizer, his punishment, to be buried alive in the vault, would seem to be the wages for both criminal and sinful urges. In Somerton’s case, however, the result of his assiduous pursuit of knowledge, if we accept his scholarly innocence, is to be warned, shocked even, but spared any physical hurt. What the longer-term mental effects are we are not to know, but the replacement of the ‘treasure’ seems effective as an act of mitigation.

Considered structurally, however, these dénouements tell us much about the subtle differences in the narratives of the two genres. If ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ provides us with a gratification that comes with the solution of a puzzle, James’s tale, too, seems to possess something of a template for the ghost story. As David Punter has said:

 [...] In ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, for instance, although the structure of the plot looks conventional in that a search for treasure produces dreadful effects [...] the fact that he ends up face to tentacle with the treasure’s obnoxious guardian is in no way organic to him, and thus the breach in the natural order is all the more horrifying.34

But, of course, this is entirely the point of the ghost story narrative. The metaphysical imperative takes the narrative beyond the limits of mere conventional structure; the culmination of a supernatural
tale is the encounter with the ghost itself. Thus, what might be the culmination of an investigation in a detective story, the solving of the Abbot’s cipher, is but a step along the way to the meeting with ghost. In the ghost story, there are consequences beyond enquiry and exposition; in ‘A Warning to the Curious’ (1925), for instance, Paxton solves the mystery of the missing crown but suffers a fatal encounter with the ghost of the guardian.

The ghost story, therefore, is not just metaphysical in its subject matter, but also, when compared with the detective story, it is, in the structural sense, ‘meta’, too; it exists beyond the confines of the classic thematic introduction, story of the crime, investigation, solution narrative. In the same way that Borges’s metaphysical detective stories broke out of the conventional mould with visions of the infinite text, the ghost story posits a world where the application of logic and the solving of puzzles is no antidote to the power of the supernatural.

Despite this point of departure, it would be facile to see the ghost story as possessing a form which is somehow free from structural delineation; this is far from the case, especially in the case of James’s stories. David Punter has also suggested that ‘almost all of the stories are structurally identical in that they proceed steadily through a series of prefigurations towards a single revelation or encounter’, a conventionality underlined by Julia Briggs, who sees the characters in a James story as subservient to this model:

M. R. James keeps his characters thin to the point of transparency. They are quite deliberately washed free of all subtlety or complexity which might cloud or impede the all-important progress of the plot. In the delineation of character James employed no tricks; there were no new developments, no sudden revelations to catch the audience unprepared, for all the devices of surprise are limited to that element of the story which concerned him most, the plot.

This is, of course, the very criticism which has been levelled at the formulaic structure of the detective story in its golden age between the wars, and there is no doubt that the Jamesian ghost story did become the model for many imitators; E. G. Swain, H. Russell Wakefield, R. H. Malden, and A. M. Burrage, for instance, all imitated the prototype of
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the scholarly inquirer. When compared with thematic introduction, story of the crime, investigation, solution, we find therefore, that the Jamesian story is a reflection of this form and not a repetition of it. Thus, the introduction would be followed by intellectual inquiry/curiosity, which corresponds to the investigation in the detective story, and may be characterized by the discovery and unearthing of hitherto unknown phenomena, even the prefiguring of the ghost itself. The ramifications of the two latter developments may lead either to death or other severe consequences for the protagonist, and the possibility that the ghost may even be exorcized as a result of the encounter. There remains, too, the likelihood of eternal haunting; that the ghost transcends the conventional concepts of space and time and exists to re-enact such encounters again and again.

The investigation phase of both stories sees a contrast between the two protagonists. In the majority of Jamesian ghost stories, the antiquary is in loco of the detective, but invariably this role becomes increasingly uncomfortable. Somerton begins the story as the confident researcher, pre-eminent in his profession, as he unlocks a mystery that has defeated the best minds for nearly four hundred years. But when he encounters the guardian of the treasure he is effectively removed from the comfort of his own discourse into a world where he relinquishes control of his own destiny. In story after story by James, the scholar discovers that there are matters which lie outside the scope of even the most accomplished individual, a place where the language of rationality and meticulous research are no defence against irrationality and menace.

Often the criticism of James’s texts has taken the course implied by the title of ‘A Warning to the Curious’ that it is advisable not to inquire into matters best left alone. Such critiques render James’s ghost stories as intensely conservative. This seems to me to be simplistic, because what these texts constantly reveal is that a world beyond the rational exists, and for the intrepid it may bring surprising and unexpected results. Even if we take the view that the idea of the ghost is presented by James as a metaphoric warning against delving into taboos, there is an equally valid argument for seeing this metaphor as a way that learning can open up an infinite and unexpected world. So, an alternative argument might be to realize that James takes a remarkably enlightened view of the supernatural; he both acknowledges its existence and is respectful of its power. In ‘The
Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, for instance, the ‘treasure’ is returned to its original place, as is the crown in ‘A Warning to the Curious’ and even in ‘Canon Alberic’s Scrapbook’; although in the latter case the offending drawing is burnt by Dennistoun, it is copied, and the book preserved. This is not a view which seeks to destroy the world beyond conscious understanding, however threatening it may be, quite the reverse, it is a philosophy which adopts, if anything, the humane position of co-existence. For Brian Cowlishaw, the presence of the supernatural in James’s works is a tacit recognition of Freud’s concept of the unconscious and, in particular, the preservation of its artefacts, an act of repression consonant with Victorian ideas of evolution, civilization, and the psyche: ‘Better to sublimate and restrain, for James, than to dig up, piece together and work through. To repress is to progress, both as an individual and as a species.’

Both stories reach their climactic moment in the depths, and it is true to say the price of the investigations has been death and distress. It is a reminder of the final scene in ‘The Gold Bug’, when Legrand looks down into the pit he realizes that he has revealed the skeletons of two men. He surmises that they are the men who dug the hole, killed where they stood so that they could not reveal the truth. The problem with uncovering the past is that you can never be sure what you will find.
Revenge is a kind of wild justice... (Francis Bacon (1561–626), ‘Of Revenge’ (1625))

It is now the stuff of legend in the world of detective fiction. In A Study in Scarlet (1887), a man lies dead at No. 3, Lauriston Gardens, Brixton, and above the body on the wall, written in blood, is the word ‘Rache’. After his accustomed examination of the scene, Holmes makes the following pronouncement:

There has been murder done, and the murderer was a man. He was more than six feet high, was in the prime of life, had small feet for his height, wore coarse, square toed boots and smoked a Trichinopoly cigar. He came here with his victim in a four-wheeled cab, which was drawn by a horse with three old shoes and one new one on his off fore-leg. In all probability the murderer had a florid face, and the finger-nails of his right hand were remarkably long.¹

Despite these dramatic deductions, it is the single word facing them all which excites Holmes the most. Frustrated by Scotland Yard’s Lestrade and Gregson’s failure to read its true meaning, Holmes tells them, “‘Rache’ is the German for “revenge”; so don’t lose your time looking for Miss Rachel.”² As the story unfolds, it is clear that this
clumsily written clue, written in German to lay a false trail, reveals that retribution really does lie at the very heart of the murder of Enoch Drebber. From this moment, we are made aware of the existence of another story, one which must be told eventually if a satisfactory resolution to the whole is to be achieved.

In this chapter, I shall suggest that Conan Doyle’s use of the double narrative sets up a haunting of the current story, where a chronological inversion of the case confronting Holmes and a narrative from some point in the past is hinted at but whose revelation is delayed. This device is very familiar to readers of the Holmes canon; a nemesis-like figure returns to exact revenge for a past injustice, bringing a reminder that Conan Doyle was one of the early pioneers of the fractured narrative. Among many examples in the short stories are the vengeance of John Turner of Ballarat in ‘The Boscombe Valley Mystery’ (1891) on the blackmailing Charles McCarthy; the persecution of the Openshaw family at the hand of the Ku Klux Klan in ‘The Five Orange Pips’ (1891), and two which will feature here: the remarkable tale of Henry Wood in ‘The Crooked Man’ (1893) and his betrayal at the hands of Colonel Barclay; and the fate of the duplicitous Blessington in ‘The Resident Patient’ (1893).

In the novels, with their greater capacity for historical causality, the emphasis given to both the separate strands of narrative in two stories is more formalized. The story which begun this chapter, *A Study in Scarlet*, is divided in two parts consisting of Part I, parenthetically entitled ‘Being a Reprint from the Reminiscences of John H. Watson, M. D., late of the Army Medical Department.’, and Part II, ‘The Country of the Saints’. *The Valley of Fear* has Part I, *The Tragedy of Birlstone* and Part II, *The Scowrs*, and even *The Sign of Four* (italics original to the edition) has the last thirty or so pages devoted to the historical origins of the present case. This kind of structure is not merely a device to provide a neat motive for some crime, but rather it reveals a deeper recognition of the workings of the human psyche. The fact that we can, according to Freud, repress that which might enable us to ‘avoid unpleasure’ so that ‘its essence consists simply in the act of turning – and keeping – something away from the conscious’ (Freud’s italics). The natural consequence of such an effect is that at any given moment, triggered by all manner of stimuli, repressed trauma may return to ‘haunt’ the subject. Thus, these fractured and inverted narratives are fertile ground for the construction
of metaphor; the previous text returning to inhabit that which contains the story of the present. This relationship between texts is liminal, in much the same way that the relationship of the unconscious is to the psyche, the merest hint of past traumas in the present text giving rise to the existence of the repressed content of the previous history. The latter is then exposed by a significant event in the present narrative which inevitably exposes the secrets from the past.

In his repeated use of this idea, I contend, therefore, that Conan Doyle is drawing on the reservoir of supernatural stories which feature the retributive ghost, a genre that he both admired and contributed to. Chapter 2 revealed how stories of cipher and code depicted the way in which the past was actively investigated and interpreted; this chapter will examine the way in which the past returns to inhabit and interrogate the present. Since Conan Doyle's day, particularly, the double narrative has been the subject of a rich and diverse development in detective fiction, and its presence invariably brings about an invocation of the ghostly tale.

There are, of course, obvious parallels with this model that exist in the ghost story, particularly so in the case of the revenant who returns after a long absence to the scene of a former life to seek redress for some past traumatic event. The idea of the vengeful ghost is given a voyeuristic twist in James's 'The Mezzotint' (1904), for instance, where a painting comes to life which depicts the revenge taken on a landowner by a poacher hanged for stealing, who steals the baby son and heir so that the family name dies out. In a later, chapter I will discuss how this idea has a specific resonance in the work of Susan Hill.

Although the theme of retribution is as old as the ghost story itself, no one has written about or developed the theme as much as Sheridan Le Fanu. Julia Briggs has described his contribution to this subject thus:

[... ] the commonest pattern of all in his work, and one of the commonest in ghost stories as a whole, is the theme of guilt and retribution, which Le Fanu uses masterfully. [...] In stories which follow this pattern the effects of sin cannot be avoided or evaded. Once having dedicated themselves to evil, the protagonists cannot shut away their past or forget their former wickedness.4
As an introduction, I propose to consider one of Le Fanu’s earliest and most influential ghost stories, ‘The Watcher’ (1851), in conjunction with Conan Doyle’s ‘The Crooked Man’, which also features a ‘ghost’ from the past. In ‘The Watcher’, the story’s protagonist, Captain Barton, by implication Le Fanu himself, undergoes a dramatic epiphany. At the commencement of the story, Barton is resolutely sceptical in matters spiritual, specifically the Revelation, and its attendant subject of the supernatural:

The discussion had degenerated into one upon the supernatural and the marvellous, in which he had pursued precisely the same line of argument and ridicule. In all this, it is but true to state, Captain Barton was guilty of no affectation; the doctrines upon which he insisted were, in reality, but too truly the basis of his own fixed belief [...] and perhaps not the least strange of the many strange circumstances connected with this narrative, was the fact that the subject of the fearful influences we are about to describe was himself, from the deliberate conviction of years, an utter disbeliever in what are usually termed preternatural agencies. 5

By the end of the story a very different Barton emerges from the wake of his experiences:

[...] there does exist beyond this a spirit world – a system whose workings are generally in mercy hidden from us – a system which may be, and which is sometimes, partially and terribly revealed. I am sure – I know [...] that there is a God – a dreadful God – and that retribution follows guilt. In ways, the most mysterious and stupendous; by agencies, the most inexplicable and terrific; there is a spiritual system [...]6

Le Fanu ascribes the act of vengeance not just as a religious force, acting out the biblical exhortation of an eye for an eye, but by other agencies both ‘inexplicable’ and ‘terrible’. What happens in between these two positions is one of the most memorable depictions of a rettributive haunting that the ghost story has ever seen.

‘The Watcher’ was subsequently slightly revised and republished as ‘The Familiar’ in what was probably Le Fanu’s most celebrated collection, In a Glass Darkly (1872). It is set in the Dublin of 1794, and
Captain Barton, a member of an aristocratic family, has returned after distinguished service at sea. Despite wearing ‘an expression of gravity and melancholy’, and at times an air of diffidence, outwardly all seems well, and as Barton settles into the social life of the city, he becomes engaged to a Miss Montague, an accomplished belle of Dublin society. But Barton is a haunted man, ‘the gravity and melancholy’ are indicators of deep-seated troubles; as he walks through the streets of the city at night, he is pursued by what, at first, are footsteps. As the regularity of these experiences increases, he receives first one letter addressed, revealingly, to ‘Mr Barton, captain of the Dolphin’ warning him of “danger”, and a second stating ominously, ‘do what you may, I will see you as often as I please, and you shall see me [...]’ Both are signed by ‘The Watcher’, who, good as his word, confronts Barton one evening while he is out walking with friends. This is the pivotal moment of the story; it is the encounter between man and his past and the moment from which all consequences flow. The drama of this meeting is clear in the language used by Le Fanu. The figure which approaches Barton has a look of ‘maniacal menace and fury’ on ‘a singularly evil countenance’, but it is the reaction of Barton himself that is the most telling.

I was absolutely astonished [...] at the effect of this apparition upon Captain Barton. I knew him to be a man of proud courage and coolness in real danger – a circumstance which made his conduct upon this occasion the more conspicuously odd. He recoiled a step or two as the stranger advanced, and clutched my arm in silence, with what seemed to be a spasm of agony and terror! And then, as the figure disappeared, shoving me roughly back, he followed it for a few paces, stopped in great disorder, and sat down upon a form. I never beheld a countenance more ghastly and haggard.

The astonishment felt by Barton is deepened because, beneath the frightening exterior, he recognizes the figure as Sylvester Yelland, a subordinate who served on the Dolphin under his command. It seems that Barton had formed ‘a guilty attachment’ with his daughter, and the affair ended by virtue of Yelland’s harsh treatment of her, which resulted in her death. Consequently, Barton meted out the most severe punishments on Yelland and had thought that the sailor had
died in a hospital in Naples. In desperation, Barton attempts to shake off the effect of the encounter with Yelland’s ghost by visiting a clergyman, confessing all to his future father-in-law and even placing a guard on his room, but to no avail as he finally succumbs to the inevitable fate that waits him.

In ‘The Crooked Man’, we learn of the strange death of Colonel Barclay, which Holmes solves pretty promptly; but it is only later that we hear the real story of Henry Wood and Barclay from many years ago during the time of the Indian Mutiny. Wood was sent under cover of darkness to seek relief for his besieged regiment at Bhurtee in the Punjab. But before he could reach help, he was captured by the enemy, having been betrayed by Sergeant James Barclay, his rival for the hand of Nancy Devoy. After years of torture and privation, he returned to England quite literally a broken man and by chance met Nancy, now married to Barclay who has, in turn, risen to the rank of Colonel. Determined to confront Barclay he follows Nancy home and this is the result:

[... ] At the sight of me he looked as I have never seen a man before, and he went with his head on the fender. But he was dead before he fell. I read death on his face as plain as I can read that text over the fire. The bare sight of me was like a bullet through his guilty heart.13

This is the language of the ghost story; to all intents and purposes, Wood, like Yelland, is a dead man walking. Interestingly, during the struggle, the servants hear Nancy call out, ‘David’, to her husband. This was apparently a reproach in which Nancy likens Barclay to the biblical king, who has Bathsheba’s husband, Uriah, transferred to a zone with heavy fighting so that he will be killed, leaving David free to marry Uriah’s wife. The King was severely reprimanded for this sin and suffered a divine retribution, though unlike with the colonel, it involved the death of David’s baby son and not himself.

What literally frightens both Barton and Barclay to death is an encounter with what Freud called ‘the uncanny [...] that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.’14 In both cases, what was familiar to both men in their past has returned to haunt them; this past acquaintance is crucial to the effect because as Freud points out, ‘something must
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be added to the novel and unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny.\textsuperscript{15} The assumption behind this is that by no means all that is unfamiliar is in any way frightening. Thus, recognition is the trigger that turns the ‘novel and unfamiliar’ into the uncanny, both Barton and Barclay, not only see a disturbing apparition but one with which they are familiar. In ‘The Familiar’ and ‘The Crooked Man’ the uncanny is bound up with the perception of the haunted and appearance of the ‘ghost’ itself, and the expectation that the figure before them was dead. This I call the transformational moment because the consequences which follow from it alter the whole trajectory of the narrative. The haunted Barton and Barclay have been transported into a purgatorial state in an instant. Their lives as they were when first they knew their ghost are irrecoverable, as are the lies they have led since. For Barclay, the resultant fear and guilt are used up in the twinkling of an eye as Wood’s retribution claims his life; Barton, however, must agonize in this state for many days until the inevitable takes place.

Interestingly, Barton appears ‘ghastly’, and Barclay ‘has death on his face’ at the moment of their encounters, and it seems that their expressions take on the ghost-like qualities of their victims. What is retribution at its heart but to re-tribute, to give in return? The purpose of these ‘hauntings’ seems, therefore, to be to return injustice with a form of justice; but in the ghost story the spectre is invariably operating outside the constraints of any legal framework, and the act of retribution, as in Barton’s case, is performed with utter impunity. In fact, far from any further consequences that the criminal law might impose, the consummate moment of revenge is frequently the signal for the haunting to be brought to an end. In the detective story, however, the retributive act can only bring an end to the injustice if it occurs, as it does in ‘The Crooked Man’, precisely because it follows the pattern of a haunting; Barclay ‘was dead before he fell’ with the implication, as if he had seen a ghost. Wood is exonerated, and the debt is settled. In all other circumstances, although the retributive act emanates from the classic narrative of the ghost story, violent revenge in the detective story must always fall within the considerations of the criminal code.

The personal vendetta pursued by Wood is a reminder, too, of the provenance from which a number of Conan Doyle’s came. The mention of India throughout the canon is to invoke an alien culture,
which, when it returns to Britain in one form or another, intrudes on the narrative, often to a startling effect, summoning up ambivalent feelings surrounding Empire. Wood’s return, then, is emblematic of the uneasy feeling of guilt and menace occasioned by the British occupation of India. The irony of this is that Wood’s dire situation is primarily inflicted on him by a fellow soldier, but his spectral appearance, dressed in the rags of an Indian beggar, sharpens the focus onto the potential retribution which comes from the creation of an Empire. In *The Sign of Four*, the weight of Empire hangs even more heavily over proceedings; the plundering of treasure taken during the Indian mutiny from the city of Agra, ‘a great place, swarming with fanatics and fierce devil worshippers of all sorts’ paints a picture of India exacting revenge against their overlords, a place that is wild and threatening.  

Such is the burden of this murderous acquisition that ultimately it benefits no one; Jonathan Small consigns the booty to the Thames in a symbolic gesture, ending the whole adventure for good. Small’s violent, vengeful return is given added weight by the double narrative form placing the present crimes in the context of the crime in Agra.

**Conan Doyle** has actually touched on the subject of Empire in his supernatural fiction to describe how the past can return in unexpected ways. ‘The Brown Hand’ (1899) concerns a doctor who has returned from India, where he had occasion to amputate a native’s hand, which had become so infected that it threatened the man’s life. After removing the hand, the doctor, something of a collector of specimens, brings it back to England and keeps it preserved in a jar. Consequently, the doctor is haunted by the spirit of the man seeking his lost hand – Muslim belief directs that God will only receive those who are *whole* – in the laboratory where he keeps his specimens. But the hand has been lost; the haunting only ceases when his young houseguest, also a doctor, amputates a hand from a lascar patient who has had an accident and tricks the ghost into believing that it is his own. Freud has described ‘a hand detached from the arm’ as ‘highly uncanny [...] especially when [...] credited [...] with independent activity.’ The hand itself, a ‘trophy’ from India, is a metaphor for the wrongs committed by the British in India, and its return is a reminder to all that such actions always have consequences.

The equivocal circumstances regarding the law at the end of ‘The Crooked Man’ raises the whole question of the balance between
Detective Fiction and the Ghost Story

the criminal code and what is often described as natural justice. Consider, for instance, the different faces of justice as they occur in Le Fanu's celebrated ghost story, ‘Mr. Justice Harbottle’ (1872), and Conan Doyle’s ‘The Resident Patient’. These two tales of retribution turn our idea of due judicial practice on its head, substituting instead the possibilities of natural justice. Le Fanu's tale of Elijah Harbottle, reputed to be ‘the wickedest man in England’, a judge in the Court of Common Pleas, was based on the infamous hanging judge, John Jeffreys, forever associated with the aftermath of the Monmouth Rebellion. Jeffreys's reputation for cruelty, dishonesty, and debauchery were well known to his contemporaries.

The story is a revised version of ‘Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street’ (1853), set between 1746 and 1748 and, in the detached manner of many ghost stories, is retold by a Londoner called Anthony Harman from the account given in letters by an elderly friend. Harbottle finds himself under attack by vengeful spirits, largely as the result of the consequences of a case he hears at Shrewsbury assizes of one Lewis Pyneweck, who is charged with forgery. Pyneweck was once a grocer in Shrewsbury and becomes in the course of the narrative a prisoner in the jail there. As in so many of the cases presided over by Harbottle, the only questions to weigh are whether the charge is valid and, if so, whether the punishment meted out conforms to the dimensions of the crime. Harbottle is visited by an old man, Hugh Peters, who warns him of a plot afoot against the judge by his peers; afterwards Harbottle has Peters followed by his footman. It is also revealed that Pyneweck's ex-wife resides in Harbottle's own home as his housekeeper under her maiden name, Flora Carwell. She brought her only child in exchange for the silence of the Judge on what had previously transpired between them, leaving her husband incarcerated and abandoned to the whims of injustice. She is horrified and full of remorse when she consults a Shrewsbury paper to find her ex-spouse among the most recently executed. But Pyneweck haunts Harbottle, and one day while he is in court he is given a letter which appears to have been handed in by the ghost of the dead grocer. This letter informs him that he is to be tried for the murder of Pyneweck, and later Harbottle has a disturbing dream in which he is condemned to death by a monstrous doppelgänger called Mr. Justice Twofold. On the day appointed by the ‘court’ for his execution, Harbottle is found hanging from the
banister at the top of the great staircase in his house. The ‘trial’ of Harbottle is, of course, a travesty, a burlesque of the corrupt justice which he himself has dispensed throughout his life; in this spectral courtroom, for instance, the murder victim is able to be present and give evidence against his killer. But, of course, in the ghost story the procedural rules of a court of law do not apply; all that matters is that retribution, a kind of natural justice, should be seen to be done.

Such a *force majeure* runs through ‘The Resident Patient’; Blessington, a bank robber who turned informer on the rest of the gang, one of which was hanged and the other three sentenced to fifteen years apiece. Blessington’s secret is revealed when, despite setting up nerve specialist Dr. Percy Trevelyan in a consultancy in Brook Street and reserving rooms for his own use on the premises, the gang manage to gain access to his rooms. Subsequently, Blessington is found hanged from a ceiling hook in his own bedroom. Suicide is suspected until Holmes pieces together what actually happened in the room where he is found and pronounces that ‘a very deeply planned and cold-blooded murder’ has been carried out. By means of the ash from Havana and East Indian cigars and the traces of footprints on the carpet, Holmes deduces that three men were involved and then proceeds to speculate what took place:

> Having secured him, it is evident to me that a consultation of some sort was held. Probably it was something in the *nature of judicial proceeding*. It must have lasted for some time, for it was then that these cigars were smoked [...] [my italics]

> Well, it ended by their taking Blessington and hanging him. The matter was so pre-arranged that it is my belief that they brought with them some sort of block or pulley which might serve as a gallows [...] Seeing the hook, however, they naturally saved themselves the trouble.

The death of Blessington is yet another parody of the course of Justice. The ghosts of retribution from Blessington’s past inflict the same punishment on him as their confederate, Cartwright. The incredulous Inspector Lanner is at a loss at the *modus operandi*: ‘Why should anyone murder a man in so clumsy a fashion as by hanging him?’ But hanging, of course, is precisely the point; this is the operation of a natural justice supplanting the process of the criminal law.
Stories such as ‘The Crooked Man’ and ‘The Resident Patient’ operate on the margins between detective fiction and the ghost story. They contain the stock device of the supernatural story, the figure whose sole purpose is to exact revenge for a wrong committed in the past. This means that, of necessity, they shift the focus of the conventional detective story away from the criminal law to a world where anarchic solutions hold sway. Whether it is hallucination and guilt that drives Harbottle to his doom, as Doctor Hessilius speculates at the beginning of the story, or the actual intervention of supernatural forces, this is a realm where the accepted conventions do not apply. So it is with ‘The Resident Patient’; at the deepest level such narratives are subversions of the narrow generic category in which they reside. In this case, the law is powerless to influence the progress of the plot; Holmes is reduced to displaying his art with a number of smart deductions, but the protagonists, the ghosts of the story, the Worthington bank gang, Biddle, Hayward, and Moffat manage to achieve their purpose and, on this occasion, get clean away. At the very end of the story, there is what amounts to an attempt at ‘natural justice’ by a further act of providence, but even this is beyond the power of Holmes and Scotland Yard to have any influence over it:

From that night nothing has been seen of the three murderers by the police, and it is surmised at Scotland Yard that they were among the passengers of the ill-fated steamer *Norah Creina*, which was lost some years ago with all hands upon the Portuguese coast, some leagues to the north of Oporto.23

In the last of the four Holmes novels to be published, *The Valley of Fear* (1914–5) the question of what constitutes the rule of law and its provenance becomes enmeshed with concerns much closer to home. Such is the importance that Conan Doyle gives to both narratives in *The Valley of Fear* that he said of the story:

‘The Valley of Fear,’ which had its origin through my reading a graphic account of the Molly Maguire outrages in the coalfields of Pennsylvania, when a young detective drawn from Pinkerton’s Agency acted exactly as the hero is represented as doing. Holmes plays a subsidiary part in the story.24
The virtual side-lining of the Great Detective is significant as it adds weight to that part of the narrative which represents the past. Because of this, it ensures that the anterior narrative will inevitably have an existence within the text of ‘The Tragedy of Birlstone’; this, I contend, manifests itself as a presence, a haunting the nature of which is only made clear when the full story is told. The nature of this ‘haunting’, too, serves to emphasize both the events of the past and the lawlessness of the times in which they took place.

The story concerns the supposed murder of John Douglas, who was killed by a shotgun wound to the head so severe that the face is unrecognizable. Significantly, we learn that Douglas ‘appeared to have plenty of money, which was said to have been gained in the Californian goldfields’ and that ‘he had spent a part of his life in America.’ 25 But mystery seems to surround this period of his life; his wife ‘was either very reticent about her husband’s past life or else, as seemed more likely, was very imperfectly informed about it’, and ‘she would display acute uneasiness if her absent husband should ever be particularly late in his return.’ 26 We are also made aware that Douglas’s intimate, Cecil Barker, ‘was the more noticed as being the only friend of the past unknown life of Mr. Douglas who was ever seen in his new English surroundings.’ 27 These halting references convince us that a second narrative exists, one which intrudes on the present, taking the form of, as yet, an indistinct and sinister presence. Slowly, but surely, this tide of mystery seeps into the narrative. The doctor examining the body notices a branded mark on the right arm, ‘a triangle inside a circle’, which the butler confirms as matching the one possessed by John Douglas. The inferences keep coming; lying across the body’s chest is a sawn-off shotgun, which is clearly the murder weapon. The gun bears the marks of one made by the Pennsylvania Small Arm Company; again, the American connection is established. Later MacDonald, the Scotland Yard Officer, suggests that ‘the private grudge is the more likely theory’; 28 this is confirmed by his old friend Barker, who states:

[...] That Douglas had given him the impression that some danger was hanging over his head, and he had always looked upon his sudden departure from California, and also his renting a house in so quiet a place in England, as being connected with his peril. He imagined that some secret society, some implacable organization,
was on Douglas’s track which would never rest until it killed him.29

As these references pile up, Douglas’s wife seems to confirm the explanation put forward by Barker when she tells Holmes:

I knew it in many ways. I knew it by his refusal to talk about some episodes in his American life. I knew it by the precautions he took. I knew it by certain words he let fall. I knew it by the way he looked at unexpected strangers. I was perfectly certain that he had some powerful enemies, and that he was always on his guard against them. I was so sure of it that for years I have been terrified if ever he came home later than was expected.

Might I ask, said Holmes, ‘what the words were which attracted your attention?’

‘The Valley of Fear,’ the lady answered. ‘That was an expression he has used when I questioned him. I have been in the Valley of Fear. I am not out of it yet.’30

These intimations are the equivalent of the initial, fleeting appearances of the ghost in supernatural fiction, like the ghost of Yelland in ‘The Familiar’, enough to stimulate interest but never definitive, always elusive and awaiting the climactic moment. The metaphorical ‘ghost’ of the underlying narrative performs the same function, but it has, too, a fundamental effect on the structure. We realize that whatever feats of deduction Holmes performs, it will not, as is usual in the conventional detective story, bring closure to the narrative until the content of both texts are known. This is even in Holmes’s mind when he reveals Douglas in his hiding place; he understands full well the presence of another story. When Douglas offers to tell the history of the Valley of Fear, Holmes replies, ‘That’s the past, Mr. Douglas...What we desire now is to hear your story of the present.’31 Holmes’s priority is what preoccupies the mind of all detectives, to establish the solution to the current narrative; the underlying story must then make sense of the whole.

After Douglas has recounted his tale of self-defence and subsequent deception, he tells the story of his previous life in America. Douglas, who had been masquerading as a fellow union member from Chicago called John McMurdo, reveals himself as Birdy Edwards, the
Pinkerton detective. The story of the Scowrers as the Ancient Order of Freeman is a thinly-disguised version of the Molly Maguires, an organization that Conan Doyle had been researching prior to writing *The Valley of Fear*. The Molly Maguires was, in fact, a nineteenth century secret society of mainly Irish-American coal miners, and it is believed that the ‘Mollies’ were particularly active in the coal fields of Pennsylvania between the time of the American Civil War until a series of sensational arrests and trials from 1876−8. Members of the ‘Mollies’ were accused of murder, arson, kidnapping, and other crimes, in part based on the testimony of an actual Pinkerton detective, James McParland. Birdy Edwards is clearly Conan Doyle’s version of McParland, and like his real life counterpart, Edwards infiltrated the Scowrers in order to bring the ringleaders to justice.

Edwards’s explanation of his undercover work in America reveals a neat narrative *volte-face* by Conan Doyle. What should have been a straightforward case of retribution carried out by the Scowrers for Birdy Edwards’s undercover work becomes a case of false identity. Edwards had realized that his only chance to escape the clutches of the avengers was to fake his own death. As luck would have it, Baldwin’s face is so disfigured by the shotgun blast, resulting from their struggle, as to be unrecognizable. His assailant had a similar physique to that of Edwards, who has no difficulty in passing off the body as his own.

So, Douglas’s account of his past life in Vermissa Valley raises other ghosts which are bound up with a subject that was close to Conan Doyle throughout his whole life, Ireland. In particular, Conan Doyle, according to Lydia Fillingham, was ‘deeply concerned about the violence of secret groups within Ireland’.

Conan Doyle had been an implacable opponent of Home Rule, but the apparent success of the same policy in South Africa and Canada persuaded this fervent supporter of Empire to change his mind on the issue in 1911. Even after this, he still harboured fears about the possible instability this might bring. But for Conan Doyle, Ireland was not just a matter of politics; it was bound up with his own sense of identity, as his letters reveal.

Born in Scotland, with parents of Irish descent, Conan Doyle nonetheless thought of himself as an Englishman, though the cultural strains of all three peoples would remain with him throughout his life. ‘I am half Irish you know,’ he once told one of London’s press
lords, after losing his temper over a newspaper article, ‘and my British half has the devil of a job to hold the hotheaded rascal in.’

Of these disparate ‘strains’, it was the Anglo-Celtic influence of his mother, Mary Doyle, that had most influence on his literary career:

My real love for letters, instinct for storytelling, springs from my mother [...] with the glamour and romance of the Celt very strongly marked. In my early childhood, as far back as I can remember, the vivid stories she would tell me stand out so clearly that they obscure the real facts of my life. It is not only that she was a wonderful story teller, but she had an art of sinking her voice to a horror-stricken whisper when she came to a crisis in the narrative, which makes me goose-fleshy now when I think of it. It was in attempting to emulate these stories of my childhood that I began weaving dreams myself.

Reading these lines, it is not hard to see the origin of Conan Doyle's creative imagination. If his mother was the catalyst that stirred in him the literary sense, then the core of that influence, its source, was Ireland and its Celtic traditions. The language he uses is particularly interesting; he talks of ‘glamour’, ‘romance’ and, most revealingly, ‘dreams’, and there is little doubt that these ideas were instrumental in shaping his love of mystery, adventure, and the supernatural in fiction. Whilst we might consider the detective stories of Poe, Collins, and the historical adventures of Sir Walter Scott as influential, Conan Doyle's output also owes a debt to the supernatural fiction of Irish writers such as Le Fanu and Bram Stoker. Ireland’s rich history of myth and legend, entangled with a wild and remote landscape, are given free rein in, for instance, Le Fanu's, ‘Utor de Lacy’ (1861), ‘The White Cat of Drumgunniol’ (1870), and ‘Stories of Lough Guir’ (1870). These are in the same Celtic tradition of those told to him by Conan Doyle's mother; his early ghost story, *The Firm of Girdlestone* (1890), owes much to the plot of *Uncle Silas*.

Conan Doyle's complex make up, that mixture of the wild, romantic and the sangfroid of what he called his ‘British’ half, stands as a likely representation of the breadth and theme of his entire oeuvre, as well as the constituency of the British Isles itself. In Conan Doyle's own estimation, the first narrative of *The Valley of Fear* appears as a triumph for the rational detective story; the mystery of the death of
Birlstone is solved through the application of logic. But the second narrative is quite a different matter; the Vermissa Valley is a vision of a ‘new’ Ireland relocated to the American frontier, one where the rule of law scarcely exists. Little wonder then, at the end of the first narrative, when Douglas has been discovered, and the body identified as Ted Baldwin, a member of the murderous Scowrers, he asks, ‘How do I stand by English law?’ Holmes replies: ‘The English law is, in the main, a just law. You will get no worse than your just deserts from it.’ The contrast between the stability of a judicial system which Douglas now faces and the lawlessness he has escaped from is palpable. We may imagine that this representation of anarchy is what Conan Doyle feared might be the outcome of Home Rule if the North and South could not be reconciled. He was, to say the least, dubious, despite his change of heart; in April 1912, five months before formally announcing his support, he said:

It was the apparent enmity of Ireland to the Empire which held me from Home Rule for many years [...] I am an imperialist because I believe the whole to be greater than the part and I would always be willing to sacrifice any part if I thought it to the advantage of the whole [...]  

But two years later came this caveat:

I am for home rule in Ireland and home rule in Ulster [...] I am convinced that the men of Ulster will never submit to an Irish home Parliament. I tell you those men are not bluffing. They are in earnest. The outcome will be so serious as to amount practically to civil war [...]  

This apocalyptic and, as it turns out, prescient vision was written in the very year, 1914, that *The Valley of Fear* was published. There is no doubt that the spectre of Ireland loomed large in Conan Doyle’s thoughts when he wrote his final Sherlock Holmes novel; just as the author was haunted by the situation in his spiritual home, the ghosts of Ireland are a constant presence throughout the text.

The acceptance of Edwards’s plea of self-defence by the courts seems to signal a satisfactory outcome to the story – but no. Because a second ghost is waiting to exact the retribution that eluded the first,
that ghost is Moriarty. Moriarty, of course, is the éminence grise of the Holmes canon; despite his infamy in the history of letters and his celebrated appearance in ‘The Final Problem’ (1893), Moriarty plays a direct role in only one other of Doyle’s Holmes stories. The Valley of Fear was set before the confrontation at the Reichenbach Falls, but published afterwards. Otherwise Holmes only mentions Moriarty retrospectively in five other stories: ‘The Adventure of the Empty House’ (the immediate sequel to ‘The Final Problem’), ‘The Adventure of the Norwood Builder’ (1903), ‘The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter’ (1904), ‘His Last Bow’ (1917) and ‘The Adventure of the Illustrious Client’ (1924). Originally created by Conan Doyle as an instrument by which Holmes could be killed, Moriarty came to be regarded as his alter ego, a Mr. Hyde whose very fibre is the antithesis of all that the Great Detective stands for. The fact that Moriarty remains largely in the shadows only serves to enhance his mystical status. Pointedly the language Holmes uses twice refers to him as possessing supernatural qualities; in ‘The Final Problem’:

[...] the man had hereditary tendencies of the most diabolical kind. A criminal strain ran in his blood, which, instead of being modified, was increased and rendered infinitely more dangerous by his extraordinary mental powers. Dark rumours gathered round him in the University town, and eventually he was compelled to resign his chair and come down to London. He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organiser of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city [...] 38

And in The Valley of Fear:

Not only formidable, Watson, but sinister – in the highest degree sinister [...] The greatest schemer of all time, the organizer of every devilry, the controlling brain of the underworld, a brain which might have made or marred the destiny of nations. 39

And a rare admission by Holmes of Moriarty’s power beyond the grave in the immediate aftermath of the struggle at the Reichenbach Falls when he recounts his adventures to the incredulous Watson in ‘The Empty House’, ‘I am not a fanciful person, but I give you my word that I seemed to hear Moriarty’s voice screaming at me out of the abyss.’ 40
Quite simply the notion of Moriarty as the embodiment of the criminal, the spectre of evil who haunts Holmes to his very core, is one of the central metaphors of the whole series. All criminals are judged by his prodigious standards, and none reach them. The murder of Edwards, thrown overboard on a ship bound for South Africa, completes the frame which the elusive figure of Moriarty forms around the story. The first attempt to kill Douglas/Edwards, which Moriarty orchestrated, having failed, he pursues his victim relentlessly until the task is completed. Moriarty’s name appears at the very beginning and the end of the narrative, like an epanalepsis it reminds us of the control he exerts over the story despite his absence. Thus Conan Doyle provides us with not one but two retributive ‘ghosts’ who return to menace the two detectives. This double revenge emphasizes further the threat that exists from the lawless and anarchic world of Irish secret societies and their representation of an anarchy which might be visited on Ireland itself. It is no coincidence that the embodiment of all that is anathema to stability and decency, Moriarty, should be given a name which has its origins in Ireland; in a story which thinly disguises Conan Doyle’s anxiety for the future, his presence is a measure of that fear.

So, the metaphor of the underlying narrative is revealed as far more than a mere trope, a way in which Conan Doyle is able to articulate a menace which transcends plot. In *The Valley of Fear*, the retribution which threatens from overseas uncovers a deep-seated concern about matters much closer to home. This is not so much xenophobia, although the late Victorian and Edwardian era was characterized by paranoia about such issues, but a genuine desire to preserve stability at home. In this respect, detective fiction, with its intent on the *status quo*, seems to be a powerful advocate for equilibrium at a time when such ideas seem to be at risk.
4

‘That Forbidding Moor’:
The Hound of the Baskervilles, a Ghost Story?

The ghost is very anxious to assert its former rights. (Sabine Baring-Gould (1834–924), A Book of Dartmoor)

An Apologia

It was one of those rare moments of affirmation. The instant I read Michael Dirda’s description of The Hound of the Baskervilles (1901–2) as ‘the first “grown-up” book I ever read – and it changed my life’, it reawakened distant memories of my own. This remarkable story bade me enter a world of adventure beyond even my own childish fantasies, the world of the detective which, despite the many directions that books have taken me since, I have never entirely abandoned. For someone growing up in a working-class town in the post-war decades, this Dartmoor seemed a far-off magical land full of mystery, terror and intrigue, entirely alien to the grey mess of urban life. Here was a place, a primeval landscape, inhabited by spectral hounds, desperate convicts, ancient legends, cunning murderers, and Corinthian heroes taken straight from the Gothic canon – a kind of reincarnated Wuthering Heights. No amount of subsequent scholarly know-how can ever make up for the thrill of that first reading, which will stay with me always.

I can still remember the day, long ago, when I bought the complete long and short stories of Sherlock Holmes in the familiar two-volume
That Forbidding Moor
edition published by John Murray, and I have them still, their care-worn appearance a silent and constant witness to their endless appeal. Always pre-eminent was the story of the hound; many is the time that chilling phrase describing the death of Sir Hugo Baskerville has resonated with me invoking the kind of ghoulish delight peculiar to boys of a certain age, ‘standing over Hugo, and plucking at his throat, there stood a foul thing, a great, black beast, shaped like a hound, yet larger than any hound that ever mortal eye has rested upon.’ In the most fanciful Gothic novel, there can be no more powerful image than this; but, as I hope this chapter will show, it is by no means the only outré feature of a tale which seems to stand apart from the rest of the Holmes canon. And stand apart it does in so many ways.

* * *

The uniqueness in The Hound of the Baskervilles begins with its place in the chronology of the series. Its serialization in the Strand magazine between August 1901 and April 1902 marks the reappearance of Holmes after his ‘demise’ at the Reichenbach Falls in ‘The Final Problem’ (The Strand, December 1893) at the end of The Memoirs and a full eighteen months before his ‘formal’ reappearance in ‘The Empty House’, the first story in The Return. Despite the setting of the story predating ‘The Final Problem’ after an absence of nearly eight years, the resurrection of Holmes is that of a literary spectre who has risen from a supposedly defunct corpus. So, even at its inception The Hound of the Baskervilles is an island in the sea of Holmes' stories, a thing apart, and this I think is the key to understanding the work's extraordinary undertow. For even amongst the daring breadth of the Holmes series, with its tales of drug addiction in ‘The Man with the Twisted Lip’ (1891), the sheer bizarreness of ‘The Red-Headed League’ (1891) and ‘The Engineer’s Thumb’ (1892), and repressed sexuality in ‘The Copper Beeches’ (1892) and ‘The Solitary Cyclist’ (1903), The Hound of the Baskervilles remains the most talked about and outrageous of all Conan Doyles's creations. More than in any of his other Holmes tales, Conan Doyle seems to have absorbed the spirit of place; Dartmoor, its legends, topography, and character are as much a part of the book as any of its protagonists. For this and many other reasons, I believe that to pass off the story as a mélange of detective fiction spiced with the derring-do of an adventure story would be to
miss the point. At one level of comprehension, there is no denying the story’s more tangible qualities, but look again at the text closely, the language, the setting and certain cleverly-tailored references, and one begins to discover a new and compelling theme, one which has led me to believe that here, at the heart of one of the greatest detective stories ever written, is a ghost story.

M. R. James, writing in his preface to *Ghosts and Marvels*, states that ‘two ingredients most valuable in the concocting of a ghost story are, to me, the atmosphere and the nicely managed crescendo.’ If James’s two criteria are to be believed, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* certainly qualifies; the eerie setting of the moorland landscape actively embellished by Conan Doyle and a shattering climax involving the unmasking and death of Stapleton and his deadly charge. But, of course, there is very much more to it than that, so during the course of this chapter I hope to make the case for *The Hound of the Baskervilles* to be read in a way which is receptive to the idea of the supernatural. This is not to deny its existence as an outstanding detective story, but more to argue that the work is capable of being enjoyed on different levels simultaneously, which are, surprisingly, by no means mutually exclusive. Beyond ratiocination, beyond adventure, the story possesses a dreamlike quality which oscillates, as dreams often do, between the recognizable, in this case the conventions of the detective story, and an elusive sense of the intangible. I would best describe the latter as emanating from the remarkable narrative interplay of absence and presence; for much of the story, Holmes is apparently absent, but actually present throughout as ‘The Man on the Tor’; the absent Sir Hugo is, paradoxically, present through reincarnation – more of this anon – as are the egregious hound, the ethereal and enticing beauty of Beryl Stapleton and the elusive doomed convict Selden, yet another shadowy figure, unseen except in death. But most of all, I am interested in the character of Stapleton and his relationship with Sir Hugo, which forms a bridge between the legend of the Baskervilles and the present day. This bond, when viewed from the perspective of the ghost story, reveals much about the underlying narrative of the story.

The beginning of the story actually presents us with something of an enigma – on the verso opposite the first page is written the following brief message:
Beguiled by the innocence of my first reading, it took many years before the significance of this apparently innocuous acknowledgement really hit me, because in many ways these few lines hold the key to the conception of the story. Bertram Fletcher Robinson was a well-known journalist and author who befriended Conan Doyle during a long sea voyage to South Africa in 1900 aboard the SS Briton. The fruit of this encounter seems to have been an agreement to co-operate over a Dartmoor story, which Robinson had mooted and which Conan Doyle embraced. The extent to which Robinson was involved in the book is still a matter of dispute between scholars, but there is little doubt that at the formative stages Robinson had considerable input, hence Conan Doyle’s high profile and much reprinted acknowledgement. This is confirmed by the fact that both men visited Dartmoor in April of 1901.7

In many ways, Robinson was the ideal collaborator for Conan Doyle, a keen sportsman and adventurer, with an interest in detective fiction; his *The Chronicles of Addington Peace* (1905) would eventually be afforded the ultimate accolade for the genre by being listed in the influential *Queen’s Quorum: A History of the Detective-Crime Short Story as Revealed by the 106 Most Important Books Published in this Field Since 1845*. But, above all, it was Robinson’s knowledge of Dartmoor and its folklore that proved to be the touchstone of their relationship. In 1882, the Robinson family had moved to the village of Ipplepen, close to Dartmoor, and he soon became something of an authority on its topography and, importantly, its rich legacy of ancient history. Reading his carefully researched article for *Pearson’s Magazine*, published in 1904, on the many ancient monuments and physical characteristics of the landscape, it is clear that here was someone who knew the moor intimately.8 Interestingly Robinson features both a detailed description of the fortified camp at Grimspound, a
remote place home to many a ghostly legend, and a reference to the perils of the great bog at Fox Tor, where many men and animals have succumbed over the centuries. It is known that Conan Doyle and Robinson visited both places together and, somewhere in the creative processes of the former, it seems to have provoked an exchange between the reality of the place and fictional necessity, resulting in the birth of the Great Grimpen Mire.

In Robinson, however, the temporal nearly always resided alongside the spiritual; just as he was assiduous in acquiring a formidable knowledge of the physical Dartmoor, he also fell under the spell of its many supernatural tales. Prominent amongst these are places associated with gruesome tales of hounds; Wistman’s Wood is just such a place of mystery and magic, its oaks bent in penitence to the wind, a grotesque parody of that which its name implies but nonetheless a precious survival of the ancient woodland that once covered the moor, something still recorded by recent Ordnance Survey maps as ‘Dartmoor Forest’. Wistman’s is said to be home to a pack of black spectral hounds driven by a gigantic, malevolent hunter, once responsible for the death of a local farmer’s son. The ‘Wish’ hounds, as they are known, rise up from the depths of the wood at the dead of night, in particular St. John’s Eve on the 23rd June, in search of their quarry. Although sightings of these hounds have occurred in many parts of the moor, received wisdom has it that this phenomenon emanates from Wistman’s Wood. Legends surround ancient places, partly because of their antiquity and association with historical events, but in the case of Wistman’s Wood there is something more, something miraculous about the Wood’s survival in the face of man’s attempts to tame the landscape for grazing stock. So, such places are not a connection just with the past, but the ancient past, representing a continuum with a time when the vast primordial forest existed side by side with those who built the stone and hut circles. This preoccupation of Robinson is not lost on Conan Doyle, it seems; in one of several references to the ancients, Stapleton tells Watson that the grey circular rings of stone that he can see are

[...] The homes of our worthy ancestors. Prehistoric man lived thickly on the moor, and as no one in particular has lived there since, we find all his little arrangements exactly as he left them. These are his wigwams with the roofs off. 9
A point which Watson takes up in his first report to Holmes:

When you are out upon its bosom you have left all traces of modern England behind you, but on the other hand you are conscious everywhere of the homes and the work of the prehistoric people. On all sides of you as you walk are the houses of these forgotten folk, with their graves and the huge monoliths which are supposed to have marked their temples.\(^\text{10}\)

Grimspound and Wistman’s Wood stand as sentinels defying historical momentum, witnesses to an age when man was not as much in the ascendancy over the environment as he is now. A time when Dartmoor was a true wilderness and when the imagination of man was more suggestible, a time when legend and superstition were accepted as part of the rhythm of life.

Somewhere in the wildness of Dartmoor is the quality which Julia Briggs recognised in Thomas Hardy:

Hardy incisively realized what lesser writers were only dimly aware of, because he saw it so vividly enacted across the Dorset landscape – the loss of an older, more stable and locally integrated life, with its magical ways of thinking and feeling.\(^\text{11}\)

Dartmoor is just such a landscape as Briggs describes, divorced from ‘modern England’ where the evidence of its past is there for all to see, a rougher, wilder Eden, steeped in the naivety of its inhabitants.

Nearly twenty years after *The Hound of the Baskervilles* appeared, Amyas Northcote, who was himself from an aristocratic Devon family and a contemporary of M. R. James at Eton, produced thirteen ghostly tales under the title *In Ghostly Company* (1922), his only such collection. In several of these remarkable stories, ‘Brickett Bottom’, ‘In The Woods’ and ‘The House in the Wood’ for instance, nature is represented as a force whose often benign face belies a source of unnerving terror. In ‘The Downs’, however, Northcote produces an eerie twist on this theme which captures perfectly the deep psychological impressions that successive traumatic events have on the perceptions of a particular landscape. Set in an unspecified recent past, it chronicles the experiences of the story’s protagonist, who undertakes a night time walk across a hilly tract known as Branksome
Down. As he makes the journey, he becomes aware that he is in the presence of another who walks by his side; the man in much distress bemoans enigmatically that, although the night is ‘dark to you. It is darker for me.’ Soon he is surrounded by a host of people from all times:

Here I saw a group of persons clothed apparently in the priestly robes of ancient Britain; there walked a soldier wearing the eagle-crested helmet of Rome. Other groups there were in dresses of later date, the steel-clad knight of the Middle Ages, the picturesque dress and flowing hair of a cavalier of the seventeenth century. These figures eventually vanish as mysteriously as they appeared when he reaches the top of the hill. It transpires that he has crossed the down on the very night, when legend has it, that all those throughout history who have suffered a violent death on the downs come back to seek lost rest. Northcote skilfully uses the metaphor of those who have died in a particular way to represent the chain of human history and its relationship with a particular landscape. In this context, those who have gone before continue, sometimes in a different dimension, but occasionally breaking into another, to bear witness to the land’s history, in the same way that Sir Hugo lives on in the form of Stapleton.

Above all, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is an elegant parallel of the many ghost stories which feature remote and inaccessible places and the mystique which surrounds them. So, it seems to me that there is a very tangible reason for considering such places as repositories for supernatural ideas; the downs which Northcote describes are remnants of a landscape of England, once dominant, which now by virtue of their elevation and remoteness have resisted the high farming processes available elsewhere. These areas, of which Dartmoor is a vestige, are escapees of the successive Inclosure Acts, which for centuries eroded the commons and moorland of Britain. Dartmoor, however, has not been entirely immune to this threat; over a hundred years ago, Sabine Baring-Gould was bemoaning the erosion of its precious heritage:

Tenements there must be, but they should be in sheltered valleys, and the wide hillsides and the sweeps of moor should be left
severely alone. As it is, encroachments have gone on unchecked, rather have been encouraged.\textsuperscript{14}

I belabour this point because the first thing which strikes you about \textit{The Hound of the Baskervilles} are the elegiac, haunting descriptions of the moorland landscape, something not usually associated with the Holmes’s canon. Take Watson’s introduction to Dartmoor:

[... ] There is your first sight of the moor,’ said Dr. Mortimer, pointing out of the carriage window.

Over the green squares of the fields and the low curve of a wood there rose in the distance a grey, melancholy hill, with a strange jagged summit, dim and vague in the distance, like some fantastic landscape in a dream. Baskerville sat for a long time, his eyes fixed upon it, and I read upon his eager face how much it meant to him, this first sight of that strange spot where the men of his blood had held sway so long and left their mark so deep.\textsuperscript{15}

Or in his first report to Holmes, Watson conflates the bleak aspect of the moor:

The longer one stays here the more does the spirit of the moor sink into one’s soul, its vastness, and also its grim charm.\textsuperscript{16}

These are among many such musings which the story contains and much against the grain of Conan Doyle’s conventional Holmesian prose. The language Conan Doyle uses here, therefore, is highly significant; there is a reverence for this landscape which seemingly has the stamp of Robinson on it. But mere respect for age does not suffice on its own, hand in glove with the recognition of great antiquity comes awe, even a sense of menace, which permeates every description of the moor throughout the book. The purpose, it seems, is to establish the idea that landscape is history, to look at a landscape is to perceive its past, to read its record. This sense of times gone by is fundamental to the whole understanding of \textit{The Hound of the Baskervilles}; the plot itself turns on the historical rights to ownership, and all that goes with it, of an ancient estate.

The story begins with the now legendary demonstration of deduction by Holmes on the walking stick left by Dr Mortimer at 221b,
Baker Street. Having first asked Watson for his observations, Holmes proceeds to dismantle his friend’s reasoning and supplants it with his own accurate picture of the moorland practitioner. Mortimer’s visit is doubly significant; it establishes the nature of the case for Holmes to consider, and crucially it introduces the legend of the evil Sir Hugo. This ancient tale forms the heart of the narrative; from it all the motivational and sensationalistic forces in the plot flow, and from the character of Hugo himself comes the central unifying force between the past and the present. He is the key figure in any supernatural reading of the story.

It is almost certain that the legend of Sir Hugo comes from the lurid tale of a larger than life figure who lived on Dartmoor some two hundred years before *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was written. We know that Robinson, immersed as he was in these old tales, recounted some of them to the receptive Conan Doyle during their sortie on Dartmoor. What he told him remains unclear, but there is one story so close to that which appears in the book, the sinister tale of the seventeenth century Devon Squire, Richard Cabell III, as to brook all conjecture. Again, we do not know whether the pair actually visited Cabell’s home, Brook House at West Buckfastleigh, but enough of the essence of the many stories about the evil Squire seemed to have found their way into *The Hound of the Baskervilles* that the gruesome details of his life seem to have been a major topic of conversation.

Cabell was originally a supporter of the Royalist side, but during the Commonwealth he paid for this, quite literally, by being fined by Parliament. Eventually he switched sides and, as a result, gained a reputation as a man who could not be trusted. This was the catalyst for deep resentment of Cabell it seems, for wild rumours about his life sprung up all over the place. He is variously supposed to have sold his soul to the devil, committed all sorts of unspeakable acts of immorality and, worst of all, murdered his wife. Although untrue, his wife actually survived him by some fourteen years; this last indictment is of particular interest to those studying *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. He is supposed to have accused his wife of adultery and, when she escaped his clutches, pursued her on to the moor and stabbed her to death. His wife’s pet hound is then supposed to have turned on Cabell and torn out his throat. When he died on 5 July 1677, his grave was surrounded by a specially built sepulchre, and the tomb
reinforced by a huge slab, such was the fear that his ghost might rise up and terrorize the neighbourhood. One of Cabell’s passions was hunting and, despite all these precautions, it is said that on the night of his interment, a phantom pack of hounds came baying across the moor to howl at his tomb, something which would be repeated on the anniversary of his death when Cabell is supposed to lead them away in the chase across the countryside. The tomb remains to this day in the graveyard of the Holy Trinity Church, Buckfastleigh.

The parallels of the Cabell legend with that of Sir Hugo are manifold and have been well documented; Sir Hugo is a Cavalier, his portrait at Baskerville, to which we will return, depicts him thus; he is a hunting man like Cabell, and most of all he is licentious and violent. He becomes the literary personification of what legend had made of Cabell. What is more, history appears to be repeating itself, because Mortimer has noticed what the police missed when investigating Sir Charles’s death, ‘the footprints of a gigantic hound’ nearby the body. All this is, as Holmes himself would say, very suggestive; one of the cornerstones of the detective canon has as its very core a supernatural legend tied to the landscape in which it is set. But Mortimer had withheld the detail of the Hugo legend from the Coroner’s Inquiry because ‘a man of science shrinks from placing himself in the public position of seeming to indorse [sic] a popular superstition’ and saw no good reason to add to Baskerville Hall’s ‘rather grim reputation.’

Note here the use of the phrase ‘man of science’, which becomes key to the ensuing conversation. Confronted with the prospect of the irrational clouding of the case, Holmes, as the personification of the logical thinker, berates Mortimer for not calling him in earlier, so that he could have examined the physical circumstances of the Baronet’s death. Mortimer tries to justify his reluctance saying that he has already given his reasons for being so; but just as this might signal closure on the subject, Mortimer initiates a revealing exchange between the two men by adding a hesitant coda to his remarks:

‘Besides, besides —’

‘Why do you hesitate?’

‘There is a realm in which the most acute and most experienced of detectives is helpless.’

‘You mean that the thing is supernatural?’
'I did not positively say so.'

'No, but you evidently think it.'

'Since the tragedy, Mr. Holmes, there have come to my ears several incidents which are hard to reconcile with the settled order of Nature.'

Mortimer then proceeds to repeat the testimony of several local people who have witnessed the presence of an unworldly creature ‘ghastly and spectral’ and as a result, there is ‘a reign of terror in the district’. As a result of this, the conversation becomes even spikier; Holmes again:

'And you, a trained man of science, believe it to be supernatural?'

'I do not know what to believe.'

Holmes shrugged his shoulders. ‘I have hitherto confined my investigations to this world,’ said he. ‘In a modest way I have combated evil, but to take on the Father of Evil himself would, perhaps, be too ambitious a task. Yet you must admit that the footprint is material.’

'The original hound was material enough to tug a man's throat out, and yet he was diabolical as well.'

'I see that you have quite gone over to the supernaturals.'

This final barb from Holmes is weighted with irony. Picture the scene – Mortimer a physician, ‘a man of science’ is here a protagonist for what might appear to be the very antithesis of his profession, and Holmes who is, for all his devotion to logic and what at the time was the fledgling science of Forensics, an amateur, finding himself defending the rational with a Doctor of Medicine. This conversation goes to the heart of the ghostly associations in The Hound of the Baskervilles. The critic, Pierre Bayard, who has written an engaging book reopening the case, argues that ‘there is every reason to suppose that the generally acknowledged solution of the atrocious crimes that bloodied the Devonshire moors simply does not hold up, and that the real murderer escaped justice.’ We might suppose that, for Mortimer, we may read Conan Doyle; if ever a ‘man of science’, espoused the cause of the supernatural it was he.

The counterintuitive presentation of this argument leads one to believe that the exchange between Holmes and Mortimer is not
just important as a device for the furtherance of the plot, but that this juxtaposition is designed to add weight to the author's convictions about the spiritual world. Not even in the Holmes canon do we encounter such undercurrents about the idea of the ghost as we do in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and it is worth remembering what Conan Doyle wrote some thirty years later as an attempt to articulate his attitude to the supernatural:

When a life has been cut short before it has reached its God-appointed term, whether the cause be murder or suicide (of accident I speak with less confidence), there remains a store of unused vitality which may, where the circumstances are favourable, work itself off in capricious and irregular ways. This is, I admit, a provisional theory, but it has been forced upon my many considerations. Such a theory would go some way to explain, or at least to throw some dim light upon, the disturbances which from all past time have been associated with scenes of violence and murder. If it could be conceived that the unseen part of a man is divisible into the higher, which passes on as spirit, and the lower which represents animal functions and mere unused vitality, then it is this latter which has not been normally worked off in a life prematurely ended, and which may express itself in strange semi-intelligent fashion afterwards.²⁴

Readers of detective fiction are often amazed at the extent to which Conan Doyle embraced the idea of spiritualism, reincarnation, and the ghost world generally. For a writer who was one of the pioneers of logical deduction techniques and forensic science in the Holmes series, the prospect of a medical doctor espousing the world of shadows in this way may seem personally irreconcilable. On the face of it, the former would appear to be an absolute refutation of the latter; while it is true that many writers have written in both detective and ghost forms, few, very few, have carried this apparent paradox into their private lives. Yet, the language of the Dartmoor setting, the Hugo legend, the exchange between Holmes and Mortimer, and the above passage seem to me entirely consonant with a reading of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* that takes into account these potentially conflicting literary ideas. Rather than pull the story apart, they seem to be essential building blocks of the whole.
In particular, the passage from *The Edge of the Unknown* seems to hint at the way the plot might work. Let us imagine the death of Hugo as a life which ‘has been cut short before it has reached its God-appointed term’; he has fallen foul of his lustful urges, and he receives his rightful comeuppance from the egregious hound. We might conclude that, although his demise is entirely justified in moralistic terms, it comes prematurely because he has chosen to act immorally. According to Conan Doyle, the latent, unused energy is passed on in the form of ‘animal functions’. I contend that there are re-animated, reincarnated, in Stapleton those desires which compelled Hugo to behave as he did. The overriding imperative that drives Stapleton is the accession to the vast Baskerville estate once in Hugo’s possession but now lost – Stapleton is, in fact, the son of Sir Charles’s younger ne’er-do-well brother, Rodger. Interestingly, Conan Doyle anoints him with the name Stapleton, which is an ancient and venerable family name made up of the Old English word *stapol* meaning ‘post’, and *ton* meaning ‘settlement’. Make no mistake, the idea of land and inheritance run deep in this story. Stapleton is the revenant produced by the bad blood of the Baskerville line dating back to Hugo, which is manifest in Rodger and his son. The unspent energy they possess is charged with the reclaiming of what is seen as their birthright. It matters not one jot whether we as readers are convinced by such a premise; if we project ourselves for a moment into Conan Doyle’s world, we discover someone who was, at the very least, open to such suggestions. So, just as Stapleton is a metaphor for the reservoir of evil that generations can produce, Sir Henry as his antithesis completes the manicheistic circle.

After the grim descriptions of the moor we have already witnessed, Watson, Mortimer and Sir Henry approach the house. Sir Henry’s first sight of Baskerville Hall sets the tone:

> Through the gateway we passed into the avenue, where the wheels were again hushed amid the leaves, and the old trees shot their branches in a sombre tunnel over our heads. Baskerville shuddered as he looked up the long, dark drive to where the house glimmered like a ghost at the far end.  25

It is an irresistibly Gothic description. It would fit seamlessly into *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, where Radcliffe ascribes the same importance
to atmospheric scene setting on first impressions. Here is the vision which greets the hapless Emily on her arrival at Udolpho:

‘There,’ said Montoni, speaking for the first time in several hours, ‘is Udolpho.’

Emily gazed with melancholy awe upon the castle, which she understood to be Montoni’s; for, though it was now lighted up by the setting sun, the gothic greatness of its features, and its mouldering walls of dark grey stone, rendered it a gloomy and sublime object.  

Like Radcliffe’s novel, the middle passage of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is steeped in the language of the supernatural. Structurally, it is dominated by Watson’s two reports to the (apparently) absent Holmes and subsequent extracts from his diary. Just before these appear, Watson meets Stapleton on the moor, and they survey the sinister Grimpen Mire. The pair see a moorland pony struggling in vain in the murderous bog, bringing about the same aura of menace as that generated by the Shivering Sands in *The Moonstone*. Stapleton says ominously, ‘It’s a bad place, the great Grimpen Mire’, and as to the wider moor he is equally mysterious, describing it as ‘rather an uncanny place altogether.’ As Watson’s walk progresses, he also meets Beryl, Stapleton’s ‘sister’, again the language is highly suggestive of the ghost, ‘With her perfect figure and elegant dress she was, indeed, a strange apparition upon a lonely moorland path.’ With just one word, ‘apparition’, we are plunged back into the ghostly milieu; there is no escape from the relentlessly sinister atmosphere which the story generates. It is little surprise that Watson says to her anxiously, ‘since I have been here I have been conscious of shadows all round me.’

Ghostly premonitions are now firmly embedded in Watson’s mind, and interest in the spirit world is rife amongst the company; even the plot which Stapleton weaves around Sir Henry is based on legend and the supernatural. In his first report, he repeats a conversation in which Sir Henry asks Stapleton whether he believes in the supernatural, and he replies that he knows of ‘similar cases, where families had suffered from some evil influence, and he left us with the impression that he shared the popular view upon the matter.’ But the principle subjects in both reports are the ghostly figures which Watson sees on the
moor. The first is the hapless convict, Selden, the younger brother of Eliza Barrymore. When Watson and Sir Henry catch up with him, he is described as having a spectral countenance, ‘an evil yellow face, a terrible animal face, all seamed and scored with vile passions.’ The visual presentation of Selden as a ghost is emphasized by his status as a convict, an individual who has been placed outside the conventional social sphere, doomed to haunt the bleak landscape as a fugitive. But the pursuit of Selden leads to Watson spotting yet another ghost-like figure silhouetted against the sky. This mysterious ‘wraith’ is ‘a tall thin man [...] his arms folded, his head bowed, as if he were brooding over that enormous wilderness of peat and granite which lay before him. He might have been the very spirit of that terrible place.’ Holmes has, in fact, withdrawn from the investigation in order to ‘haunt’ it.

The defining moment of the narrative comes when Holmes examines the portraits of the Baskerville ancestors; Watson has already prepared the ground for this on his arrival at Baskerville Hall by drawing our attention to the paintings. Holmes has outlined his suspicions about Stapleton to Watson but feels the case is incomplete, but the portrait of Sir Hugo, however, proves to be the clincher. He makes light of his discovery in front of Sir Henry: ‘he seems a quiet, meek-mannered man enough, but I dare say that there was a devil lurking in his eyes’ but during supper ‘his eyes were continually fixed upon it’. After Sir Henry retires to his room, Holmes reveals the truth. He asks Watson whether the portrait reminds him of anyone; he havers, but when Holmes covers up the Cavalier’s hat, the scales fall from his eyes. It is worth recording the ensuing conversation because of its significance:

‘Good heavens!’ I cried, in amazement.
The face of Stapleton had sprung out of the canvas.

‘Ha, you see it now. My eyes have been trained to examine faces and not their trimmings. It is the first quality of a criminal investigator that he should see through a disguise.’

‘But this is marvellous. It might be his portrait.’

‘Yes, it is an interesting instance of a throwback, which appears to be both physical and spiritual. A study of family portraits is enough to convert a man to the doctrine of reincarnation. The fellow is a Baskerville – that is evident.’
In many ways, this is a remarkable passage; the scene is pivotal; the supernatural language, the haunting landscape, the spectral hound, the sense of historic mystery, all culminate here. For many, the desperate pursuit of the hound and its protagonist, Stapleton, is the climax of the whole adventure, while it has all the visceral energy of a tale of derring-do, this scene with its implication of rebirth is utterly transcendent. It challenges, too, the conventional dictum of the detective story that all things are reducible by logic; Holmes's rhetoric is neither fanciful nor sceptical but matter of fact. The 'throwback' is not only 'physical' but spiritual, and such relationships in portraiture are evidence of reincarnation. The use of the authoritative 'doctrine' applied to reincarnation adds further weight to the whole idea of rebirth, implying that it is a concept which has already been subjected to academic rigour and worthy of serious consideration. But we should not, perhaps, be surprised; this is Conan Doyle after all. For plot purposes, it would suffice to emphasize the likeness between Hugo's portrait and Stapleton, but Conan Doyle chooses to endow this simple revelation of family likeness with a metaphysical conundrum.

The presence of paintings in the ghost story is, of course, nothing new; invariably these are portraits of the individuals who are the ghosts at the centre of the drama. It is as if the notion of a painting is a way of capturing not merely the likeness of an individual but the very soul, too. This image, although apparently inert, is ready to be re-animated as a being in transition between life and death. There are many examples. In 'Schalken the Painter' (1839), Le Fanu recounts a strange occurrence in the life of artist Godfried Schalken, inspired by his atmospheric use of light and shade and Oscar Wilde's 'A Picture of Dorian Gray' (1891), where the portrait becomes the repository for recording all the depravities committed by Gray. An interesting variation, too, which has some resonances with The Hound of the Baskervilles, occurs in Henry James's story of ancestral repression, 'Owen Wingrave' (1892). Wingrave is born into a family with a long military tradition but rebels against the pressure to conform. He goes to stay at the family's ancestral home; his relatives finally hope to persuade him of the error of his ways. But the past weighs on him heavily, and, in the celebrated scene, the portraits of his ancestors have an overpowering influence on his state of mind and prove to be the final straw. He is found dead the next day. One
portrait in particular, which has direct parallels with that of Sir Hugo, which affects Wingrave greatly, is that of his great-great-grandfather, Colonel Wingrave, who has a bad reputation, and killed one of his own children in a fit of rage. Later the evil Colonel was found mysteriously dead in his room, and when Owen agrees to spend a night in the same room to prove his manly spirit, he succumbs on the very same spot as his forbear. As he himself says, ‘I’ve started up all the old ghosts. The very portraits glower at me on the walls. There’s one of my great-great-grandfather that fairly stirs on the canvas.’

In all these stories, the painting becomes a focus for the representation of the supernatural potential. It seems that in the ghost story the portrait stands as the wellspring from which supernatural effects are created by engagement with the human psyche. Schalken uses the canvas to record a ghostly event he swears took place. In ‘A Picture of Dorian Gray’, the soul of Gray is projected into the picture, and while his own physical appearance remains altered, the portrait becomes the medium by which he can measure the damage done to his spiritual wellbeing. Owen Wingrave falls victim to the portrait of an evil ancestor whose spectral presence is ultimately his undoing. In The Hound of the Baskervilles, the portrait of Sir Hugo is a fulcrum between the detective story and the ghostly tale. It is the means by which Holmes confirms his suspicions and enables him to close the case, so as such it is the story’s major clue; but simultaneously it gives rise to the notion of reincarnation of Sir Hugo as Stapleton and the supernatural consequences which flow from that. The portrait’s pivotal place in the plot also underlines the importance which Conan Doyle attaches to the ghostly legend and the part it plays in the unfolding of the narrative.

There is, too, a nice irony to the story of Stapleton the revenant; he is an entomologist who deals in facts, as Christopher Clausen points out:

[...] Stapleton, the man of science, proves to be the trainer of the Hound, the murderer of Sir Charles, the disguised next heir of the baronetcy, and a throwback to the most evil of all the Baskervilles.

The Hound of the Baskervilles is in fact a story of throwbacks from beginning to end. Civilization is not merely fragile; its representatives are paralyzed. Stapleton nearly wins, for he is masterful,
imaginative, wholly unscrupulous and more purposeful than any other character in the story except Holmes. Since Holmes is absent from nearly half the story – living out on the moor when Watson believes him to be in London – Watson and the reader alike have a frustrating sense of being at war with forces that are menacing, unerringly directed, and impossible to identify.  

In this somewhat conventional reading it is Holmes, the personification of reason, who is the means by which the forces of misrule are dispelled. Stapleton and his instrument of death, the hound, die, Sir Henry is free of danger, and the restoration of order is complete. But are we entirely convinced by this outcome? Along with a number of critics, I suggest that this is far from a satisfactory dénouement. For instance, one of the reasons Bayard challenged the whole outcome of the plot is that the ending of the story is unconvincing in the extreme. In a canon which repeatedly places the emphasis on verifiable facts, the disappearance of Stapleton seems to be seriously out of line. Indeed, if this were a Hollywood blockbuster, we should expect to see a sequel featuring the return of Stapleton the arch villain, who actually escaped from the mire in order to continue his revenge on the Baskerville family.

As I conclude what has been a personal pilgrimage through one of detective fiction’s true masterpieces, I am more and more struck by Stapleton’s ghostly credentials. Stapleton is depicted as the spirit of Sir Hugo reincarnate because of his undying purpose to recoup the lost inheritance of the Baskerville estate. He represents the embodiment of the baton-sinister of the Baskerville family, whose struggle, like the retributive ghost, is an endless search for gratification against the legitimate forces of good. Stapleton is not just the putative heir to the land; he is of the land itself. He arose from the evil Sir Hugo, whom he resembles, and his ‘death’ is in the manner of a re-absorption into same ground from whence he came. Stapleton’s mysterious demise corresponds, too, with the elusive character of the spectre in a classic ghost story; it enhances the case for a supernatural reading because it bucks the absolute finality expected of the conventional detective tale. In the end, he is destined to remain one of the legends of the moor, amongst the legions who already occupy its haunted landscape. For Holmes, the engagement with apparent supernatural forces has brought him to the very limit of his powers;
he tells Watson, after their near encounter with Stapleton in London, that ‘this matter cuts very deep’. I think it significant that, in this of all cases, when Holmes disappears, he does so, not by feigning death as he did after the death of Moriarty, or by donning a disguise, but as a silhouetted ghostly figure on the moor. In this instance, in keeping with the tenor of the text, he resorts to living like a ghost in order to catch one.
It takes two to speak the truth, – one to speak, and another to hear. (Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), ‘Wednesday’)

Agatha Christie’s 1930 book *The Mysterious Mr. Quin* is one of her best kept secrets; it is perhaps the least well known of her early texts and certainly one which has received scant critical attention. This is a pity, because while Christie’s writing has frequently been portrayed as possessing excellent plotting but set within a flat, matter-of-fact style, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, on the other hand, contains some of her finest prose and acute observation of the art of detection and its relationship with human nature. In ‘The Man from the Sea’, for instance, Mr. Satterthwaite, the book’s principal protagonist, reflects as he tries to get to the bottom of the mystery surrounding the lonely Signora. He presses her on her unhappy marriage:

He felt himself groping – groping – in the dark recesses of her mind where she was trying to hide her secret from him.

‘The boy – it’s got to do with him. You wouldn’t mind about anything else.’

He heard the faint gasp she gave and he knew he had probed correctly. A cruel business but necessary. It was her will against his. She had got a dominant, ruthless will, but he, too, had a will hidden beneath his meek manner. And he had behind him the heaven-sent assurance of a man who is doing his proper job. He felt a passing contemptuous pity for men whose business it was
to track down such crudities as crime. This detective business of the mind, this assembling of clues, this delving for the truth, this wild joy as one drew nearer the goal...Her very passion to keep the truth from him helped him. He felt her stiffen defiantly as he drew nearer and nearer.²

For Christie, this is perceptive writing with a genuine depth to it, and the musing on the nature of detection and the role of the detective are emblematic of The *Mysterious Mr. Quin* series as a whole. Not only do they portray the process of investigation in some detail, but the often complex mind of the detective is effectively dissected in a way that recalls Poe’s description of Dupin in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’. To achieve this latter objective, Christie intriguingly divides the detective function between two characters. Herein lies the most compelling reason for celebrating these stories, because the other half of the detective duo is a ghost, who is the motive force behind detection. In this chapter, I shall examine this idea as a proposition as well as looking in some detail at Christie’s text. In addition, I will assess how this theory relates to Poe’s Dupin and the metaphysical detective stories of Jorge Luis Borges and try to find an answer to the question: Where did the mysterious Quin come from, and why is it imperative to present him as a ghost?

Christie devotes just two paragraphs to *The Mysterious Mr. Quin* in her autobiography but there is no doubting the book’s significance in her own mind; as so little has been written about the Quin stories, Christie’s view, albeit a subjective one, is worth repeating in full:

Actually my output seems to have been rather good in the years 1929 to 1932: besides full-length books I had published two collections of short stories. One consisted of Mr. Quin stories. These are my favourite. I wrote one, not very often, at intervals perhaps of three or four months, sometimes longer still. Magazines appeared to like them, and I liked them myself, but I refused all offers to do a series for any periodical. I didn’t want to do a series of Mr. Quin: I only wanted to do one when I felt like it. He was a kind of carry-over for me from my early poems in the Harlequin and Columbine series.

Mr. Quin was a figure who just entered into a story – a catalyst, no more – his mere presence affected human beings. There would
be some little fact, some apparently irrelevant phrase, to point him out for what he was: a man shown in a harlequin-coloured light that fell on him through a glass window; a sudden appearance or disappearance. Always he stood for the same things: he was a friend of lovers, and connected with death. Little Mr. Satterthwaite, who was, as you might say, Mr. Quin’s emissary, also became a favourite character of mine.³

It is clear from what Christie says that these stories had special meaning. In the ‘Author’s Foreword’ to the first edition of *The Mysterious Mr. Quin*, she confirms that her interest in Harlequin was sparked by a set of Dresden figures of her mother’s which represented characters from the *Commedia dell’arte* – Harlequin, Columbine, Pierrot, Pierrette, Punchinella and Punchinello. Perhaps Harlequin’s connection with her mother, who first encouraged the young Christie to start writing, made these stories so personal that they were not to be a series to be trotted out one after another, but to be reserved as a private pleasure. The pleasure Christie gleaned from writing the Quin tales is vitally important to their appreciation, not the least because they tell us much about the author in her formative years. In these stories, it is as if Christie takes a step back from her conventional texts to analyse the nature of a detective in a way she often eschewed with Poirot and Miss Marple.

The first story is called ‘The Coming of Mr. Quin’ and establishes something of a pattern for the whole book. Mr. Satterthwaite, a well-to-do gentleman, a friend of the rich, accepted in aristocratic circles, is a guest at a country house party; he is described as ‘sixty two – a little bent, dried-up man with a peering face, oddly elflike, and an intense and inordinate interest in other people’s lives’.⁴ The jacket blurb to the first edition actually amplifies this description and reveals even more of Satterthwaite’s character:

Mr Satterthwaite is a dried-up elderly little man who has never known romance or adventure himself. He is a looker-on at life. But he feels an increasing desire to play a part in the drama of other people – especially is he drawn to mysteries of unsolved crime. And here he has a helper – the mysterious Mr Quin – the man who appears from nowhere – who ‘comes and goes’ like the invisible Harlequin of old. Who is Mr Quin? No one knows, but he
is one who ‘speaks for the dead who cannot speak for themselves’, and he is also a friend to lovers. Prompted by his mystical influence, Mr Satterthwaite plays a real part in life at last, and unravels mysteries that seem incapable of solution.

As the guests assemble, the discussion turns to a former owner of the house who mysteriously committed suicide ten years ago, seemingly without reason. Just as one guest refers to the wild weather as ‘A good night for ghosts to walk’, a stranger appears at the door. Satterthwaite notices that the stained glass in the door gives the stranger the appearance of being dressed in a multi-coloured costume, and when he is seated in front of the fire, the shadows form a curious mask over his eyes. These impressions of the harlequin figure occur throughout the whole series, reinforcing the image of his motley dress and the elusive nature of his presence. The stranger announces himself as Harley Quin and a friend of the late owner of the house.

There now begins the process which Quin will repeat many times throughout the course of these stories, the teasing out of the truth of a mystery. The prompting continues until Satterthwaite realizes that he is taking part in a drama, and Quin is its director:

This is Mr. Quin’s doing. It was he who was staging the play – was giving the actors their cues. He was at the heart of the mystery, pulling the strings, making the puppets work. He knew everything, even to the presence of the woman crouched against the woodwork upstairs. Yes, he knew.

Eventually, through judicial questioning Quin is able to elicit the solution from those who were present on the night of the suicide ten years earlier. It appears that through a misunderstanding, the previous owner, who had murdered an elderly man for love of his young wife, mistakenly kills himself thinking the police have come for him, but they merely want to tell him that his dog has been killed. The plot, for once, is largely secondary to the introduction of Quin himself and his role in the affair. As he disappears after the solution has been revealed, he recommends the ‘Harlequinade’ to Satterthwaite stating that its ‘immortals are always immortal’.

The reference to immortals is an interesting comment. Over the centuries, the *Commedia dell’arte* developed a core of characters who
were distinct types; the three main stock roles were servant, master and lovers. These characters, the ‘immortals’ as Quin refers to them, became known as ‘masks’ and are inseparable from the character of the mask. Thus, the behaviour of each stock role was repeated as each new play was created. Although there were variations down the years, the classic, traditional plot depicts the lovers being thwarted by an elder, but helped by the servants. Invariably, matters would be happily resolved; such was the convention. If all this sounds familiar, repeated conventions, stock characters and satisfactory resolution, it is because, whether Christie intended it or not, *The Mysterious Mr. Quin* strikes the most eloquent parallels between the Harlequinade and detective fiction.

Like Harlequin, Harley Quin haunts the stories. He appears from nowhere when mystery arises, and fulfils his role as either protagonist or enabler. The detective of literary convention is something of a ghost, too, an immortal who enters the lives of those caught up in the mystery as if from another world, another dimension. He or she is an eternal figure because their character is transferable from one story to another. In the golden age, the finite community invaded by crime was the stock scenario of the detective story; this extended to colleges, the country house, the village, indeed any closed community where a limited number of suspects could be mustered would suffice as a suitable milieu into which the detective might come. W. H. Auden has gone as far as to suggest that ‘the detective must be a total stranger’ who would presumably appear at the outset of the crime and disappear at the conclusion. ⁸ This ghost-like behaviour of the detective corresponds to the unquiet soul of supernatural fiction which cannot rest until the cause of the trauma has been laid to rest.

As we shall see, the more we delve into the character of Quin the more it is evident that he is symbolic of a particular type of detective. It follows that someone like Miss Marple, for instance, embedded within her rural community and drawing on its characters and behaviour to help her solve crimes, does not meet Auden’s definition or correspond to the way Quin appears and then disappears from the narrative. Marple, even when she is away from St. Mary Mead, is often entangled with old friends or relations when investigating a case. Dolly Bantry in *The Body in the Library*, for instance, on discovering the eponymous body, immediately turns to her old
friend for help. Miss Marple is the epitome of that familiar relative or friend always on hand, so when such a case has been solved, it often appears that she has scarcely moved out of her personal social milieu. Auden, himself, felt that detectives such as Sherlock Holmes and Father Brown were nearer to his ideal, sufficiently detached and able to display objectivity and morality respectively. For different reasons, those of solitude and detachment, it is this type of detective who, we may argue, behaves in the same way as ghosts. In the creation of Quin, therefore, Christie is, ironically, distinguishing between the character and behaviour of her two principal detectives, Poirot and Miss Marple. Poirot, unlike Miss Marple, has been a policeman in the past and is now a professional private detective who moves far beyond his immediate circle in order to ply his trade.

But having suggested the detective as an immortal in ‘The Coming of Mr. Quin’, the Quin stories embark on an altogether more complex analysis of the detective function itself. The next three stories in the series, ‘The Shadow on the Glass’, ‘At the “Bells and Motley”’ and ‘The Sign in the Sky’, begin to shape the relationship between Satterthwaite and Quin. ‘The Shadow on the Glass’ is the story of cunning murder by a jealous husband and recalls the sexual shenanigans of the *Commedia dell’arte*. This is an environment made for Satterthwaite, a country house party featuring the well-to-do, where he can observe the behaviour of people whose mores he understands. Satterthwaite describes Quin as possessing an ‘uncanny power – of showing you what you have seen with your own eyes’. Quin states rather obliquely that he is neither a ‘magician’ nor a ‘criminologist’ but asks Satterthwaite to recall what his first impressions were when attending the scene of the crime. From this basic exercise in observation, Satterthwaite remembers a clue and is able to locate a secret window from which the shooting has taken place. Despite his assertion that he is not a magician, Quin helps Satterthwaite to see the truth in ‘At the “Bells and Motley”’, a tale of misrepresentation and disappearance, by asking Satterthwaite what constitutes the essence of a conjuring trick. The reply, of course, that the hand deceives the eye, reveals that for all the time the search spread far and wide, he was right under everyone’s nose in disguise. True to the tradition of the stories, the whole plot turns on the activities of a *Commedia dell’arte*-like group of circus acrobats called the Clondinis. In the third of this group of stories, ‘The Sign in the Sky’, a clever murder
of a young wife by an older husband, with its shades of Pantalone, is achieved by the manipulation of time. Quin’s advice to Satterthwaite is to go to Canada to interview one of the servants who was present at the time of the murder. She is able to tell Satterthwaite that she saw train smoke at the time of the murder forming a giant hand in the sky, hence the title, and from this he deduces, with suitable encouragement from Quin, that the clocks in the house have been altered, because no train was due at that time. By the end of this story, we are now aware that the relationship between the two is well established, Satterthwaite the shrewd judge of people and Quin the seemingly omniscient counterpart.

Aside from the startling use of a ghost as detective, the most striking thing then about these stories is the way in which the detective function is actually divided between the spectral Quin and the earthly Satterthwaite. For a golden age writer in her formative years, this is an audacious idea, it seems that Christie set out to dissect, or even deconstruct, the central stock character of her books. There is a real desire in this work to reconcile the intuitive and rational sides to inquiry, but what are the origins of such a quest, and why is it so important for the genre?

Despite its impact in the Quin tales the idea of a divided function is, in fact, as old as the detective story itself. By common consent, the first modern detective story, the root from which a whole genre grew, is ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, which introduced to the world the idea of the serial detective. What Poe revealed in the three Dupin stories was a character of such radical and innovative form that we can only imagine the impact on the literary world. The idea that one character should consist exclusively of observation, ratiocination and inspiration, and devoid of most qualities we would normally ascribe to an emotional human being, yet be successful, is a minor miracle. Here is how the narrator describes Dupin’s singular disposition:

He boasted to me, with a low chuckling laugh, that most men, in respect to himself, wore windows in their bosoms, and was wont to follow up such assertions by direct and very startling proofs of his intimate knowledge of my own. His manner at these moments was frigid and abstract; his eyes were vacant in expression; while his voice, usually a rich tenor, rose into a treble which would have sounded petulantly but for the deliberateness and entire
distinctness of the enunciation. Observing him in these moods, I often dwelt meditatively upon the old philosophy of the Bi-Part Soul, and amused myself with the fancy of a double Dupin – the creative and the resolvent.¹¹

The dual personality of the detective seems to have been something of a preoccupation for Poe; in the beginning of his preamble to ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, he suggests that the ‘analyst’, whom we might call the detective, is:

[...] Fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics; exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of acumen which appears to the ordinary apprehension preternatural. His results, brought about by the very soul and essence of method, have, in truth the whole air of intuition. The faculty of re-resolution [sic] is possibly much invigorated by mathematical study [...] Yet to calculate is not in itself to analyse.¹²

This is a more precise exposition of the distinction between the creative and the resolvent. The two significant words here are ‘preternatural’ and ‘intuition’; although the resolvent side of the detective’s art is essential to the working through of the data, there exist those elusive qualities of observation and inference that are the difference between success and failure in the investigation of crime. Poe uses the analogy of the chess player to explain that the true analyst’s skill lies in transcending the mere rules of the game to gain ascendancy by shifting the focus away from the actual game taking place on the board. This enables the protagonist to consider more intangible factors such as the psychology of the opponent and the way this impacts on their method of play.

Poe returns to the theme in ‘The Purloined Letter’ (1844), but this time the analogy of the chess player is replaced by the thieving Minister D, who steals a comprising letter from a prominent lady. The heart of the story comes not from the theft itself but the way in which the Minister chooses to conceal the document. Dupin chides the Prefect and his men for their fruitless search because they lack that elusive quality of imagination and intuition needed to combat the mind of the Minister. Dupin’s innovative method used to solve the mystery is to identify with the criminal. Dupin wins because of
his moral strength: the Minister is unprincipled, a blackmailer who obtains power by exploiting the weakness of others. It is precisely because the Minister and Dupin both have creative and resolvent minds, those of the poet and the mathematician, that the latter is able to divine the hiding place. Thus, it is an intangible, metaphysical force which sets the literary detective apart, something with which Christie imbues the ghostly half of her detective duo. In ‘At the “Bells and Motley”’ Satterthwaite acknowledges the part played by Quin in their investigations:

‘I do rather adopt that attitude towards you. A man of magic. Ha, ha. That is how I regard you. A man of magic.’

‘And yet,’ said Mr. Quin, ‘it is you who do the conjuring tricks, not I.’

‘Ah!’ said Mr Satterthwaite eagerly. ‘But I cannot do them without you. I lack – shall we say – inspiration?’

It is significant that Christie chooses to make Quin the ghost, the essence of preternaturalness and intuition, whose observations seem all-knowing and miraculous. Satterthwaite, on the other hand, has a style that is earthbound; he is a man who uses the tools given to him, once the intuitive leap is made.

Some eleven years after the publication of The Mysterious Mr. Quin, Jorge Luis Borges wrote the first of three detective stories, ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ (1941), as part of a wider initiative to mark the centenary of the publication of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’. Borges completed his doubling of Poe’s original project by adding ‘Death and the Compass’ in 1944 and ‘Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in his Labyrinth’ in 1949. Not only did Borges celebrate the writing of the first modern detective story, but he took up the theme of the ‘Bi-Part’ soul of the detective. In ‘Death and the Compass’, Erik Lönnrot and Police Commissioner Treviranus investigate the strange series of killings which seem unconnected but in fact are a trap set by gangster Red Scharlach to exact revenge on the detective. As befits a story written in celebration of Poe’s tales of ratiocination, Lönnrot and Treviranus represent the two sides of Dupin’s character. Lönnrot ‘thought of himself as a reasoning machine, an Auguste Dupin, but there was something of the adventurer in him, even something of
the gambler.’14 Their exchange over the first murder reveals their different approaches to detection: Lönnrot, who pursues the clues which emerge from the killings as an analytical exercise, insists that the books possessed by the murdered rabbi are significant, suggesting a ‘rabbinical solution’ rather than ‘the imaginary bunglings of an imaginary burglar’ and that ‘This crime may, however, belong to the history of Jewish superstitions’.15 But Treviranus, a practical man, replies, ‘I’m not interested in “rabbinical explanations” as you call them; what I’m interested in is catching the blackguard that stabbed this unknown man.’16

As always with Borges, there are subtle cross-references which are clues to the deeper meanings within the text. Lönnrot bears the name of the nineteenth-century Finnish polyglot Elias Lönnrot, physician and philologist and collector of traditional Finnish oral poetry, who created the national epic, the Kalevala (1835), from short ballads and lyric poems collected from the oral tradition. In this Lönnrot, the poetic side transcended his scientific, analytical background, and as a result he allowed himself to believe, misguidedly as it happens, that the short poems he collected were fragments of a continuous epic, of which no full version survived. Accordingly, he joined a number of them together with connective material of his own and imposed upon the whole a unifying plot, rather as his Borgesian counterpart does in ‘Death and the Compass’. When we realize that ‘both’ Lönnrots are interested in proverbs, riddles and incantations, it becomes clear that Borges is not quite recreating ‘a reasoning machine, like Auguste Dupin’ but one half of the ‘Bi-Part Soul’, someone who has allowed the poetic, creative force to become dominant.

If Lönnrot corresponds with the Quin-like intuitive spirit, then Treviranus is his true counterpart. Again, Borges provides us with a hint as to his character in the name. Treviranus is of German origin, and although it has connotations with the Roman triumvirate, it is with two brothers, Gottfried Reinhold Treviranus (1776–837) and Ludolph Christian Treviranus (1779–864), that the most direct relevance lies. Both were leading botanists (Gottfried actually coined the term ‘biology’), and so they were men of science, measured, not given to wild and unsubstantiated hypotheses. Thus, Borges’s Treviranus is a common-sense policeman, steeped in procedural methods and used to reaching conclusions based on facts. Some critical thinking
has suggested that Lönnrot and Treviranus correspond to Dupin and his dull companion the narrator; I reject this. All the evidence points, as it does in the case of Quin and Satterthwaite, to these pairings being the separated constituents of Dupin’s Bi-Part Soul. If Dupin, the first ‘modern’ literary detective, is the paradigm for the ultimate reasoning machine, the template for those who come after, then any analysis of the detective function is necessarily a dissection of that character – the creative and the resolvent.

This whole imbalance may be demonstrated in the negative; in ‘Death and the Compass’ when the creative is at variance with the resolvent things go wrong. Treviranus is right when he expresses his scepticism about the Jewish connection in the murder of Yarmolinsky, but is unable to see the underlying scheme behind the crimes. Lönnrot, on the other hand, is wrong about the ‘rabbinical explanation’ but solves the riddle by means of ‘A drawing-compass and a navigational compass completed that sudden intuition’.17 But even this discovery proves to be disastrous; it leads him straight into the hands of Red Scharlach and death. The irony of Lönnrot’s fate is that, for all his intellectual acumen, he is unable to see that the plot created by Red Scharlach is merely a cover for the revenge the gangster seeks for the death of his brother. For Lönnrot, the game seems over ‘he had virtually solved the problem; the mere circumstances, the reality (names, arrests, faces, the paperwork of trial and imprisonment), held very little interest for him now.’18 Like Somerton in ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, he solves the puzzle but fails to recognize the danger it exposes, even when the trail leads him to his enemy.

Borges was clearly interested in the subject of Dupin’s Bi-Part soul because he returns to the subject in the third of his tributes to Poe, ‘Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth’. The story is a clever locked room mystery which poses interesting challenges to the two faces of detection. Two friends, Dunraven and Unwin, are visiting a labyrinth in Cornwall during the summer of 1914. Dunraven tells Unwin the story of the labyrinth, built by Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, chief of a Nilotic tribe, in order to protect himself from the ghost of his cousin, Sa’īd, whom he had murdered and who had vowed to exact revenge on the chief. Some years later, it seems that Sa’īd’s spirit had indeed found Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari and killed him. After hearing the story, Unwin casts doubt on its validity; he believes that it was not Ibn who had fled to England and built the labyrinth, but
Saʻīd, who had stolen the fortune of Ibn. Unwin argues that Saʻīd had built the labyrinth to lure the chief to his death. There is even a subsequent story, ‘The Two Kings and the Two Labyrinths’, providing a third version of the events, told by the rector of the local parish, of two near Eastern kings, one of whom invites the other to his elaborate labyrinth, leaving him lost and humiliated, the first king; in an act of revenge, later destroys the kingdom of the other and then abandons him in his special labyrinth without doors or corridors – the desert.

Intriguingly, we learn at the beginning of the story that Dunraven ‘was conscious of himself as the author of quite a respectable epic, though his contemporaries were incapable of so much as scanning it, and its subject had yet to be revealed to him’ and ‘Unwin had published a study of the theorem that Fermat had not written in the margins of a page by Diophantus.’19 These are precisely the qualities which, when combined, go to make up the disposition of a detective like Dupin. Both characters are representative of those dispositions encountered in the Dupin stories and adopted by Lonnrot and Treviranus. But this time, Borges delves deeper into the mechanics of the detective story than before; when Dunraven outlines the story of Ibn and its considerable mysteries, the instinct of the mathematician in Unwin seeks to clarify, but the poet is not so sure:

‘Please – let’s not multiply the mysteries,’ he said. ‘Mysteries ought to be simple. Remember Poe’s purloined letter, remember Zangwill’s locked room.’

‘Or complex,’ volleyed Dunraven. ‘Remember the universe.’20

Borges’s reference to ‘The Purloined Letter’ is, of course, disingenuous, but this brief exchange is highly revealing. The mathematician Unwin immediately seeks to reduce a mystery to its basic truths while the poet sees beyond the reducible to the fundamental problems of truth. As the story unfolds, Borges makes us aware that the mystery, like many others, is capable of supporting many versions of the ‘truth’ and, as it does so, reveals the tension between the creative and the resolvent which the detective must reconcile. Something Dunraven is only too well aware of:

Dunraven, who had read a great many detective novels, thought that the solution of a mystery was always a good deal less
interesting than the mystery itself; the mystery had a touch of the
supernatural and even the divine about it, while the solution was
a sleight of hand. 21

This strikes deep at the heart of the division; if the essence of the
mystery is to invoke the supernatural, the thought processes engaged
to resolve it reflect this in some way. The Dunraven half of the detec-
tive character resides in a metaphysical world where only possibili-
ties exist, he is not so much concerned with the truth in a particular
case as defining the nature of truth. At no point in the story does
Dunraven offer a solution to the mystery; as such, he is even more
dislocated from the mystery than Lönnrot is when pursuing Red
Scharlach. When Unwin dismisses Dunraven’s relation of the ‘facts’
of the story in favour of ‘something sensible’, the latter’s response is
a somewhat sarcastic reference to nebulous phenomena: ‘Set theory,
for instance, or the fourth dimension of space’. 22 When, however,
Unwin is presented with the mystery, he looks, as a mathematician
would, for symbols that aid resolution. He ultimately rejects the
image of the labyrinth, substituting it with that of the spider’s web,
and suggests that Sa’īd was the spider waiting for his prey at the
centre.

In ‘Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth’, what starts
as an investigation into an unsolved mystery becomes an exercise
in the juxtaposition between the nature of truth when applied to a
specific case, and its place in the wider universe. It is what happens
when the creative mind is unburdened by the specifics of a partic-
ular problem; for Borges, the likelihood of finding a solution to the
problem of Ibn is not a transferable panacea for the wider problems
of the universe. Because the two minds are set on tracks which are
of a different gauge, as Unwin refines his theory based on the events
themselves, Dunraven counters by reference to the infinite laby-
rinth of time and space, indicating that each problem solved merely
throws up further mysteries. It is a reminder that the detective story
turns on that fragile marriage between the tangible circumstances of
the crime and the unfathomable workings of the detective’s psyche.

In the case of Quin and Satterthwaite, where inspiration and reason
meet, the result is very different; the former’s inspiration is the cata-
lyst for the latter to provide resolution, not a barrier to it. As we have
seen, Satterthwaite admits to Quin that ‘I cannot do them without
Christie’s attempt to demonstrate this symbiosis through the metaphor of the ghost has, I argue, its origins in the pages of Poe’s three seminal detective tales. At the end of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, Dupin explains the reason why the Prefect has failed where he has succeeded:

I am satisfied with having defeated him in his own castle. Nevertheless, that he failed in the solution of this mystery is by no means that matter for wonder which he supposes it; for in truth, our friend the Prefect is somewhat too cunning to be profound. In his wisdom there is no stamen. (sic) It is all head and no body, like the pictures of the Goddess Laverna, – or, at best, all head and shoulders like a codfish. But he is a good creature after all. I like him especially for one master stroke of cant, by which he has attained his reputation for ingenuity. I mean the way he has ‘de nier ce qui est, et d’expliquer ce qui n’est pas.’

The final sentence, from Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Héloïse*, contains the fate to which all detectives like the Prefect and Lönnrot are condemned – the extended quotation as translated is: ‘It is a mania shared by philosophers of all ages to deny what exists and to explain what does not exist.’ The failure to combine the creative imagination with the logical interpretation of the facts means a denial of what reality may be telling us, in favour of a ‘rabbinical solution’ and nothing else. The analogy of the key word ‘stamen’ is not lost on us either. To pursue its logic, we need to acknowledge that the stamen is that part of the plant which, through its anthers and filaments, produces the pollen, the magic substance which produces life. This analogy encapsulates that indefinable quality required of the literary detective; he or she must, to some extent, be possessed of a mystery themselves in order to set about resolving one. Christie clearly understands this well; in Quin she isolates that spirit-like quality of seemingly magical inspiration essential to the character’s being. Unlike the real-life counterpart, the literary detective, for dramatic effect, must be seen to possess powers that leave ordinary mortals gaping in wonder. This is why Christie’s representation of Quin as a ghost is apposite; the process of revelation is every bit as mystifying as the solution itself.

The detective canon is littered with seemingly magical exegeses. Dupin's feat in producing an orang-utan as the protagonist from the
evidence at the scene set a precedent for all detectives who followed him. The solution commences with the intangible quality of inspiration; the creative mind divines that the marks on the throat of Madame L’Espanaye are ‘the mark of no human hand.’ Using this hypothesis, the study of a zoological reference book produces an apparent answer; from this point, a further inspiration concerning the maritime connection, a fragment of a sailor’s ribbon for his queue, and Dupin’s resolvent capacity can make the observed facts fit the conjecture. The advertisement is the final attempt at coalescence; the only way to resolve is to speculate, as we have already seen elsewhere Dupin says of his theory, ‘I do not know it [...] I am not sure of it.’ The sailor arrives in response to the advertisement, and Dupin is vindicated, the creative and the resolvent have triumphed.

Hercule Poirot is, of course, Christie’s own exemplar of the practices of Dupin; he is also the natural product of Quin and Satterthwaite’s combined personae. He makes great play of the action of his little grey cells, in assessing evidence and for all his careful attention to detail and observation, scarcely any of his cases would be resolved without his creative instinct. In The ABC Murders, for instance, he solves a seemingly random sequence of murders, trailed by a series of enigmatic letters, by an audacious piece of lateral thinking. Poirot’s hypothesis dismisses the received wisdom that the letters were written by a homicidal maniac, and instead announces that the perpetrator is, in fact, a very different character:

‘En vérité, it did not seem to make sense at first sight. And then I saw light. It was to focus attention on several murders – on a group of murders... Is it not your great Shakespeare who has said “You cannot see the trees for the wood.” [...]’

‘When do you notice a pin least? When it is in a pin-cushion! When do you notice an individual murder least? When it is one of a series of related murders.’

‘I had to deal with an intensely clever, resourceful murderer – reckless, daring and a thorough gambler.’

Once Poirot isolates the particular murder which is the key to the whole case, the murderer emerges; his characteristics outlined by Poirot fit the solution perfectly. But it is what Poirot says when
denouncing the murderer that is most revealing; he declares the murderer to be ‘The man I had known a long time in my secret mind [...]’. 27 The ‘ghost’ of Poirot’s creativity is vindicated; the moment when the creative meets the resolvent is the culmination of any detective story. We might conjecture whether this reading runs counter to accepted scientific practice that a hypothesis is anterior to the establishment of facts, a theory which leads to the discovery of something altogether unknown. But in the case of the detective story, frequently the detective works backwards from the crime itself and uses what we may call inspiration or intuition through a mysterious, almost spiritual process, his secret mind, in order to arrive at a solution which most meets the facts in the case. Thus, in The ABC Murders, Poirot invokes that process, which we might call the ghost of Quin, to set ‘the little grey cells’ to work. Only then can the regression to the state of affairs that pertained prior to the murder be engineered to take the narrative forward.

Poirot’s leap, his different way of looking at the problem, mirrors Dupin’s own method of working when confronted by the mind of the Minister in ‘The Purloined Letter’: ‘I knew him, however, as both mathematician and poet, and my measures were adapted were adapted to his capacity, with reference to the circumstances by which he was surrounded.’ Dupin’s regression, his creative spark, is governed by the nature of his opponent’s own reasoning function. We have already noted that the Minister is considered by Dupin to be, like himself, both poet and mathematician; so, in this respect, his instinct would be to reject more esoteric hiding places for such a letter, such as the hollow leg of a chair or beneath floorboards. As Poe explains, ‘The mathematics are the science of form and quantity; mathematical reasoning is merely logic applied to observation upon form and quantity.’ 28 Valid as these ideas are, they are not, according to Poe, transferable to the consideration of morals or, say, two motives that, when united, are not necessarily equal to the sum of their parts.

The process of catalysis between Quin and Satterthwaite continues in ‘The Man from the Sea’, which Christie describes as one of her favourite stories. It is not a crime story per se, but more an exploration of the tragedy surrounding love and its consequences. Satterthwaite foregoes his usual trip to the French Riviera and instead takes a holiday on a Spanish island. He frequents a beautiful hilltop garden
which has a seemingly empty villa at its heart, and there he meets a terminally ill man, Anthony Cosden, who had visited the island some twenty years earlier and has now returned to commit suicide by throwing himself off the cliff. Satterthwaite thwarts this attempt and learns from the man that this is the second time in two days that he has been thwarted in this way. The previous night, it was a man in a harlequin costume, and Satterthwaite realizes that this must be his ‘friend’ Quin who has appeared. Exploring the outside of the villa, Satterthwaite encounters its occupant an Englishwoman who tells him of her sad history; she had been married to an Englishman who bought the villa for them to live in over twenty years ago. So badly was she maltreated by him that she miscarried, but after only a year of marriage she watched him drown in the treacherous waters below the cliff. A brief affair with another Englishman followed, resulting in the birth of a son, now grown up and about to marry. Somehow Satterthwaite understands the connection and persuades Cosden that he should return to the villa, and there he is reunited with his former lover. Satterthwaite meets Quin in the garden and the latter indicates enigmatically that the Englishwoman’s husband actually loved her but could not bring himself to express it without hurting her.

‘The Man from the Sea’ is, by any measure, a curious oddity for Christie to have written; it has the feel of a hugely personal tale, rather than the unfolding of a mystery story. It also contains some of the most subtle exchanges between Quin and Satterthwaite, who do not, in fact, meet until the final scene of the story. When Satterthwaite confronts Cosden in the garden and hears about the appearance of Quin the night before, he explains the nature of his relationship with the mysterious stranger:

‘You must excuse my excitement. Do you happen to know anything about catalysis?’

The young man stared at him.

‘Never heard of it. What is it?’

Mr. Satterthwaite quoted gravely: ‘A chemical reaction depending for its success on the presence of a certain substance which itself remains unchanged.’ ...

‘I have a certain friend – his name is Mr Quin, and he can be best described in the terms of catalysis. His presence is a sign that
things are going to happen; because he is there strange revelations come to light, discoveries are made. And yet he himself takes no part in the proceedings.  

This is an interesting analogy; the process of inspiration is dependent upon the presence, within the mind of the detective, of a certain idea. That certain idea takes the form of Harley Quin the ghost, and it begs the question as to why particularly Christie felt that the most appropriate way to represent this osmotic process was in the form of a haunting. Stephen Frosh suggests that the presence of ghosts is frequently a harbinger of some kind:

[...] When ghosts appear it is in order to tell us to do something. A relationship needs to be put right [...] Psychoanalytically, something that keeps stirring us up has to be acknowledged and worked with, however drastic the changes this demands in our ongoing lives. Haunting is therefore the space not only of the meeting of personal and social, but of past and future. It is a message from the past of the future will become if we do not reflect and change.  

We see, for example, this process in Dickens's celebrated ghost story 'The Signalman'. When the spectre appears to the haunted signalman, it is to warn of an impending disaster. The ghostly figure becomes a medium of revelation. This happens in 'The Man from the Sea' and many of the later stories in the Quin series. The mere appearance of Quin to a third party is enough to alert Satterthwaite to the need for action of some kind; deep within the psyche of the detective, represented by the metaphor of the ghost, is a trigger which leads inexorably to the solution of a mystery. Satterthwaite is able to use his emergent creative powers to make the connection between 'a message from the past', that Cosden is, in fact, the Englishwoman's long lost lover and sees the chance to resolve the situation by effecting a reunion.

Thus is set off the interaction between the creative and resolvent. In 'The Voice in the Dark', Quin actually exhorts Satterthwaite to solve a murder involving an inheritance by himself, insisting that he has done so before and can again in this case. It is the presence of Quin that matters; all this becomes clear when we realize that he is not Satterthwaite's alter ego but a latent part of Satterthwaite's
reasoning process. In the final story, ‘Harlequin's Lane’, it seems that Satterthwaite’s emergence as a detective is complete; he is able to see a ballerina dressed as Columbine accompanied by the figure of Harlequin, just before her mysterious and ecstatic death in Harlequin’s Lane, when another witness is only able to see Columbine. This is a highly symbolic moment; Satterthwaite realizes that the ballerina, who had sought the perfect Harlequin to dance with in Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Carnaval*, all her life, had found her perfect partner in Quin. But Satterthwaite is perplexed as to why only he should have seen them together. Quin tells him that ‘you see things that other people – do not.’ Others see Quin, but only Satterthwaite understands him because he engages with that part of the psyche which is fundamental to his comprehension of events; Quin represents comprehension to Satterthwaite, to others merely a ghost. He sees that which is not visible to others, enabling him to bring order to chaos.

In the Quin stories, therefore, we see Christie working through the components that go to make up the literary detective; these are constituents which we find in harmony in Hercule Poirot and Mrs Marple. In doing so, she was following in the footsteps of Poe and the Bi-Part soul of the first detective and unwittingly providing the counterpart to Borges’s own experiments with the nature of the detective. Down the years, this separation between the creative and the resolvent, the poet and the mathematician, has been the defining force for the character. It is responsible, too, for the way in which the modern detective is portrayed; when we encounter the poet in Adam Dalgleish, the painter in Simon Serailler and the intellectual in Morse, they are figures whose creative instincts must reach an accommodation with the increasing influence of forensic science and the concomitant rise of the resolvent in detection, which threatens the very existence of the independent, ratiocinative mind.
6
Golden Age Gothic: John Dickson Carr’s Locked Room

...When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.... (Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*)

In *The Hollow Man* (1935), John Dickson Carr’s larger than life detective Dr. Gideon Fell rails against the pursuit of realism in detective fiction:

A few people who do not like the slightly lurid insist on treating their preferences as rules. They use, as a stamp of condemnation, the word ‘improbable’. And thereby they gull the unwary into their own belief that ‘improbable’ simply means ‘bad’.

Now, it seems reasonable to point out that the word improbable is the very last which should ever be used to curse detective fiction in any case. A great part of our liking for detective fiction is *based* on a liking for improbability.

This is Carr speaking from the heart; he scorned consistently literary attempts to reproduce everyday life, even at the age of 15, he published a polemic against realistic writers claiming that they ‘rob life of all that is beautiful’. Much of his ire was directed at the *noir* thriller and Raymond Chandler in particular, whose hard-boiled fiction he described as ‘a clueless and featureless riot of gunplay.’ Carr was not interested in depicting realism for its own sake, from which we may conclude that his novels were, in effect, elaborate
fantasies designed to interrogate, but not deviate from, detective fiction’s more abstract elements. This tension between the rational clue-solving requirements of the conventional detective story, the strict adherence to the golden age’s fair play rules, and Gothic ideas, characterize his works as distinctive. It is during this period, more particularly in the nineteen-thirties, that he wrote some thirty-one novels often including the combination of these apparently contradictory elements. His output was largely realized in the form of locked room mysteries, a form in which he became pre-eminent. Novels such as *The Hollow Man* (1935) and *The Judas Window* (1938) are now considered masterpieces, not just as locked room mysteries, but in the wider sphere of the genre.

The locked room has, of course, a seminal place in the history of detective fiction because the very first such story, Edger Allan Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, is one of the most celebrated of all locked room puzzles. But aside from the ingenuity of plot which such stories involve, no other form of the detective story lends itself to metaphor and symbolic interpretation as much as the locked room mystery; with its puzzling imagery of enclosure, isolation and death. As Joseph Kestner has suggested:

> The locked room is so central a motif because it allows the extension of narrative plot to cover or imply a range of additional significances: repression/the return of the repressed, the unconscious, the mother’s body (womb), the tomb and death, incest, death and resurrection, narcissism, solipsism, and existential alienation.  

In this chapter, I want to explore some of these allusions in the context of Carr’s locked room stories and how they engage with the idea of the supernatural. I shall be concentrating in particular on the locked room as the locus for the ideas of death and resurrection, and the psyche as symbolic of the sequestered space. The compatibility of enclosure between theme and structure is reinforced by the genre’s narrative arrangement, where the investigation is placed between a frame containing the story of the crime and its solution. So, both conceptually and structurally, the locked room *motif* is a rich source of study.

For Carr, the locked room became a place of misrule where the *effect* produces an interruption to the rules of causality, hinting at
the possibility of the supernatural at work. Although many of his tales use supernatural and Gothic imagery as a device to enhance the atmosphere of his stories, I will also present direct evidence that Carr actually associated the locked room with the presence of ghosts. This includes his best-known ghost story, ‘The Door to Doom’ (1935), in which a murderous, haunted room at a remote inn is a central feature. In this story as in many of his detective tales, the locked room is a place of death, and specifically a ritualistic death in which victims are placed or, interestingly, place themselves, to await their fate. It is the idea here, rather than the reality, which is important; the murderer is able to move in and out of this space at will and undetected in the manner of a ghost in supernatural fiction. This perception is a deliberate ploy of Carr’s; the more his detective stories move away from the representation of the everyday world and towards the fantastical, the more he seems to revel in the possibilities.

Many of the ideas to be found in Carr’s fiction were inspired by Poe; the Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque made a great impression on him, commenting that they possessed ‘a terrible power’. In particular, what appealed to the anti-realist Carr was Poe’s sense of a bizarre and macabre imagination. So, despite working in the golden age when so much of the detective story canon conformed to rigorous ‘rules’, becoming formulaic as a result, Carr was determined that his own work should reflect the sense of Gothic malevolence so prevalent in Poe. Indeed, Carr achieved the extraordinary feat of compliance with the pervasive ‘fair play’ guidelines, while simultaneously managing to produce stories of vivid individuality. This passage, from the start of his career, expresses his deep understanding of Poe’s writing:

Poe wrote of ravens perching on pallid busts in ‘purple-curtained’ rooms at midnight, when the embers died on the hearth and black memories of a departed brooded in man’s mind – surely an exquisite setting, had he chosen to make of ‘The Raven’ a ghost story instead of the musical poem in the English language. He wrote of men doomed to death by great mental torture in the dungeons of the Inquisition; of yawning pits sheltering horrors unnameable; of sweeping pendulums whose undersides were razor-like knives swinging ever closer above the breast of the prisoner. He told of
strange houses wherein dwelt stranger inmates; women, imprisoned alive in the tomb, breaking out while a storm roared about the towers of the grim house. He dealt with a terrible pestilence whose ‘avatar and seal’ was blood – ‘the redness and horror of blood’; and of the Red Death coming like a thief in the night to strike down the revellers at a masked ball. These are all horror stories supreme carrying an atmosphere and an uncanny fascination that is their own.7

The Poe canon is littered with the claustrophobic terror engendered by the tomb-like void; the L'Espanaye’s apartment in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’ is little more than an extension of the enclosed spaces to be found in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ (1839), ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’ (1842), ‘The Tell Tale Heart’ (1843), ‘The Black Cat’ (1843), ‘The Oblong Box’ (1844) and ‘The Cask of Amontillado’ (1846). To encounter the enclosed space in Poe is to evoke the spectre of death; being buried alive, walled up or ‘murdered’ in a locked room by an ape, are all fates triggered by this symbolic space.

Even though many of these enclosures are physical, Poe’s tales are littered, too, with protagonists whose mental processes are disintegrating. Much of the truly terrifying in these stories emanates from deeply disturbed psyches; in ‘The Tell Tale Heart’ and ‘The Black Cat’, for instance, the madness caused by guilt proves to be the undoing of the narrator. Poe’s tales are, in effect, a domestication of the Gothic in both form and content; the scaled-down short story format narrowing the focus of the narrative to a severely limited number of characters. This reduction in scope and intense concentration provided a suitable model for the early detective story that allowed the narrative focus to remain on the central theme, the crime. So, on reading Poe, Carr would have been exposed to a whole gamut of different associations that the idea of the locked room leaving little room for doubt as to where his inspiration for such stories came from.

Carr’s very first novel, It Walks by Night (1930), relies heavily for its effect on Gothic imagery. Set in Paris, where he had stayed in 1927, the novel invokes the excessively macabre performances given at the Grand Guignol, so much so that on his return to the States, he wrote a novella of that title which was published in 1929; it was destined
ultimately to become *It Walks by Night*. The opening lines set the
tone, for this most lurid affair:

...*and not least foul among these night monsters (which may be found
even in our pleasant land of France) is a certain shape of evil hue which
by day may not be recognized, inasmuch as it may be a man of favoured
looks, or a fair and smiling woman; but by night becomes a misshapen
beast with blood-bedabbled claws. So I say to you, even you who live
in the city of Paris, when your fire burns low by night, and you hear a
gentle tapping of fingers at the window-pane, do not open your door to
this supposed traveller, who...*8

This quotation is from a seemingly fictitious fifteenth-century book
by an Archbishop Batognelles, being read by the narrator, a young
American called Jeff Marle. It is likely that Marle is, in fact, Carr's
*alter ego*, reprising the author's own visit to Paris. The novel also
marks the debut proper of Henri Bencolin, the first of Carr's three
great detectives The plot is typical Carr fare, a locked room mystery
with a strong sense of the macabre, the seeming impossibility of
which is suggestive of the supernatural: A closely-guarded room in a
Paris gambling house: ten minutes after the Duc de Saligny, whose
wedding party is in progress, entered the card room, the police burst
in and find that he had been murdered, his mangled body on the
floor, a severed head staring up from the centre of the carpet. Both
doors to the card room had been watched, yet the murderer had
gone in and out without being seen by anyone. But this is Carr, and
nothing is as it seems, the Duc de Saligny has already been murdered
by Madame Louise de Saligny's deranged first husband, Laurent, who
has, rather improbably, disguised himself as Saligny. The murder has
been planned by Madame de Saligny, who has discovered Laurent's
secret, and she is helped by the playwright, Vautrelle, her putative
lover. Vautrelle is, in turn, murdered by Madame Louise by virtually
severing his head with a knife, as she discovers his secret affection
for another.

The solution to this bloodbath is arrived at by realizing that misdi-
rection is the key to the murder of Saligny; but looking back on Carr's
work, this aspect of the plot is not nearly as intriguing as the thematic
content woven into the narrative. This novel was the start of one of
the most extraordinary careers in the whole crime writing canon
and is peppered with those *motifs* which would characterize Carr’s entire *œuvre*. As Carr’s biographer Douglas Greene has argued:

*It Walks By Night* is told like a horror story. The mood is almost claustrophobic, with madness at the heart of the events, and the book is filled with tight, tense, loaded language, grotesque scenes, incongruous images, and references to Poe and Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*.  

The list of gratuitous references to macabre literature marks this as distinctly self-conscious. Dr Grafentstein recounts a conversation he had with his patient Laurent, whose insanity lies at the heart of the book; it concerns the influence that certain texts have had on his life:

‘I have been reading along one line. Scherr, Friedreich, Dessoir, on the licence of the Middle Ages: Suetonius, Friedlander on what they call the “depravity” of Rome (and you know Wiedermeister’s *Der Casarrenwahlsinn*?); particularly the Borgia chronicles, the Marquis de Sade; Upminsing’s *La Vie de Gilles de Rais* – ‘[...]’ I remember that he had a fondness for the imaginative writers: Baudelaire, De Quincey, Poe’ [...]

Carr sets out deliberately to create a fantastic world for a detective tale where the macabre and the excesses of the imagination are common occurrences. As already noted, Poe had actually abandoned the ratiocinative detective story after the three Dupin tales, perhaps because he realized that life reduced to the rigidity of logic was an absurdity. The metaphor of the locked room in ‘The Murders of the Rue Morgue’, for instance, implies the existence of two distinct worlds: on the outside is the realm of the detective, as typified by Dupin, where the exercise of pure reason holds sway and the inside, its opposite extreme characterized by the destabilized dystopia of the L’Espanaye’s apartment. But in Carr’s case, his admiration for Poe led him not to abandon detective fiction, but to adopt both these *loci* of ‘unreality’ so that the tensions between the two are constantly at play in his work.

Woven into this Gothic farrago, there are ghosts too; pre-eminent amongst these, of course, is Poe. Paris is the city of Poe’s three Dupin
stories and Carr, an American, stands in the same relation to it as did Poe. He wastes little time in describing the city as ‘lights and shadows, perfume and danger – the salon, the greenroom, the pits – abbey, brothel, and guillotine, a Babylonian carnival [...]’ and amid these grotesqueries stalks Henri Bencolin, a *juge d’instruction*. In common with the exotic surroundings the figure of Bencolin appears not of this world, seemingly possessed with a preternatural intuition, and an appearance which is positively satanic:

The light over him turned his face to a devilish and inhuman mask. The black eyebrows slanted and hooked down over gleaming eyes; the thin, cruel lines going down from cheek-bones past small moustache and pointed beard, the parted hair twirled up like horns.

We remember that Dupin also possessed an other-worldly quality; he occupies ‘a time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted through superstitious into which we did not inquire’ and that he is ‘enamoured of the Night’.

Carr’s engagement with Poe in *It Walks By Night* is intensified in the chapter ‘We Talked of Poe’ when a discussion about famous murders prompts a reference to a famous moment from ‘The Cask of Amontillado’:

‘To my mind, the most artistic scene in all literature comes from Poe... You know Poe, don’t you Raoul?’ – and he smiled... ‘It is in the story about the Amontillado, where Montressor takes Fortunato down into the catacombs to bury him in the wall forever, walled up with blocks of stone and bones...’

So, it comes as no surprise that the body of the real Duc de Saligny, murdered by Laurent, is found walled up in his own wine cellar. This is not merely a parody of ‘The Cask of Amontillado’; it is a reflection that for Poe that the burial or secreting of a body was by no means the end of the matter. But at this stage in his writing career this is Carr merely toying with the idea of the supernatural and its possibilities. In fact, we might infer from *It Walks By Night* and his subsequent detective novels that Carr’s flirtation with ghosts was just that, a caprice which was always brought to heel by the resolvent
enclosure of the detective fiction narrative. Certainly S. T. Joshi, a noted Carr scholar thinks so:

We must now return to the question of the function of the quasi-supernatural (for, of course, aside from one stupendous instance, the actual supernatural never comes into play in a detective novel) both in Carr’s work and in his thought. The fact that the supernatural is ultimately resolved into the natural in Carr’s novels (a trait that accidently links him with such Gothic writers as Ann Radcliffe and Charles Brockden Brown) may possibly indicate Carr’s belief in the rational order of the universe [...].\textsuperscript{15}

Certainly Bencolin’s remark, when confronted with the puzzle of the Saligny/Laurent murder, that, ‘There must be sanity to the play somewhere; if there is no meaning in all these incidents, there is no meaning in all the world...’, would seem to endorse this philosophy, at least as far as Carr’s conventional detective fiction is concerned.\textsuperscript{16} Perhaps a more precise reading of Carr on this subject would be to say that he did have a real sense of an ordered universe and, although this led to a resolution of the mysteries in his novels, he posited, too, the possibility of a metaphysical world.

I have already referred to the part played by Sir Walter Scott in the development of the early ghost story; ‘The Tapestried Chamber’, for instance, became, as we have seen, a model for the haunted room story. It is a structure we are now very familiar with; the protagonist visits an old house, one of the rooms is haunted, and invariably this is where the hapless visitor ends up sleeping. During the night, or even successive nights, sleep is difficult, and inevitably the presence makes itself known, culminating in the much-anticipated encounter between the living and the dead. In Scott’s tale, the unfortunate General Richard Browne encounters the ghost of an evil ancestress of his friend Lord Woodville in the said tapestried chamber, whom he recognizes from a portrait in the house’s picture gallery as a figure from the seventeenth century. In these tales, the effect upon the visitor can vary dramatically between the extremes of merely being shaken to irrevocable physical and psychological harm and even death. But, crucially, the meeting with a ghost can also be the point on which the narrative turns, as the victim becomes drawn into the ways of the supernatural. Browne is the epitome of the rational
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figure, a battle-hardened soldier seemingly unlikely to succumb to such phenomena. His account of his experience, however, feels very similar to that of Barton’s contrition in Le Fanu’s ‘The Watcher’.  

Day at last appeared, and I rose from my bed ill in health and humiliated in mind. I was ashamed of myself as a man and a soldier, and still more so at feeling my own extreme desire to escape from the haunted apartment, which, however conquered all other considerations; so that, huddling on my clothes with the most careless haste, I made my escape from your lordship’s mansion, to seek in the open air some relief to my nervous system, shaken as it was by this horrible encounter with a visitant, for such I must believe her, from the other world.  

So, in some way, the ghostly encounter can be a signal for transformation, an epiphany in which the haunted room, and by extension the locked room in detective fiction, becomes an important locus for our relationship with death and transfiguration. In this sense, the enclosed chamber becomes symbolic of fate itself where, however much one resists, the inevitable takes place. In ‘The Tapestried Chamber’, the room in question has long been associated with many hideous murders; as Woodville tells Browne, ‘The recital of them would be too horrible; it is enough to say that in yon fatal apartment incest and unnatural murder were committed.’  

This is an early example marking the scene of a crime or the haunt of murderers as a locus of haunting, and it suggests a direct point of reference with the locked room mystery. As Owen Davies has explained, it is clear from the numerous examples of people witnessing ghosts that crime and hauntings have a long history and that there is, too, a distinct geography to ghost-seeing;  

Sometimes houses were said to be haunted when, to be more precise, it was only certain spaces within them that attracted phenomena. The ghost might be limited to the room in which a person was murdered or committed suicide.  

H. G. Wells’s short story ‘The Red Room’ (1894), like Scott’s tale, has further interesting reflections on the nature of the haunted room and its effect on the ‘victim’. The narrator arrives at Lorraine Castle; it seems he has come to see a haunted room and announces confidently to two elderly people that he has never seen a ghost and is not
easily frightened. They warn him ominously that he is doing so of his own free will. A third man, also elderly, joins them; they are the caretakers of Lorraine Castle, which has been left unoccupied by ‘her ladyship’. The atmosphere of this conversation is one of foreboding, and when the narrator asks to be shown to the haunted room, he is told that he will have to go alone.

This somewhat enigmatic conversation accentuates the clash between the modernist scepticism of the narrator and the more traditional beliefs of his distinctly odd hosts:

They seemed to belong to another age, an older age, an age when things spiritual were different from this of ours, less certain; an age when omens and witches were credible, and ghosts beyond denying. Their very existence was spectral; the cut of their clothing, fashions born in dead brains. The ornaments of the room about them were ghostly – the thoughts of vanished men, which still haunted rather than participated in the world today. 21

This cuts deep into a key relationship that energized the fondness for the ghost story since the era of the Gothic novel – rational doubt confronted by forces which transcend the tenets of logic. As Julia Briggs argues:

Like a number of other nineteenth-century art forms the ghost story set about deliberately reviving the system of magical interaction between man and his universe that now belonged to a past increasingly identified with the Middle Ages. The conviction with which authors wrote of traditional beliefs was often related to their knowledge or understanding of that lost animistic world picture. 22

The narrator makes his way through the castle to the red room. The room has been the subject of many incidents since the ‘tragic end’ of a joke played by a husband on his young wife there long ago. 23 Most recently, a young duke died while trying to spend a night in the haunted room. The room is full of black and red furnishings and dark corners, and despite his attempts to keep the room lit with many candles, they are mysteriously extinguished, and he begins to see things. He panics and falls over the furniture and passes out.
As he comes to, the custodians are taking care of him and tell him about the red room. Recovering his memory, the narrator announces to them that he now knows the room is haunted. They are eager to know who haunts it – is it the old earl or his young wife? The narrator says the room is haunted by something far worse: fear itself. Bringing the story to a grim close, the elderly man proclaims that he knew as much, and that the room will remain haunted by ‘black Fear [...] so long as this house of sin endures.’

The irony of this dénouement is that despite all the pretence and the trappings of the ghost story, the old castle, strange characters and a supposedly haunted room, the climactic outcome reveals that the terror experienced by the narrator is entirely of his own making. As Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert make plain:

While it is not necessary for an author to believe unconditionally in the supernatural for a ghost story to come off (H. G. Wells’s ‘The Red Room’ shows that), it is essential that he or she engages fully in the pretence of believing.

Outwardly, the narrator takes a gung-ho approach to the idea of a haunted room, but the fear he experiences is the repressed fear of death that comes from such a notorious space. The room is a place of limbo; he experiences a state of liminality as he hovers on the threshold of two states, life and death. In effect, this is a rite of passage, the result of which his repressed state of fear, banished hitherto by his hubris, emerges. So, in this case there is a second enclosure, distinct from the physical one he enters, his own psyche, which proves to be the source of the ‘haunting’. In Bram Stoker’s ‘The Judge’s House’ (1891), however, a partial rewriting of ‘Mr. Justice Harbottle’, the sanction for such sang-froid is death. The student Malcolmson willingly spends several nights in the great hall of the evil judge’s house and is eventually sentenced to death by the spectral ‘old devil’ and is found hanging from the bell rope in the morning.

A similar situation with a very different result pertains in Carr’s locked room mystery, The Red Widow Murders (1935). Lord Mantling owns an old and decaying mansion in London; in that mansion there is a sinister room said to be haunted by the ‘Red Widow’ – a legendary figure who was married to the executioner who guillotined French aristocrats. A number of Mantling’s friends and family have
died there, the legend being anybody who enters the room alone dies within a couple of hours. Mantling decides to open up the room which has been closed for thirty years and sit inside for two hours, a test of bravado; but there are other suitors for the Red Widow so, in the end, it is decided that they will draw cards for the privilege. In the morning, the victim is found dead, poisoned by curare, locked inside a room whose door was continuously under observation.

The victim has willingly submitted himself to the ordeal of the Red Widow Chamber by entering the drawing of cards; this bravado is reinforced by the plot which reveals that he seeks actively to enter the room to further an investigation he is carrying out. The vigil he undergoes voluntarily recalls the fate of Browne and the narrator in ‘The Red Room’. In all three cases, the image of the victim awaiting his fate alone might almost be a ritual sacrifice. As the number of locked room mysteries increased, this repeated trope became a performance, an artifice with more than a suggestion of the theatre. The trick of the murder in ‘The Hollow Man’, for instance, is actually in the form of a theatrical illusion, a magical sleight of hand witnessed by a third party at close quarters who fails to spot the deception.

But the contrived Gothic setting of The Red Widow Murders and the ritualistic killing also reveal that the locked room mystery invokes the conventions of the ghost story. Carr’s tale and others like it are particularly a parody of the haunted room tale; in the detective version, the ghost is supplanted by the killer, who re-enacts the ghostly visitation by committing murder. In both genres, the encounters, ghost and haunted, murderer and victim, involve loss of some kind, the drastic loss of life, innocence, sanity or fearlessness. Thus, the room acts as a double enclosure; this time it is not only a physical frame around the key engagement of the story, isolating the protagonists and accentuating the importance of the scene, but also it is a metaphor for the very heart of the narrative.

‘The Door to Doom’ is an illustration of what happens when the locked and haunted rooms appear in the same narrative. It is a supernatural tale which draws on elements of Wilkie Collins’s mystery tale, ‘A Terribly Strange Bed’ (1852), a story which had subsequent versions by Weatherby Chesney, ‘The Horror of the Folding Bed’ (1898), and Joseph Conrad, ‘The Inn of the Two Witches’ (1913). Peter Maynard, a hiker, becomes lost in a French wood and is directed by two strangers
to a path leading to an inn where he can stay for the night and shelter from a storm. On the way, he meets a strange girl who tries to dissuade him from going to the hostelry, but as she disappears in the rain, he sees the inn ahead. He asks the strange old couple for a room but is told that the inn is full. He stays for supper, however, and learns that the inn stands partly on the foundations of a house once owned by a nobleman, the Comte de Villefleur, who was ‘bad’ and practiced the dark arts. Very little remains of the original building, which was substantially burnt when the nobleman was executed, and the inn incorporated into what remained. Maynard sees a key still on a hook and asks why he cannot have that room and is told that this is the key to ‘his’ room, the nobleman’s, and it is never let.

The girl he met in the woods now reappears, as do the two men who directed him to the inn. He insists upon staying in the forbidden room, but is warned by the girl ‘don’t touch anything or go near anything.’ At this point, our minds are directed towards the possibility of a mechanical device being present in the room, rather in the same vein as the story by Collins et al. But Carr’s story takes a different turn. As Maynard occupies the room, the candles go out, as in the ‘The Red Room’, a deliberate trick to leave him in the dark. Maynard discovers that the door that leads out into the corridor is unlocked, but when he opens it he nearly falls to his death, as the corridor has disappeared, and instead a pit awaits him. He manages to stop himself falling and realizes that there are two doors side by side; one leads back out into the corridor, the other to certain death. The trick is to remove the knob and place it on the other door, and in the gloom the hapless inhabitant is deceived. So, we begin to believe that here is another ingenious locked room mystery, but just as this seems to be the solution the old couple return to the room to see if their ruse to rob Maynard, like so many others before him, has been successful. Maynard hides and witnesses the agonies of the couple as they fall into the pit. They are discovered at the bottom together with a scarecrow-like figure, which has its arms around them – the ghost of the Comte has claimed them.

Carr understood well the debt which the detective story owed to the supernatural, and much of his work hovers on the boundary between the two. ‘The Door to Doom’ is perhaps his most explicit example; it portrays this shared literary space as a seamless entity. The inn is a place of both diabolic evil and the crime of murder both
in the past and the present and as ever in Carr the focal point for this disturbance is the locked room. It is not only the place where bad things happen but it is where they ultimately become resolved. But the real essence of the story is that it can be read both as one of his locked room mysteries, with its neat little trick of the false door, and as a distinctly disturbing ghost story. This latter point has a nice irony to it as the ghost of the past, at the scene of his own crimes, does away with the present-day criminals. To Carr, this seems entirely natural; the two realms are interchangeable, the so-called detective world of reality with the restoration of order and the realm of misrule. So, ‘The Door to Doom’ turns out to be a crime story which, ironically, transmogrifies into the supernatural to bring about its solution. It is one of the central paradoxes of Carr’s work that his rail against reality and conformity is counterbalanced by his adherence to the formulaic, rational narrative of detective fiction. So, this dénouement is an interesting departure from that principle, if only in part, as his letter to his friend Frederic Dannay, about ‘The Door to Doom’ states:

I tried to combine a formula of mine: that apparently supernatural events should be explained, and yet at the end a real enigma of the supernatural should remain. [my italics] [...] I can’t write a straight ghost story. For my own soul’s comfort I must have an explanation. It seems untidy, it seems dodging a writer’s real responsibility, to say, ‘Oh, that was a ghost.’ I know (when we consider the work of M. R. James, for instance) that this attitude is irrational and would even spoil the literary effect of the story. Let others do it, and I shall read and admire. But to write it, no. Hence the compromise by which the difficult problem is explained naturally, but the easy problem – that which a child might explain in half a dozen ways – is allowed to be supernatural.  

Carr here suggests that the truth is inviolable; the contorted plot of his most complex locked mystery has but one truth; the supernatural, however, posits supposition and gives rise to the most inventive parts of the imagination. The point is well made in ‘The Door to Doom’, in that the ghost of the count is present in the narrative, but crucially supports the struggle against evil by doing away with the owners of the inn. This is despite the fact that the Count had been
an evil man during his own lifetime; death and return as a revenant seems to have brought about a damascene conversion.

It is possible too, to draw some metaphysical conclusions from ‘The Door to Doom’ as just like the entry into the dark physical space, access to and assimilation by the psyche is equally mysterious and unseen. These parallels are apparent from the narrative; the candles go out immediately, and Maynard’s physical situation mimics that of the psyche, his visual impairment being replaced by the imagination. In this reading, emotional response holds sway over more apparent perceptions, and just like the narrator in ‘The Red Room’ fear and the will to live become paramount. Aside from psychical considerations, it is perfectly possible to see the presence of the skeleton of the old nobleman as a metaphor for the restoration of order and expiation for past wrongs.

It was not long before Carr produced a full-length fusion of the locked room mystery and the supernatural story. This book, *The Burning Court* (1937), one of the most remarkable novels of detective fiction’s golden age, contains, as Joshi calls it, ‘one of the most jarring moments in literature.’ Not that Carr was any stranger to burlesquing the conventions of the genre; in *The Hollow Man* he devotes a whole chapter to a review of the various solutions to locked room mysteries employed by authors since the emergence of the modern detective story. As if this was not enough, he has his detective, Dr. Fell, address this diatribe directly to the reader, deliberately drawing attention to the novel’s fictionality. In *The Burning Court* he again subverts the conventional narrative by suggesting an alternative supernatural solution to what appears to be a detective story. It is impossible to discuss the intricacies of *The Burning Court* without giving an outline of what is a rather complex narrative, and although I intend to concentrate predominately on the significance of the novel’s outcome, some knowledge as to prior events is essential.

Edward Stevens, an editor at a publishing house, is on the train home, recounting the story of the death of Miles Despard, the uncle of his boss, Mark Despard. Miles died of gastroenteritis, and although his death was considered ‘natural’, two strange events accompanied it. A housemaid, spying into Despard’s room through one of the glass doors, reported that a woman had left through a door that had been bricked up for years. After Despard died, under his pillow was found a strange piece of string tied in nine knots, a witch’s ladder. Stevens
shrugs off both events and opens the book he is bringing home to edit. The book is on true crime, by the famous writer Gaudan Cross, focusing on murder trials, beginning with the trial and execution of Marie D’Aubray in 1861. There is a picture of Marie D’Aubray attached to the section, which causes Stevens to jump. The picture is of his wife, Marie. Stevens gets home and confronts his wife, who tries to convince him that the picture means nothing. Stevens goes up to wash his hands, and when he returns, the picture is gone. The doorbell rings; it is Mark Despard and a doctor named Partington. Mark Despard explains he believes his uncle was murdered, and that he, Partington, and Stevens, are going to dig up the body and carry out an autopsy.

Miles Despard is buried in a crypt, sealed with cement, and in a passage which pays considerable homage to Poe, the three men begin the long process of breaking up the entrance to the tomb. After they do, they climb down the long steps to retrieve the body. They find Miles’s coffin, open it, and reveal nothing. A quick search confirms that the body has disappeared from the sealed crypt. Gaudan Cross explains that the murder of Miles Despard was planned by his nurse, Myra Corbett and Mark Despard, who has disappeared. The ‘disappearing’ lady in costume did not leave through the bricked up door but by one directly opposite, and what the housekeeper saw was a reflection of this through a mirror. Miles’s body was hidden by Mark in the funeral urn as he was last to leave the crypt. Later the body was removed from the crypt altogether, after the coffin had been searched.

The ending of The Burning Court was highly controversial, however, as Carr suggests an alternative, supernatural solution. An epilogue suggests that Stevens’s wife, Marie, is a reincarnation of a woman burned at the stake for practicing witchcraft in the seventeenth century. Marie was condemned by a Despard and finally got revenge by killing Miles Despard and framing another Despard for the murder. Gaudan Cross, whose ‘solution’ it appears was designed to throw the police off the scent has known Marie since childhood and is a supernatural figure himself.

Before I discuss the extraordinary ending of this novel, it is worth considering some of the references which contribute to the supernatural atmosphere of the text. The first thing which strikes the keen reader of Carr is the lack of an omniscient detective. It marks out
The Burning Court as a thing apart; at a time when Carr was busy producing novels with three series detectives, Bencolin, Dr. Fell and Sir Henry Merrivale, this absence should at least alert our interest to the extent that this work may be in a different key. It would never do for a golden age writer to have his detective to be mixed up with, and defeated by, the forces of the unknown.

There are, of course, some ancient echoes in this story. The disappearance of Miles’s body from the crypt is a parody of Christ’s resurrection. The account of Christ’s death and resurrection in the Gospels, for instance, is replete with the allegorical language of enclosure and its association with death. The ritual murder of Jesus on the cross is followed by the burial in the tomb hewn out of rock, after which the chief priests and Pharisees, on Pilate’s instructions, ‘made the sepulchre sure, sealing the stone and setting a watch’ (Matt.27: 66). The miracle of Christ’s subsequent escape from the sealed chamber is followed by yet another, this time involving the penetration of enclosed space:

Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were, assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst [...] (John 20: 19).

So, Carr prepares us for the likelihood of uncanny events by means a series of references. We have already noted the homage that he pays in other works to the crypts of Poe, and The Burning Court is no exception. For Carr, the crypt is also a space from which bodies can disappear. Although the parallels with Christ’s tomb are apparent, this crypt, as Carr himself points out in a footnote to the text, is modelled on the real life version in the Dunecht case, from which he took both the dimensions and the interior design. The Dunecht mystery concerned the removal of the body of the Earl of Crawford from the family crypt at Dunecht House near Aberdeen in 1881. Not only does Carr take the dimensions for his fictitious crypt at Despard Park, but in doing so he invokes the era of body-snatching in Scotland, which grew with the prominence of the medical schools during that period. The Earl’s body was discovered in a shallow grave nearby which led to much fanciful speculation for the disappearance. Eventually, however, a man named Soutar was convicted
of the crime and sentenced to five years imprisonment. He almost certainly did not act alone.\(^{30}\)

Both in the real world and in books, crypts and burial grounds are certainly places which invoke the realm of the supernatural. This often arises from the notion that a corpse has unfinished business in this world, before he or she is ready to pass on to the next. This theory is entirely consonant with the idea that Carr tries to convey in respect of the disappearance of Miles Despard’s body in *The Burning Court*. Despard, after all, has been murdered so, the ghostly tradition dictates that his spirit will walk until his murderer has been found. In his exploration of the spirit world, *The Edge of the Unknown*, Conan Doyle actually devotes a whole chapter, ‘The Law of the Ghost’, to a number of cases where coffins have moved mysteriously inside previously undisturbed crypts.

Based on previous experience of Carr’s output, one might justifiably expect that the repeated supernatural references were mere red herrings, interrupting what will turn out to be a conventional golden age text, much in the manner of his earlier books. But here Carr produces a sensational double bluff by making these seemingly cosmetic excursions matters of substance. Instead, Carr suggests that there are two solutions, one ‘natural’, the other supernatural. To a certain extent, this is a reprise of the ending to ‘The Door to Doom’, where the writer of detective fiction within Carr gives us an ‘explanation’. In doing so, he is pandering to the requirement in the conventional detective story for resolution. So, we find that on one level, Carr has used many of the tropes of the detective story to further a supernatural tale; the thematic introduction, the small group of suspects, not one but two locked room mysteries and two murders. The effective part of this *schema* is the way in which the underlying direction of the narrative is kept from view until the final page. This is, of course, especially effective in respect of the supernatural revelations as our expectation is that a natural solution will suggest itself. But this solution only serves as a model for subversion by the outrageous supernatural explanation. In doing so, Carr achieves the distinction of portraying the juxtaposition between these apparently irreconcilable worlds, highlighting the fundamental divergence between the two genres. On the one hand lies logic, with its emphasis on cause and effect, and on the other, the realm of the metaphysical, which posits the implausibility of such reduction.
The Burning Court is, therefore, an important event in the history of the detective story because it anticipates the metaphysical detective stories of Borges a decade later. Carr suggests a universe similar to that encountered by Lönnrot at the end of ‘Death and the Compass’, where alternative versions of the present reality may exist. In the conventional detective story, a narrative choice is made, the plot is set, and the prescribed solution is delivered. In The Burning Court, however, Carr poses an alternative question. What happens when what is merely hinted at in the locked room mystery, magical and supernatural events, actually come to pass? So, in this locked room, gone are the constraints of the narrative closure, and instead the locked room at the centre of Carr’s fiction becomes a place of uncertainty and equivocation which both undermines and reaffirms our view in the process of natural justice. But there is a deeper issue here: by pointing out that, no matter what certainties the detective story comes up with, there is not merely an alternative solution but almost certainly an alternative universe, which some people, not necessarily Carr, believe in.
That is a haunted town to me! (Andrew Lang (1844–912), *Almae Matres*)

In the very first Rebus novel, *Knots and Crosses* (1987), Ian Rankin offers us two visions of Edinburgh, the old and the new. As Rebus makes his way home in the early hours, he ponders the spectre of a serial killer, a strangler, at large in this most elegant of cities:

> Edinburgh slept on, as it had slept on for hundreds of years. There were ghosts in the cobbled alleys and on the twisting stairways of the Old Town tenements, but they were Enlightenment ghosts, articulate and deferential. They were not about to leap from the darkness with a length of twine ready in their hands.¹

Later we find these apparently different Edinburhgs, ancient and modern, being considered as two parts of a whole brought together, not just as contrasts but engaged in a strange symbiosis:

> John Rebus was moving through the jungle of the city, that jungle the tourists never saw, being too busy snapping away at the ancient golden temples, temples long since gone but still evidence as shadows. This jungle closed in on the tourists relentlessly but unseen, a natural force of dissipation and destruction.

Edinburgh’s an easy beat, his colleagues from the west coast would say. Try Partick for a night and tell me that it’s not. But
Rebus knew different. He knew that Edinburgh was all appearances, which made the crime less easy to spot, but no less evident. Edinburgh was a schizophrenic city, the place of Jekyll and Hyde sure enough, the city of Deacon Brodie, of fur coats and no knickers (as they said in the west).²

The Edinburgh Rankin introduces to us here is one which returns again and again throughout the whole Rebus series; the schizophrenia of a city in thrall to its own past and only able to see its present through the prism of history. Edinburgh, then, is a city of ghosts, so full of them that they seem to be present at every turn. The word ghost is so common, in fact, that Erin MacDonald has pointed out that it ‘appears more frequently in Dead Souls (1999) than the word pint.’³ Given the heroic quantities of alcohol which Rebus consumes during the course of a book, this is an impressive statistic.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the palimpsest of Edinburgh haunts the pages of the Rebus series in three ways: through the history of its construction, its vast reservoir of real life crimes and its literary tradition. It will serve to illustrate how the idea of the palimpsest contributes to the interplay between the character of Rebus and the location of Edinburgh, and the consequences for the genre of detective fiction.

The notorious stories of Edinburgh’s past, particularly the repeated appearances of the real-life Burke and Hare and the Resurrectionists, and Robert Louis Stevenson’s fictitious Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, become the narrative’s constant shadows. They are metaphoric ghosts, of course, representative of the past’s return, a standard by which current evil is frequently measured. But these ghosts are not confined to figures from the past; the city and its structures, too, are images which carry deep significance for the text. Here is how Rankin’s own introduction to The Falls defines the way that his own writing builds on what has come before:

My books have always been attempts to explain aspects of Scotland to both outsiders and natives. I like using ‘hidden’ stories – Mary King’s Close (Mortal Causes) and cannibalism (Set in Darkness) – as my starting points. There are things you can say which can’t always be contained by history books. It’s true also that I take real life unsolved crimes [...] and extrapolate
from them to say something about the world we’ve made for ourselves.4

These earlier texts are never subsumed, never obliterated, but retain their identity. In fact, although Rankin calls them ‘hidden’ texts, often their provenance is explicit. Queensferry House’s grisly seventeenth-century murder, for instance, featured in Set in Darkness (2000), which I discuss in more detail later, is the historical counterpart of the case which Rebus investigates. This story, like so many in the Rebus series, combines not only its historical protagonists but the very fabric of the building and its symbolism in Scottish history. Rankin’s overwriting sets up a direct relationship between the past and present: it is an act of juxtaposition where a former text may be used to read another. The natural consequence of this is that the former text inhabits the latter, and its presence is something we are constantly aware of. Although this is a recurring theme throughout this book, it is a particular feature of, and recalls, Conan Doyle’s double narratives described in Chapter 3.

The formation of overwritten texts gives us a unique insight into one of the fundamental processes of narrative creation. It is particularly appropriate in the genre of detective fiction, which constantly looks back to a previous event, the crime, in order to make sense of the world. Its narrative superimposes the solution to a mystery on the original story of the crime, so that the past is always present, and the present is always concerned with the past. In the Rebus stories, Rankin’s take on the Conan Doyle double narrative is to create a palimpsest. Genette, in his classic work on the subject, outlines how the palimpsest works in practice:

That duplicity of the object, in the sphere of textual relations, can be represented by the old analogy of the palimpsest: on the same parchment, one text can be superimposed on another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through.5

The key here is the lingering presence of the original text, that special quality which gives Rankin’s works a haunted atmosphere. It acts as a signpost directing our attention away from the present; as Rankin says of Edinburgh, ‘a city which seemed defined by its past as much by its present’.6 This is the city of Scott, who as we have seen, was interested
in ghosts and Muriel Spark, about whom Rankin wrote an uncompleted PhD. It is also the city of Conan Doyle and Joseph Bell; a place where detective fiction came of age. But transcending all these, one author looms larger in the Rebus texts than any other. Rankin is a life-long admirer of Robert Louis Stevenson, whom he called a ‘rebel, adventurer and restless spirit, he was a tortured artist whose prose remains pure, vibrant and healing.’\(^7\) One story, *The Strange Case of Dr. and Mr. Hyde*, although it is set in London, recurs like a *leitmotif* for the equivocal nature of Edinburgh itself as well as the characters in the novels. Time and again, we are not only made aware of the contrasts between characters, but also within them as well. Deacon Brodie, Edinburgh’s notorious burglar, for instance, thought to be a model for Stevenson’s novel, was a ‘businessman by day, robber by night.’\(^8\)

But if Edinburgh is full of ghosts, then so is Rebus; he is a character haunted by his past, someone who carries with him the ghosts of his whole life. No part of his life seems exempt; unsolved cases become ‘clanking old skeletons’;\(^9\) his old friend and colleague Jack Morton is typical of those in his personal life, ‘one of too many ghosts’;\(^10\) as to family, ‘the ghosts of his parents never visit’, but they are ghosts nonetheless,\(^11\) and in his previous life, Rebus’s wife soon recognizes ‘that he was haunted still by his years in the army’.\(^12\) Amidst his own myriad of ghosts, Rebus, in turn, haunts the streets of Edinburgh; he is often to be found frequenting the city alone at night, contemplating its past. In *Knots and Crosses*, on just such a sojourn, pondering the whereabouts of his former army colleague, Gordon Reeve, he realizes that ‘he could feel the city closing in on him, bringing to bear all its historical weight, smothering him.’\(^13\) This is key to much that happens in Rebus’s life; the spectres from Edinburgh’s past return not merely as ‘enlightenment ghosts’, but become transformed as participants in his everyday life. Rebus learns that it is impossible ‘to throw off the shackles of the past’ as Rankin himself has said; his attempt to do so seems to involve the manic pursuit of his work. But this only leads to a vicious circle, a kind of grotesque dance of fate with the city; the guilt he feels for his professional and personal shortcomings is not merely reflected by the notoriety of Edinburgh’s past but seemingly confirmed by it.

But as far as present ghosts go, they do not come more notorious than Morris ‘Ger’ Cafferty, the controlling crime boss of Edinburgh. His relationship with Rebus is a curious mixture of symbiosis and
outright hostility, which produces an uneasy partnership in which each recognizes the other’s fallibilities. At one point, Rebus puts him in jail, a jail which soon falls under Cafferty’s control. Cafferty habitually mocks Rebus by calling him ‘Strawman’, a nickname based on a court officer’s error in calling Rebus by the wrong name to testify at a trial. Nevertheless, Rebus keeps returning to Cafferty for assistance, which Cafferty, by turns, either provides, refuses or disguises with misdirection, usually dropping an inadvertent clue or two. In later novels, Cafferty is a near-permanent figure, released from jail and claiming to have gone straight while retaining criminal control of Edinburgh from behind the scenes. He is often linked to cases that Rebus and Clarke are investigating, but there is never enough evidence to bring charges against him. But the real fascination of the relationship is the tantalizing parallel it projects with the characters of Jekyll and Hyde. So deep rooted is the soul of Stevenson’s book in the Rebus stories that it is often difficult to disentangle its relevance. One classic exchange between the two, however, takes place in *The Black Book*, when Rebus goes to quiz Cafferty about the current case; the gangster could be describing himself as Rebus’s *alter ego*:

‘But we’re cruel people, Strawman. All of us, you and me. And we’re ghouls.’ His face was very close to Rebus’s, both of them bent over. Rebus kept his eyes on the grass below him. ‘When they killed the grave-robber Burke, they made souvenirs from his skin. I’ve got one in the house. I’ll show it to you.’ The voice might have been inside Rebus’s own head.  

Rebus cannot bear to look; he realizes that he would be looking into a dark reflection of his own eyes. Cafferty’s words hit home, that everyone possesses a cruel side to them and, for Rebus, the gangster is the personification of that evil. It is a realization that for every man there is a devil, for every lawmaker there is a criminal, and that these qualities are not abstract ideas but reside within us all. The voice of Cafferty seems to be within him, saying what he knows to be true; the lines from Jekyll and Hyde seem now to be chillingly appropriate: ‘that man is not truly one, but truly two.’  

A necessary consequence of Rebus’s make-up is the acquisition of new ghosts from the present to overlay those already present, each a building block of the complex individual he has become. It is,
paradoxically, a process of self-renewal, not necessarily in any positive sense, but one which is essential in defining his nature. The result of each experience is that he must always carry with him the latest detritus from his life, which in turn takes its place as the latest rewriting of his memory. I have described elsewhere the effect of Freud’s metaphoric concept of the Mystic Writing Pad, where repressed memory, having been stored in the psyche but never obliterated, returns at key moments of experience.\textsuperscript{16} The repository of Rebus’s memory acts in just this way. In \textit{Dead Souls}, he reflects on how the transience of his existence, rather than allowing him to escape each encounter of his past, merely ensures that yet another ghost is created:

\begin{quote}
\[...\] The never-ending dance and criss-crossings which took up so much space in his head. The party that never stopped, the invitations guilt-edged.

Life and death in Edinburgh. And space still left over for a few ghosts, their numbers increasing.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

And at the very end of \textit{The Falls}, when he decides against selling his flat with its myriad memories, because it is the place where all the ‘ghosts’ that he acquires are rationalized:

\begin{quote}
All the cases he’d worked, the monsters he’d encountered...he dealt with them there, seated in his chair, staring out of his window. He found room for them in the bestiary of his mind, and there they stayed.

If he gave this up, what would be left? No still centre to his world, no cage for his demons...

Tomorrow he’d call the solicitor, tell her he wasn’t moving.

Tomorrow.

For tonight, he had new cages to fill...\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

We understand much about Rebus from this passage; the constant search for renewal through each new encounter, each new ghost, becomes a confirmation of his continuing existence. We might also speculate that Rebus’s flat, so precious to his memories, a place he literally haunts, is emblematic of the Edinburgh of the stories. He is
as much a part of Edinburgh and its history as the myriad of other ghosts, past and present, which inhabit its streets. So, ultimately in his shiftless life, it becomes apparent as the only place he truly belongs. Inevitably such indivisibility between environment and the man becomes the overarching preoccupation of these narratives.

The Old Town of Edinburgh is a distillation of that theme in the Rebus novels which depicts beauty masking a darker underworld, a specious feast for the eye, not to be entirely trusted. Built on a sloping ridge, houses were erected in lines radiating from the Castle, and from the back of these tenements emerged on steep slopes. Following the disastrous defeat at Flodden in 1513, a more extensive and massive wall was built to relieve the anxieties of Edinburgh’s citizens, who were in a near state of panic at their vulnerability. Such was the effectiveness of the Flodden Wall that it precluded any exterior development outside its perimeter which now enclosed the entire city. With the ever present threat from English armies, the whole population found itself penned into a ridiculously small area, so with new-found security came an increasingly intractable problem, one which would last until well into the eighteenth century – space. The undulating land enclosed by the wall did not lend itself to lateral expansion, the only way was up, or, as it turned out, down. The result was the erection of tenements which, for their day, reached an immense height, 120 feet or more. These have been called ‘the first skyscrapers in the world’, built at the extreme limit of the prevailing engineering knowledge of the time. In these circumstances, it easy to understand the upward development of the tenements, but because of the steep nature of the ground on which they stood, it was also possible to cut into the hillside to burrow under the buildings to form extensive vaults. So, in the Old Town, the idea of building a palimpsest-like settlement, layer upon layer, was also inverted by the addition of what, in effect, was an underground city. For Rankin, this physical evolution of the city is fundamental to the understanding of the modern Edinburgh and its citizens; its influence still casts its shadow.

Unlike the artistic version of the palimpsest, the above-ground floors were open to view, but the analogy is even more applicable in the case of the vaults; here the cramped and rat-infested complex was out of sight, covered by the accretions above. Nor was this alleviated when the New Town was constructed in the eighteenth century; bridges spanned the valleys between the hills to the new building
sites away from the Old Town, and the spaces beneath the viaducts were quickly filled in so that the superstructure, in many cases, completely lost its identity. Again these vaults were places where the poor and disadvantaged lived, and in both towns they rapidly acquired the reputation for crime. Meanwhile, the well-to-do tended to live in the upper stories away from the dirt, noise and disease. Such was the state of affairs that, in 1822, William Hazlitt would famously call Edinburgh and its stark contrasts a ‘City of Palaces, or of tombs – a quarry, rather than the habitation of men’. Stevenson, too, commenting on the Old Town in 1878, was just as scathing: ‘houses sprang up story after story, neighbour mounting on neighbour’s shoulder, as in some Black Hole of Calcutta, until the population slept fourteen or fifteen deep in a vertical direction.’

The portrayal of Edinburgh, this city with its veneer of refinement masking a much darker side, is, of course, no accident. This repressive environment is a reflection of the contemporary society which Rankin animates in the Rebus novels; an Edinburgh which is a far cry from the elegance of the New Town. In *Hide and Seek*, Charlie, the young student, friend of the murdered junkie Ronnie, tells Rebus that Edinburgh is ‘not just the piper on the ramparts, or the Royal Mile, or the Scott Monument.’ Rebus then asks Charlie to say just what he means by the ‘real’ Edinburgh. This is his revealing reply:

‘Deacon Brodie,’ said Charlie, suddenly interested again. Burke and Hare, justified sinners. But it’s all been cleaned up for the tourists, you see. And I thought, hang on, all this Lowland low-life still exists. That was when I started touring the housing estates. Wester Hailes, Oxgangs, Craigmillar, Pilmuir. And sure enough, it’s all still here, the past replaying itself in the present.

It has built over its past again and again, hidden its less acceptable face until the present day now acknowledges its latent, violent mix of depravity and crime, sitting cheek by jowl with its putative respectability.

While the New Town afforded the opportunity for the better-off to desert the perilous life of the Old Town’s crowded tenements, the latter continued to attract the poorest folk, and the early nineteenth century, in particular, saw a large influx of refugees from the ravages of the Irish potato famine and Scotland’s own highland clearances.
Thus, the history of Edinburgh illustrates perfectly the tension between the familiar elegant façade of the city, a face it shows willingly to the world, and its *alter ego*. In this version, the inhabitants of the former were literally haunted by the presence of the less fortunate; haunted, that is, in the sense of inhabiting a particular space. This is precisely the vision of Edinburgh which Rankin brings up to date in the Rebus novels, a place both emblematic of the universal city and yet a discrete place with its own special character. In *Mortal Causes*, for example, Rankin chooses Mary King’s Close, an ancient subterranean street, as the site where the body of Billy Cunningham is found, a place which has acquired a dark reputation over the years. The body has a tattoo identified with ‘Sword and Shield’, a Scottish Nationalist group with links to sectarianism in Northern Ireland. The victim turns out to be Cafferty’s son and raises the prospect of a terrorist atrocity in a tourist-filled Edinburgh, at the time of the Festival. The marriage of this ancient scene of tragedy with a modern reminder of the seamy side of Edinburgh life is a poignant illustration of one of the series’ enduring themes. Although this particular place is new to Rebus, he is well aware of its significance:

 [...] he’d been in similar old buried streets beneath the High Street. He knew of Mary King’s Close.

‘Story goes,’ said the constable, ‘there was a plague in the 1600s, people died or moved out, never really back. Then there was a fire. They blocked off the ends of the street. When they rebuilt, they built over the top of the close.’ He shone his torch towards the ceiling, which was now three or four storeys above them. ‘See that marble slab? That’s the floor of the City Chambers.’

This passage provides the perfect metaphor for the way in which the city of Edinburgh intrudes into the narrative. We already know that Edinburgh has a long history of burying its past, to which the two underground cities are testament, in the cause of outward respectability. But such a history is hard to shake off; what the more upwardly mobile population were attempting to escape from, even denying, were places such as Mary King’s Close, which were overcrowded and plague-ridden. But as Rankin constantly reminds us, quite literally at all sorts of levels, the dystopian side of the city is never far away. Appropriately for the context of *Mortal Causes*, the Close was never eradicated but
covered over, swept under the City’s ‘carpet’, and like so many things in Rebus it remains as a sinister and haunting presence. No surprise then that later on in Mortal Causes we learn that after the plague but before the fire, ‘When the denizens moved back, they swore the close was haunted by the spirits of those who had perished there.’

But the idea of the palimpsest relies as much on the present as it does the past. The Rebus novels were being written at a time when the issue of Scottish Independence became the hot political topic of the day. As ever, it is not only the people but the very fabric of this which is of interest to Rankin; at the end of Dead Souls (1999) the scene prefigures the plot of Set in Darkness (2000), the next book in the series. As Rebus contemplates the demolition taking place on Holyrood to make way for the new Parliament building, his thoughts are not filled with hope for the future but tainted with cynicism, fearful of what the building work might unearth,

[...] The stories and horrors of the city’s past and present...he knew they’d all come rising in the digger’s steel jaws, bubbling to the surface as the city began its slow ascent towards being a nation’s capital once again.

Forget it, John, he told himself. It’s the Old Town, that’s all.

Sure enough, in the opening pages of Set in Darkness, the past and present collide. A body is discovered in Queensberry House, which is being refurbished for use in conjunction with the new Parliament building. This modern corpse, some twenty years old, is found in the blocked-up kitchen fireplace in the exact same place where in 1707, the mad James Douglas, Earl of Drumlanrig, murdered a servant boy, roasted him on a spit and consumed some of his flesh. But this coincidence is even more embedded in Scottish history; Douglas was the son of the Duke of Queensferry, Secretary of State, whose job it was to negotiate the Act of Union. The murder took place on the night that the agreement was signed. The symbolism of this latest crime is self-evident; not for the first time, history returns to intrude upon the present. The ghosts that linger in the very fabric of the city are always, it seems, in the throes of rematerializing into modern life, to be refigured, even to reshape the future:
Hidden City. The historical proof: when invading armies advanced, the populace made themselves scarce in the caves and tunnels below the Old Town. Their homes might be ransacked, but the soldiers would leave eventually – it was hard to enjoy victory without the evidence of the vanquished – and the locals would come back into the light and begin rebuilding.

Out of the darkness and into the light.  

These engagements of past traumatic events with the present frequently parody the return of the repressed traumas of psychoanalytical theory which so often beset Rebus himself. Invariably, these returning events are modified to meet changed circumstances; at the heart of the case was still the question of Scotland and her parliament, but this time the body behind the fireplace proves to be Chris Mackie, the hired thug of a local gangster. When the body of Roddy Grieve, Labour candidate for the new parliament, is found in a nearby summerhouse, a perverse symmetry with the century’s old crime emerges; Grieve is from one of Scotland’s most prominent families. In a tale which explores the murky, corrupt world of property developers, politicians and hoodlums, the sordid business of covering up the past with new buildings proves equally as fraught as the world of crime.

At the end of Set in Darkness, Cafferty has returned to reclaim his empire and has led both Rebus and Barry Hutton, nephew of the Edinburgh arch-villain Bryce Callan, into a trap. Hutton had believed that Cafferty has delivered Rebus to him; Rebus takes a beating, but Cafferty exacts his vengeance on Hutton and kills him. But where is the body? Rebus wonders:

Cafferty sat back. ‘You know the story about the Old Town? Reason it’s so narrow and steep, there’s some big serpent buried under it.’ He waited for Rebus to get it; decided to supply the punchline himself. ‘Room for more than one snake under the Old Town, Strawman.’

Hutton’s is a symbolic burial. He becomes part of the fabric of this city built on ghosts, he joins the ranks of the many who will return to haunt Rebus. But the hidden body is a double blow for Rebus, because he knows that any attempt to find Hutton and bring closure
to the case is doomed to failure. It is the supreme irony that the very fact there are so many building sites in the brave new Edinburgh means redevelopment will erase, as it always has done, the misdeeds of the past. History has taught us that in Edinburgh’s case, progress, the act of rebuilding, risks revealing the shadows of the past. In a neat twist of fate, the ‘best’ prospect of finding Hutton’s body will be, like the servant boy in the original Holyrood murder and the body of Mackie, a chance discovery in the distant future that will the unearth the body, release the ghost and create yet another mystery from the past all over again, in what seems a never-ending cycle. So, Rebus, meanwhile, is left without the satisfaction of closure to his case and, worse still, the city strengthens its hold on him by withholding a new secret from him.

We are, by now, familiar with the importance of past stories to Rankin’s writing; one of the strangest such tales occurs in *The Falls* (2001), where the reader is plunged into a present-day version of the true story of the Arthur’s Seat coffins. The prominent hill known as Arthur’s Seat is Edinburgh’s most imposing natural landmark. The link with Arthur is thought to be questionable, and although the landscape does contain evidence of habitation, which includes both cultivation and fortifications, it seems that it was a focal point for those escaping the occupation of Roman Britain. As a result, it acquired a certain sinister reputation, but in all its history it can scarcely have yielded a more puzzling mystery than that unearthed by a group of boys in July 1836. During the course of their games on the hillside, the boys discovered a cave which contained seventeen tiny coffins each containing a wooden figure. Subsequent researches seemed to suggest that these had been placed there at regular intervals over a number of years, but despite much speculation by many experts, a definitive explanation for the find has still not been found. One prominent theory, and it remains merely a theory which has now passed into local folklore, is that the coffins were placed there to represent a proper burial for the victims of Burke and Hare, whose notorious reign of terror took place in 1828 alongside the crimes of other resurrectionists active at the time.

In *The Falls*, a serial killer has committed a series of murders over a number of decades instigated by a sense of unsatisfactory, personal loss, akin to the victims of Burke and Hare. This prompts the killer to repeat the original crimes by placing coffins at the scene of each
murder, the last one some five years before the start of the story. As always with Rankin, these crimes are part of a wider social tapestry. Philippa Balfour, a young student who happens to be from one of Edinburgh’s most prominent families, is found murdered, where else but on Arthur’s Seat. Allied to this crime is the discovery, at a beauty spot which gives the book its title, near the victim’s home, of yet another coffin. Philippa is murdered by the mysterious Quizmaster who orchestrates events through an Internet game, which even supplies a link to the death of the student, Emmanuel Caillet, a true story mentioned by Rankin in his introduction to the novel. Inevitably, the present murders have a strong historical connection, much more than even the ‘copycat’ coffins would suggest. In what seems to be an appropriate stroke of irony and a gloriously entangled mixture of the past and the present, the murderer, with more than a passing nod to Burke and Hare, proves to be a retired pathologist, Professor Devlin, a man who has devoted his life to dead bodies. It is the loss of Devlin’s wife, and his warped interpretation of her death, that has led to him becoming a killer.

Earlier in the book he shows Rebus around the black museum at the Surgeon’s Hall; he tells Rebus, ‘The history of surgery, Inspector, is the history of Edinburgh.’ Devlin also shows him the portrait of Dr. Kennet Lovell, ‘his favourite’, one of the anatomists who carried out the dissection of William Burke, after his execution. Aside from his medical duties, Lovell ‘worked in wood’, an oblique reference to the wooden coffins, and Devlin intimates that he bought one of Lovell’s tables ‘as a small memento of the early years of pathology.’ So, the case ends with the capture of a murderer whose provenance is to be found in the ghosts of Edinburgh’s past; as Devlin says at the end, ‘I should never have let slip about Lovell [...] a good historicist would naturally be unable to resist looking into my claim further finding disturbing parallels between past and present [...]’

Although Burke and Hare took bodysnatching to a new extreme by murdering their victims, they were the exception to a much more widespread practice of grave-robbing in the nineteenth century. The rapid expansion of medical schools meant that there was a voracious appetite for bodies needed for research, and hard though it may be for us to comprehend the removal of bodies from a grave, it was not a felony but a misdemeanour in common law. Often the latter is punishable by merely a fine, and only rarely accompanied
by imprisonment, but generally avoiding the harsher penalties of the statutory criminal law. In fact, the Resurrectionists were careful to leave behind jewellery or other items of value found on the corpse so that they would escape a criminal prosecution. The situation became so bad in the now notorious Greyfriars graveyard in Edinburgh that graves were often protected by a heavy iron grating known as a mort-safe. But, of course, there had to be a market in the first place for this grisly trade to flourish. Edinburgh, because of its growing medical tradition, became notorious for turning a blind eye to the practice, and one man, Dr Robert Knox, who was appointed to run Barclay’s anatomy school in Surgeon’s Square, Edinburgh in 1826, and who dealt with Burke and Hare as well as the grave robbers themselves, seemed to have few scruples in this respect as long as the supply of bodies was forthcoming. Although the Anatomy Act of 1832 curtailed the practice, Knox’s place in the blacker history of medicine was already assured, and the spectre of bodysnatching continues to send a shudder through the history of the city. As the old children’s rhyme goes,

Up the close and doun the stair,
But and ben wi’ Burke and Hare.
Burke’s the butcher, Hare’s the thief,
Knox the boy that buys the beef.

This dark memory is invoked in *Resurrection Men* (2001). Rebus is sent back to Police College to undergo retraining after throwing a mug of coffee over Chief Superintendent Gill Templer. But this is a really a cover; the reality is that Rebus has been sent on this course undercover to investigate the five others present. Intriguingly, the format for the course is to re-open an old unsolved case and encourage the participants to work together as if they were back at their stations. This unearthing of the past has led to the participants to be tagged the Resurrection Men, and on this occasion their course leader, a retired DCI Tennant, asks Rebus and his colleagues to pick over the bones of one Rico Lomax, a Glaswegian lowlife murdered some six years previously. But this is no random choice of case; it is one which both Rebus and DI Gray, another member of the group, both worked on, and for Rebus it resurrects distinctly uncomfortable ghosts from his past. Already he begins to feels like the Resurrectionists of old.
When the group visit Edinburgh in the course of their inquiries and stop outside John Knox’s house, Ward, another member of the course, remembers the boredom he felt at having to visit the place when he was at school; this sparks an interesting exchange involving Edinburgh’s association with the name Knox:

Gray wagged a finger. ‘That’s history you’re insulting, young Allan. Our history.’

Rebus wanted to say something about how women and Catholics might not agree. He didn’t know much about John Knox, but he seemed to recall the man hadn’t been too keen on either group.

‘Knoxland,’ Gray said, stretching out his arms. ‘That’s what Edinburgh is, wouldn’t you agree, John?’

Rebus felt he was being tested in some way. He offered a shrug. ‘Which Knox, though?’ he asked, causing Gray to frown. ‘There was another: Doctor Robert Knox. He bought bodies from Burke and Hare. Maybe we’re more like him...’

Gray thought about this, then smiled. ‘Archie Tennant delivered us the body of Rico Lomax, and we’re cutting it open.’ He began to nod slowly. ‘That’s very good, John. Very good.

Rebus wasn’t sure it was exactly what he’d meant, but he accepted the compliment anyway.33

Despite the compliment paid to him Rebus’s comments are intensely guilt-ridden. At one level he likens the black trade between Knox and the Resurrectionists to that engaged in by the police. At the heart of this lies the notion that, when you put aside all the adrenalin filled pursuit of criminals and the triumph of justice, policemen, when all is said and done, make a living from human misery. Bodies turn up, investigations are made, conclusions reached, and then on to the next case. Viewed in this light, justice seems poor compensation for the eternal dilemma between desire for the next case and the guilt which accompany such thoughts.

There is, too, a palpable, yet unspoken, menace in this dialogue; Rebus has already identified Gray as his chief target in his under-cover role, something which Gray also senses, so their exchanges become increasingly loaded. Rebus’s contention that the figure of Robert Knox haunts their work as policemen, digging up the
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secrets of the past without fear of the consequences, is turned on him by Gray. Gray, however, alights on the murder of Rico Lomax as a chance not necessarily to solve the crime, but to expose what he believes is a secret about Rebus's part in the investigation. Gray has realized that something is amiss as the Lomax case is not the one usually employed by the course and that it is more than a coincidence that a case they both worked on was chosen. So, the spectres of Robert Knox, of Burke and Hare and the Resurrectionists become translated into a modern-day haunting, they are redolent of Edinburgh's dark past. What is significant is the way in which the raising of the ghosts of the town coincides with the return of Rebus's ghosts. There are plenty of these associated with the Lomax affair. The murder of Lomax had, in fact, become enmeshed with a particularly nasty rape case – Rebus had been given a tip-off that the rapist was holed up in Lomax's caravan on the east coast, but he got there too late and torched the caravan in frustration. This had been used by Lomax, his friends and associates a place to lie low when the heat was on. Frustrated at his inability to make an arrest, he had enlisted the help of his old nemesis Cafferty to find Lomax, but his men had beaten him to death. Although Rebus's intentions were genuine enough, if it ever emerged that he had involved Cafferty in this way, his career would be over. His guilt and unease increase as he realizes, too, that somewhere in the files they are poring over, there was information which incriminated him. So, even if he managed to solve the case involving Gray and the others as his undercover mission requires, his masters, with nothing to lose, may also get Rebus, too.

Although our eye is drawn by the more obvious references to Robert Knox and the whole scandal surrounding the Resurrectionists, it is the personal effect this 'haunting' has on Rebus that catches the attention. John Knox, the founding figure of Presbyterianism, was, of course, largely responsible for the overthrow of Catholicism in Scotland. In 1560, he became a minister at St. Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh, where he stayed until his death in 1572. The mention of Knox has significance for Rebus; although not a Catholic, he has befriended a Catholic priest, Father Conor Leary, whose death is recounted in *The Falls*. Rebus's guilt is strong because Leary has spent much time trying to persuade him to listen to some of the responses that religion might give to the detective's many
unanswered questions. For Rebus, his conversations with Leary ‘[...] had been like confessionals. He’d probably revealed more of himself to the priest than to anyone before him [...]’. But Rebus has never found it possible to espouse belief fully, not able to face the certainties it offers. He cannot even face Leary’s funeral but lingers outside and succumbs to guilt-ridden tears. We sense, therefore, that when faced with Gray’s assertion of Presbyterianism as ‘our’ religion, we sense that Rebus’s sympathies, despite his beliefs, are not with Knox. In a nice touch of irony, it is Gray and his cohorts who are eventually exposed as corrupt, and brought to their downfall by Rebus.

The Rebus novels are a paradigm for that brand of modern detective fiction which sees the detective as grounded in a particular locus. In these circumstances, the detective invariably assumes many of the qualities of the place he inhabits. In the Colin Dexter novels, for instance, Morse, who, despite having a first-rate mind, has failed during his time at Oxford. Nonetheless, when he becomes a policeman there, we find that he has retained his love of erudition and classical music and, as such, his personality mirrors the popular view of life at the University. He takes this character into his police work and, often to the annoyance of his colleagues, he solves cases as one would a crossword. This rarefied approach to detection derives fundamentally from the physical environment in which he works. Rebus, on the other hand, is a product of the Edinburgh which Rankin presents to us; he becomes a complex, baffling individual because the city, of which he is a part, is a palimpsest. The Edinburgh of the novels is constantly over-painting its past in order to present a new face to the world. But this does not mean an eradication takes place, it is merely removed from sight; thus, this presence is spectral, an uncomfortable reminder of matters best forgotten. In this context, the setting becomes a creative force that haunts a text in such a way that the fates of its characters are inextricably bound to it.

For Rebus, then, Edinburgh transcends any notion of mere setting; it breathes, it is a living organism. Such is the pervasiveness of Edinburgh that when he is sent to London to help with a case involving a serial killer in *Tooth and Nail*, Rebus is constantly haunted by the practices and customs of his native city and imagines the underground stairs to be like the stairwell on the Scott Monument.35
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It is not just Rebus the man who is identified with the character of the city; Rankin specifically ascribes this obsession with its past to the role of the detective in *Black and Blue*:

As a detective, he lived in people’s pasts: crimes committed before he arrived on the scene; witnesses’ memories ransacked. He had become a historian, and the role bled into his personal life. Ghosts, bad dreams, echoes.  

The detective who is embedded within a setting will inevitably acquire ghosts the more cases he handles, the more the memories pile up, just like the city; as Rebus himself muses, ‘past misdemeanours and the way they refused to go away’. It is not merely in a narrative sense that the detective story looks back to the story of the crime, the whole action of investigation and retrieving is an engagement in a historic process.

So, Edinburgh, in this incarnation, is the perfect foil for the character of Rebus himself; as the city is haunted, so it is with the detective. This phenomenon arises from a singular set of circumstances; both are essentially the product of an aggregation of events and traumas which have shaped their character. They are products of their history, overridden by each new development, the past superseded, even covered, but never erased. At any moment, this latent past is liable to rise up and insinuate itself into the present. A study of fictional detectives would soon reveal how this might come about because a detective’s professional life is a journey through the traumatic events which surround crime. Frequently, crime writers attempt to underline this public persona with a private life which in some way is either a consequence of their exposure to such happenings or complementary to it. Invariably, it is both. In Rebus’s case, the dramas of regret, failure and loss pile one on another until his very essence seems to be exclusively constructed from these constituents alone.

*Exit Music* is the last book depicting Rebus as a serving policeman. At the very end of the novel, Rebus and Siobhan Clarke are sitting at the hospital bedside of Cafferty, who has been viciously assaulted. Suddenly, the monitor beside the bed indicates a crisis: Cafferty is ‘flatlining’. Without hesitation, Rebus jumps on the bed and administers CPR yelling, ‘Damned if this bastard’s going to give up the
ghost on me [...] After all we’ve been through [...] can’t end with a couple of whacks’, and Rebus muses not ‘a cold, cleansed death for you’. 39 This equivocal response says it all; it is Rebus who does not want to give up the ghost; Cafferty is a part of him as much as he is a part of Cafferty. To remove one is to diminish the other. They are, too, indelibly fixed in time and place forever now to be part of a wider palimpsest that is Edinburgh.
That is the land of lost content ... (A. E. Housman (1859–1936), *A Shropshire Lad*, XL)¹

Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (1983) is one of the most celebrated ghost stories of modern times. Adapted for television in 1989, it continues to attract interest and is now the subject of a recent major film. One of the main reasons for the story’s impact is its overwhelmingly tragic, yet compelling, central theme, the death of children and the appalling consequences which flow from it. It is a subject that is at once profoundly and universally affecting, not just because of the tragedy of a life unfulfilled, but because the death of children is the death of the future. It stops the tide of life in its tracks and conjures up the nightmare world of P. D. James’s novel, *The Children of Men*, where no children are born to an infertile population. From a literary perspective, the story has one of the iconic spectres of contemporary fiction, the figure of the woman in black herself, doomed to pass on her own grief to all who witness her melancholy presence.

The themes of childhood loss and family trauma are subjects of deep interest to Susan Hill, and they are a recurring feature in her work. In this chapter, I shall examine these subjects as they occur specifically in *The Woman in Black* and how it relates to their treatment in two of the Simon Serrailler detective novels, *The Pure in Heart* (2005) and *The Risk of Darkness* (2006). In doing so, I hope that the
examination of these texts will draw parallels between Hill’s writing in both forms especially as it affects the relationship between both genres. Hill is an ideal subject for such a study because, like many of her predecessors who have featured in these pages she has, inter alia, produced ghost stories and detective fiction of considerable interest. Unlike her ghostly tales, which began with The Woman in Black some thirty years ago, the Serrailler series of novels are a relatively new introduction; the first, The Various Haunts of Men, was published in 2004. Since The Risk of Darkness, four further novels have appeared, The Vows of Silence (2008), The Shadows in the Street (2010), The Betrayal of Trust (2012) and A Question of Identity (2013). As will become apparent when reading the Serrailler novels, it is important to keep in mind the continuity of the series; although each of the principal cases is different, many of the thematic developments relating to different characters and particular families transcend the boundaries of individual books. In this exploration of The Woman in Black, I want to keep in mind two other classic texts on the subject of childhood loss, Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw (1898) and M. R. James’s ‘Lost Hearts’ (1905). There is no evidence that Hill intended to display any conscious influence of these stories on her own, but the subject matter might at least suggest that The Woman in Black is in some way a response to these profoundly disturbing tales.

The Turn of Screw is the earliest of the three and perhaps one of the most famous ghost stories ever written, so its presence is hard to ignore. The text has been extensively examined from many viewpoints; the purpose of these remarks is not to comment on all such aspects of a profound narrative but to construct a signpost into Hill’s writing. Of its many themes, Victorian mores, repression, sexual impropriety, insanity and the rest, The Turn of Screw still carries weight as one of the most poignant tales of childhood loss and corruption ever written. The governess, who is hired by a man to care for his nephew and niece, begins to see around the grounds of the estate the figures of a man and woman whom she does not recognize. These figures come and go at will without ever being seen or challenged by other members of the household, and they seem to the governess to be supernatural. Psychoanalytical readings, most notably by William Veeder, have suggested that the governess sees the ghosts as a form of repressive rage against her own father. She learns from Mrs. Grose that her predecessor, Miss Jessel, and another employee, Peter Quint,
had had a sexual relationship. It is also implied that Quint sexually molested Miles and the other members of the household.

Whatever the validity of this assertion, the figures of Quint and Miss Jessel, in relation to Miles and Flora, are emblematic of the world of adults. But this is a specific adulthood; it is a state that indulges in relationships frowned upon by wider society. According to the governess, their sexual conduct renders them as transgressors, outcasts unfit for the eyes and minds of children, as David Punter has pointed out:

> It is she who is responsible for educating the children into a sense of their ‘station’ in life, although she has little idea of what that station is, and even less of her own. She discharges these duties by conventional means, through the instilling of fear of ‘tabooed’ objects and relationships, and the attempt to redirect the children’s affections onto herself. These tasks are incompatible: as she deploys all her strength to dissolve the children’s world, and then condemns them for lack of feeling.\(^2\)

In a sense, the governess finds herself as the defender of some vague, socially acceptable adult world in opposition to the version inhabited by Quint and Miss Jessel. She sees only bad in Quint, but it is clear that the children perceive a quite different vision, one that appears to be attractive to them.

This conflict between two ways of behaviour in a society with a rigid philosophy on such matters does have distinct resonances with the ghost of Jennet Humfrye, in *The Woman in Black*, who herself is an outcast from society because of her own indiscretions. The loss of her son, which she experiences followed by her own untimely death, renders her as a revenant doomed to return to the scene of her tragedy. In the ghost story, this haunting invariably brings about further loss; just as the ghost of Jennet claims the lives of innocents, so the appearance of Quint precipitates the death of Miles, whom he has corrupted. We might draw from this that the ghosts in these two stories stand as witnesses of the possible dire consequences of the passage from childhood innocence into adulthood. This world is dangerous – it has contingencies which, once they take effect, are irrevocable, as the two orphans in M. R. James’s ‘Lost Hearts’ make plain, as we shall see.
The first thing to note about *The Woman in Black* is the framing device. The frame is important because it suggests that this story may be one of a significant rite of passage, an experience which has profoundly affected Kipps but which he has, nonetheless, survived. It is Christmas Eve, and Arthur Kipps, a successful middle-aged solicitor is preparing for the celebrations with his family. At the time of the story, he has been married to his second wife Esme, already the mother of four children, for fourteen years, during which time they have been living in the rural idyll of their house, Monk’s Piece. We have no indication of the precise year in which Kipps begins his narrative, but we may guess that the central narrative takes place in the late Victorian era, and the narration itself some thirty years later. Esme’s children, now largely grown up, decide to indulge in a practice established by Dickens, a favourite author of Hill’s, and tell each other ghost stories. Kipps himself listens to the increasingly outrageous stories with unease and refuses peremptorily to tell one of his own – but the incident has raised old fears within him, and with a distinct sense of unease he resolves to write down his own ghostly experience from the past, a story he has never told Esme or her children. What follows is a narrative which makes the distinction between the fictional Gothic fantasies told by his family and, the personal tale which is still Gothic in character but, carries the poignancy of personal experience.

As a young solicitor, Kipps is summoned to Crythin Gifford, a small market town on the northeast coast, to attend the funeral of Mrs. Alice Drablow. He learns from his principal, Bentley, that Drablow was an elderly and reclusive widow who lived alone in the desolate and secluded Eel Marsh House, situated on Nine Lives Causeway. At high tide, the house is completely cut off from the mainland, surrounded by marshes and subject to sudden mists. On the journey north, he meets Samuel Daily, a prominent local businessman, who makes Kipps shudder at the mention of the name Drablow. On arrival, he stays at the Gifford Arms and, ominously, Kipps recalls this night with wistful pleasure:

> [...] Even though I thank God every night that it is all over, all long past and will not, *cannot* come again, yet I do not believe I have ever again slept so well as I did that night in the inn at Crythin Gifford. For I see that then I was still all in a state of innocence, but that innocence, once lost, is lost forever.³
This might serve as a thematic summary for the book itself; the state of innocence and its loss will come to characterize the text. Not only is the loss of innocence of itself a traumatic event, but its consequences are equally harrowing. We have an inkling here that, as much as *The Woman in Black* features the loss both of innocence and life itself for a child, adults are no less immune from its effects.

The atmosphere darkens at the funeral, where Kipps sees a mysterious woman dressed in black with a pale face and dark eyes, but any attempt to find out who she may be is met with a fearful silence. Particularly strange is the small army of unsmiling children peering at the graveyard through the railings where the woman in black has appeared. The next day, Kipps is conveyed to Eel Marsh House by Keckwick the coachman, who has been the regular link during Mrs. Drablow’s lifetime. During his first visit, Kipps begins to sort through Mrs. Drablow’s papers at Eel Marsh House, and he encounters a door he cannot open. Once again at the heart of a ghost story the shadow of the sequestered room assumes a sinister significance; already one anticipates that the penetration of this space will hold the key to the mystery. This passing reference to one of the stock images of the ghost story presages the next chapter, which is called, intriguingly, ‘Whistle and I’ll Come to You’. The reference to M. R. James is an atavistic acknowledgement of the supernatural tale, which, like the detective story, frequently refers to its own history. This is a rather clever trope by Hill because the nursery, when opened, and the playthings it contains, will be a poignant reminder of Kipps's own childhood. The chapter title is as good as its name; the inculcated Kipps and the dog are nearly drawn to their death in the marsh by a curious whistle. Just as in the James story, he finds that his investigations into the secret history of Mrs Drablow bring consequences with far-reaching effects.

His stay becomes an increasing nightmare; he endures an increasingly terrifying sequence of unexplained noises, the appearance of the woman in black, and most terrifying of all, he hears the sound of a horse and carriage in distress, closely followed by the screams of a young child coming from the direction of the marshes. Keckwick is late collecting him because of the sea fret, arriving just as he despairs of being rescued. Despite his experiences, Kipps refuses to be intimidated by his experience, and he seems fatally drawn to Eel Marsh House, so much so that he resolves, against all advice, to stay
there alone until his task is complete. Accordingly, he returns to the marsh with only a dog for company. This time, he penetrates into the emotional and physical heart of Eel Marsh House, the nursery; it is from this room that he has heard strange sounds which invoke strangely familiar memories. The feelings he experiences here become enmeshed with the whole idea of innocence, sparked by the rhythmical sound of the rocking chair:

It was the sound of the wooden runners of my nurse’s rocking chair, when she sat beside me every night while I went to sleep, as a small child, rocking, rocking [...] It was the sound that meant comfort and safety, peace and reassurance, the regular, rhythmical sound at the end of the day, that lulled me asleep and into my dreams, the sound that meant that one of the two people in the world to whom I was closest and whom I most loved was nearby. 4

Because of these childhood reminiscences, he does not feel fearful but emboldened by memory:

[...] I felt that nothing could come near to harm or afright me, but I had a protector and guardian close at hand. 5

These moments in the nursery with all its connotations of childhood innocence and the security of family life mark the beginning of the end of Kipps’s own state of naivety. He reasons that ‘It was as though I had, for the time that I was in that room, become another person’, and, aside from returning to his own childhood, he experiences crucially an overwhelming sense of ‘grief and sadness’ at ‘loss and bereavement’ that hitherto in his sheltered life he has not encountered. 6

These feelings might be interpreted in two ways; not only do they signal an awareness of his own innocence, which insight itself implies is lost forever, but also that he undergoes the same experience felt by Jennet. Kipps is rescued by Daily and spends a considerable time in convalescence. During this time, he learns that Jennet gave birth to a child but, because she was unmarried, the social mores of the time required her to give up the child to the care of her sister. Mrs. Drablow and her husband adopted the boy, called Nathaniel, insisting that he never know that Jennet was his mother.
Jennet went away for a year; however, after realizing she could not be parted for long from her son, she made an agreement to be able to stay at Eel Marsh House with him as long as she never revealed her true identity to him. One day, a horse and carriage carrying the boy across the causeway became lost and sank into the marshes, killing all aboard, while Jennet looked on helplessly from the window of Eel Marsh House. The child’s screams that Kipps heard were those of Nathaniel. Jennet later died and returned to haunt Eel Marsh House, as well as the town of Crythin Gifford, with a vengeful malevolence, as the Woman in Black. According to local tales, seeing the Woman in Black meant that the death of a child would be sure to follow. After some time, Kipps returns to London, where he marries his fiancée, Stella, has a child of his own and tries to put the events at Crythin Gifford behind him. At a fair, while his wife and child are enjoying a horse and carriage ride, Kipps suddenly sees the Woman in Black once more. She steps out in front of the pony pulling the trap and startles it so greatly that it gallops away and collides with a tree, killing the child and fatally injuring Stella, who dies of her injuries ten months later. This is Jennet’s vengeance.

The enactment of Jennet Humfrye’s revenge is the classic act of the ghost. In a story of this kind the ghost has but one function, unhindered by legal or social niceties, it is to seek redress for the disturbance in the continuum of life which had brought about the haunting in the first place. As we have already seen elsewhere, there occur here clear distinctions with the detective story; the ghost story is uninhibited in its approach into what constitutes instinctive behaviour, and the narrative transcends any consideration of the criminal law in favour of what we might call a ‘natural justice’. The ghost might well take on the mantle of a murderer who kills out of a sense of injustice because sentence has, in effect, already been passed. This occurrence might even elicit a degree of empathy in others, invoking, for instance, Kipps’s acute sense of loss when in the nursery. Jennet’s experience had been profound and shocking. To be the helpless witness to the loss of one’s own child, is one thing, enough to be the ultimate torment for any parent, but to endure the whole tragic episode as a consequence of the circumstances imposed on her by social forces, is quite another. So, it is possible to see the actions of Jennet’s ghost as not merely a spiteful act against individuals but revenge on the repressive morality of society. The story, therefore,
becomes a powerful indictment of a society more concerned with appearances than common humanity. It suggests that the ghost story can become a medium which allows us to view the interplay between cause and effect in this way, unimpeded by any application of artifice such as the criminal law. So, the narrative is a nexus of the corruption of innocence which leads either to death itself or an existence haunted by experience. Jennet Humfrye’s perceived fall from grace with a child born out of wedlock results in her death and that of her son, Nathaniel; while Kipps’s rite of passage into adulthood means confronting a world of which he has no knowledge, but which ultimately leads to tragedy, the death of Stella and his son Joseph, which like Jennet’s before him, he is destined to witness.

_The Woman in Black_, with its Gothic overtones, its period setting and, above all, its theme of childhood loss, has distinct resonances with M. R. James’s ‘Lost Hearts’. This is not to imply that Hill intended it so, but the treatment of the parallel themes makes for an interesting comparison. In James’s tale, the evil Abney destroys the lives of two vagabond children he has taken under his wing in the most horrific way, by removing their hearts while still alive in order to consume them and assume occult powers. Abney’s savage demise at the hands of the ghosts of the children is poetic justice for his crimes. But the central narrative is as much about the corruption of children as their murder; as a result of their fate, James skilfully manages to turn them both into figures of pity and, simultaneously, memorable spectres with the capacity for menace. This corruption takes the form of the loss of childhood innocence when confronted with the harsh truths of the adult world; the stolen hearts become a metaphor for the removal of all vestiges of compassionate humanity that they possessed formerly. In the same way that Kipps comes face to face with the cruel world of fate by encountering the Woman in Black and her melancholy story, James’s protagonist, Stephen Elliott, like Jennet’s son Nathaniel, is dislocated from conventional family life. He is plunged into an unfamiliar life with his elderly cousin, and witnesses the hapless ghosts of the murdered children. As Simon MacCulloch has pointed out, these apparitions are an initiation into the new and alien wilderness he has entered:

The ghosts of Abney’s victims represent those who have already been cast out into that wilderness. The menace that they direct
towards Abney is emphasized less than the ‘unappeasable hunger and longing’ created by the theft of their hearts.\textsuperscript{7}

The loss that the ghosts of the children feel corresponds to that of Jennet; the loss of her son has ripped the very heart from her own existence and, like the orphans, the price she pays for knowledge of the adult world is first devastating deprivation, followed by death. In turn, these souls are destined to become both outcasts and the means by which others are inducted into their realm.

In both stories, the catalyst by which Kipps and Stephen are drawn in is a world where innocence has been replaced by knowledge; the inexorable desire for inquiry is something we have already encountered in James, but it is also present in \textit{The Woman in Black}. It might be said that the knowledge acquired by Jennet is carnal; the birth of her son out of wedlock renders her liable to the hostility of the adult world. Kipps, on the other hand, has the kind of curiosity reserved for James's protagonists. His job of collating Mrs. Drablow's papers goes beyond his duties as a solicitor and becomes an obsession, a desire to know the secret of Eel Marsh House. It is this passage from the material world into that inhabited by the woman in black, the core of the whole story that changes him irrevocably:

I could hear the mysterious silence, and once again the haunting, strange beauty of it all aroused a deep response within me. I could not run away from that place, I would have to go back to it, not now, but soon, I had fallen under some sort of spell of the kind that certain places exude and it drew me, my imaginings, my longings, my curiosity, my whole spirit, towards itself.

[...] I felt older and like a man who was being put to trial, half fearful, half wondering, excited, and completely in thrall.\textsuperscript{8}

As Kipps's curiosity serves to drain the innocence from him, Stephen Elliott undergoes the same experience; from the moment he arrives at Aswarby Hall ‘there were plenty of things about the Hall and the Hall gardens which Stephen, who was of an adventurous and inquiring turn, was anxious to have explained to him.’\textsuperscript{9} Stephen’s confrontation with the ghosts of the children, the result of his ‘inquiring’ mind laying him open to such exigencies, is not so much a warning as to the dangers posed by Abney, but rather a demonstration of the consequences of
Abney’s evil. As an orphan, Stephen seeks love and reassurance from his new surroundings, but this encounter with the adult world is likely to end with the loss of his heart. Symbolically, the loss of his heart would negate the possibilities of experiencing the love and happiness he seeks from the world. In the final analysis, although Stephen does not lose his heart physically, he suffers a rude awakening to a world he imagined as benign. ‘Is Mr Abney a good man, and will he go to heaven?’ he asks; in the light of experience, the answer must be no.\textsuperscript{10} We can measure the extent to which Stephen has been affected by his traumatic encounters as the coroner pronounces that the savage wounds on the dead Abney must have been inflicted by some ‘wild creature’.\textsuperscript{11} Stephen, however, is ‘led to a very different conclusion.’\textsuperscript{12}

In both \textit{The Woman in Black} and ‘Lost Hearts’, therefore, an intensely personal encounter with a ghost can be both a preliminary to death, but also a window on a world previously hidden by the naivety of the haunted. At the very heart of this kind of ghost story the exchange between the spectre and the haunted is based on a process of enlightenment that is not necessarily benign, and which invariably results in loss of some kind. For Kipps, this transaction means he must forfeit the greatest source of love in his life, the very ‘heart’ of his world – Stella and Joseph – as the price he must pay for his ingenuousness. Only when this catharsis is complete can he move on and rebuild his life, but even then it is a life that will be forever haunted.

Jennet has been characterized as an archetypal vengeful ghost, but where does such a figure come from? In Chapter 2, I discussed how past narratives impose themselves on the present; in such texts, the ghost invariably appears as a figure who returns to seek retribution for a previous wrong. It seems appropriate in the case of \textit{The Woman in Black}, with its female ghost, to seek out the origin of our notion of retribution in Greek mythology. The goddess, Nemesis, whose presence resides in much western literature and who now is associated principally with the operation of fate, good or bad, was originally connected with the act of killing. Nemesis, according to Graves, was ‘the goddess in her annual mood of murder [...]’,\textsuperscript{13} arising specifically from her provenance in philosophical creation myths:

Some say that darkness was first, and from darkness sprang chaos. From a union of darkness and chaos, sprang Night, Day, Erebus, and the Air.
From a union between Night and Erebus sprang Doom, Old Age, Death, Murder, Continence, Sleep, Dream, Discord, Misery, Vexation, Nemesis, Joy, Friendship, Pity, the Three Fates, and the Three Hesperides.14 [my italics]

In the case of Narcissus, for example, whose beauty led him to be disdainful of those who loved him, Nemesis lured him to a pool where he saw his own reflection in the water and fell in love with it, not realizing it was only an image. His inability to leave the beauty of his reflection led to his death.15 This aspect of Nemesis’s judgement demonstrates that the deity, while exercising retribution on the bad, was equally capable of dispensing justice to those who possessed too much good, and always cursed those who were blessed with countless gifts. This resonates with Jennet, whose own retribution falls, not on the wicked, but on those who have the precious gift of children, something which she herself had been denied. Thus, evil emerges from the eternal cycle triggered by the actions of cruelty and deprivation, which translates love and innocence into hatred and resentment, which, in turn, is repeated over and over again. In The Woman in Black, therefore, Jennet endures; she is no longer the wronged woman, but an immortal figure whose image embodies our belief in the contingency of life and its effect on our innocence.

The Pure in Heart and The Risk of Darkness renew Hill’s examination of the corruption of the innocence through the different medium of the detective fiction or, as Hill prefers it, the crime novel. The central plot concerns the harrowing story of a multiple child murderer; the specifics of the narrative concentrate on the abduction and killing of a nine-year-old boy from outside his home. If this sounds like the outline for yet another serial killer story, this is a novel which contains one of the biggest jolts in the whole of modern detective fiction. As the full horror of the crimes unfolds, it transpires that the killer is a woman. Over the years, we have been conditioned to expect serial killers to be men, both in fiction and real life. There are, of course, exceptions, but even rarer are female killers of children; Beverly Allitt and Myra Hindley of recent times owe at least part of their notoriety to the fact that they are women. If this were the only remarkable facet of these novels, this revelation alone is enough to challenge the preconceived ideas of the most openminded reader, but it is not.
Aside from the shock value that the gender of the killer brings, the reason that these two novels are of such profound interest lies in their relationship to Hill’s ghost stories and, in particular, *The Woman in Black*. It is my contention that in citing the relationship between Jennet Humfrye and Edwina Sleightholme we are witnessing a skilful transposition from one genre to another. This is not merely based on the cold fact that both are killers of children, but on how the nature of spectrality, specifically its metaphoric narrative possibilities, can be represented in different contexts. The thematic core of these works is the notion of innocence represented by childhood or at least a child-like vulnerability. This, in turn, begs the question as to what is the fate of innocence when faced with the exigencies of the adult world?

In the first, *The Various Haunts of Men*, which deals with the effects of a sadistic serial killer on the cathedral town of Lafferton, we have been introduced to Chief Inspector Simon Serrailler and his family. All the books in the series so far have featured multiple murderers, and this work established what would be an enduring feature of the series, the parallel lives of a number of disparate characters whose own lives are often connected thematically, directly or indirectly, to the main narrative thread. I have written elsewhere on the tendency of detective fiction narrative to reinforce its central themes by complementary allusions, a process enhanced by the genre’s narrative structure.\(^1\) This imperative makes concentration on the plot and its resolution the overriding preoccupation of the text, so that supporting thematic allusions become an important contribution to the whole.

*The Pure in Heart* begins, paradoxically, in Venice, where Simon Serrailler, who, aside from his police duties is also a promising artist, is taking a holiday. It is here that we encounter the first of many visions of innocence that the novel portrays. Simon receives news that his younger sister is gravely ill; Martha is in her mid-twenties, some ten years younger than Simon. She has been severely mentally handicapped since birth ‘pitiful, ugly, drooling, unable to communicate, barely responsive’, in other words, in all but name a baby with all the innocence that accompanies that state.\(^2\) As the novel progresses, Martha’s life and death will challenge the idea of that innocence and its sanctity throughout her whole family. For Simon’s part, he loves her with an unconditional love that one might have
for a child, ‘the strange, pure love which can receive no recognition or response and demands neither.’ This purity of innocence is one of the paradoxes of the novel; it is by turns seemingly inviolable, Martha appearing incorruptible by virtue of her isolation from the world and yet simultaneously deeply vulnerable to the actions of others. It is almost as if her life is a void which will be filled by the corruption of the adult world that surrounds and controls her, like a spectre, with her inscrutable expression, she is the first of many ‘ghosts’ that haunt the pages of the novel.

The unmarried Serrailler, one of triplets, is from a medical family. His mother, Meriel, and father, Richard, are both doctors, as are the other two triplets, Ivo and Cat, with whom he has an especially close relationship. On his return, he learns that Cat is expecting her third child; this raises the irony of a juxtaposition of two innocents, the new baby and their handicapped sister Meriel. The plight of Martha reveals the guilt felt by her father, whose visits to Martha have been infrequent, and he was once heard to refer to her as ‘the vegetable’. The condition of Martha and the impending new arrival, therefore, takes on the impression of a cycle of renewal within the family. At the hospital, Simon meets Meriel, who articulates the agony experienced by a mother in such a position, ‘Every time I come through that door I feel torn in two [...] Afraid she will be dead. Hoping she will be dead.’ Such is the poignancy of these words that they will return to haunt the text in a shocking way as the fate of Martha is determined.

But the agonizing over Martha’s condition and Cat’s pregnancy is just the beginning of a network of subplots in the novel. The text abounds with the experiences of the innocent in the face of a complex and potentially hostile world. Andy Gunton, a local lad, leaves prison after four years; his only recourse when free is to lodge with his sister and her family with whom he has nothing in common. The whole experience leaves him disorientated and confused:

Jeez. What was four years? A bloody lifetime, half his youth, but then again nothing, a blink; he did not know where he was or what he was doing, he might have landed from Mars.

And still later:

He thought back to prison. He had a glimmer of understanding why people sent themselves back there. Not that he would, not
ever. But the world was difficult. Freedom was difficult. Nothing was as he’d expected it to be, everything, once the novelty of being out had worn off, was either a shock or a disappointment. He felt aimless and frustrated. He wanted to get on with something...life, he supposed. Was this life? 22

The time Andy has spent in prison has been the same as a second period of gestation, and his release a rebirth, but it is subject to all the contingencies of the world. To all intents and purposes he is a child again, beginning from scratch and reabsorbing the ways of a world that no longer provides him with shelter and nourishment. But he has to learn again, as others in the narrative do, that to be an innocent in this world, is no guarantee of a benevolent fate. He cuts a spectral figure, invisible, a non-player in the mainstream of life, one seemingly destined to dwell on the margins. This is not say that he is without ambition; in fact, with all the artlessness of youth, he imagines that he will pursue a career in horticulture after spending eighteen months working in the prison garden. But before he can even contemplate achieving such a goal, he has to face the temptations and corruption of a society naturally hostile to his kind of ‘innocence’. This malevolent influence comes in the form of his old partner in crime, Lee Carter, who since Andy’s incarceration has prospered through his criminal activities. Such is his need for money and the independence that it brings; he agrees to take on the job of delivering stolen high-performance cars. Inevitably this leads to disaster; he is caught and once again seems at the mercy of the law; only later is he rescued by Serrailler, who finds him the opening in gardening work that he seeks.

Another character who has a release of a different kind is Cat’s friend, Karin McCafferty, who receives the all-clear from the cancer that has threatened her life. She has shunned orthodox treatment in favour of homeopathy, and this seems to have paid off; only later in The Risk of Darkness will the storm clouds return. Deserted by her husband, too, she is in the process of being reborn, in the same way that Andy’s release affects him. The fact that Cat is pregnant adds to Karin’s uncertainty; it stirs old instincts, ‘The old longing for children, usually at the back of her mind, stung sharply again.’ 23 For Karin, as for many of the lost souls in The Pure in Heart, the yardstick by which happiness is judged is the warm and happy family of Cat and her husband, Chris, another doctor. This ‘happy little unit’ seems
to be the unattainable Shangri-La for the likes of Andy, Karin, and for the helpless Martha. Each in their own way is haunted; haunted by desires, loss and the uncertainty of their lives.24

When we reach the centre of the complex web in The Pure in Heart, the abduction of David Angus begins to resonate with the subplots which surround it. David is the archetypal innocent, a nine-year-old who is taken while waiting outside his home for a school lift. The shocking, seemingly casual way he disappears only underlines his vulnerable state. One minute he stands free, the next he is spirited away:

He was still laughing a bit when the car drew up beside him, laughing too much to take in that the colour was wrong and that someone had opened the door and was pushing him roughly inside as the wheels spun hard away from the kerb.25

The moment he disappears David assumes the role of a ghost, as his distraught mother, Marilyn, conjures up his imaginary presence:

He was here. She smelled him. She sensed him. If she reached out she would touch him. If he was here he was dead.

She lay down on her son’s bed and pulled out his pyjamas from beneath the pillow. They smelled of his hair, the odd, particular boy’s smell. She cradled them. He was here now. After a while, she fell asleep and David slept beside her, his small thin body tucked into hers, as close a part of her as it had been before his birth.26

The abduction and murder of David remind us that one of the fundamental themes of The Pure in Heart, The Risk of Darkness and The Woman in Black is the nature of killing. Most of all, the deaths in all three novels concern the brutal curtailment of innocence. It is a bleak prospect; the only ‘compensation’ for this savagery is to avoid the risk of inevitable corruption which comes with the passage into adulthood. The characters of the spectre, Jennet, and the serial killer, Edwina, are testament to what happens when this process goes badly awry. We might even surmise that death in this context is a metaphor for experience itself. We have already noted that Jennet exacts her retribution ruthlessly, without regret, in what passes for the law of the ghost, a relentless pursuit of redress for her loss, her only raison
So, in metaphoric terms, it is a case of the iniquitous values of society returning to exact consequences on future generations. In Edwina’s case, however, we learn very little about her motives; she has a hunger, a compulsion which drives her on, a phenomenon that seems abstracted from her everyday persona. Certainly she kills dispassionately, without remorse or consideration of the consequences. We are left to speculate about some unspoken childhood trauma which has led her to behave in a psychotic fashion on the present generation of children.

But there is yet another kind of killer to consider; Meriel’s visit to the hospital to see Martha was not routine. Being a doctor, she had the knowledge to inject Meriel with a lethal solution. She murders her own child out of conviction that the quality of her life has now been compromised to such an extent that it no longer has any meaning. Martha dies, ironically, not because she deserves to, but because she possesses too much good; her condition dictates that she is the embodiment of the book’s title, ‘the pure in heart’, uncorrupted by the sins of the world. It is to be the very epitaph for her gravestone. So, Hill, in all three novels through the language and actions of the ghost, confronts us with conflicting notions about the taking of innocent life. It challenges us to decide at what point does our reaction of horror at killing become mitigated by the operation of misguided retribution, insanity or mercy?

It is not possible, as already noted, to ascribe the act of revenge to Edwina, or indeed anything else which might pass as motive; this is a murderer whose actions are never explained, no reason given save the periodic ‘craving’ which leads her to behave as she does. One is drawn to the conclusion that if Nemesis has any part to play, as it does with Jennet, then this is fate in its customary random form. The name Nemesis is related to the Greek word νέμειν/némein, to which Chambers gives the neutral meaning of ‘to deal out or dispense.’ This implies that Nemesis originally meant the distributor of fortune, neither good nor bad, simply in due proportion to each according to what was deserved. But even this version of fate is distorted in the face of the mind of a murderer who distributes fate as a perversion, intervening in life without reason. For the detective novel, with its obsession for explanation, this introduces the counter thrust of an existentialist narrative where meaning is merely the creation of random human actions. One of the ironies of the comparison of these
texts is that, in the *The Woman in Black*, there is a ghost who murders as a ‘conventional’ killer for ‘identifiable’ if irrational reasons, and in *The Pure in Heart* and *The Risk of Darkness* a murderer who, to all intents and purposes, lives as a ghost and kills for no apparent reason.

Throughout the course of both novels, Hill uses the metaphor and the language of the ghost to describe the characters’ predicament. Pre-eminent amongst these is Edwina herself; from the moment of her dramatic arrest on the cliffs of the Yorkshire coast by Serrailler, to her interrogation, she is seen increasingly as a spectral figure. She adopts the enigmatic manner of Jennet, she stares at her interrogators, but gives nothing away. ‘Didn’t answer questions, didn’t tell them what she was thinking. Kept quiet. She could do that for ever.’

Later Serrailler even manages to induce a few tears from her when he asks her to describe herself:

The silence lasted minutes, not seconds. Ed was staring at her own hands, but the hands had still not moved. Dead hands.

Then Serrailler saw that she was crying. The tears were silent, and ran very slowly, individually, down her cheeks. He waited. He waited. She made no move to brush them away.

‘Just tell me,’ he said quietly. ‘It’s easy. Say their names. Then tell me what happened. Ed?’

Nothing. The silence went on and the waxen hands remained still and the tears came, one by one, and slid slowly down, and he waited.  

Already Ed has assumed the unearthly persona of a twilight being, unresponsive to everyday discourse; she has withdrawn into another world. From this moment, all the references to her are couched in ghostly language; we learn that Kyra, the little girl who lives next door to Ed and who has struck up a close relationship with her, cannot understand why Ed has gone. She is terrified that she will never see her again. When her mother sees this, she says, “you look like you’ve seen a bleedin’ ghost.” But she hadn’t. That was what was wrong. She hadn’t.’ And later, Kyra’s mother muses that, ‘Ed’s house was odd, like a ghost house, a hollow shell sitting next door, not just a house where they were out at work or even away on holiday. Different.’ In the irony that a killer of children befriends a child
without harming her, there is here the merest hint that some clue from her own childhood may hold the key to Edwina’s condition. Perhaps the considered loss of her own childhood without fulfilment and the opportunity to relive it through one individual is the trigger – we are not to know.

The full horror of Edwina’s crimes gradually unfolds as forensic teams discover nine bodies of children in the cave near where she was arrested. Her mother, Eileen, plunges headlong into a campaign to try and prove her innocence, more out of guilt than any other reason, while her new husband, Dougie, despairs as he remembers Edwina as little more than a will-o-the-wisp:

When she had gone, he had the strange feeling that nobody had been there, no one he could pin down or remember, a nothing sort of person, a small, dark, fleeting shadow [...] It was as though even her words hadn’t been there, hadn’t left any trace on the air, just breath which had evaporated, leaving no mark in his memory.34

In the final analysis, Serrailler is forced to admit that Edwina possesses qualities that are supernatural:

‘I felt it. Evil. Looking at her. But it wasn’t what I expected. It was impenetrable and pointless. Cold. Locked away. Shut up inside itself [...] I felt I had no point of human contact with this person, not a single spark of recognition that we belonged on the same planet.’35

I have spoken of Jennet and Edwina as differing personifications of Nemesis, as the agent of fate in the guise of murder. At this point, it is necessary to understand the true meaning of fate and to separate it from ambiguity; in particular, I want to stress the randomness of fate, its arbitrary role in the unfolding of life. One useful way of understanding and isolating its meaning is to separate fate from the idea of destiny, with which it is often associated, as Christopher Bollas explains the classical origins of both terms:

The course of destiny can be altered, but this is usually through the epic hero’s interpretation of his destiny. On the other hand fate,
or the fates, do intervene quite often, and it’s possible to speak of capricious fates. Not until the seventeenth century do we observe an increasing differentiation between these terms, when destiny becomes a more positive concept depicting that course that is a potential in one’s life [...]. Possibly the idea of fate derives from an agrarian culture where people are dependent on the seasons and the weather for their nurturance, thus giving man a sense that his life is very much up to the elements.36

The operation of fate is irrational and impersonal; both Jennet and Edwina select their victims at random, the former with the definite purpose of revenge, and the latter through an unknown urge. From the victims’ perspective, their deaths are a consequence not of any destiny but an unhappy stroke of fate that could easily have befallen another. The reason why this is important, particularly in relation to Hill’s crime fiction, is the instability it brings to the narrative. If we consider the conventional detective narrative, its overriding imperative is the unfolding of story of a crime destined to bring closure, the criminal is caught and the motive for the crimes revealed through the solving of clues, but in *The Pure in Heart* and *The Risk of Darkness*, we are brought face to face with a murderer where no motive is forthcoming. The murder of the innocents has, to all intents and purposes, been a random event caused by some deep and unexplained psychic disturbance. What animates both novels is the tension set up between a plot that does not fully resolve and a narrative structure which pulls in the opposite direction. Hill’s use of the ghost metaphor in the language of the texts is, too, an effective way of tying the narrative to a more ethereal, unobtainable world than we are used to in the detective genre. All of which makes clear that to be innocent in whatever form it might take, is no guarantee of safety or protection; indeed, it may even be the very definition of vulnerability itself. In all of Hill’s crime novels to date, we encounter the random fate of the innocent when faced with a figure emblematic of the idea of fate. In *The Pure in Heart* and *The Risk of Darkness*, it is not just the guilty who risk darkness.
Tony Hillerman’s Cultural Metaphysics

The pale-faces are masters of the earth, and the time of the red-men has not yet come again... (James Fenimore Cooper (1789–851), *The Last of the Mohicans*)

Tony Hillerman’s novels embody much that has changed in the detective fiction of the last thirty years. Since the re-emergence and development of metaphysical ideas in the detective story, a phenomenon which heralded, in part, a reconnection with some of the founding principles exhibited by Poe, the genre has broadened its thematic horizons considerably. These innovations have seen the detective story become infinitely more inclusive of different cultures away from the traditional representation of western values towards an increasing body of work on gender and racial politics, cultural diversity and, importantly for these pages, an acceptance of the supernatural. For many of these reasons, Hillerman’s Joe Leaphorn/Jim Shee series of detective novels are pointers into a future where supernatural ideas can find new and enriching ways to co-exist with the conventions of the genre. They are texts, too, which frequent the borders of interpretation; all of them may be read as conventional detective stories while simultaneously embracing metaphysical ideas that draw attention to the profound nature of spiritual belief and its relationship with the natural world. They posit, too, the tensions between two very different cultures, the mystical traditions of the Navajo way of life and that of the crime story and its investigation. This chapter will, therefore, explore how Hillerman balances the
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Demands of a modern, secular world and the cultural imperative of an ancient society where the existence of the supernatural is central to its philosophy. One intriguing facet of this conjunction is the way in which the ratiocinative techniques of the detective are combined with the intuitive wisdom gleaned from the spirit world.

On a few occasions during the course of this book, texts have been featured which genuinely immerse detective fiction in the supernatural without resorting to its presence as a transitory explanation. These include the stories featuring the Psychic Detectives as well as two chapters featuring conventional texts: The Burning Court posits an alternative dimension as a separate, parallel universe to the tangible world of the rational detective, while Christie’s The Mysterious Mr. Quin is an elaborate metaphor for the way in which the logical processes of the detective function. But Hillerman’s books seem to offer something different, a tacit recognition that in some cultures the presence of the supernatural is not incompatible with so-called ‘rational existence’. This brings these texts closer to the ideas of the metaphysical detective story and even flirts with notion of magical realism.

The term ‘metaphysical detective story’ was first used in 1941 by that pioneering critic of the genre, Howard Haycraft, in an attempt to describe the theological, paradoxical intricacies of Chesterton’s Father Brown series, which do have some tenuous connections with Hillerman’s work. \(^2\) Haycraft argues:

> Chesterton is at his best when he states a problem in apparently supernatural terms and then resolves it by philosophical paradox – see such tales as ‘The Hammer of God’, ‘The Invisible Man’, and that anthologists’ favorite ‘The Queer Feet’. \(^3\)

So, in ‘The Hammer of God’, what appears to be a death caused by the wrath of a retributive God is, in fact, a murder, but because this act is carried out by a clergyman from the tower of a church, it becomes a parody of its original proposition. In Chesterton, solutions to the mysteries are always arrived at by the conventional method of deduction, but Father Brown, as a priest, believes that divine power is working through him to uncover the truth. So, while we still encounter the transitory plot idea, the difference comes with the belief that the detective is participating in a
wider supernatural exercise. In Hillerman, of course, his detectives, although immersed in the spiritual world, are not priests but professional policemen, products of a system designed to deal strictly in the rational, confronted by much older and more deeply embedded cultural practices.

Since Haycraft, the definition of the metaphysical detective story has been refined continuously; William V. Spanos came up with the phrase ‘anti-detective story’, and Dennis Porter suggests that ‘many modern tales are machines without exits. The end brings neither revelation and the relief of a concluded sequence, nor, \textit{a fortiori}, the return of order to a community and confirmation of human mastery.’ It is easy to identify this fruitless search for truth in novels such as Thomas Pynchon’s \textit{The Crying of Lot 49}, for example, where Oedipa Maas’s strange trail of detection leaves her none the wiser, as it does with Quin in Paul Auster’s \textit{City of Glass}. But more recently, Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney have suggested that a metaphysical detective story ‘adds to a mystery rather than resolving it’ and that this discontinuance raises ‘profound questions [...] about narrative, interpretation, subjectivity, the nature of reality and the limits of knowledge.’ What is intriguing about this definition is the idea that the metaphysical story changes our perception of what we choose to call reality. Quite apart from its lack of revelation, \textit{City of Glass} also explores the different meanings of identity and reality. This bewildering maze starts with Paul Auster, the writer of the novel, to the unnamed ‘author’ who reports the events as reality, to ‘Paul Auster the writer’ a character in the story, to ‘Paul Auster the detective’, who may or may not exist in the novel, to Peter Stillman the younger, to Peter Stillman the elder and, finally, to Daniel Quinn, protagonist. Such is the confusion created by these relationships that we are aware of several different ‘realities’ spilling over into each other until our sense of narrative progression is utterly confounded.

This question of what constitutes reality is a fundamental requirement of this form of the detective novel; we learn, for instance, from one of its earliest exponents, Borges, that the solution to each of his three homages to Poe’s Dupin trilogy is but one of a number of alternatives. Borges implies that in other dimensions other ‘realities’ apply, which in itself is a gentle subversion of the conventional detective story’s preoccupation with certainty. In ‘The Garden of Forking
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Paths’, Albert explains how Ts’ui Pen’s book depicts a ‘dizzying web of divergent, convergent and parallel times’:

In most of those times, we do not exist; in some, you exist but I do not; in others, I do and you do not; in others still, we both do. In this one, which the favouring of chance has dealt me, you have come into my home; in another, when you come through my garden you find me dead; in another, I say these same words, but I am an error, a ghost.⁸

The idea that in some ‘realities’ we are ghosts, that a spirit realm exists which we believe in, which runs parallel to the world we experience, yet is within our consciousness even as we inhabit our own dimension, is the central tenet of Tony Hillerman’s series of novels featuring Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn and Sergeant Jim Chee. A number of themes and elements suggest themselves in Hillerman’s Navajo mysteries, but the overarching impression is the coincidence of two very different cultures, that of the Navajo and the rationalist world of the police. What adds spice to the narratives is the fact that the main protagonists, the detectives, are of Navajo descent. Chee, who is younger and more impressionable, takes a more traditional Navajo worldview, believing in the power of traditional singers and other rituals; however, he has come to take a more figurative or symbolic view of chindi, Navajo ghosts. Chee studies to be a yataalii, or medicine man, roughly speaking a shaman, whenever time allows, largely because he sees the assimilation of the Navajo in white society as destroying Navajo culture and making it difficult for many to fit into either world. Leaphorn, on the other hand, is somewhat sceptical of tradition, but nonetheless he respects it. Although he takes seriously reports of witchcraft, he does not believe in witches, but, following a murder-suicide early in his career, in which a man killed three people whom he believed to be Skinwalkers, Leaphorn realizes that belief in witches can lead to very ‘real’ problems. As Hillerman says ‘While Leaphorn was no longer truly a traditional, he still treasured the old ways of his people.’⁹

Listening Woman (1978) is the third of the Leaphorn/Chee mysteries and one of the most celebrated; it was nominated for the 1979 ‘Best Mystery Novel’ Edgar Award. Because it contains all those qualities typical of the series, I propose to examine this text as an exemplar of
those involving Leaphorn, and it will be followed by an analysis of the Chee novel *The Ghostway* (1984), which has a similar standing.

The plot outline for *Listening Woman* is as follows: A blind Navajo healer, Margaret Cigaret, called Listening Woman, attends Hosten (Old Man) Tso to find out what has been ailing him. While she withdraws a short distance to meditate, Tso and Listening Woman's young assistant are murdered by an unknown assailant. The FBI makes no progress with the case until Leaphorn picks up the threads some months later. After talking to Listening Woman and John McGinnis, the old trader on Short Mountain Trading Post, Leaphorn discovers that Old Man Tso had an ancient Navajo secret about ceremonial sand paintings which he hoped to pass on his grandson shortly before his death. Earlier Leaphorn has been nearly run over by a man wearing sunglasses, whom he nicknames 'Goldrims', and starts a search for him. Also thrown into a seemingly unconnected mix are a missing helicopter and an unsolved armed robbery. Leaphorn looks in vain for the location of the mysterious sand paintings and finds Tso's grandson, now a Catholic priest, who is involved with a white girlfriend. They disappear, and Leaphorn suspects that young Tso either is involved in the murder of his grandfather or has been taken captive by the real killers. Leaphorn tracks them down to a remote cave, where he discovers the sacred place of the sand paintings and finds himself confronted with the people behind the murder of Tso, who died because of what he might have known about the hideout. They have kidnapped some boy scouts and Tso's grandson and the girl. The killers are members of the militarist 'Buffalo Society', a radical Indian rights organization, which includes Goldrims, who are in the process of conducting a high-profile terrorist action involving the kidnapping and planned murder of fifteen innocent people. The stolen helicopter was part of the getaway plan. Leaphorn effects a rescue, but Tso's grandson dies.

In *Listening Woman*, Hillerman keeps us aware that we are reading about the conjunction of two very distinct cultures. After Leaphorn has nearly been run over, he sits and contemplates the prospect of 'blessed' rain on the parched landscape, an effect which is emblematic of the cultural differences at play:

It was not a Navajo concept, this idea of adjusting nature to human needs. The Navajo adjusted himself to remain in harmony
with the universe. When nature withheld, the Navajo sought the pattern of this phenomenon – as he sought the pattern of all things – to find its beauty and live in harmony with it.¹¹

This dichotomy applies to Leaphorn himself; although he is naturally invested with Navajo culture he has been schooled in the white man’s way of life. He graduated from university with a degree in archaeology and then learnt the rules of policing. His journey from Navajo upbringing to the secular world is the mirror image of Hillerman, himself, who came to Indian life from a material world. As such, many of the books deal with this twilight area between the two cultures, with the characters constantly drawn to one or the other and even both at the same time.

Consequently, Leaphorn exhibits attributes of the analytical detective, but often these seem infused with traditional ways. On the trail of his would-be assassin, he comes across a scene where he divines that Goldrims's savage dog has killed two sheepdogs. The line of deduction which leads him to discover the shallow grave of the dogs is positively Holmesian:

There were tracks everywhere [...] Leaphorn examined a rim of sand in a bootprint near the water, fingered it, tested its moisture content, considered the state of the weather, and weighed in cool humidity in this shadowed place [...] Leaphorn studied the sandy floor. He examined an indentation, made by an oblong rectangle eighteen inches long and eight inches wide [...] Leaphorn picked up a bead-sized ball of sand. It flattened between thumb and forefinger into a sticky, gritty red. A droplet of drying blood. Leaphorn sniffed it touched it with his tongue, and trotted partway up the sloping wall of the pocket. He stood looking down on the basin.¹²

From this vantage point, Leaphorn sees that the tracks run out, they have been erased, so he digs and makes the gruesome discovery of the dead sheepdogs. This extended passage of deduction seems to run much deeper than mere inferences drawn from clues; here Leaphorn seems to be transcending his police training by exercising much older skills, those handed down to him by his Navajo forebears. The miraculous revelation, as a consequence, appears shamanic, and the whole
process of reading clues becomes a supernatural process; even the now sceptical Leaphorn could believe ‘that a witch had killed them.’

Subsequently, Leaphorn visits McGinnis, the owner of a remote trading centre; he has gone to see the old man, well known for his knowledge of all the gossip about local people, to try and find out why Tso had talked about the violation of certain sand paintings, a grave taboo, before his death. McGinnis tells him of Tso’s gentleness and that this type of killing is not the Navajo way; ‘That’s one kind of white man’s meanness the Navajos never took to [...] you don’t have this planning in advance and going out to kill somebody like white folks.’ This is a telling remark as it covers a more general metaphor prevalent in Hillerman’s novels, that crime, especially violent crime, of course, is emblematic of the damage inflicted on the Navajo by white culture. This does not preclude, of course, crime being committed by the indigenous population, but somehow this always seems to have emanated from the wider world.

The result of this conversation is to set Leaphorn reflecting on his innate knowledge of Navajo metaphysics; they recognize ‘no life after death [...] good simply ceased. That which was unnatural, and therefore evil, wandered through the darkness as a ghost disturbing nature and causing sickness.’ For the Navajo, therefore, the effect of such killings was an ‘unrelieved horror’, and so Leaphorn, as an instrument of an external law bent on justice, is in effect simultaneously combating the influence of a supernatural evil. There are parallels here with the traditional western ghost story, where the spectre is frequently the product of some disturbance in the fabric of life, which can either be a crime or the result of some unresolved personal wrong.

From this point, the narrative becomes charged with the tension between the older, spiritual world of the Navajo and the modern, secular business of the pursuit of criminals. It is a mirror of the struggle taking place within Leaphorn himself who, try as he might, finds that his work as a detective is as inextricably linked to his Navajo past as it is to his present role as a detective. After he has driven from McGinnis’s place to Tso’s hogan, a traditional Navajo house, in search of the old man’s grandson, he waits for the dawn. Recalling the substance of his conversation with McGinnis, he contemplates the nature of evil and how the Navajo Wolves, men and women who had the ability to transform themselves into dogs, wolves, even
bears, would wreak havoc amongst his people. He remembers that ‘as a boy he had believed, fervently and fearfully, in this concept of evil.’ Since then, at university, he had come to reject this view of the world in favour of a seemingly more rational version, but then he also recalls an incident from that time:

He had visited his grandmother, and gone alone to the old volcano core. Climbing the crumbling basalt crags, feeling brave and liberated, he had found two caves – one of which seemed to lead downward into the black heart of the earth. There had been no witches, nor any sign that anything used these caves except, perhaps, a den of coyotes. But he hadn't climbed down into the darkness.

This passage demonstrates the latent effect of the ancient, supernatural on the Navajo psyche. In ancient cultures, no matter how exposed someone has been to alternative social practices, it seems the latent effect of the supernatural is still powerful. It remains deep in the psyche, waiting to emerge at moments of crisis.

The ‘darkness’ is a dilemma that Chee also experiences; in The Ghostway he is confronted with a hogan where a Navajo, Albert Gorman, who has become a Los Angeles hoodlum, dies from a bullet wound. In the normal course of Navajo protocol, a dying man would be taken into the open air to die so that the spirits may escape the environment surrounding the corpse. In this case, because the death has occurred in the hogan, the body was dragged through a corpse hole in the wall of building to a suitable place outside, but the ghost has been trapped inside. Chee’s Navajo upbringing presents him with an unenviable choice:

Chee stared at the corpse hole, a black gap broken through the north wall. He had cocked his pistol without knowing he’d done it. It was incredible. People do not go into a death hogan. People do not step through the darkness. White men, yes. As Sharkey had done. And Deputy Sheriff Bales. As Chee himself, who had come to terms with the ghosts of his people, might do if the reason was powerful enough. But most Navajos would not.

Such is the quandary between the draw of his atavistic upbringing and the reality of his life as a police officer that he has to hide his
fears from a young relative of the family. After all, what could be more natural for a policeman than to visit the scene where a murdered man has died?

What would he do if he went in? Run his fingers between the logs. Poke into cracks. Looking for what? There was no reason to go inside. No reason to step through the hole into the darkness.²⁰

So, Leaphorn and Chee are haunted men, whose personal reflection of the main text of the series, the awkward conjunction of two different worlds, causes them much anxiety. Despite his new life as a policeman, his refusal to descend into the unknown confirms the power of immemorial cultural roots, transcending those ideas which have been more recently acquired. Nor is this confined to Leaphorn; later we learn that even Tull, another ‘modernized’ Navajo who is one of the Buffalo Society conspirators and a hardened criminal, believes that he is immortal after surviving two near-death experiences. No matter which side of the law you are on, these ancient beliefs, embedded so deep into the psyche, still exert their influence.

The ascendancy of atavistic feelings in Leaphorn continues; he learns from McGinnis that old man Tso may have been in possession of some important medicine bundles which were supposed to have the power to prevent the ending of the world. It is possible that he was killed for these artefacts which have deep significance in the Navajo world. Tso’s grandson is unable to help him on the whereabouts of the bundles, so Leaphorn turns to Listening Woman. She tells him that she was going to recommend Tso to initiate a Mountain Way sing and a Black Rain ceremony to drive away his sickness. While talking to her, he realizes that Tso’s attacker had not seen Listening Woman; if he had, he would surely have killed her as a possible witness. This meant that his escape route had not been across the open country, but instead the trail led into the canyons which almost certainly meant a hideout somewhere. Convinced now that Goldrims killed Tso because also he finds the paw prints of a very large dog on the earthen floor of the hogan, Leaphorn starts to connect the various strands of the leads he has been following. Using Navajo instinct, he draws a line on a map through the site of the sheepdog deaths, Tso’s hogan where he was killed, and an apparent sighting of the stolen helicopter, and he finds that they begin to
form a trail. Having briefed himself on the Buffalo Society members and the bank raid they carried out, he becomes convinced that these incidents will lead him to a resolution. The catalyst here is the nature of Navajo metaphysics which drive his thought processes:

Too much coincidence. Leaphorn didn't believe in it. He believed nothing happened without cause. Everything intermeshed, from the mood of a man, to the flight of a corn beetle, to the music of the wind. It was the Navajo philosophy, this concept of interwoven harmony, and it was bred into Leaphorn’s bones. There had to be a reason for the death of Hosteen Tso, and it had to be connected with why Goldrims – or at least Goldrims's dog – had been drawn to the Tso hogan.  

Leaphorn follows the trail of Goldrim's dog, Tso’s grandson and girlfriend into the canyons and so to the showdown with the Buffalo Society’s leaders. It has taken the ideas of a mystic philosophy of pantheistic wholeness to recognize the hidden design behind the seemingly random set of events. Leaphorn uses methods of reasoning from both of the worlds represented in the narrative; he draws inferences from physical clues such as the scene of the dog fight, supported by his much older instinct Navajo instinct for such, and underpins these discoveries further by resort to metaphysical ideas.

As the novel draws to an end, Leaphorn therefore finds himself in the cave where the Buffalo gang are holding Tso’s grandson and his girlfriend hostage along with a number of boy scouts. As he surveys the cave, he stumbles upon the great secret which haunted Hosteen Tso, a series of sand paintings handed down from previous generations, designed to enable the world to be restarted in the event of a catastrophe. These were the paintings which Tso had seen vandalized, and over which he had agonized, and sure enough, nearby Leaphorn finds his footprints. Goldrims, who turns out to be Tso’s other renegade grandson and leader of the Buffalo Society, had been told of the cave by Tso and, as a result used as the base for his operations. Tso had to die to be kept quiet.

This dénouement is full of symbolism; what has been a sacred place for the Navajo is taken over ironically by extreme radicals fighting for the cause of the Indians against white oppression. In the desperate fight at the end, the cave is destroyed by an explosion; money from
the armed robbery is reclaimed, but the sand paintings are obliterated. This debacle can be read as the hopelessness of any resurrection of the Navajo world which is steadily being eroded out of existence. The whole narrative has turned on events which flow from the existence of series of supernatural paintings designed to save the world, and despite the rescue of most of the hostages, their destruction speaks of an underlying bleakness. The exchange between the two ‘realities’ becomes a struggle between the supernatural, as represented by the Navajo tradition, and the materialistic world of the white man. As the narrative unfolds, we read the dominance of the latter over the former as an apocalyptic warning for all cultures, whose last resort is contained in a heritage of the imagination.

As if to emphasize these sentiments about differing cultures, on returning to Chee we find that he contemplates the implications of the corpse hole again towards the end of *The Ghostway* and realizes that transgressing the law of the death hogan is merely a metaphor for a more fundamental sickness, of which he now begins to see the full significance:

Chee’s head ached, his eyes burned. He was thinking maybe Albert Gorman died outside the hogan after all. Maybe he hadn’t stepped through the corpse hole into a *chindi* hogan. Maybe he wasn’t contaminated with ghost sickness. But that didn’t matter either. The ghost sickness came when he made the step – out of *hozro* and into the darkness. Out of being a Navajo, into being a white man. For Chee that was where the sickness lay.

Chee’s epiphany is to develop in later novels; he completes his training as a shaman and carries out his first ‘sing’ in *Skinwalkers* (1988). The thoughts he expresses here come straight from Hillerman who, in his foreword to Laurance Linford’s book *Tony Hillerman’s Navajoland*, recalls an instance which speaks volumes for the ‘universal ignorance on the part of the great American public of Indian religions, tribal value systems, all things foreign to our dominant system’, as he puts it:

[...] I will recall a westward flight from Albuquerque. The pilot was on the public address system identifying what we were flying over. The mountain to the right, he said, was Mount Taylor, an
extinct volcano over 11,000 feet high with its dried lava flow forming El Malpais monument. Had he known, he might also have told us that before we Whites re-named it after a deceased president, it was Dootł’izhii Dziil, the sacred Turquoise Mountain of Navajo mythology [...] I’m sure the pilot’s omissions weren’t caused by disrespect for earlier American cultures. It was the product of universal ignorance on the part of the great American public of Indian religions, tribal value systems, all things foreign to our dominant system.²⁴

Hillerman’s remarks recall the metaphor of the palimpsest; white culture has overlaid that of the Navajo to the point of extinction. But, still, the ways and practices of the ancients persist, like the palimpsest of Edinburgh, the underlying historical structure is constantly impacting on the present. In fact, ‘presence’ is the operative word here; aside from its overtly supernatural culture which Hillerman’s books embrace, the Navajo reservation itself is a haunting reminder of the injustices meted out by the dominant society which has supplanted it.

Hillerman’s emphasis of the importance to the Navajo of the Turquoise Mountain is evidence of the part played by landscape in their culture. This evokes the whole subject of landscape and its effect on human behaviour which was raised in the discussion of Dartmoor in Chapter 4. It seems that the combination of a long, undisturbed landscape and its attendant generations of occupants give rise to a culture which has at its roots a mystical symbiosis. It is as if the relationship transcends mere occupation and that the land itself takes on an identity of its own, so that the people who dwell there are not merely on the land, but of it, too. This supernatural association has a wider application; Hillerman, for instance, has often acknowledged his debt to an earlier series of mystery novels written by the British-born Australian author Arthur Upfield, whose work was published from 1928 onwards. Upfield’s novels possess many of the features which are reflected in Hillerman’s works; they are set among tribal aborigines in remote desert regions of tropical and subtropical Australia, and the spiritual beliefs encountered in the Navajo culture are present, too. As with Hillerman, Upfield’s detective has indigenous blood; Detective Inspector Napoleon (Bony) Bonaparte is half-aboriginal. Like Chee and Leaphorn, Bony works with deep understanding
of tribal traditions. In 1987, *The Sands of Windee* (1931) was included by H. R. F. Keating in his list of the 100 best crime and mystery books ever published.\textsuperscript{25} Hillerman discussed his debt to Upfield in many interviews and in his introduction to the posthumous 1984 reprint of Upfield’s *A Royal Abduction* (1932), in which he describes the appeal of Upfield’s crime novels. In particular, Hillerman was struck by the depictions of both the harsh outback areas and of ‘the people who somehow survived upon them’ that lured him, and he goes on to say that ‘When my own Jim Chee of the Navajo Tribal Police unravels a mystery because he understands the ways of his people, when he reads the signs in the sandy bottom of a reservation arroyo, he is walking in the tracks Bony made 50 years ago.’\textsuperscript{26}

The Leaphorn/Chee series, therefore, represents a radical shift in how the accepted practice of the re-imposition of order in the detective story is achieved. Both Leaphorn and Chee are detectives who possess not only respect for supernatural ideas but actual belief in their practice. Leaphorn uses a mixture of conventional clue-solving and Navajo lore in order to arrive at the solution to a case. For a detective story, this is a remarkable narrative, an idea which is supported by the fact that at no stage during this novel, or indeed any of the others in the series, is the idea of the supernatural debunked. The metaphysical is often questioned and occasionally viewed sceptically but is never deliberately deployed as a plot device to be discounted by a rational solution. Even more remarkable when one considers the fact that the novels do contain what we might term as ‘conventional endings’; malefactors are, after all, more often than not brought to justice. This is the operation of white man’s justice, but what abides, what transcends the everyday operation of the tangible is the metaphysical world of our imagination, an idea also found in Chesterton. Father Brown may solve the problems of the secular world by the use of logic, but he is also aware of a wider compass, an all-knowing force which encompasses the narrative within which he operates. We, as readers, understand that this universe abides in the memory and imagination of the psyche, and who knows where else, and that, notwithstanding its vulnerability to modern ‘realities’, it exerts an instinctual power that we still have to comprehend fully.

So, in the light of this experience, we return to Merivale and Sweeney’s definition of metaphysical detective fiction, perhaps with a greater understanding of what it is that challenges our perception
of the ‘nature of reality’. In Hillerman, as in Chesterton, the metaphysical world is invariably upheld as a legitimate, alternative way of experiencing the world. The title of this chapter poses a question as to whether detective fiction, particularly through the medium of the Hillerman novels, may be moving towards a form of magical realism. Matthew Strecher defines this as ‘what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe.’  

Other definitions of magical realism are notoriously difficult to pin down; Strecher’s is probably the most understood by western cultures because of the western reader’s disassociation with mythology. Thus, magical realism is invariably viewed through what constitutes ‘real’; so, in the Hillerman texts the presence of the Navajo culture set in the savage reality of the landscape appears as a jolt to western sensibilities. No such confusion exists within, say, non-western cultures, where the occurrence of myth, legend and the supernatural co-exist with what might elsewhere be regarded as a ‘real’ setting. So, magical realism is very much bound up with the ‘conception of the real’. These texts create a reality, as Scott Simpson has put it, ‘in which the relation between incidents, characters, and setting could not be based upon or justified by their status within the physical world’. Based on this definition, it is possible to say that the Leaphorn/Slee novels certainly come closer than most otherwise conventional detective texts in their portrayal of the supernatural. So, in this particular instance, the connection between the rational and the supernatural seems to be a cultural phenomenon; and perhaps for the future, as conventional detective fiction is written within ever more diverse contexts, the barriers between what is perceived to be ‘real’ and what is ‘metaphysical’ will be broken down.
Conclusion

This book began by expressing the fear that the apparent divergence between detective fiction and the ghost story was such that any meaningful attempt at comparison was futile. It seemed, on the face of it, to be a conjunction between logic and anarchy, between form and asymmetry, between narrative closure and uncertainty and between the tangible and the metaphysical. My hope is that the foregoing pages have proved these putative disparities to be false, because this book is an attempt to portray some of the ways in which the detective story has consistently engaged with the supernatural story, particularly since the time of Conan Doyle and M. R. James. More specifically, the ghost story has played a significant part in the evolution of the detective narrative by virtue of its language, imagery and atmosphere. This has been apparent throughout the consideration of such diverse subjects as the past, inquiry, retribution, narrative structure, setting and the loss of childhood, all of which have served to illustrate the extensive nature of this long and productive association. In this final chapter, I will revisit some of these themes reflecting on my arguments and their importance for the detective story. I will first endeavour to capture the broad historical perspective of detective fiction’s supernatural engagement and conclude by contextualizing the examples found throughout these pages.

It is probably difficult for our generation to appreciate the impact of prevailing literary sources on the nascent form of the detective story. The pioneers of detective fiction, however, lived in a literary age which was closely in touch with strong influences of, first, the
Gothic novel and then subsequently, sensation fiction. Both these forms made free with thematic material which might be considered to be antithetical to the norms of the conventional ratiocinative detective story – melodrama, supernatural events and fantastic locations. Yet, this proximity to such material does not seem to have unduly inhibited Poe, Collins or even Conan Doyle. These early writers infused their works with bizarre and supernatural rhetoric almost as a matter of course; there does not seem to have been a conflict in their minds in associating the sedulous logic required to resolve the mystery of a crime with more abstruse metaphysical ideas. In ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, the plot itself is preposterous, bordering on parody; the notion that an orang-utan could be the perpetrator of such a crime belongs much more to Gothic fantasy than it does to Dupin’s world of logical deduction. Even in the less eccentric story of ‘The Purloined Letter’, the solution to the whereabouts of the egregious letter is arrived at by resort to metaphysical considerations between the respective psyches of the offending Minister and Dupin himself. We have seen, too, how Conan Doyle used the language and imagery of the ghost story to enrich the narrative of the Holmes canon. A substantial feature of the history of the detective story up to the outbreak of the First World War was the manner in which it absorbed, rather than rejected, supernatural fiction.

It was within this context of metaphysical ideas that the golden age of detective fiction began. Writing in 1913, Carolyn Wells, in her groundbreaking book *The Technique of the Mystery Story*, states that the mystery story can be divided into three groups, ‘a broad classification’ of ‘Ghost stories, Riddle stories, and Detective stories.’ For Ascari this idea:

[...] testifies to the fact that detective fiction had not yet asserted its identity as a separate genre, but was still regarded as part of a larger cluster of popular genres. It was the search for form – to the detriment of other concerns, such as subject matter and ideological assumptions – that progressively helped foster a narrow critical perspective [...]

While this is undoubtedly true, my contention is that, despite its struggle to achieve a discrete identity, and notwithstanding its exponential growth between the wars, it did not sever its ties with the
ghost story. Instead, the concept of the supernatural was retained as an innate part of the new genre; it became a metaphoric ghost itself, haunting the detective story with repeated manifestations of its own rhetoric. Not even the prescribed formats of the golden age were able to suppress this inherent desire to reveal its origins and as we have seen in the work of Agatha Christie and John Dickson Carr and others, the acknowledgement of the ghost story became even explicit at times. This is by no means unremarkable; it is worth remembering that that this was not only the era of Wells’s prescriptive text but also S. S. Van Dine’s short essay entitled ‘Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories’ (1928), and a year later Ronald Knox, theologian, priest and crime writer produced his ‘Ten Commandments’, or ‘Decalogue’, which listed the main prerequisites for the genre. Both these documents are witness to the apparent hostility towards the supernatural, Van Dine’s eighth ‘rule’ pronounced, ‘Such methods for learning the truth as slate-writing, ouija-boards, mind-reading, spiritualistic se’ances [sic], crystal-gazing, and the like, are taboo’, while Knox’s second ‘commandment’ actually read: ‘All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.’

Such was the latent presence of the supernatural and the metaphysical within the genre that towards the end of the golden age an apparently different kind of detective story emerged. It is no coincidence that the metaphysical detective story, as noted in earlier chapters, originally defined by Chesterton’s Father Brown series, came under new focus when Borges wrote ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’, as part of a wider initiative to mark the centenary of the publication of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’. The metaphysical works of Borges and others have been seen hitherto, as something of a new departure for the genre; a supernatural reading of detective fiction casts considerable doubt on this idea. Works such as ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’, and his two later detective stories ‘Death and the Compass’ and ‘Ibn-H’akam al-Bokhari, Murdered in his Labyrinth’, are, in fact, a re-animation of Poe’s original intellectual and metaphysical approach to investigation. Borges sought to recapture the essence of the detective story, or as one critic has put, it ‘recover what he took to be the genre’s original impulses’; the key point being that Borges saw one of the fundamental ‘impulses’ to be inextricably connected with metaphysical ideas, and so his attempts at detective fiction reflected what he saw as a fundamental component of
the genre. This is nothing new for the detective story; Chesterton, himself, confirms this in his very first Father Brown story, ‘The Blue Cross’ (1911), when the priest states the detective’s most potent weapon, his reasoning powers, are merely part of a wider metaphysical universe:

Reason is always reasonable, even in the last limbo, in the lost borderland of things. I know that people charge the Church with lowering reason, but it is just the other way. Alone on earth, the Church makes reason really supreme. Alone on earth, the Church affirms that God himself is bound by reason.

The detective, therefore, is an instrument of that divinity; according to Father Brown, ‘A miracle is startling, but it is simple. It is power coming directly from God instead of indirectly through nature or human wills.’ While it is possible to concede that many of the Father Brown stories transitory supernatural devices are defeated by reason, the fundamental point is that this emanates from a metaphysical source outside the parameters of the detective fiction narrative. Thus the source of Father Brown’s powers is revealed as other worldly. The inclusion of such ideas within the boundaries of the genre’s closed narrative posits the existence of a wider intangible universe outside the accepted scope of the conventional detective story. We may, therefore, see Borges’s intervention as a way of reaffirming the latent element of the supernatural that has always been present in the detective story from its inception. Such is the power of this presence that certain contexts within the detective narrative invariably give rise to the invocation of either ghostly language or the idea of the ghost itself.

I now want to return to some of the thematic ideas raised in the book, as exemplars of the relationship between the detective and ghost fiction. It is apparent that detective fiction’s recognition of the ghost story has been represented by two broad categories; those which are explicit, as represented by Christie’s Mr. Quin and by Hillerman’s Navajo novels, and those where metaphor is used as a transitory plot or linguistic device to heighten an atmosphere of mystery. This, of course, does not preclude the former category from being interpreted as metaphor, or, for that matter, the latter being read in an alternative way, as I have done with The Hound of the Baskervilles. The
important point is the presence of supernatural discourse in the text. These instances have, of course, much to do with the disposition of the writer, but more profound factors are at work, too. Aside from the author’s more conscious efforts, the body of detective fiction has, over time, acquired a myriad of ideas and references. This, I believe, functions as a kind of memory which may be drawn on at any given time in the creative process. To write in a particular generic form is to assume the mantle of its history and practice; this process, I contend, can therefore also function just as easily in an abstracted state as a material one.

While not wishing to psychoanalyse this point unduly, we might just indulge this analogy a little further by expanding the notion of this putative memory. While a writer is not necessarily aware of all this information at any given time, it can be readily retrieved and placed into consciousness when needed. I suggest that the trigger for such moments in genre writing is the awareness of the historical associations in that genre, its origins, its relationships and, most of all, its body of work. There exists within the collective memory of the detective story, its writers and its texts, a latent reservoir of ideas which come into play whenever new additions to the genre are made. The subject of retribution, for instance, represented by the figure of the retributive ghost, a force from the past bent on revenge, has been one of the dominant figures of the supernatural story since its beginning. Sometimes this character can materialize in the form of a nemesis in both the detective and ghost story, as in Susan Hill’s work or when the character of Henry Wood in ‘The Crooked Man’, a reflection of Yelland in ‘The Familiar’, appears as the personification of that ghostly figure who has come from the past to haunt Colonel Barclay for his past misdeeds. Not only does Conan Doyle produce a number of these retributive figures in the Holmes canon, but he frequently adds another retributive dimension to such tales by associating this theme with Empire, and India in particular; Wood, for instance, is not only a figure from Barclay’s past, he has also returned from India. One of the key influences on subsequent detective story writers is helped, too, by the fact that Conan Doyle was an advocate for spiritualism and wrote a number of very successful ghost stories himself. In the same way that Ascari rightly sees no accident in the Holmes saga being referred to as the ‘canon’ or the sacred writings’ and possessing, as a result, a distinctly religious dimension, I do not
think it possible to read these stories without some recognition, too, of the debt they owe to the supernatural.  

Thus, one of the stock figures of the ghost story has become a central character in detective fiction, too. One of the classic texts of the genre, for instance, has a novel take on the nature of retribution. E. C. Bentley’s *Trent’s Last Case* (1913) involves the death of Sigsbee Manderson, an American financier, who has been shot at his country home in Devonshire. Not only does Trent fail to identify the murderer, making a series of errors in interpreting the clues of the case, he also ends up as a figure haunted by his failure. Trent identifies correctly which clues are relevant, but he fails to draw the correct conclusions from each, and as result the whole investigation founders. The whole plot, however, is an elaborate plan to stage manage his suicide to incriminate his English secretary, John Marlowe, whom he wrongly suspects of having an affair with his wife, Mabel. Trent falls for the ruse and duly identifies Marlowe as the killer; it is not until the very end of the book that Cupples, Mabel’s uncle, admits that he shot Manderson in self-defence as he tried to stop the suicide. This news is shattering for Trent who declares that ‘I will never touch a crime-mystery again [...] I could have borne everything but the last revelation of the impotence of reason.’ Thus, the intended retribution falls not on Marlowe but Trent himself, so this is not retribution born of a personal vendetta, it is what every detective dreads, the punishment for an utter failure to apply infallible logic. But one of the most interesting facets of this novel is the fact that Manderson’s retribution is precisely that of a ghost; as L. M. Anderson has suggested that in the detective story, ‘Vengeance may even be arranged from beyond the grave, as shown in [...] *Trent’s Last Case*’.  

The infusion of ghost story rhetoric for dramatic effect is well illustrated, too, by some of the descriptions of landscape to be found in the detective story. We have already seen the way in which the glowering moorland of Dartmoor is represented in both *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Sittaford Mystery*. The reason for this is that Dartmoor and other primordial landscapes give the impression, if not the reality, of being pure, untouched for centuries, and are traditionally places where the inhabitants cling to ancient beliefs and practices. These impressions of wild moorland, as already noted, owe much to the Gothic imagination and, because of their extensive use in novels of that period, such landscapes already have a pre-eminent
place in our historic perception. But representation of wild places need not rely only on metaphoric language; in some texts, the landscape itself is part of a supernatural culture which treats the physical as an integral part of the metaphysical. Tony Hillerman’s work, for instance, features the dramatic Mesa landscape of the southwestern States, not just as wild place but because it has a special place in Navajo lore. In *People of Darkness*, Officer Jim Chee contemplates Mount Taylor, a name given to it by a white culture, and the significance for his people:

He sat smoking, looking at Mount Taylor, thirty miles to the east. The sun had dropped behind the horizon, but the top of the mountain, rising a mile above the valley floor, still caught the direct light. Tsoodzil, the Navajos called it, the Turquoise Mountain. It was one of the four sacred peaks which First Man had built to guard Dinetah. He had built it on a blue blanket of earth carried up from the underworld, and decorated it with turquoise and blue flint. And then he had pinned it to the earth with a magic knife, and assigned Turquoise Girl to live there and Big Snake to guard her until the Fourth World ended. Now it appeared the magic knife had slipped. The sacred mountain seemed to float in the sky, cut off from the solid earth by the ground haze.10

Here landscape exists not just as metaphor but an embodiment of myth and cultural belief. In societies where the supernatural is a part of everyday life, the physical environment becomes part of a much wider holistic philosophy. The landscape has been ‘built’ for a specific purpose, in this case to guard Dinetah the traditional homeland of the Navajo tribe. So, this passage is a reminder that many ancient peoples believed themselves to be part of a landscape, not merely occupiers. Such an environment is then readily opened up to the supernatural because the landscape becomes a ‘living’ entity whose fate is inextricably bound up with those who live amongst it. These ideas are now beginning to experience something of a renaissance as the modern environmentalist movement is urging a greater understanding of our natural surroundings and to live with landscape in a more sympathetic way.

In some cases, a detective story’s setting can induce a symbiotic relationship with its characters, and is one of those triggers which
invoke supernatural imagery. This is particularly so with the detective. Rebus is now synonymous with the city of Edinburgh where the ghostly associations of the buildings and their history transfer themselves into the central character. This exchange is reciprocal; as much as Rebus takes on the guise of his surroundings he haunts them, destined to become inextricably tied to the place where he resides. Not that this is an isolated example; the idea that a venerable city can create this atmosphere occurs elsewhere in detective fiction in a number of locations. Barbara Whitehead, for instance, has used the city of York in her *York Cycle of Mysteries*, where the ancient history of the city and its buildings bear down on the text. John Baker’s novels, also set in York are even more explicit about the ghostly potential of the city; of this, Baker has said, ‘There must be a ghost in every other building in this town’, and he also makes the wider point that ‘We don’t just occupy a place, the place also occupies us [...] We don’t just live in a place, it is where our imaginations are set in motion [...]’.¹¹

So, as these pages have shown, there is an extensive body of textual evidence which supports the ghostly allusion as a transitory device and, as the volume of detective fiction grew in the golden age, the more prevalent it became. Aside from *The Sittaford Mystery*, which I considered in the Introduction, Christie also uses this trope in such novels as *Endless Night* (1967) and *Sleeping Murder* (1976), which feature cursed land and a supposedly haunted house, respectively. Neither is John Dickson Carr’s equivocal response to the supernatural in *The Burning Court* an isolated example; in many of his novels, a ghostly atmosphere is created to reinforce the ‘impossibility’ of the plot. *The Red Widow Murders*, for instance, is actually a repeat of the ‘night-in-the-haunted-room’ plot he introduced in *Hag’s Nook* (1933), while *The Unicorn Murders* (1935) includes crimes that apparently only a ghost could commit. This method is still very much alive today. Guy Adams’s remarkable novel, *The Breath of God* (2011), for instance, sets Sherlock Holmes’s logic against the psychic forces of Aleister Crowley, John Silence, Thomas Carnacki and Julian Karswell, no less, to investigate the mysterious deaths of two aristocrats who appear to have been murdered by supernatural means. What turns out to be another bravura display of deduction by the master detective involves the resurrection of excerpts from past ghost stories as red herrings. Silence produces Smoke and Flame
as spirit guardians; Carnacki produces his electric pentangle, and Karswell relates an incident from M. R. James's ‘Mr. Humphries and his Inheritance’ (1911) and performs rituals using runic symbols, as in ‘Casting the Runes’ (1911).

We might be tempted to come to some grand conclusion that this consistent debunking of supernatural ideas by the detective story was, in some way, a microcosmic re-enactment of the Enlightenment, portraying the triumph of reason over the darker, wilder forces of the Gothic. More relevant, I suggest, is the example set by Ann Radford, who frequently resorted to the plot device where the supernatural was concerned. It is the long shadow of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and its successors that loom large over the detective story. We can recognize that in the process of mystification, one of the bedrocks of the detective story, logic in itself would be unable to provide the language and the metaphor to present the puzzle in an engaging way. This is something which Julian Symons has recognized, that such a narrow focus would be to ignore the rich provenance to be found in some parts of the genre:

The detective story pure and complex, the book that has no interest whatever except the solution of a puzzle, does not exist, and if it did exist would be unreadable. The truth is that the detective story, along with the police story, the spy story and the thriller, all of them immensely popular in the last twenty years, makes up part of the hybrid creature we call sensational literature. This hybrid has produced a few masterpieces, many good books, and an enormous mass of more or less entertaining rubbish.12

There is little doubt that all the popular genres listed by Symons are not ‘pure’ entities but the product of a textual exchange, so perhaps the central irony of detective fiction is the fact that the very thing which often animates its text, which gives it an air of the unknown, is also the very thing which subverts its founding principle of reason. Poe’s idea was to make the exercise of logic the central tenet of his new fiction, and yet after just three outings he abandoned the idea, the discrete thematic and structural interplay between pure reason and strict narrative form had been exhausted. As Symons states, the repetition of such an idea would become unreadable. But instead of atrophy, the detective story came to absorb within its own identity
that quality of imagination and mystery which the ghost story possesses in abundance. This is the heart of fiction, it must have imagination in order to exist; in fact, the tension set up between the process of logic and the rhetoric of the supernatural has now become the very soul of the genre. This attraction is irresistible; proof against prescription, convention and ratiocination, this association between detection and the supernatural is perhaps the oldest and the most resilient in all popular genres.
Notes

Introduction

1. The full reference for this ghost story is: Edmund Crispin, *The Case of the Gilded Fly* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), pp. 67–75. Edmund Crispin was also a writer of ghost stories and an editor of ghost anthologies. He was a particularly fond of M. R. James's work, and the denouement of *Frequent Hearses* (1950) takes place in a maze recalling a similar incident in 'Mr. Humphreys and his Inheritance'.

# 1 Detecting the Ghost

24. ‘A Psychical Invasion’, p. 34.
25. ‘A Psychical Invasion’, p. 44.
34. *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story*, p. 63.
35. ‘The Nemesis of Fire’, p. 159.
40. Chambers actually gives the name of such a gem as a scaraboid, that is, one carved in the shape of a beetle often used by the ancient Egyptians, rather than a scarabeus, which is the name for the beetle itself.
44. Ronald R. Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–18. This reference is specifically for the lie detector. The additional information on other developments are contained passim in this excellent book.

2 Decoding the Past: Narrative and Inquiry in ‘The Musgrave Ritual’ and ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’

5. This window, it seems, was inspired by those in the private chapel of Ashridge House, Little Gaddesden, Herts. An account of this connection can be found in ‘A Haunting Vision: M. R. James and the Ashridge Stained Glass’ in *Warnings to the Curious: A Sheaf of Criticism on M. R. James*, ed. by S. T. Joshi and Rosemary Pardoe (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2007), pp. 253–7.
12. ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, p. 79.
22. These two lines were not in the first Strand Magazine publication but added by the time the story was published in *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* in December 1893. This was almost certainly done to clarify the ritual and ensure that the solution was deducible from it.
23. ‘Oh, Whistle and I’ll Come to You, My Lad’ in *Casting the Runes and Other Ghost Stories*, p. 64.
27. *The Edge of the Unknown*, p. 129.
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28. ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, p. 84.
29. ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, p. 82.
30. *The Literature of Terror*, p. 86.
32. ‘The Treasure of Abbot Thomas’, p. 94.
34. *The Literature of Terror*, II, p. 86.
37. Brian Cowlishaw, “‘A Warning to the Curious’: Victorian Science and the Awful Unconscious in M. R. James’s Ghost Stories” in *Warnings to the Curious*.

3 Out of the Past: Retribution and Conan Doyle’s Double Narratives

6. ‘The Watcher’, p. 19. This quotation is not in the later slightly revised edition of the story which, as my text explains, is called ‘The Familiar’. From this point, the discussion refers to the later version.
17. *The Uncanny*, p. 150.
18. ‘Mr. Justice Harbottle’ in *In a Glass Darkly*, p. 88.
27. *The Valley of Fear*, p. 481.
28. *The Valley of Fear*, p. 496.

4 ‘That Forbidding Moor’: *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a Ghost Story?

4. Some Conan Doyle scholars have cited 25th September to 20th October 1888 as the period in which the story is set, based on information quoted in the story itself. If these suggestions are correct, this would place it between *The Sign of Four* and ‘The Copper Beeches’ in the chronology of Holmes’s cases, and obviously would account for the lack of any reference to Holmes’s miraculous escape from the Reichenbach Falls as *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is intended as an earlier case. I have not researched this
parallel chronology, although I have no reason to doubt it, as it does not impact on my argument, which is concerned with Conan Doyle's own creative chronology, which clearly isolates the story at a pivotal place within the canon.

17. See pp. 96–8 of Pugh and Spiring (Note 6) for some interesting information on Cabell.

38. The Hound of the Baskervilles, largely because of its qualities as something of an outlier in the Holmes’ series, has always attracted attention from other writers. Laurie King’s novel The Moor is particularly noteworthy as it reflects upon both the art of detection and the supernatural subjects which are pre-eminent in the original narrative. The Moor is her fourth novel featuring the now married Holmes and his wife Mary Russell. The latter is engaged in research studies at Oxford while Holmes continues his detective practice, and occasionally their paths coincide in order to work on a case. Holmes, who has to go abroad, sends Russell to Devon in response to a request from his old friend, Baring-Gould, who is concerned about an unexplained death and the appearance of a phantom coach accompanied by spectral hounds. What follows is a tale steeped in the supernatural, which revives the ghosts of the Baskerville case some thirty years earlier. But most significant is King’s reaction to the portrait scene at Baskerville Hall between Holmes and Watson, because, yet again, it is the device on which whole story turns. In The Moor, the Hall has been acquired by a dubious businessman called Ketteridge, who lives there with his somewhat sinister secretary, Scheiman. The plot also involves the secrets surrounding the testing of a tank on the moor, but interestingly it is the resurrection of the whole idea of a Stapleton as a reincarnated Hugo and that portrait which prove decisive in unmasking the criminal. The full reference for this book is: Laurie King, The Moor (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998).


5 Agatha Christie’s Harlequinade: The ‘Bi-Part’ Soul of the Detective


4. ‘The Coming of Mr. Quin’ in The Mysterious Mr. Quin, p. 11.

5. ‘The Coming of Mr. Quin’, p. 16.

6. ‘The Coming of Mr. Quin’, p. 19.

7. ‘The Coming of Mr. Quin’, p. 27.


9. ‘The Shadow on the Glass’ in The Mysterious Mr. Quin, p. 44.

10. ‘The Shadow on the Glass’, p. 46.

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13. ‘At the “Bells and Motley”’ in The Mysterious Mr. Quin, p. 53.
15. ‘Death and the Compass’, p. 148.
17. ‘Death and the Compass’, p. 152.
20. ‘Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth’, p. 256. The reference to ‘Zangwill’s locked room’ concerns Israel Zangwill’s The Big Bow Mystery (1892), a tale remarkable because the detective Grodman is the murderer – something the golden age would later frown upon. The allusion to ‘simple’ is because the solution involves the murderer committing the crime as the first person to enter the room after the locked door is opened.
27. The ABC Murders, p. 214.
29. ‘The Man from the Sea’ in The Mysterious Mr. Quin, p. 108.

6 Golden Age Gothic: John Dickson Carr’s Locked Room

10. *It Walks By Night*, p. 15.
11. *It Walks By Night*, p. 4.
12. *It Walks By Night*, p. 35.
14. *It Walks By Night*, p. 137.
16. *It Walks By Night*, p. 65.
17. See Chapter 3.
29. The exceptions to books featuring these three detectives during this period are *Poison in Jest* (1932), which has Patrick Rossiter, and *The Bowstring Murders* (1933) with John Gaunt, both detectives, but neither made another appearance.

7 Rebus’s Edinburgh Palimpsest: The Spirits of the Place

22. *Hide and Seek*, p. 52.
28. Not that the Burke and Hare story is anything new for an Edinburgh writer of detective stories. Owen Dudley Edwards has revealed that Conan Doyle showed early interest in Hare through the story ‘My Friend the Murderer’. Later Hare was the inspiration for the characters of Blessington, in ‘The Resident Patient’, disguised as a supergrass in a major robbery and Holy Peters in ‘The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax’. So, by the time Rankin included them in his fiction, their ghost was already afoot in the genre, albeit in some obscurity.
34. *The Falls*, p. 156.
36. Ian Rankin, *Black and Blue*, p. 381.
37. *Black and Blue*, p. 433.
38. Rebus actually returns in *Standing in Another Man’s Grave*, but by this time he has been forced to retire and works as a civilian in a cold-case unit.

8 Susan Hill’s Lost Hearts: *The Woman in Black* and the Serrailler Novels

9. ‘Lost Hearts’ in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, p. 36.
10. ‘Lost Hearts’, p. 36.
11. ‘Lost Hearts’, p. 52.
12. ‘Lost Hearts’, p. 52.
30. The Risk of Darkness, p. 120.
32. The Risk of Darkness, p. 139.
33. The Risk of Darkness, p. 271.
34. The Risk of Darkness, p. 302.
35. The Risk of Darkness, p. 357.

9 Tony Hillerman’s Cultural Metaphysics

1. Tony Hillerman was born in Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, and was a decorated combat veteran of World War II; he earned the Silver Star, the Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. From 1948 to 1962, he worked as a journalist, and earned a master's degree. He taught journalism from 1966 to 1987 at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque and also began writing novels. He lived there with his wife until his death in 2008. Hillerman wrote 18 books in his Navajo series, and over 30 books total, among them a memoir and books about the Southwest, its beauty and its history. His literary honours were awarded for his Navajo books. He was also awarded the Parris Award (named in honour of Parris Afton Bonds) by Southwest Writer's Workshop for his outstanding service to other writers. His books have been translated into eight languages, among them Danish and Japanese. One of the glories of Hillerman’s writing is the cultural details he provides about his subjects: Hopi, Zuni, European, American, federal agents and especially Navajo Tribal Police. He has been honoured as a Special Friend of the Navajo people for his contribution to the understanding of their culture and practices.

2. Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story, p. 76. This book was the first to be devoted entirely to the criticism of the detective story.

3. Murder for Pleasure, p. 76.


10. Following the Navajo tradition of giving names based on personal attributes, Hillerman often refers to unnamed characters by descriptive nicknames. Thus, the man wearing gold-rimmed glasses is called ‘Goldrims’ until his name is identified later in the book. Elsewhere in the series, a boy wearing a Superman sweatshirt, who is the grandson of a man under investigation, is called ‘Supergrandson.’ A murder victim is referred to as ‘Pointed Shoes’ even after the body is identified.


14. *Listening Woman*, p. 64.


21. *Listening Woman*, p. 189. Hillerman is referring here to the Navajo idea of *hózhó* which encompasses a holistic approach to beauty, harmony and the interconnectedness of the natural world. As I say later in the chapter, the crime in a Hillerman novel is a synecdoche for that which destroys *hózhó*.

22. In addition to the differences between ‘white’ and ‘Navajo’ culture, Hillerman often explores differences in social status in white society. For example, many wealthy antagonists feel that the status brought by their money allows them to do certain things that would be considered immoral—witness the attitude of some influential white criminals. McNair in *The Ghostway* is one such.


28. Interestingly, Aimée and David Thurlo have taken up the mantle of Tony Hillerman and have begun a series of novels about the Navajo which promise to be true to the spirit of the originals.

Conclusion

Select Bibliography and Suggested Reading

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