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The Filth and the Purity: policing dirt in late-Victorian detective fiction

Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction, by Christopher Pittard, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, xii + 260 pages, illustrated, £60 (cloth), ISBN 978 0 7546 6813 8

Down the 'mean streets' of detective fiction, Raymond Chandler famously wrote, 'a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid'.¹ Such a (for Chandler, inevitably, male) detective must be free from corruption, but at the same time not impervious to it; his courage should serve above all as a sign of vulnerability. Chandler's detective was to be both knight-errant and Everyman. His honour marked him apart from the amoral cynicism of Dashiell Hammett's corrupt gangsters and equally corrupt policemen, while his gritty humanity distinguished him from the upper-crust detectives of the English inter-war 'Golden Age'. It was for the latter that Chandler reserved his scorn, whose tales of murder and investigation were characterized by improbable motivations and exotic means of assassination, from 'hand-wrought duelling pistols' to 'curare, and tropical fish'.² Chandler outlined his ideal detective against the backdrop of this wry sketch of the genre as it had developed after the First World War. What was primarily at stake in his own detective fiction was, in contrast, the threat of moral contagion as the untarnished hero rubs up against the grime and corruption of those 'mean streets'—a phrase which, as Christopher Pittard reminds us, derives originally from Arthur Morrison's *Tales of Mean Streets* (1894). As such, Chandler's hardboiled style marks 'the reassertion of a materiality' that was already 'inscribed in British Victorian detective fiction' prior to the advent of the 'Golden Age' (216). What returned in Chandler's writing, according to Pittard's impressive study of late-Victorian detective fiction, was the very thing that the English 'Golden Age' had sought to repress.

Materiality and contagion are key terms for Pittard's analysis of the development of late-Victorian and Edwardian detective fiction, together with cognate concepts from the sociological, criminological, medical, publishing, and popular cultural contexts whose histories are intertwined with it. Pittard's core thesis is that detective fiction of the late-Victorian and Edwardian eras 'dramatises an anxiety about material contamination and impurity, including a metaphorical category of crime as dirt, and aligns detection with the act of cleaning' (3). The emblem for this figuration of crime and detection in terms of dirt and purification is the image that appears on the front cover of the book, an 1888 advertisement from the *Graphic* depicting a policeman who holds up his bulls' eye lamp to illuminate a poster whose text reads: 'ARREST all Dirt and cleanse Everything by using HUDSON'S SOAP. REWARD!! PURITY, HEALTH & SATISFACTION BY ITS REGULAR DAILY USE.' (1) Late-Victorian detective fiction, according to Pittard, imagines crime and detection 'in exactly the way that the Hudson's advertisement does' (3).

Purity and contamination are, of course, preoccupations that extend beyond the confines of the Victorian period or, indeed, of detective fiction. As a formal

opposition, purity/contamination looks like the foundation of any kind of exclusionary cultural formation, from animistic and religious prohibitions to the politics of race, gender, nation, sexuality and any other category in which difference is codified and policed. In one respect this might appear to weaken the thesis of the book, since it could no doubt be argued that the literature of any given period manifests anxieties of one form or another regarding purity and contamination. The strength of Pittard's analysis arises, however, from the way in which he situates this broad thematic concern within a series of admirably specific and impressively detailed contextual readings of Victorian detective novels and stories. The overall critical significance of the study is therefore not so much its discovery of contamination, taken either literally or figuratively, as a central nineteenth-century preoccupation, but rather the rich insights that such a charged concept provides into the diversity of Victorian culture, within which both the materiality of filth and the representation of difference acquired increasingly intense significations.

Detective fiction is an inspired choice for such an analysis because it opens the discussion onto several distinct but related arenas of cultural and social anxiety in the second half of the nineteenth century. The metropolis provides a central focus for much of the discussion, along with the associated pollution-related issues into which Victorian detective fiction immersed its readers, from the literal mire of the streets to the fears regarding the East End as a space of criminality, miscegenation and degeneration. Such reading matter might itself be feared to have a contaminating effect—a concern which Pittard discusses in relation to the moral panics concerning sensation fiction and penny dreadfuls. This is duly taken up in relation to George Newnes's efforts to purify the genre when he established *Strand Magazine*. Pittard's reading of Conan Doyle's 'The Man with the Twisted Lip' is axiomatic in this regard, the counterpart to the Hudson's soap advertisement in which the process of detection is reinvented as an act of cleansing. In this story, a respectable middle-class man, Neville St. Claire, is feared murdered by a filthy and disfigured beggar named Hugh Boone. However, Sherlock Holmes deduces that Boone is in fact St. Claire in disguise, and that he has been earning his income by acting as a beggar in the City (itself another risk of contamination that threatens the distinction between forms of capitalist speculation, as well as crossing the social barrier between respectable and non-respectable class identities). Holmes's dramatic unmasking of St. Clair takes the form of an attack with a soapy sponge, which removes his disguise and in the process washes away the crime itself, since there is no longer any murder victim nor any suspected perpetrator. Pittard's reading of this scene touches upon anxieties regarding the presence of beggars in the City and the urban legends of wealthy tramps. But the substance of the analysis is to show how Holmes's act of purification is aligned with the presiding ethos of the magazine, enacted through Newnes's editorial policy and in the accompanying illustrations by Sidney Paget, which 'reinforce the suppression of sensationalism desired by Doyle and Newnes' (96).

Pittard's wide-ranging study traces a series of such moments, in which the rhetoric of purity and contamination helps to illuminate the relationship between detective fiction and the material contexts with which it engaged, from

the moral tone of popular print media, to debates over criminal anthropology, medicine, the Social Purity and anti-vivisection movements and, less familiar to recent critical discussions, the emergence of another popular genre in the nineteenth century: the urban myth. The book begins and concludes with discussions of genre, starting with an original and persuasive reading of Fergus Hume's *The Mystery of A Hansom Cab* as a hybrid novel of Sensation/detection, and ending with an interrogation of the efforts by detective novelists in the nineteen twenties to police the genre for compliance to a set of formal prescriptions and avoidance of tabooed clichés. This is the 'eugenics of genre', in Pittard's slightly strained metaphor, from which the materialism of the Victorian era was likewise expunged and which would have to await Hammett and Chandler for its rediscovery.

This is an avowedly interdisciplinary study of detective fiction, which takes its conceptual reference points from Mary Douglas, Kristeva, Foucault and Bourdieu, but which carries its theoretical baggage lightly and is almost entirely free from jargon. It will be of obvious interest to scholars of Victorian literature, for whom discussion of staple authors like Arthur Conan Doyle, Arthur Morrison and Grant Allen is brought into illuminating connection with less widely discussed writers such as L.T. Meade and Marie Belloc Lowndes. Equally welcome is Pittard's recognition of female detectives in late-Victorian fiction, highlighting an area where more work remains to be done. This is, however, a work of cultural, rather than narrowly literary, history and its engagement with fiction is articulated with a variety of other kinds of texts including putatively scientific studies of the criminal by Lombroso and Goring; social investigation and polemics by W.T. Stead and Andrew Mearns; Florence Nightingale's criticisms of germ theory and her recommendations for hospital design to combat the spread of disease through miasmatic infection; Paget's illustrations and Galton's experiments with composite photography. Much of this will be familiar ground to scholars of the late-Victorian period. But Pittard's discussion repeatedly turns up interesting details and unexpected angles on the familiar that make it worthy of attention. Occasionally his claims for the connection between the literal and the figurative seem to overreach, as for example in the suggestion that the function of soap as 'self-defence against illness' gave it 'the potential to act in a similar way' to the gun in America as 'the totem of democracy' (15, n.68). Such moments, however, are comparatively rare and do not significantly detract from what is on the whole a thorough, detailed and substantial contribution to the scholarship around detective fiction and late-Victorian culture.

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¹ Chandler, Raymond. "The Simple Art of Murder" in Howard Haycraft (ed.) *The Art of the Mystery Story: a Collection of Critical Essays*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1947: 237

² Ibid: 234

Note on contributor: Merrick Burrow is Head of English at the University of Huddersfield. His recent publications include 'The Imperial Souvenir: Things and Masculinities in H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* and *Allan Quatermain*,' *Journal of Victorian Culture*, volume 18, no.1 (2013) and 'Conan Doyle's Gothic Materialism', *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, volume 34, number 3 (July 2013). He is currently working on the treatment of childhood and the primitive in the writings of R.L. Stevenson.