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*Interrogating the Crimes of  
the Twentieth Century*  
**Detecting and Policing in Perec and  
His Peers**

**By Liam J. Wilde.**

*A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in  
fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Masters  
by Research in English Literature (MRes)*

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## Abstract

Detective fiction exerts a complex influence on the perception of law enforcement, its place within the community and crime writ large. The private detective is neither a civilian nor part of the police; they sit on the fringe of law enforcement. Meanwhile the police officer invokes an image of a blue uniform and a proposed function: solving crimes and providing justice for all. However, many officers do not wear uniforms and can be dysfunctional or amoral in their practices. Fictionalized detective stories inform the public's understanding of confirmations of guilt as a result of investigation. Variables such as evidence, resources and the power of police authority can be manipulated and directed to serve political ends. The central text which this thesis will use to illustrate such ideas will be Georges Perec's 1969 novel *La disparation*, notable for its contestation of the detective as a force for legitimizing truth claims in the context of investigation. The novel is set against the backdrop of France's May '68 protests, providing grounding for both its anarchic tone and its radically cynical view of governmental authority. Indeed, it is my assertion Perec is a unique brand of crime writer because his work consistently philosophises how truth operates in detective fiction on both a narratological (to be explored in Chapter 2) and political level (Chapter 3) with specific reference to genocide, ethnic cleansing and the fascism that so often leads to them. I have also used several other texts which exhibit similar characteristics and views where relevant. These are Perec's titular 'peers'. Such examples include Didier Daeninckx's novel *Murder in Memoriam*, Gilbert Adair's *Death of the Author* and Kamel Daoud's *The Meursault Investigation* as well as several other postmodern detective texts which have been influenced by, or have paved the way, to Perec's work.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Notes on Genre: An Introduction**

Portrayals of law enforcement agents and private detectives contribute to inaccurate conceptualizations of the foundational purpose of law enforcement and its function in contemporary society. Many narratives praise the sacrifices police make to provide a service to the community and often focus on synecdochised instances of individual heroism. This type of narrative has been the central thrust of many Hollywood blockbusters in recent years including *End of Watch* and *Patriots Day*. Simultaneously, there is an abundance of narratives depicting police corruption, which are often presented as isolated instances without interrogation of what ‘corruption’ within wider law enforcement entails. This type of narrative is often filtered through the viewpoint of the private detective and, as I will discuss has been a consistent trope since the detective genre’s very conception. Both narratives stretch the reality of policing and investigation by normalizing both types of behaviour, leading to a contradictory situation where law enforcement agents are unrealistically upheld both as idealised figures, and are simultaneously immoral anti-heroes. I do not wish to provide a study of such narratives. It is certain my thesis would fall apart at its seams because of the enormous amount of content to be analysed. Instead, I wish to examine a collection of writers linked by their transgressive approach to investigation, policing and the role both play in legitimatizing truth claims in fictional and non-fictional cases. Many of the texts I will look at have been approached by myself, and should be understood by the reader, as satellite texts to the central pull of Georges Perec and his lipogramatic novel *La disparation* which masterfully unites experimentation of form and political transgression, speaking to the social issues of then-contemporary French state and the recent history of the Holocaust. Chapters Two and Three of this thesis will explore attempt to deconstruct the binary of form and political content respectively. By the conclusion of this thesis, I hope to have demonstrated that the two are closely interrelated in Perec’s fiction.

However, before I delve into Perec and his peers’ approach to the detective genre and their theoretical engagement with policing, I believe it is important to set out in this chapter what I perceive to be the

key tenets of the detective genre. Fundamentally, I believe that detective stories continue to captivate for reasons other than their ability to engage with conceptualizations of how crime is handled within communities. Bestselling postmodern detective stories such as *The Name of the Rose* and Auster's *New York Trilogy* have shown that form itself has a definitive appeal to a popular readership. Yet, any theoretical analysis of detective fiction would be incomplete if it turned a blind eye to how the genre engages with popular conceptualizations of crime. Both of these strands of theory are immeasurably important to the work of Perec and the authors I have analysed alongside him. Like others before me, I also wish to dispel the idea that 'genre fiction' is a term which connotes fiction of lesser value. Instead, I wish to posit that 'genre' is a term which simply suggests form and convention. The term can refer to works of literature long acknowledged as masterful. Sherlock Holmes himself is often picked apart in works of literary criticism which analyse the character's place within the canon beside terminology which refers to the thriller, mystery and detective novels. This is without mentioning the influence of pulp writing upon Conan Doyle's work – particularly the 'penny dreadful'. Indeed, though the dichotomy of genre and literary fiction can appear pronounced at times; the two do not even exist separately from one another. Both 'literary' and 'genre' are terms which connote aesthetic value without clear rationalization. In this introductory chapter, it is therefore worthwhile to interrogate the role of genre, detecting and policing and its subversions within postmodern literature.

### **Towards a Theory of Radical Detective Fiction**

The debate over whether genre fiction can ever be understood as a 'serious' form of writing can be contentious. 'Perfect' works of genre fiction are generally understood as novels which are built to sell, both by publishing houses and by literary critics. The real difference in understanding between these two forces, in my opinion, is one of optimism and one of cynicism. This dynamic is subject to deft analysis in an essay by Suman Gupta entitled 'Literary/Genre Fiction'. Gupta details that the content and production of literature is approached differently by two main forces of control; academics and marketeers. He claims that both account for an enormous amount of what is bound and sold by publishing houses and appears to be hostile to both. He heavily implies that this dichotomy has led to

a stalemate in the range of fiction available and by association, fiction's outreach. Gupta describes that 'especially literary critics and to some degree marketing gurus are responsible for pigeonholing novels into genres, not authors' and that "'genre fiction" is a broad church and "literary fiction" is a nebulous phrase'. He asserts that this forced distinction has led the phrase "'literary fiction" [to become] emptied of meaning' (Ed. Habjan & Imlinger, 2016: p. 201). Gupta quotes from Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson on this subject toward the end of the essay as he turns towards attempts by intellectuals to engage with the myriad nature of the literary market. Gupta claims that globalization has forced culture toward continual 'restructuring', 'ideological neutralization and de-contextualization (using it in such diverse ways that it becomes available to contradictory co-optations and therefore continuous reiteration)' (p. 208). Certainly, claims of 'ideological neutralization' are incredibly important to any understanding of genre. If genre can be understood as a repetition of key tenets within writing, this idea of an 'ideological neutralization' hints towards why these tenets become established in the first instance. Gupta is implicitly identifying editors and publishing houses as people who establish genre conventions by imposing constraints upon authors in order to make novels more 'marketable'.

As I have already mentioned, Gupta spends much of this article drawing on ideas from Frederic Jameson's prophetic essay 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre'. Much of this essay anticipates the rise of 'genre' as the dominant force in the public understanding of literature. It is critical of the 'pigeonholing' described by Gupta. From the very start of the essay, Jameson interlinks genre with tradition by arguing that (1975: p. 135)

Genres are essentially contracts between a writer and his readers; or rather to use the term which Claudio Guillén has so usefully revived, they are *literary institutions*, which like the other institutions of social life are based on tacit agreements or contracts. The thinking behind such a view of genres is based on the presupposition that all speech needs to be marked with certain indications and signals as to how it is properly to be used.

Through comparing the institutionalization of literature by universities to simple forms and conventions of communication, implied by the term 'social life' and made more explicit by 'indications and signals' of individual utterances, Jameson appears sympathetic to the view that individual utterances can be understood in terms of historical context, but not, perhaps, in the common-sense way practiced by students of literary studies. By extending Marx's theory of history to include novels as a creative product of labour, Jameson argues that literature can be understood in relation to culture and therefore can be viewed as part of the makeup of the superstructure. Jameson interrogates this idea by arguing against it, claiming that forms of writing and 'utterances' are anterior to the established order. Derrida argued that texts are not subject to the same forces that basic inanimate objects are; words carry meanings which are fundamentally unstable and change over time. The written word is resistant to order and this is certainly the case of the primary text of this dissertation, which is anarchic in both its written style and its politics. Jameson shrewdly identifies this phenomenon within literature and situates it within a broader political context, suggesting that (p. 157)

Changes in the infrastructure always result in shifts in the superstructure, and not the other way round (at least in the realm of literary history; the notion of a reciprocal interaction between base and superstructure is derived from other more overtly ideological types of superstructural phenomena, e.g. political discourses, which do not enjoy the semiautonomy of the literary text).

Perhaps the most interesting item in this quotation is Jameson's description of the literary text as *semiautonomous*. The use of such a term pits Jameson at odds with Gupta. For Gupta the text is subservient to two seemingly hegemonic forces, while for Jameson, the text dictates and is not dictated to. Such a view would insist that genre is organic – it grows directly from the literary text and is not predetermined by the forces of the market. It therefore stands to reason that innovations within the detective genre can be understood as a form of radical protest – for they transgress against the makeup of capitalist society itself.



Many Marxists besides Jameson have attempted to theorize detective fiction, choosing to interrogate what the radical potential the genre can have where mass marketing has an enormous influence over it. While critics such as Franco Moretti vehemently disagree with Jameson, arguing that the genre 'is essentially a function of mass culture serving to contain and subdue creative or speculative reflection', others from the Frankfurt Institute such as Ernest Bloch viewed 'popular fiction as prompting an active participation' and 'utopian possibilities' emphasising its 'creative potential'. Similarly, Bloch's colleague, Bertolt Brecht, 'talks of reading the detective novel as an intellectual habit. He emphasises the enjoyment provided by logical thought' (McCracken, 1998: p. 67). This is a sentiment shared by Jameson who, in a recently published book on Chandler, asserts that 'the principal effect of the violence in the American detective story is to allow it to be experienced backwards, in pure thought, without risks, as a contemplative spectacle' (2016: p. 5). Formal qualities aside, the detective novel has a history of radical politics interweaved within its form. One title continually cited as formally marking the 'launch' of the detective genre is William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* (1794). As Thompson explains, Godwin's novel 'represents the first sustained attempt to use the detective fiction genre as a means of criticizing society' with the essential premise to the novel suggesting that 'laws and institutions are inherently repressive and should, therefore, be eliminated – his fiction inaugurated a way of evaluating society that has since become a convention of crime fiction' (1993: p. 2). This is an assessment which many critics of the genre appear to be sympathetic towards. As McCracken suggests, detective fiction 'play[s] out the social contradictions the law is designed to resolve. These are mediated through the figure of the detective, who represents the contradictory nature of the modern self' (p. 51). As such, the detective genre was forged in the context of radical politics. It can, and has, been used a vehicle for criticizing society writ large through the perspectives of its characters. The central claim of this thesis is that the practices of law enforcement agents, expressed in Perec *et al*, are not free from this criticism. Perec's work specifically engages in forms of social critique that have always been at the heart of the genre. His rejection of the norms of genre fiction is part of his dedication to a politically engaged mode of detective fiction.

Though the exact origin of the modern detective novel is subject to debate in academic circles, it has strong roots in ‘fictionalized accounts of criminal confessions, such as the *Newgate Calendar* (1773)’ and ‘Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722)’, which, as Thompson claims, marks ‘the beginning of the full scale crime novel’ (Thompson: p. 2). Others are meanwhile critical of this position, choosing to situate the emergence of the detective novel within the pre-existing conventions of narrative itself, arguing that all forms of narration ‘proceed by way of revelation and explanation’ (McCracken, p. 51). The genre ‘has been compared with the myth of original sin, the first loss of innocence and the Garden of Eden, and the myth of Oedipus, whose discovery of his origins are also a discovery of his crimes’ (McCracken: p. 51). Indeed, as I have already highlighted in the abstract to this thesis, truth is a concept of immeasurable importance within the detective novel. As D.A Miller (p. 33) remarks of this phenomenon, the form of the detective novel is

based on the hypothesis that everything might count: every character might be the culprit and every action or speech might be belying its apparent banality of literalism by making surreptitious reference to an incriminating Truth [...] [which] turns out to have a highly restricted applicability in the end.

This conceptualization of truth as having ‘restricted applicability’ to the detective novel is remarkably close to the one put forth by Lyotard in his treatise on the postmodern condition. Truth is central to both the detective novel and consumerism, and yet, it can equally be absent from both. For the detective novel to achieve something radical, whether in the political or formal sense, the genre often seeks to critique its own form and means of delivery in the very same way that Jameson describes when he insinuates the notion of innovations within genre as ‘breaks’ with existing modes of communication. This is a claim I will soon come to apply to all central texts of this thesis.

The establishment of these ‘conventions of communication’ is rooted within mass media and culture. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the expansion of print newspapers and journals allowed the crystallization of the detective genre as we know it. Key texts, such as those from Poe, Conan Doyle and Wilkie Collins were serialized for the purposes of wider public consumption. This forged a link between genre & mass culture (Thompson, p. 2) and coincided with development of the modern police force under

Robert Peel. The central aim of Peel's police force sought to control crime through the principles of 'policing by consent' and manage a growing domestic opposition to Imperialism within colonized nations. That both crime and empire needed to be controlled by an arm of the state contributed to public anxiety regarding both subjects, which novelists responded to in their work. Celebrated examples of where detective novels have responded directly to Empire include Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* and Wilkie Collins's novel *The Moonstone*. Writing which responded to Victorian anxieties is often described by scholars as 'sensationalist' for its ability to link 'the intimately private with a public realm of scandal, particularly scandal intruding on the realm ostensibly most immune to it, domestic life', becoming 'the genre of the home under siege' (Adams: p. 164). However, as the detective genre's original roots within Godwin's anarchistic sensibilities might suggest, authors have rarely been content with the work of the professionalized police force, often choosing to criticize officers. As Stephen Knight (p. 153) remarks:

Though nineteenth-century police had their high moments in detection, as with M. Lecoq and Ebenezer Gryce, a condescending attitude to them long dominated the genre, from Collins to Sayers and Poe to Chandler

syWhere the detective genre deals directly with the police force, it often sets its protagonists at odds with the culture and procedures of the modern police department. Where the novel concerns the private detective, the police are shown to be inept at handling the riddle of the narrative and, more than often, are extremely corrupt. This is often the case in many examples of American hardboiled detective fiction of the thirties through to the seventies, where faith in institutions which sought to manage crime had declined. This contributed to a shift in how the detective novel portrayed American institutions, often choosing to challenge legality where laws and justice serve the interests of the wealthy and powerful. As David Fraser (2005: p. 243) comments:

The traditional marginalised detective of American 'hard-boiled' fiction, the lone wolf, now has a distinct political and ideological spin. The 'private' detective has become a sort of a 'public eye', casting his investigative gaze into the shadows of official history in order to reveal a 'new' truth about power and memory.

Fraser suggests this phenomenon has a strong equivalence in French genre fiction, describing the development by the *polar* and *néo-polar*. Fraser defines the *polar* as a 'slang reduction of roman policier' (p. 237), which, in its

original manifestation resembled American hard-boiled detective fiction with a French accent, the roman noir. In the 1970s, a newer variant, considered by some to be a sub-genre and by others to be a new genre, the *néo-polar*, emerged from the upheavals in French politics, society and culture following the events of May 1968 and their aftermath.

This is the case of all main texts of this dissertation. They have been highly influenced by French radical politics of the 1960s. Perec situates *La disparation* during the student movement and general strike of May 1968, which provides a suitable backdrop from the novel's radical tone and form. Meanwhile, Daeninckx's novel *Murder in Memoriam*, which Fraser discusses in his article, focuses on the aftermath of the Paris Massacre of '61, where Algerian protestors were subject to violent repression. These topics will be approached more directly in the third chapter of this dissertation.

### **Style Over Substance? Raymond Chandler and Value**

A cornerstone of detective fiction, Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*, is a novel unusually bleak for its kind. It is immersed in an inescapable sense of foreboding - and yet - is one of the most celebrated detective novels of the twentieth century. It is also a textbook example of a novel which exuded a strong influence on the French *néo-polar*, hence its relevance to our discussion. The novel is steeped the traditions of 'high' modernist Literature. T.S. Eliot's name makes an appearance when the novel's protagonist, Philip Marlowe, is given a ride home by Amos. When he refuses a tip, Marlowe responds by offering to buy him Eliot's collected works. Marlowe notes 'He already had them' (2000: p. 349). Later, when they encounter each other for a second time they discuss Eliot's 'The Love Song

of Alfred J. Prufrock' and agree, in a flippant style typical to Marlowe's sensibility that 'the guy didn't know very much about women' (p. 642).

Chandler's writing makes it obvious that there is a strong connection between the tradition of detective fiction and modernist literature. Chandler often mentioned writers such as Hemingway as an influence on his style of writing. Coming to the profession late in life he had to teach 'himself to write: he took a correspondence course, where he churned out pastiches of Hemingway; to teach himself the mechanics of plotting' (Brown, 2012). Like Hemingway & Stein, Chandler's style insists on short, simple and descriptive sentences. As Hemingway himself describes in *Death in the Afternoon* (2014: p. 154)

If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them.

This style of writing demonstrates an affinity with detective fiction, since writing in such a style forces the reader into participation as they attempt to understand what the writer has omitted, why they have omitted it, and any relevance it may have to the plot. The reader is forced to interrogate their own understanding of the novel in order to make judgements over where it may lead next.

Chandler also worked with Faulkner to produce a script for the film adaptation of *The Big Sleep*, a film which in and of itself was notably modernist, as it presented cinematography and dialogue as a developed substitute for description and speech within noir. Will Norman describes the movie industry as a medium which emerged 'out of the period's two characteristic mass phenomena: unemployment and the culture industry' (Norman, 2014: p. 748), with the latter term that Norman uses, originally used by Adorno to describe an essential characteristic of the conditions that led to modernism. Unsurprisingly, Chandler was at odds with Marxist critiques of the American entertainment industry. Adorno and Horkheimer had declared three years previously that 'mass culture [was] a unique response to late capitalism', whereas Chandler 'preferred to understand it as an

ideal principle last realized in Renaissance England' (p. 753), proclaiming that technological innovation would lead to a new understanding of literature's capabilities. If Jameson and Gupta are to be believed, the exact opposite of this has happened. The scope of literature has narrowed, not widened. Nonetheless, Chandler, like many modernist writers, asserted he was predominantly interested in re-styling form. That 'readers just thought they cared about nothing but the action; that really, although they didn't know it, the thing they cared about, and that I cared about, was the creation of emotion through dialogue and description' (1962: p. 219), a sentiment which remained constant throughout Chandler's literary career. In his polemical essay 'The Simple Art of Murder' Chandler asserts an affinity between pulp and 'high' art, insisting that (1995: p. 979)

the strange thing is that this average, more than middling dull pooped-out piece of utterly unreal and mechanical fiction is not terribly different from what are called the masterpieces of the art [...] the cheating is a little more obvious; but it is the same kind of book.

It is clear Chandler cared more for detective fiction as an aesthetic product than an inanimate printed work and his approach to writing demonstrates the fundamental instability of the concept of 'genre' fiction as an inferior mode of communication.

Indeed, Philip Marlowe arguably represents the most important innovation in the PI's character during the twentieth century. For someone embroiled in the business of law enforcement, Marlowe is a conniving character persistently shown to the reader as extremely rough around the edges. When he is not chain smoking, he is shown to be consuming entire bottles of whisky in short spaces of time while interrogating witnesses from society's underbelly with unparalleled levels of contempt. He is also a character who other writers either directly, or indirectly imitate in their creation of a detective character, just as various English detective novels of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century attempt to replicate Sherlock Holmes - and just as many detectives on T.V. are imitations of Peter Falk's Columbo. There are, however, pre-existing traditions behind each of these re-inventions which receive less attention. Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories are profoundly influenced by

serialized, sensationalist writing. As noted previously, Chandler cites Hammett, Hemingway and Stein as influences while Columbo was preceded by endless televised detective stories; he is simply one of the more memorable incarnations of the same character. It is easy to see how this phenomenon implies Jameson's notion that genre is a 'convention' of communication. Strangely, this places Jameson in the company of formalists such as Tzvetan Todorov. Todorov claims that the conventions of writing detective fiction must be well established prior for a work by a writer to be considered a cornerstone of the genre (1997: p. 43):

Detective fiction has its norms; to "develop" them is also to disappoint them: to "improve upon" detective fiction is to write "literature", not detective fiction. The whodunit par excellence is not the one which transgresses the rules of the genre, but the one which conforms to them: *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* is an incarnation of its genre, not a transcendence.

Most relevantly, Todorov asserts that the detective form has one simple constraint; that 'style, in this type of literature, must be perfectly transparent, imperceptible; the only requirement it obeys is to be simple, clear, direct' (p. 46). He distinguishes the thriller from the detective novel as a genre primarily interested in soliciting an emotional response from the reader. He insists its characteristics are centred upon immediacy: 'We are no longer told about a crime anterior to the moment of the narrative; the narrative coincides with the action. No thriller is presented in the form of memoirs' (p. 47). He pronounces that 'it is around these few constants that the thriller is constituted: violence, generally sordid crime, the amorality of the characters' (p. 48). However, Todorov's analysis does not venture even a guess as to the function violence and crime actually serve in the context of literature, which is of essential importance to this thesis, and to any deeper understanding of the genre.

Answers for such questions could lie within the work of literary sociologists such as Vincenzo Ruggiero who have claimed that crime in fiction can be used as 'a tool for the communication of sociological meaning and the elaboration of criminological analysis' (2003: p. 1). Ruggiero further

suggests that the function of crime in Literature exists primarily ‘to build explanatory bridges between the mentalities of law and fiction’. He suggests that ‘We are used to seeing the world through the lenses of the law, rather than those of the values and the imagination’ (p. 4). That is, crime in fiction (distinct from ‘crime fiction’) exists to bridge a gap between the supposedly objective nature of the legal system, and the subjective experiences of criminality. Such comments by Ruggerio have led one reviewer of his book to comment that it ‘should be recommended as essential reading by all criminology teachers who wish to help their students develop a sociological imagination’ (Carlen, 2004: p. 812). Fiction aids criminological analysis through helping the reader to empathise and think imaginatively about the roots of social problems which produce crime and how that crime might be prevented – the abject poverty which leads Raskolnikov to kill the pawnbroker in *Crime and Punishment*, for example, or Meursault’s racially charged murder in *L’étranger* [The Stranger] as a product of social isolation or an imperialist modes of thought. As I have previously mentioned, this intersection between imagination and logic has fascinated Marxist critics of literature such as Jameson and Brecht, who assert that the poetics of crime in the detective novel are not overridden by emotion but instead are subservient to the logic of cause and effect. This, alongside their view that literature should be understood by its sociological content problematizes Todorov’s formalism, demonstrating its limited scope. Fundamentally, there cannot be any interrogation of form without an analysis of a detective novel’s content, and there can be no analysis of content, without an analysis of form. However, I hope to demonstrate the significance of both through Chapters Two and Three of this thesis.



## Some of Detective Fiction's Postmodern Incarnations

The importance of form in the detective novel has made the genre exceedingly popular with literary postmodernists. Authors defined as postmodern tend to explode the concept of value to examine its individual parts. The very same could be said of concepts such as truth and perception.

Postmodernists are described as writers who mar the boundary between 'high' and 'low' culture in a manner similar to detective novelists. Postmodern writers consciously adopt genre to purposefully transcend the nature of it, a habit often emphasized for effect. Referring to this practice as *pastiche*, Jameson considers it a contradiction; a rare phenomenon in literature where irony is humourless, a 'blank parody'; he compares it to 'a statue with eyeballs'. Jameson claims that pastiche is 'the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language' (Ed. Brooker, 2014: p. 167). Barthes understands undertakings such as this as an attempt to 'reject Literature as a mythical system', that it represents 'the murder of Literature as signification' in which 'literary discourse' itself is incorporated into the text to expose it as a 'simple semiological system' (p. 160). This practice is related to concepts such as 'intertextuality' and 'metatextuality' which, as we will come to discuss in the following sections, is of a definitive importance to the detective novels of all main writers of this thesis – though I would like to stress, is not a feature limited to twentieth century fiction.

Perhaps the most prevalent example of a postmodern work that imitates detective fiction and appears to mirror Jameson's theory is Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*. The novel details an apparent or inapparent conspiracy by a postal service which the novel's protagonist stumbles or does not stumble upon. Like Chandler's Marlowe novels, the plot takes place in Los Angeles where its protagonist, Oedipa Maas, racks the brains of the city's inhabitants to find information but instead often finds their worldview is ultimately as incoherent as her own. As Francisco Collado-Rodriguez comments, Pynchon's Oedipa 'becomes a non-hardboiled detective in the land of the hardboiled detectives, and she is also a seeker who, like Sophocles' Oedipus, tries to reveal an unknown truth' (2015: p. 257). However, she struggles to interpret her surroundings with accuracy. In one instance

Pynchon implies she is unable to organize 'the night into real and dreamed' (2000: p. 89) and yet in another, she is described as shrewd and skilful in the act of interpretation, a 'whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts' (p. 78). Oedipa's contradictory nature contributes to the novel's central theme that reality is fluid and not fixed, nor is it objective and eternal. An emphasis on interpretation turns Pynchon's novel into one concerned primarily with semiotics. Its lack of a conclusive 'big reveal' recalls Derrida's assertion that the 'absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and play of signification infinitely' (2001: p. 354). Just as we cannot conclude that language has a set of fixed meanings, Pynchon cannot conclude the novel because there is not a complete truth for Oedipa to discover which would mark the difference between the novel's red herrings and anything resembling 'shrewd analysis'. This is a transgression against a repeatedly identifiable characteristic of the detective novel, as Jeffrey Nealon describes (Ed. Merivale & Sweeney: 1998: p. 117)

Whether consciously or unconsciously, the genre comments upon the process of sifting through signs, and ultimately upon the possibility of deriving order from the seeming chaos of conflicting clues and motives.

The chaos Nealon describes features in *49* as an ontological play of difference between fact and misunderstanding. Furthermore, as readers must too interpret to derive meaning from a text, they come 'metafictionally to identify with the detective, as both the reader and the detective are bound up in the metaphysical or epistemological work of interpretation, the work of reading clues and writing a solution or end' (p. 117). Truth as a factor in the act of interpretation is therefore pushed to its limit by Pynchon, until the reader is lured into allowing the novel to wash over them – and yet, the book constantly remains an exemplary incarnation of the detective novel.

This trend in writing is by no means limited to American fiction. If literary postmodernism ever emerged in the first place, it likely began with a small number of Latin-American writers associated with the post-war boom of magical realism. Many authors from this sect adopted the form of the detective novel for their own purposes. The most obvious example is Jorge Luis Borges. A fascination

with detective fiction is a continual motif in Borges' writing, largely influenced by his love of Chesterton. Such examples include 'The Garden of Forking Paths' and 'Death and the Compass'. The former uses a game of cat and mouse between an MI5 agent and a German spy in the context of the First World War to question the existence of, and the human subservience to, time and fate. While a character is laying low, it is explained to him how 'times' approach 'one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries [...] We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others, I and not you' (1981: p. 53). Espousing a philosophy like this at this point in the narrative is interesting for many reasons. As a narrative which takes the form of 'a game of cat and mouse', Borges' story exists as the middle ground between the detective story and the thriller. It is constrained by logic (the protagonist must think to remain 'one step ahead') and emotion (the reader does not want the character they sympathize with to be caught out), making the view Borges chooses to share with us a metatextual device which comments on the nature of the genre the author is choosing to transcend through imitation. Its own narrative is rebutted by a voice which claims that the events of the narrative don't matter at all because, in most timelines, they did not happen. Another of Borges' short stories, 'Death and the Compass', employs metatextual devices with a definitive relevance to the central writer of this dissertation, Georges Perec, by its continual references to the Jewish heritage of its characters. In this story, a Germanic detective living in Buenos Aires named Lönnrot investigates a series of murders which he believes to be connected to several publications concerned with Judaic theology. It is heavily implied, by the context of the story's publication (1946), its content and symbolism that the murders are the actions of neo-Nazis.<sup>1</sup> However, the narrative contests this by stating that one of the key metatextual publications, 'the Yidische Zaitung', 'rejected the horrible hypothesis of an anti-Semitic plot; 'even though many penetrating intellects admit to no other solution to this mystery'' (p. 111), instead situating the solution to the murders within the books Lönnrot chooses to pour over. The red herrings implicit in Borges' writing therefore serves to transgress against the assumptions of the reader and their identification with the detective as an interpreter of evidence. Like Oedipa and the investigators in

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<sup>1</sup> In one instance Borges notes 'the hateful whiteness of a Hospital' and on the same page, a 'three-year war' and 'three thousand years of oppression and pogroms' (p. 106)

Perc's novel, *Lönnrot* seeks answers not through conventional police procedure, but through metatextual efforts. He orders 'a package made from the dead man's books and carried them off to his apartment. Indifferent from the police investigation, he dedicated himself to studying them' while other investigators decry that Lönnrot is wasting his time on 'Jewish superstitions' (p. 108). Borges' stories act to present epistemic problems to the reader. They mine the gap between perception and reality which Pynchon exposes and problematize the supposed importance of 'truth' in the detective genre, presenting a blueprint for a radical approach to detective fiction that greatly informs the work of Georges Perec and his peers within the OuLiPo group.

## Conclusion

Introducing *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze states that 'Repetition is the pure fact of a concept with finite comprehension being forced to pass as such into existence' (2004: p. 14), asserting that repetition occurs due to both concepts and definitions being of limited stock. He compares the phenomenon to biological science, asserting that words and signs are like the 'genus' which 'thereby passes into existence [...] its extension is made up for in its dispersion' (p. 15). A mutation does not alter the common characteristics of most species in the immediate sense, only individuals within that species, just as in literature, experimentation produces original work, but it does not immediately alter the constraints of genre. An experiment in detective fiction cannot escape its place within the tradition of mystery writing by its associating itself with other works like it. As Deleuze puts it 'Words possess a comprehension which is necessarily finite, since they are by nature the objects of a merely nominal definition [...] we define a word by only a finite number of words' (p. 15). Nonetheless, the associations drawn between concepts in literary discourse can often be contradictory. The tendency to think of cultural artefacts in terms of genre makes culture subservient to the logic of consumerism. Thoreau occupies a place of high esteem within the canon of nature writing, as does Dostoevsky within crime fiction and the Brontës within romance. The result is that *Walden*, *Crime and Punishment* and *Wuthering Heights* are sold *en masse* with publishers such as Penguin and Random House encouraging uncertain readers to pursue novels which they would otherwise be intimidated by.

However, defining a novel in terms of genre necessarily imposes rigidity on fiction. An experience of a classic becomes defined by the tropes of its plot and not by any wider relevance the book may have. An urge to be innovative is born out of this phenomenon. Where many writers force themselves to defy the expectations of the reader, others such as Pynchon debate this notion of originality itself through manipulations of genre. Such novels become defined by their relation to an inherently unstable postmodern canon and its existing place within 'high' culture. To adopt this view ignores that postmodern fiction has an uncanny ability to take what has previously been defined as lacking in imaginative quality and to regurgitate it in the name of experimentation. In considering where writers might venture from the present state of fiction, writers such as Pynchon are often mentioned. However, they themselves have not 'ventured' too far; they have barely departed. The work of such writers should not therefore be valued for its experimental quality, but rather how they engage with the popular imagination and their understanding of the act of interpretation. The remainder of this dissertation will be focused upon writers who have transgressed against the nature of the detective novel, either through an experimental mutilation and examination of form itself, or by contesting common themes such as guilt, complicity and their place within fiction. Foremost amongst these writers is Georges Perec.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Perec, OuLiPo and the Detective Novel**

To solve any given case, the detective, much like the reader, must make an assertion about the meaning of a body of evidence. The reader and their chosen fictional counterpart form associations with items presented to them by the author in order to beat the central riddle the author has provided. This is evidenced by the language we use to refer to detective fiction. The term ‘clue’ nominally refers to a key piece of information that could be used to solve a riddle or brain teaser, though in the context of detective fiction, it is sometimes used interchangeably with the proper term ‘evidence’.

Language used to describe detective work is influential in the reader’s comprehension of fictional and non-fictional detection. Such terms have underlying implications, they influence how the reader conceives of variables such as ‘investigation’ and ‘evidence’. This basic idea that detective fiction is a game (or ‘contract’) between the reader and the writer with its own set of signifiers means that the genre can be read in extremely broad terms. Potentially, any narrative with an unresolved plot or sub-plot could be re-interpreted and rewritten as a detective novel, as is the case in a text I will examine later in this thesis, *The Meursault Investigation*. The centrality of interpretation to detective work provides a natural affinity with metafictional and experimental ventures by writers who hope to transgress against the norms of the detective story to expand its scope. This chapter will outline how the assertions of this thesis regarding form are illustrated by the work of Georges Perec, particularly his novel *La disparation* (1969), which its author refused to characterize as a detective novel.

However, it exhibits key characteristics of, and is therefore referred to in literary discourse as if it were one. Its experimentalism exposes the underlying poetics of detective fiction though its relentless and self-conscious dissection of form and its continual manipulations of language.

This conflict between the text’s place in the canon of detective fiction and its authorial intent feels like a tribute to the author’s anarchic imagination. *La disparation* was primarily thought of as by Perec as a linguistic experiment. The novel was written while Perec was a member of the OuLiPo group, the work of which can itself be re-read as a homage to the underlying poetics of detective fiction. OuLiPo

can often be found musing upon the nature of interpretation, perception and convention itself. The work of OuLiPo members sits on the fringe of late modernism and postmodernism. Because of its position at this juncture, writers which are associated with it have often produced work which many have struggled to place in either of Gupta's categories of 'genre' and 'literary fiction'. *La disparation* stays true to postmodern and late modernist detective fiction, as well as conventional detective novels. Like much traditional detective fiction, its central absence is superfluous in nature, while its self-referentiality suggests postmodernity. Through invoking the form of a linguistic experiment to write a novel which has taken its place within a genre that relies heavily upon interpretation, Georges Perec speaks directly to the artist's medium of the text and by association, genre itself.

### **The OuLiPo's Relationship with Detective Fiction**

The *ouvroir de littérature potentielle* [Workshop of potential literature], better known by its abbreviated equivalent, the OuLiPo, is a literary collective which was founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais in 1960. Unlike other literary activists, both Le Lionnais and Queneau had a background in the sciences. Queneau kept an active interest in mathematics while Le Lionnais was a professionally trained chemical engineer. Their enthusiasm and knowledge for their subject matter inspired them to form a group which from its initial inception has been dedicated to examining the intersecting points of literature and mathematics, usually by making the former subservient to the latter. A large amount of work that the OuLiPo has produced uses algorithms, lipograms and computerization to produce writing which is unique and experimental. Like philosophers such as Gottlob Frege and A.J. Ayer. The OuLiPo have often attempted to explain the nature of language through logic.

However, it is important to put forth the disclaimer that a straightforward definition of the group is fraught with difficulty. The application of the OuLiPo's basic tenets have changed gradually over the group's lifespan. One can attribute this to the fact that leadership of the group has changed multiple times since its initial inception and that members of the group have had varying ideas on how to define the term 'Mathematics'. Understanding the OuLiPo's foundations necessitates a discussion of

the group's precursor, the Collège de Pataphysique, an artistic collective of which Le Lionnais and Queneau were members. Both groups are interconnected but ultimately run parallel to one another. Queneau was careful that the OuLiPo should not follow the same path as the Collège. The Collège de Pataphysique was barely held together by its enthusiasm for its subject matter from its initial inception, a lack of definition which appears to have been semi-intentional. The refrain of those whose task it is to explain the foundations of the Collège is usually that anyone 'who claim[s] he or she understands the Collège de Pataphysique is probably lying' (Becker, 2012: p. 141) and that 'varying accounts of what the Collège is about tend to be so dense and almost inherently disingenuous' (p. 144). These difficulties in theoretical explanation mean that explanation of the Collège is more achievable by means of example rather than theoretical exposition.

One low-profile instance of where the tenets of the college have been applied took place in 1991, when a Swedish couple were fined by the government for naming their child 'Brfxxccxxmnpccclllmmnprxvclmncckssqllbllll6'. Their defence? That 'his name (pronounced "Albin") [...] was to be understood in the spirit of 'pataphysics' (Becker: p. 141-142). The accursed term - and its apostrophe which tends to fool the reader into thinking they're reading the beginning of a quote - was first used in a book by Alfred Jarry entitled *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician: A Neo Scientific Novel*. In this novel, the 'study' of pataphysics is defined by its author as 'a science of imaginary solutions'. The founding of the Collège was therefore a semi-serious event designed to commemorate this novel's fiftieth anniversary and, with heavy irony, institutionalize it. Despite its niche and ill-defined subject matter, the Collège became a cultural powerhouse throughout Europe. It boasted members from varying artistic trades. Its resident writers included Umberto Eco, Eugene Ionesco and Julio Cortázar and its artists such as M.C. Escher, Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp (p. 142- 143). It is even namechecked in the lyrics to The Beatles' 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer'. The underlying madcap spirit of the Collège anticipates the more bizarre antics of the OuLiPo, and however ill defined 'pataphysics might be, there are at least firm accounts of what members of the Oulipo understood as significant about it. Perec once quipped (or claimed ownership of a quip) "If you have a brother and he loves cheese, that's physics. If you have a brother



and *therefore* he likes cheese, that's metaphysics. If you *don't* have a brother and he loves cheese, that's pataphysics" (p. 142). Meanwhile, Queneau wove 'pataphysics into the fabric of the group. His and Le Lionnais's membership of the Collège informed their understanding of what OuLiPo should be able to accomplish. Queneau and Le Lionnais took heed from the Collège de Pataphysique's fanatic obsession with 'Raymond Roussel, whose approach to writing has amply informed the Oulipo's work'. As Levin Becker (p. 147) explains, it was

An important idea for the Oulipo to absorb osmotically: (a) that the raw matter of the universe is language; (b) that hypotheses about language can be proven systematically, scientifically, even if the system and the science answer only to their own cryptic logic. Queneau's avowal, at an early meeting, that "we find literary value where there is none" is the 'pataphysical part of the Oulipian project speaking.

Both groups broke with artistic forms which had gone previously, veering into an absurdism which informed the modern academic fascination with the group's place in late modernism and postmodernism. However, the work of the OuLiPo cannot be reduced to, though does possess, a series of common identifiable characteristics, much like genre fiction. Its purposeful foundations are overridden with a Nietzschean proclamation of idealism that promises a diversification in future modes of expression. However, its promise of vibrancy is perhaps at odds with the group's work, which does bear a series of common themes and devices. For instance, a large body of work by the OuLiPo which attempts to expose the fundamental nature of language relies heavily upon absences or omissions which, over the text's duration, tend to give way to that which is superfluous or 'pataphysical in nature. In the very same way as detective stories, Oulipian novels tend to concern absences of things or persons which come to stand for something far larger than they are initially presented to be. Queneau's novella *Zazie in the Metro* concerns a young girl from an upper-middle class family who is desperate to ride the Parisian Metro but is unable to because of a rail strike. The central reason Zazie adores Paris is absent, which gives way to flanerier that hints toward class divides in post-War France. *Exercises in Style*, meanwhile, is a retelling of a fight on a bus in ninety-nine assorted styles in which the register 'factual' is non-present. Meanwhile, Jacques Roubaud's utterly

psychotic 'project' *The Great Fire of London* purposefully fails in its ability to be a novel in order to resemble the grief caused by the loss of his wife.

Honorary member of the collective Italo Calvino produced something similar. A work of literature more widely taught; *If on a winter's night a traveller*. It is a story wherein you, the reader, are the protagonist and you are perpetually trying to track down a copy of the titular book you are supposed to be reading but are not. Effectively, no one owns or has read a complete, real copy of *If on a winter's night a traveller*, even though in the very real sense, they own a copy and have read a real copy of *If on a winter's night a traveller*. As in Roubaud's 'project', there is no 'novel' and there is no 'protagonist' either. Calvino's work exceeds in exemplifying the spirit of the OuLiPo despite never registering as an official member. His books take the ideas of the OuLiPo and bend them to the point of breakage to expand their scope. His novella *Invisible Cities* is another example of this. It exhibits an interpretive approach to literature, as well as the 'pataphysical sensibilities of the group. The novel focuses upon fragments of fictive speech from Marco Polo to Kublai Khan. Polo's stories are consistently undercut by the implication that details of his travels are fabricated for the purposes of entertaining the Emperor. The novel opens with Calvino insisting that 'Kublai Khan does not necessarily believe everything Marco Polo says when he describes the cities visited on his expeditions' but that he 'does continue listening to the young Venetian with greater attention and curiosity than he shows any messenger or explorer of his' (1997: p. 5). Calvino continues his philosophical dissection of doubt and interpretation by asserting that everything Marco displays has 'the power of emblems which, once seen, cannot be forgotten or confused'. That Khan's empire appears in his own mind as 'a desert of labile and interchangeable data [...] Perhaps, Kublai thought, the empire is nothing but a Zodiac of the mind's phantasms' (p. 19). The novel, henceforth, gradually descends into philosophical meditation on architecture and meaning. This is achieved in one of two separate ways. The first is directly through Calvino's narration which counterpoints descriptions of Polo's travels, with Calvino's central thesis being that Polo is unconsciously referring to Venice throughout his narration. The novel frequently manipulates architectural logic to demonstrate this. The natural assumption that as an honorary member of the OuLiPo group, Calvino would choose to

achieve this through ‘pataphysical means is rewarded as entirely correct. The novel describes flooded towers that one must ascend through swimming, cities which have ‘no walls, no ceilings, no floors; [...] nothing that makes it seem a city, except the water pipes that rise vertically where the houses should be’ (p. 42), inhabitants that ‘hate the earth’ and ‘respect it so much that they avoid all contact’ (p. 69) with it. Architecture is perhaps, a natural friend to the OuLiPo group’s intentions as it requires excellent mathematical skills as well as a good imagination and artistic sensibility. The philosophical underpinnings of *Invisible Cities* are meanwhile chiefly concerned with the act of interpretation and memory. The novel asserts that any attempt to form an accurate interpretation of a city, freed from the bias of prior experience, is simply impossible. This speaks to the fundamental nature of interpretation, which, in and of itself, speaks to the work of the detective and its wider equals within genre fiction.

The importance of *Invisible Cities* as an OuLiPian work of fiction is mirrored in the importance of Calvino’s participation in the group. The first meeting that Calvino ever attended was probably its most significant. At the meeting, held in November 1973, Perec speaks ‘about the plotting of *Life: A User’s Manual* for the first time’ while ‘Queneau discussed his fascination with the idea of false coincidences – things that seem like accidents but aren’t’. Meanwhile, ‘Calvino presented the scheme behind his *Incendio delle casa abominevole* [‘Burning of the Abominable House’], an unfinished work about a house in which twelve crimes have been perpetuated by four “exceptionally perverse characters” in a configuration left ambiguous to the reader’ (Becker: p. 191). The meeting is therefore understatedly momentous. Superficially, *Life: A User’s Manual* continues to be Perec’s most celebrated work to date, while the meeting also marked the commencement of a close relationship between Calvino and Perec, whose influence is strident over Calvino’s metafictional and linguistic experiments. Furthermore, many OuLiPian writers’ ideas appear to have a grounding in postmodern sensibilities, as well as the poetics of detective fiction. Queneau’s aforementioned ‘fascination with the idea of false coincidences’ is representative of both a common plot device in postmodern fiction and in detective novels, whereas Calvino’s plan to write a locked room mystery demonstrates that the writer exhibits an outright interest in mystery writing. Furthermore, in the very same year this meeting was held, Le Lionnais would found a subdivision of the OuLiPo, the ‘OuLiPoPo’ or ‘ouvroir de

littérature policière potentielle [workshop for potential detective fiction]’. Much like the OuLiPo, the OuLiPoPo ‘conceived its efforts along analytical and synthetic lines’. Meetings involved re-imaginings of historically significant texts as detective stories, members would ‘probe the detective-lit implications of the Cain and Abel story and Marx’s *Critique of Material Economy*’ and ‘weight the merits of Kantian versus Spinozist detectives’, as well as ‘compare definitions of the term “the perfect crime”’ (p. 266). The activities of the group highlight the body of work which the OuLiPo has produced, and especially *La disparation*, as texts which frustrate the boundaries of modernism and postmodernism as well as questions of how we might divide detective and non-detective fiction. The OuLiPo’s insistence on comparisons of Kantian and Spinozist detectives can be read as the dichotomy of *ontological or epistemological* texts; the dividing line of modernism and postmodernism put forth by Brian McHale.

The OuLiPo’s philosophical approach to detective fiction and its poetics exuded an influence on the pioneers of the postmodern detective story. Umberto Eco, author of historical detective story *The Name of the Rose*, was responsible for completing the first Italian translation of Raymond Queneau’s *Exercises in Style*. He also wrote an introduction to the English language edition of the novel, of which he commented that ‘Queneau’s French reflects a civilization and refers both to a specific social context (France, Paris) and a particular time’ (2013: p. xiii). Like Jameson, he is quick to comment that urban space is integral to the workings of the detective story, noting that he was keen to avoid ‘incurring the fate of those translations of American thrillers which make improbable and pseudo-literal attempts to transpose situations, jargons, professions, turns of speech which are typical of a different world’. Eco furthers this argument, noting that, for instance, there is no French term for the Americanism ‘downtown’. That it is ‘not necessarily the historic part, nor is it in all cities the part along the river: sometimes it’s the maze of narrow streets where local criminals operate, sometimes the area dominated by skyscrapers and the banks’ (p. xiii). Eco’s evocation of the thriller to illustrate difficulties in translating Queneau’s work raises the spectre of detective fiction upon the work of a writer who formed a group which embodies some of its key conventions. It is also coincidental that Eco should mention New York as an example of place when another pioneer of the postmodern

detective story appears to take cues from the group; Paul Auster. When writing for the New York Times in 1987, Auster was asked to review the first English translation of Georges Perec's opus, *Life: A User's Manual*. In this review, Auster praises the book, referring to it as a 'crazy quilt-monument to the imagination' but is also keen to note that 'Bartlebooth's weird saga can be read as a parable (of sorts) about the efforts of the human mind to impose an arbitrary order upon the world', signalling a kinship with Perec in his understanding of the philosophical difficulties of interpretation which informs Auster's *City of Glass*.

### **Perec's Manipulative Investigation of Genre and Language**

The most celebrated example of detective fiction that the OuLiPo group has produced is a novel by Georges Perec entitled *La disparation* (often translated as 'A Void' or 'A Vanishing'). Written during the May 1968 student protests/general strike and first published in 1969, it is the first major work of fiction that Perec produced as a member of the OuLiPo group. It is also exemplary of lipogramatic fiction. The term lipogram comes directly from the Ancient Greek term *leipográmmatos*, which literally translates as 'leaving out letter' (Literary Curiosities, 2015). A lipogram is therefore a linguistic game wherein an individual or group of letters are avoided by the speaker or author. *La disparation* is centred upon the disappearance and search for 'Anton Vowl' by 'Amaury Conson'. Their names function as intertextual puns which reference the novel's central conceit. Anton's surname is 'Vowel' with the letter 'E' removed, whereas Amaury's surname 'Conson' is a contraction of 'Consonant'. Anton's surname indicates the novel's lipogramatic form. Neither his name, nor the novel, utilizes the letter 'E'.<sup>2</sup>

The astonishingly skilled execution of its central constraint makes *La disparation* one of the most popular and quintessential works for those attempting to understand poetics of OuLiPian, and as I have claimed, detective fiction. Like Calvino's work, it shares a kinship with 'pataphysics. The novel is anarchic in its absurdism – in the sense of both Camus's definition of it and the surrealists'. Very

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<sup>2</sup> This is therefore also a play on the term 'character'. Conson and Vowl are characters both in the sense of narrative and, as in text references to 'vowels' and 'consonants', are also characters in the Latin sense.

quickly, the reader becomes drawn into a detective story with various plots and subplots, none of which arrive at a concrete 'solution'. However, unlike much of postmodern detective fiction, Perec is attentive in fleshing out his characters when exploring the metafictional capabilities of his linguistic experiment. Clues that characters of the novel discover and their subsequent deliberations upon the subject take place as if Perec were a third, unspoken entity within the novel, planting evidence which characters cannot understand, or, are understanding perfectly but are wary about discussing directly because they will be killed. In a sense this device is like Pirandello's use of characterisation in *Six Characters in Search of an Author* or Flann O'Brien's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds*. However, unlike these works, the novel's author and its genre frequently impinge upon the novel in a destructive way. Any character who discovers the cause of Anton Vowl's disappearance – that they are all characters in a detective novel - mysteriously vanishes. Perec's suggestion is that if it were possible for a character to become self-aware, they would transcend their role as fictive personalities and would be left no other choice than to cease to be characters at all, lest their discovery de-rail the course of the narrative.

Perec's authorial personality is presented to the reader but it always seems out of reach. The author occupies a liminal space where he is perceptible and yet imperceivable. Characters 'misinterpret' key clues in the novel which are planted by Perec. They feature as understatedly significant set pieces, serving to re-emphasise the novel's form for comic effect. For instance, mid-way through the novel, Perec details one of the novel's protagonists attempting to decipher 'a scrap of cardboard with 25 curious graffiti on it', a not-so-subtle reference to the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, with 'E' absent; bringing this fictive total down to 25. Upon encountering the engravings, Vowl, who has re-appeared with little explanation, impulsively begins to chalk up his own '25 signs on a blackboard', which appears to the reader as some sort of mad attempt to write the word 'Le' (Perec, 2008: p. 179-180). Another key clue to the cause of Vowl's disappearance appears when Conson peruses the bookshelves of Vowl's apartment. Perec rewrites famous texts with the letter 'E' removed. For example, the opening of Hamlet's famous 'To be or not to be...' soliloquy becomes 'Living, or not living: that is what I ask:/If 'tis a stamp of honour to submit/To slings and arrows waft'd us by ill

winds' (p. 101). Perec's characters (mis)interpret these clues as if they were real entities. Unlike much of postmodern detective fiction, they appear to the reader as unconstrained by narrative and pastiche and are instead constrained by language – the novel's lipogramatic form. This is made clear to the reader from the moment Perec begins to detail the novel's plot. The opening of the novel begins with Vowl's insomnia becoming triggered after staring at a rug for 'four days and nights' as he begins to suspect something is not quite right with his own sense of reality. He descends into a sneaking feeling that, perhaps like the reader, that he is becoming detached from himself as he interacts with the object in front of him. Perec then informs the reader that Vowl is 'a victim of optical illusions' (p. 6), that is, subject to hallucinations. The subsequent passage allows Perec to exhibit his affection for surrealism in a set piece comparable to Jean-Claude Brialy's visitation by chickens and postmen in in Bunuel's *Phantom of Liberty*. Like Brialy, Vowl too imagines animals impinging on the domestic space, that he is 'to finish up as a jackal's lunch, a snack for a rat or nourishing bait for a falcon' (p. 16). This swiftly transitions to Vowl imagining that he is 'Ishmail' aboard the Pequod, chasing the white-whale (his rug) and 'almost dying of cold and starvation, burrowing into a sand pit, shaking, suffocating, coming down with malaria, curling up both day and night in a tight ball' (p. 17) in the process. The function of intertextuality in *La disparation* is to allow Perec to, much like Melville and the white whale, explore questions of knowability. Just as the white whale eludes Ahab, the letter 'E' and therein the solution to the conundrum presented to the characters by Perec, eludes the characters of *La disparation*.

Like the work of Pynchon and Borges, *La disparation* marks a shift wherein detective novels attempt to resolve questions concerning *ontology* and perception as opposed to *epistemological* problems such as locked room puzzles. Perec, like these counterparts, provides a narrative which contests the act of interpretation itself through presenting a unsolvable philosophical conundrum centred upon knowability. The plot is not directly influenced by the way a Marlowe or Holmes character interprets clues to formulate a solution to a given crime. To accurately interpret any clue which has a direct link to the solution of the novel's conundrum is presented as an impenetrable task. Characters either cannot interpret clues accurately, or if they do they either die or disappear. Unlike his contemporaries

in the detective novel genre, postmodern or otherwise, Perec poses such questions to the reader through form and not through the channels of plainly spoken literary discourse. He does not emphasize that he is writing a parody or pastiche of the detective form; instead we are left to assume that the novel simply is detective fiction because of the central disappearance of Anton Vowl. It is important to note that Perec often repeated that he did not actively enjoy detective fiction. The genre simply intrigued Perec for its instrumental value. He was fascinated by the detective genre's metafictional possibilities and by its often-contrived devices which are, he asserted, primarily designed to entertain. He once stated that (1979: p. 10)

I hardly read detective novels any more, except some old Hercule Poirot. But as a producer of fiction, the detective novel continues to interest me and concern me in the sense that it explicitly works as a game between the author and the reader, a game whose intricacies of plot, the mechanism of the murder, the victim, the criminal, the detective, the motive, and so on, are obviously pawns

Through this, Perec appears to be suggesting that experimental literature bears a fundamental similarity with the form of the detective novel because of its capacity for games, linguistic or otherwise. Perec's opinion here also aligns with Jameson's notion of a 'literary contract' between the party of author and reader with its own conventions of language. The affinity that experimental literature shares with the detective genre has led some literary critics such as Annie Combes to point out that there is a fundamental similarity the *nouveau roman* in the way much of detective fiction is organized.<sup>3</sup> Combes comments that writers such as Agatha Christie's utilization of 'generative schemes (based on phrases, numbers, or letters) to organize the plot, as well as the order of chapters' shares core similarities with, darling of the OuLiPo group 'Raymond Roussel's way of creating a story by playing on the linguistic dimension of a given proverb' (Ref. in Sirvent, 1999: p. 160). Novels

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<sup>3</sup> The term *nouveau-roman* is used to refer to the work of literary critic and writer Alain Robbe-Grillet who first used the term in his collection of essays *Toward a New Novel* to explain his own work and that of his contemporaries. Robbe-Grillet's first novel, *Les Gommages* [The Erasers], is a detective novel which is sometimes viewed as a precursor of *La disparition* for its synthesis of mystery writing and metafictional narrative devices.



which are conceptualized through schematics, like Roussel's work, share core similarities with the aims of the OuLiPo group and, of course, *La disparation*. This becomes most apparent in the exemption of the letter 'E', to which there are references that extend beyond the writing itself. For instance, *La disparation* does not have a fifth chapter – fifth being the order in which 'E' appears in the French and English alphabet. This is not a new idea. There are pre-existing foundations for detective novels which concern letters of the alphabet. Combes mentions Agatha Christie's novel *The ABC Murders* (1936) as an example - a murder mystery 'determined by the alphabet: the victims' names and the names of the places where they are killed suggest "alphabetical murders"; "the whole story derives from the letters A, B, C"' (p. 160). Likewise, the structure of *La disparation* 'is also determined by the alphabet: it omits the letter *E* so that the missing letter becomes an enigma, both unsaid - unnameable- and evoked allegorically' (p. 160).

The idea that *La disparation* is an allegory for the deeper workings of language is one that recurs consistently throughout the novel. Though, again, this is not a new idea. One of the most persistent ideas in twentieth century philosophy is that there is a fundamental link between *language* and *cognition*. In our study these two subjects equate the writer's adopted mode of expression and the detective fiction's essential quality; the main character must be *thinking*. The persistence of this idea can be attributed to a mixture of human intuition and work by linguistics on the subject. As Birjandi and Sabah muse (2012: p. 56),

possessing a language is one of the fundamental characteristics, which is said to differentiate humans from other species. A lot of people share the intuition that they think in language; as a result, the lack of language would, in its own right, be the nonexistence of thought.

This idea that, at a fundamental level, human beings share the capacity for language is an influential one. Its mark is seen in the work of linguists such as Sapir and Whorf and of Noam Chomsky. The notion that language is fundamentally connected to thought, however, originates with the founder of the study of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure. Radically condensed, Saussure's fundamental

proposition is that any given sequence of letters, a word or a *sign* refers to an image, a signified. If I were to state the word 'tree', this would likely conjure up a variety of a tall, brown plant with leaves. However, his assertion began to evolve shortly after World War One, when suddenly, Saussure's principle that language can be used with simplicity to refer to any given object becomes subject to greater interrogation alongside a struggle to understand the complexities of concepts such as trauma and loss. This shift is best illustrated by the work of thinkers associated with 'Ordinary language philosophy'. These included thinkers such as Bertrand Russell, Gilbert Ryle and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein himself had served in the First World War and published a succinct, though by no means clear work of philosophy entitled *Tractatus-Logico Philosophicus*. *TLP* opens a more robust debate to the limitations of language. Famously, the work is bookended with the dictum 'What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence' (2001: p. 89). In a later work which, for this study, is appropriately titled *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein would turn upon this notion, choosing to nuance his arguments through presenting them in a more detailed format. He states that, upon reading *TLP* (2008: p. 4)

it suddenly seemed to me that I should publish those old ideas and the new ones together: that the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my older way of thinking

An example which applies to Wittgenstein's theory of language occurs toward the end of the first section of the investigations. He presents an often quoted and often misinterpreted example of beetles hidden in boxes, describing an imaginary circumstance where 'everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle [...] The thing in the box doesn't belong to the language game at all [...] the box might even be empty' (p. 107). In this example, the beetle resembles private experience of language that cannot be expressed linguistically. Wittgenstein pulls this very argument apart within the same paragraph, suggesting that 'if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and name', the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant' (p. 107) having argued earlier that the essential point to be made about 'private experience is really not that each

person possesses his own specimen, but that nobody knows whether other people have *this* or something else' suggesting that it would be 'possible – though unverifiable – that one section of mankind had one visual impression of red and another section another' (p. 102).

This is how *La disparation* works as a novel. The characters are given the impression that the letter 'E' has been hidden from their experience, though they are never certain and are not equipped to interrogate why. Perec achieves something extraordinary through bypassing his characters entirely to construct a 'literary contract' with the reader. One instance describes a 'full and final form of illumination' which is 'blinking' at the characters, 'just out of sight, just out of grasp' (p. 196). In another, Augustus is described as attempting to recount whether Vowl claimed that 'a work of fiction would contain a solution to his plight. An amorphous mass of books and authors bombard his brain' (p. 201), among which is *La disparation*. The figure of an aerial bombing being carried out on Augustus's brain strikes upon a key dynamic of the novel. That is, if the object of detective fiction is to interrogate facts and evidence together, to metaphorically attack the brain is to attack the locus of the detective story and the function that Augustus plays within the novel. Augustus indirectly blames Perec for this, damning that which is 'continually barring our path, continually obliging us to adopt unidiomatic circumlocutions, roundabout ways of saying things and dubiously woolly abstractions' (p. 140). Perec has therefore presented us with a highly coded (Béhar, 1995: p. 410)

story of a missing "thing" that cannot be revealed in a transparent discourse [...] by using the literary constraints, Perec situates his writing in a *locus* of violence and tension where questioning the use and the necessity of the letter "e" in language translates an original mutilation.

This very mutilation which Béhar refers to hints toward the fact that unlike the Hercule Poirot of the *ABC Murders*, Augustus can arrive at no accurate solution to the novel's central problem which does not seem underwhelming or simply false to the reader. However, to attempt a grandiose finale which

presents a big reveal involving a transcendental signified which would make sense of the novel's anarchic nature would betray the book's meticulously constructed language game.

## **Understanding, Expression and Translation: *La disparation* in English**

Thus far, I have tried to demonstrate that the environment of the OuLiPo workshop meant that Perec and those he surrounded himself with were preoccupied with detective fiction because of its formulaic nature. I have tried to indicate how *La disparation* is imbued with this tendency throughout. But there is more to it than empty formal experimentation. The importance of how the Holocaust affected Perec's work and life is indispensable; it further illuminates his work and demonstrates the capacity detective fiction has to address difficult subject matter. It also, as I will demonstrate in chapter three, contributes towards his understanding of policing and government control. Departing from the self-referentiality of postmodernism before the term was even coined, *La disparation* knowingly poses questions on the limits of representation and the ethical dilemmas inherent in attempting to represent collective trauma through its lipogrammatic form. This section will introduce Perec's life and its influence upon his work – as well as the work of the English language translator of *La disparation*, Gilbert Adair. It will lead into the third chapter of this thesis where I will further interrogate topics such as 'collective trauma' and 'testimony' in relation to Holocaust fiction, positioning such concepts within the wider context of a post-Vichy France.

Perec came from a family of Polish Jews who emigrated to France in the 30's. He describes in another novel with a number of key similarities to *La disparation*, *W ou la souvenir dans l'enfance* [W or A Memory of Childhood], how when war broke out his 'father enlisted and died. My mother became a war widow. She went into mourning. I was put out to a nanny. Her business was closed' and she 'wore the star' (1989: p. 32). The passage of time is described in no particular accuracy to mirror the perception of Perec as a child who, at six-years old, would have had no clear sense of what was happening. The paragraph I quote from ends abruptly with Perec's auto-fictional alter ego, Gaspard

Wrinckler informing us that his mother was ‘interned at Drancy on 23 January 1943, then deported on 11 February following, destination Auschwitz. She saw the country of her birth again before she died. She died without understanding’ (1989: p. 33). Therefore, when *La disparation* was translated into English in a mass market edition for the first time, the translator was tasked in working with the utmost ethical sensitivity, a deep understanding of both biographical material and the French language itself. The most readily available translation of Perec’s work in English comes from Gilbert Adair in the form of ‘A Void’. Adair had a background of writing about the Holocaust and the limitations of representing it prior to shouldering the task of introducing *La disparation* to the English-speaking world. His 1991 novella, *Death of the Author* can be read as a counterpart to *La disparation*’s themes regarding Perec’s anxiety of expression.

The novella takes the form of a semi-fictional portrait of yet another key proponent of the philosophical study of language, Paul de Man. De Man was a literary critic, theorist and a key figure in the birth of the theoretical movement of post-structuralism in its English language form. Post-structuralism tends to assert that language is unstable and has no fixed meaning. The reader, in the eyes of a post-structuralist cannot interpret a text with anything that can be described as ‘accuracy’. Instead there exists an indefinite number of multiplicities within the reader’s mind, or as Derrida would later describe it, a *play of differences*. De Man was, until the years which followed his death, characterized as one of few key figures who could be described as responsible for making literary theory ‘cool’. He was described as having ‘a mystique [...] generally admired as a thinker, esteemed as a colleague, and idolized as a teacher’. Members of staff at universities De Man taught at ‘found him erudite but ironic [...] students found him intimidating and charismatic’ (Menand, 2014). His integrity was therefore threatened when ‘in the spring of 1987, three and a half years after de Man’s death’ it had been revealed that ‘he had written during the war for two Belgian newspapers controlled by the Nazis’ after some of his articles were found in the recesses of a university library by a Belgian student. De Man’s collaborationist work included a weekly literary column for a Belgian daily newspaper, *Le Soir* which came under the control of Nazis after they began their occupation of Belgium. The articles

largely followed the Nazi line, as did the pieces he contributed to a smaller German-controlled paper, *Het Vlaamsche Land* (*The Flemish Land*). He championed a Germanic aesthetic, denigrated French culture as effete, associated Jews with cultural degeneracy, praised pro-Nazi writers and intellectuals, and assured *Le Soir*'s readers that the New Order had come to Europe.

De Man had, effectively, been living a double life for many years. He had charmed 'his way into left-wing intellectual circles' to get his first teaching role and by means of his theoretical background, necessarily coalesced with left leaning anti-authoritarian colleagues in the post-structuralist field such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (Menand, 2014).

The undercurrent of themes such as guilt and complicity in De Man's story acted as the inspiration for Adair's crime thriller. Whatever the ethical implications of doing so are, Adair's novella attempts to sensationalize the case. It is a piece of work which takes De Man's story and addresses it in the style of first person narration as if the speaker were a condemned man. The novel is darkly satirical in a manner comparable to Nabokov's *Lolita*. Like his equally well-read counterpart, the metafictional narrator of Adair's novel is consistently playing a language game wherein the narrator is attempting to direct the reader toward sympathy where it is abundantly clear he deserves none. The narrator frequently directs blame away from him himself, disowning his own articles which were 'judged so extravagantly at the time' as 'common, putrid Nazi hack work, sterile, bogus, repetitious, humiliating for me, here and now to recall' (1993: p. 57). He attacks his own style of prose to feign humility but instead demonstrates a clear moral vacuum. This is one of many recurrent instances throughout the novel where the metafictional narrator tacitly confesses his own guilt. Others include the author attempting to intellectualize his racism through nodding toward Edward W. Said's work *Orientalism*, attempting to rubbish it and the work of post-colonial theorists. Adair's narrator instead lambasts post-colonial theory as a perpetuation of stereotypes by drawing upon his own experiences as a collaborationist (1993: p. 61-62):

the pernicious paradox of the word 'Occidental' is that its sole and instant effect on the European reader is to remind him of its opposite, of the Orient, of that desert of sallow-

skinned Otherness of which the tow-headed honey-golden Aryan blondness beloved by the Nazi imagination was precisely the etherealized countertype

The narrator's language is shot with irony and double meaning. Though this is a criticism of Said's work which has reared its head multiple times in academic circles, the register in which Adair's narrator speaks serves to deepen this dichotomy of 'Orient' and 'Occident'. The East is referred to disparagingly as a non-place, a 'desert' full of 'sallow-skinned Otherness'. Simultaneously, the ideal of an ethnically pure Germany is tacitly described as ethereal and 'honey-golden'. Adair's novella revels in De Man's own theory, pitting binary oppositions against one another in order to prove its point. Like deconstruction itself, Adair exposes the fundamental inaccuracies in language to address the difficulty of writing about a subject as sensitive as the Holocaust - the narrator, meanwhile seeks to navigate this void in order to exonerate himself. The register of the novel is satirical in nature and exaggerates greatly, though simultaneously, it gradually becomes more and more difficult for the reader to understand whether Adair is satirizing De Man, or whether the narrator is attempting to satirise Nazism for his own purposes. Adair uses double meanings and the wider instabilities of language to hint towards the darker past that the narrator is refusing to present us with. Just as we are never presented with the reality of Humbert's crime, we are never presented with the exactitudes of the narrator's collaborationism.

The performative sense of pathos which Adair's novel is immersed in is a mimicry of the testimonials from victims of the Second World War and Holocaust. Unlike Adair's narrator, for Perec, this was very real. The task of Adair's translation was to therefore represent Perec's sense of irony and self-referentiality while providing an earnest sense of *La disparation's* themes of genocide, kidnappings and overriding social chaos. Perec himself struggled to come to any comprehensive understanding and therefore articulation of the pathos felt over the death of his mother and father throughout his life. Many claim he struggled with depression was a direct result of this, and that this worsened his anxiety around self-expression, meaning self-abasement and a lack of control over his emotional wellbeing. This anxiety of self-expression is burned into the pages of *La disparation*. In his biography of Perec, Bellos charts Perec's depressive tendencies. I do not feel it is a coincidence that Bellos uses a literary

example to illustrate Perec's struggle with mental illness that Perec also uses in *La disparation* to illustrate the novel's central conceit (1995: p. 151):

His constant refrain was I am a bad son. His analyst might have asked him whose son he thought he was. Had he read *Hamlet*? [...] What was it that the "bad son" thought rotten in the state of France? His father's ghost? His uncle "Claudius" or himself, Hamlet-Oedipus-Georges?

However, an example of higher importance is presented within the opening lines of this chapter. Bellos begins by talking about a short story Perec had written as a child. He notes that the 'earliest piece of Perec's fiction to have survived is a three-page short story entitled "Les Barques" ("The Boats")'. The story 'tells of twenty-three boats that lie marooned in the Seine [...] one day they are no longer there. There is no explanation at all; the story is made of description and creates an atmosphere of uncanny sadness' (p. 147). Bellos uses the short story in question as a spring-board to discuss Perec's experiences with melancholy. The image of being physically or emotionally marooned is one that occurs continually throughout Perec's fiction and life. The second narrator of *W*, also named Gaspard Wrinckler, finds himself marooned on an island after he loses control of his ship. I do not believe it is a coincidence that in *La disparation*, Perec describes the characters' failure to solve the mystery at hand as an (2008: p. 96-97)

inability to do anything but sail around it, again and again, without any of us knowing how or on which spot, to alight upon it, circumnavigating its coast [...] without for an instant hoping that, out of that Taboo that it's imposing on us, a word might abruptly light up, a noun, a *sound*

It is therefore plain to see that for Perec, the image of the boat and its sailor is one which has a personal resonance with his own feelings of isolation and loneliness. Excerpts from *La disparation* are sometimes described as infused with expressions of loneliness and despair which has led many to claim that Perec's novel is a meditation on what it means to be an orphan of the Second World War. As Warren Motte writes



The absence of a sign is always the sign of an absence, and the absence of the E in *A Void* announces a broader, cannily coded discourse on loss, catastrophe, and mourning. Perec cannot say the words *père* ["father"], *mère* ["mother"], *parents* ["parents"], *famille* ["family"] in his novel, nor can he write the name *Georges Perec*.

There is ample evidence for this in Perec's novel. It continues to occupy a place of high esteem within the canon of Holocaust fiction because of its frank honesty about its own inability to look atrocity in the eye. This is hinted at by Perec toward the end of the novel where he presents the characters with a bogus solution to the novel's mystery. He attributes the cause of the novel's disappearances to 'not merely serial murders, but genocide: all the victims, as it turns out, happen to be members of the same Turkish family, all condemned to death by the wish of the patriarch to limit his own descendants' (Béhar, 1995: p. 411). The identifying symbol of their lineage happens to be a birthmark resembling the letter 'E' which allows the patriarch to identify and exterminate the surviving members. Perec describes how 'killing was virtually a norm, killing turn and turn-about: if our family had a law ruling its conduct, it was an uncompromising, proto-Darwinian law of survival' (p. 236). The language of this passage is an implied depiction of Hitler and Goebbels' propagandistic normalization of racial hatred as a matter of patriotism; for which Darwinianism was manipulated as justification. Just as the Nazis, with De Man on their side, implied that Jews were lesser beings, Perec too implies that the victims of killings and disappearances are viewed as lesser beings in the eyes of their killers.

## Conclusion

Detective novels are never what they say they are about. They are an exercise of revealing the nature of an object of description by way of discussing it indirectly. Authors of detective novels often use the schema of the detective story to reveal something significant about the object of which they are *really* writing about. For instance, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* is a locked-room mystery about the English Empire. Chester Himes' *A Rage in Harlem* touches upon social issues such as rising inequality in the inner cities of America as well as racial segregation. Meanwhile, postmodern auteurs of the genre speak mainly to matters concerning form. They repurpose the detective novel as if it were

a malleable piece of clay in order to talk about the nature of fiction and by association; genre. experimental and postmodern writers rarely write for commercial purposes. Within the postmodern 'canon' appropriations of the detective novel have an air of diminished literary significance. Their circulation is often suggested as a 'starting point' for readers who have yet to delve fully into the postmodern canon.

In many ways, the work of writers associated with the OuLiPo mirrors this dynamic. Through writing as a semi-member of the OuLiPo group, Italo Calvino was able to expose the underlying nature of something which he was, either directly or indirectly, imitating. Perec's *La disparation*, on the other hand, speaks to the dynamics of postmodern interpretations of form and content by using the detective novel as a vehicle for expressing ideas about complex subjects such as trauma and language/linguistics. The solution to the novel's central ontological problem is 'highly coded' because of Perec's own inability to confront it directly. Perec assails his own position as the author through crassly exaggerating his power over the text to the point of parody. In a sense, his authorial persona is presented in a manner comparable to the figureheads of centralized, authoritarian forms of governance. He appears as an omnipotent figure who could strike off a character from his own cast at any point. Perec's experimentation with form explicates the underlying poetics of the detective novel as a, consciously or unconsciously, chosen mode of expression. The author's chaotic and free-spirited dissections of form by means of experimentation is anti-authoritarian politically and novelistically. When coupled with the object of its description; the Holocaust, *La disparation* speaks to the experience of fascism, authoritarianism and the need to confront it; of which, as my next chapter will demonstrate, Perec remained acutely conscious of throughout his life.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The Underside: Perec and Repressive Policing Practices**

Authoritarianism in Perec's writing appears in various forms. Most prominent and most often discussed by scholars of his work, is an undercurrent of auto-fiction which speaks to Perec's own experience of losing his father in World War Two and his mother in the Holocaust. These experiences were a strong influence upon Perec's left-leaning political views and his writing. As is already clear at this point, Perec's experiences as a Polish Jew living in France during Vichy are strongly implied in his writing, but much of Perec's writing stands opposed to all forms of dictatorial governance. While Perec's detective novels *La disparation* and *53 jours* interrogate the semiotics of the detective genre, they are also highly critical of governmental abuses of power. Where Perec's work is openly and consistently political in nature, it is often focused upon topics such as racism, militarism, fascism and any interconnectivity between the three subjects. It is my assertion that Perec, like *néo-polar* authors, appears to believe that these ideologies are implicit in the actions of the Parisian police under Gaullism.

Any critique Perec makes of French policing is necessarily integral to how Perec conceptualizes his detective figures and vice versa. This is because in both *La disparation* and *53 jours*, Perec places policing and detection in opposition to one another. As I have already discussed, through Augustus, Perec presents the private detective as stoic, rational and non-violent. As this chapter will show, *La disparation* conversely portrays the police force as violent, irrational and incompetent. I have focused primarily upon Perec in this chapter. However, I have also used Didier Daeninckx and Kamel Daoud's novels *Murder in Memoriam* and *The Meursault Investigation* in order to provide a sketch of attitudes toward policing in France and the former French colony of Algeria. Just as Perec challenges the conventions of the detective novel by refusing to conclude *La disparation* in a satisfying manner, he makes a similar challenge to accepted attitudes of policing in France by presenting the militarism of the Parisian police force as unfit for purpose. Perec's approach is an exemplary instance of how the detective novel can be employed in the interest of radical theorization on society. I wish to spend this

chapter demonstrating how Perec and his peers conceive of the role of police in 1950s and 60s French society. In particular, I wish to demonstrate their understanding of how the police can be a governmental tool for provocation and oppression rather than protection.

Of course, the assertion that detecting can be understood as a branch on the tree of ‘policing’ is not a controversial claim to make. Investigations are an essential part of law enforcement, but the pattern they follow can be unrelated to the conventions of the fictional detective genre. Detective fiction follows a logical, accessible and clear structure. Real-life investigations, on the other hand, can often be illogical and can, like the plot of *La disparation*, be subject to interference from external forces. There is an expectation that logic dictates the conduct of law-enforcement agents but this is not necessarily the case. Unlike many writers of detective fiction, Perec is scathing in his analysis of the role that police play. Traditionally, much of detective fiction involves the protagonist ‘cracking the case’ before the cops do, Perec instead implies the police would have never got there in the first place for they are far more interested in cracking skulls.

## **Theorizing the Police**

In recent years, practices of policing have been subject to increased scrutiny and debate. Widespread evidence of excessive use of force and of questionable methods used to obtain information by law enforcement agents have contributed to a shift in the public perception of investigation and treatment of suspects. While the public continues to grow increasingly sceptical of policing methods and aware of abuses of power, an increasing body of academic work has been dedicated to the analysis of policing and its role within communities. I wish to begin this chapter by attempting to put forth a theory of policing using such academic studies, and the real-life events which sparked their publication. This will enrich and inform my discussion of Georges Perec’s sociologically deconstructive approach to detective fiction which, as I have previously outlined, will dominate this chapter. One such book, Alex S. Vitale’s 2017 book *The End of Policing*, dissects the role of

America's police and for-profit prison system. It opens with Vitale asking a question which, as he explains, is not purely (p. 1):

Is there an explosive increase in police violence? There is no question that American police use their weapons more than any police in any other developed democracy. Unfortunately, we don't have fully accurate information about the number or nature of homicides at the hands of the policing.

Vitale attributes this lack of evidence to American police departments non-compliance to a '2006 law requiring the reporting of this information' (p. 1). Indeed, reactions of outrage and protest from US citizens toward trigger-happy tactics have made it clear there is an antagonistic attitude between the large swathes of the public and officers. A heavy media presence at scenes of protest, eyewitness accounts and technological developments such as camera phones have made it easier to scrutinize heavy-handed or 'militaristic' practices. Perhaps the most memorable instance of this in recent years took place in Ferguson, Missouri where protests against police brutality took place following the fatal shooting of an unarmed civilian, Michael Brown, in August of 2014. Scenes of protest erupted into violence between protestors and a heavily armed police force and served to further expose racial divisions in America. They have prompted a long overdue public discussion over the work to be done about racism within law-enforcement, as well as a more open questioning of the aforementioned militarization of the police force. The militarism in question has, historically, always been present, though was recently brought to public attention by the police response to demonstrations within Ferguson. Photographic and videographic evidence showed the mobilization of armoured trucks and usage of tear gas bombs against unarmed protestors. As Vox notes, 'images from Ferguson have prompted several observers to note that the response was as heavily armed as actual military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan' (Taub, 2014). Residents of the area were quick to note this, asserting that 'law enforcement officers had instigated the violence with their military-like tactics'

(Ellis, Hanna & Prokupecz, 2014). As Vitale reports, this is unfortunately a common approach within U.S. policing (p. 3):

Part of the problem stems from a “warrior mentality”. Police often think of themselves as soldiers in a battle with the public rather than guardians of public safety [...] militarized units like Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) proliferated during the 1980s War on Drugs and post-9/11 War on Terror only fuels this perception

Infamously, police forces have a tradition of disproportionately targeting those from working class and non-white backgrounds. As Angela Y. Davis, a key figure in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, remarks (2016, p. 40):

The vicious circle linking poverty, police courts and prison is an integral element of ghetto existence. Unlike the mass of whites, the path which leads to jails and prisons is deeply rooted in the imposed patterns of black existence.

Contemporaries on the subject in the US have been clear that such problems appear to be worsening and not improving. Michelle Alexander, in her 2012 book *The New Jim Crow*, insists there is a continuous ‘system of mass incarceration that has disenfranchised millions of African Americans and Latinos and relegates them to second-class status even after they leave prison’ (Tucker, 2012: p. 466). The election of Barack Obama, one reviewer notes, has served to draw a fork in the road wherein there is an opportunity for a ‘potential realization of full democratic promise’ but also for the former President to act as ‘the shield from efforts to dismantle institutional racism’ (p. 467). This, Alexander insists, contributes towards what she terms ‘colour-blindness’, a widespread willingness to ignore the issue where the situation of people of colour is akin to that of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* - that the American middle classes effectively choose to unsee racial injustice and abuses of power by law enforcement.

However, to confine these issues solely to the U.S. would be improper. As Vitale claims, policing is of European origin and practice. The modern police force were, from their initial conception, ‘tied to three basic social arrangements of inequality in the eighteenth century: slavery, colonialism, and the control of a new industrial working class’ (p. 34). In England, Robert Peel’s development of the ‘original’ modern police force was conceived ‘while managing the British colonial occupation of Ireland and seeking new forms of social control that would allow for continued political and economic domination in the face of growing insurrections, riots and political uprisings’ (p. 35). The practice, Vitale appears to suggest, spread to other European countries due to its proven effectiveness where its basic tenets were continually implemented. However, in France, the introduction of the modern police force was met with immediate resistance. As Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, ‘solidarity of whole sections of the population’ with ‘petty offenders [...] was constantly expressed: resistance to police searches, the pursuit of informers, attacks on the watch of inspectors provide abundant evidence of this’, citing that the primary aim of ‘police and penal repression’ in France was the ‘breaking up’ of this solidarity (1991: p. 63). As Daniel Singer (2013: p. 121) explains by way of comparison to policing by consent in England, this resistance has deep roots in French working-class hostility towards the upper classes:

Bourgeois democracy has never struck such strong roots in France as in Britain [...] successive regimes felt ephemeral, their legitimacy often openly questioned by large segments of the population. The police were more than just a show for traffic duty. More potentially, they have always also been a weapon of Civil War.

Singer evokes the CRS<sup>4</sup> as a key example of where officers have been deployed in the interest of ‘breaking up’ solidary & protest. He cites their ‘baptism of fire in December 1947 in bloody battles with striking miners in the North of France’ and their fight ‘on the internal front of a colonial war. For years their main task was to crush the Algerian National Front and its French sympathizers’ (p. 121).

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<sup>4</sup> Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité or ‘National Security Guards’

Singer's argument can be taken further. It has been reported by eyewitness accounts that many of the people arrested on this 'domestic front' during the Algerian War were not sympathizers or activists with the struggle for decolonization, but were mistakenly arrested or worse because of their skin colour, or for simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I will explore this phenomenon in greater depth later through Didier Daeninckx's novel *Murder in Memoriam*. However, the Angela Davis, who had studied at the Sorbonne during the sixties under the tuition of Herbert Marcuse, notes that 'the French Police constantly stop[ped], search[ed] and harass[ed] the Algerian students or any "dark-complexioned person" suspected of being Algerian, because their nation wanted independence' (2016: p. 185). Similar contemporary evidence of brutalizing and racist practices also continues to emerge within France. Most recently, in March of 2017, French Human Rights League held protests after (Chrisafis, 2017)

a police officer was charged with raping a young black man, Theo, with a baton during a violent arrest in Aulnay-sous-Bois, north of Paris [...] clashes and rioting broke out on estates around the French capital, leading to more than 250 arrests.

As with the protests in Ferguson, the marches were directed not only to specific instances of police violence, but a wider, and more endemic sense of misconduct within law enforcement. As *The Guardian* entails, 'French police are regularly accused of using excessive force in poorer neighbourhoods, particularly against black and minority ethnic suspects' (Chrisafis, 2017). This, it claims in 2012, is partly due to the 'poor relationship between police and young people on the ethnically diverse French housing estates, and perceived injustice and brutality' (Chrisafis, 2012).

## **Policing and French Colonialism**

By its association with policing, it is possible to view detective fiction as a problematized genre. It is a kind of narrative which exhibits a profound influence on the way policing is viewed. In popular culture, many police officers are repeatedly shown planting evidence, obtaining it by dishonest means,



manipulating witnesses and suspects, lying or extracting confessions in ways that would normally render them inadmissible. In fictional and non-fictional cases, this does very little to jeopardise their status. Meanwhile, fictional detectives such as Marlowe and Holmes reinforce the message from an external position: they regularly show the police to be inept, inefficient and prone to miscarriages of justice. The debate surrounding the respectability of the police force, its role in society and the personal integrity of its detectives, often rests upon the lines of narrative; between the suggestion that the police force are infallible 'heroes', and others claiming the system is corrupt - needing greater oversight or outright abolition. As David R. Champion describes (2017, p. 1)

Few professions represent such powerful and evocative symbols in mainstream culture, and few symbols generate such polarized reactions. These reactions range from euphemistic mythologization to vitriolic demonization. The aggregate of these perceptions [...] forms a cultural narrative, or mythos, of policing.

This 'mythos' in question is informed by points of intersection between policing and detection.

Private detectives are often shown to be at odds with the ineptitude of the police. Marlowe typically acts with complete cynicism towards the role of the LAPD and is occasionally held by them for questioning despite no evidence of wrongdoing. Meanwhile, the introduction of the arguably most uniquely important character in detective fiction history, Sherlock Holmes, begins at a police scene and ends with the recently-introduced character solving the case before the police officers do.

However, as Jon Thompspon writes, Conan Doyle's Holmes stories and their progeny are not to be understood as separate from British colonialism of which the police were an integral part, but rather as complicit in that same system. He describes Conan Doyle's work as 'distinctive in its valorisation of empirical values and imperialism', noting that Doyle 'was one of the great Victorian apologists of empire [...] in 1900 he went to the Boer War and enthusiastically worked as a doctor in a field hospital at the front'. Thompson notes that he also wrote impassioned defences of that same war, as well as British involvement in South Africa (p. 68). Conan Doyle was a strong advocate of Eurocentric enlightenment values of truth and scientific reason; used as justification by both France

and England's 19<sup>th</sup> century incursions into Eastern and African countries. Contrastingly, Thompson earlier describes Poe's Dupin, a key influence on Borges' mysteries, as representative of 'values antagonistic to democracy, but his rationalism is repeatedly valorised over the narrow, empirical values of the police, which, Dupin makes clear, are also held by the inferior democratic masses' (p. 45).<sup>5</sup> However, Dupin's rationalism is a philosophical mindset no less Eurocentric than the empiricism of conventional detection, and it, too, has been forcibly imposed on the understanding of colonized nations.

As I have already shown, many postmodern and late modernist works of literature are transgressive of such enlightenment values, demonstrating the limitations of values such as truth and justice by placing characters in search for an impossible or incomplete truth. These less conventional forms of detective fiction exhibit less of an influence upon the public imagination of crime. This is likely because late modernist and postmodern detective stories are heavily focused upon form and cater to a niche and/or erudite audience. The attitudes of postmodern and late modernist works of detective fiction are therefore beset by ambivalence in their attitudes toward policing and detection. In some cases, they can appear critical, satirizing law enforcement agents through means of pastiche or parody, and in others, remain completely apolitical and focus solely on interrogating the detective novel's form. Postmodern and late modernist works of detective fiction occupy a unique position. They stay within the fringe, are widely acknowledged as innovators of genre and, in most cases, are celebrated by a cult readership. However, they also encourage a sociologically deconstructive approach to detective fiction, urging the reader to interrogate the wider 'mythos' of police and detective work. The work of Georges Perec does this brilliantly. The key text of this dissertation, *La disparation*, is highly satirical of heavy-handed policing practices in 1960's France. It is underpinned by themes of social chaos and of Perec's experiences with French militarism having trained – but not served – as a parachutist during the Algerian War of Independence. Through radical experimentation with genre and by engagement

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<sup>5</sup> In *A Study in Scarlet*, this comparison even made by Watson himself. Holmes' typically sardonic reply is 'No doubt you think you are complimenting me when comparing me to Dupin', continuing to describe him as a 'very inferior fellow [...] He had some analytical genius no doubt, but he was by no means such a phenomenon as Poe appeared to imagine' (Conan Doyle: 2014: p. 20)

with social context, Perec's work challenges the colonialism that the Parisian police force were complicit within. *La disparation* is an indispensable cultural artefact that contextualizes policing in relation to two crucial events which shaped the future of the fourth republic; the war in and subsequent decolonization of Algeria, and the May '68 student movement/general strike.

To begin with, it is important to examine the complexities in Perec's own attitudes toward the Algerian War for it is a point in French history which had a clear influence on Perec's writing remarked upon frequently by his biographers who have predominantly remained sympathetic to the writer's initial ambition to serve in the French military. The authority on Perec in the Anglophone world, David Bellos, concludes that the writer 'had no real alternative', choosing to situate Perec in an environment of 'hostile' opposition toward the Algerian War. In one instance, Bellos recounts an instance where, upon wearing his uniform to visit a barber's in La Bourboule, Perec's throat was almost slit when the owner 'began to quake with fear (or anger)' and whose 'trembling hand slowly brought the razor under Perec's chin and down towards his throat' when the writer 'suddenly grasped' (or imagined) that the barber 'was about to slit it' (1995: p. 192). Bellos is keen to deflect blame to the wider political context, remarking that (p. 188)

Perec became a *para* at a dramatic moment in the history of France. After the loss of Indochina in the early 1950s and the Suez debacle in 1956, the army was deeply embroiled in Algeria and was prepared to use any methods to avoid another humiliation.

He remarks it was unfortunate for Perec that Algeria's declaration of independence which led to war came 'on the Tuesday after Perec qualified as a parachute trooper', however, takes care to note that service in Algeria could have been something completely avoidable for Perec from the beginning. Instead, Bellos argues 'military service was nonetheless something that he *decided* to accept. Perhaps he imagined it would make him less of a "bad son", since he would be following his father's example'. He cites Perec's moral conundrum that 'He did not want to be a soldier [...] but how could he justify taking steps to avoid the draft? What moral right did he have to escape the fate of his

comrades?’ (p. 171). Nonetheless, Perec’s exemption from serving in the Algerian war did arrive in ‘mid-February’ and the writer was discharged after months of being stationed in South-Western France. Perec’s initial commitment to serving in the armed forces took place in 1958 before several key events that shaped public perception of war. Firstly, Perec’s term of military service took place before the Paris Massacre of 1961, marked by the Paris Police’s enforcement of a colonial agenda through abhorrent cruelty on an enormous scale. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1961, Parisian police officers and the CRS responded to a protest of 30,000 pro-Liberation Algerian protestors by murdering, either by drowning or fatal beatings, anywhere between 40 and 300 Algerians and disposing of their bodies in the Seine to cover up the scale of the atrocity. Secondly, as Bellos notes, ‘It was Perec’s misfortune to come of military age before Alain Resnais’s documentary on Auschwitz, *Night and Fog*, fractured France’s voluntary amnesia about the Final Solution and the position of its survivors’ (p. 170).

Curiously, throughout this period of military service in Algiers and prior to joining the OuLiPo, Perec was part of a left-wing organization of his own co-creation which, given the context, it would be safe to assume sympathised with the struggles of the Algerian people. Its position was instead, indefinable. It was abbreviated cryptically as *Lg*, standing for ‘La Ligne General’ (The General Line). The group ‘was founded in 1958 with the aim of launching a new journal of literature and art that would revitalize and re-direct French culture’. The group ‘sought to reinvigorate Marxist approaches to modern culture while remaining outside of the control of the Communist party’ who were opposed the independence of Algeria (Bellos, 1996: p. 6). The periodical was abandoned relatively quickly, however ‘the group continued to meet for discussions until 1964 when it finally petered out’ (p.6). Perec was one of two leading members of *Lg* throughout his aforementioned period of military service and for the four remaining years afterward spent as a civilian. The year in which Perec participated in the occupation of Algiers and was simultaneously part of *Lg* is detailed in a satirical short work of auto-fiction entitled *Which Moped with the Chrome Plated Handlebars at the Back of the Yard?* Like Queneau’s *Zazie in the Metro*, the book uses persistent wordplay and spoonerisms to satirise attitudes within French society. The short story features a roster of characters which oscillate between the extremes of hard-faced military men and exaggeratedly raggedy intellectuals who dwell ‘in the café

over the road' and 'speak about Lukasse, Heliphore, Heygal and other oddbodkins tarred with the same brush' (Perec, 1996: p. 9). They are described as 'a touch cracked' (p. 9) with the insinuation being that, although the 'intellectuals' in question are vehemently opposed to French involvement in Algeria, there is a suspicious lack of communication on their part that they are. The constant juxtaposition and lack of engagement between the two groups of which Perec is part is therefore highly farcical in nature. There is little to no evidence that *Lg* will take any action to oppose the war but will do anything to avoid serving in it. One instance wherein this becomes apparent is when a character named Karalerowicz insists 'centaurianly' to Henri Pollak,<sup>6</sup> that he should get in his jeep 'and run me over. Break my foot so that it never more may it be used for murtricial ends. Then may I, bowed down under pain and affliction, go from military hospital to hospital military' (p. 11). The story makes further mincemeat of nationalistic French attitudes toward the war. Military personnel continually speak in a colloquial register which masks the war's brutality, perhaps assisted by Perec's use of wordplay. Soldiers are instructed to 'go off, at the next opportunity, to water with their blood those noble African hills which our glorious history has made into French territories' (p. 10), an instruction which, with heavy irony, suggests that the colonized land needs an exterior force to tend to it. Brutality and violence at the hands of the French military are viewed as necessary in the same way that many members of the public viewed the Parisian police's handling of domestic turmoil such as protests and insurgencies as necessary to maintain 'law and order'.

Vulgar demonstrations of power at the hands of the police and the paramilitary CRS such as the Paris Massacre continue to contribute to an understanding on the French Left that the difference between the military and police is minimal. Perec asserts directly that colonialism and policing are interlinked in his final and unfinished novel *53 Jours*. Perec makes this observation through exploring the contradictory existence of a police state in a mirror-image of post-Independence Algiers. As in *La disparation*, the novel centres upon a missing person's case; fictional writer Robert Serval. The only

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<sup>6</sup> Pollak is the protagonist of the story and a thinly veiled self-portrait of Perec. His surname is an epithetical reference to Perec's heritage. The narrator describes 'a sad tale: he'd been an orphan since his tenderest babyhood, an innocent victim, a poor little mite chucked out onto the big city streets at the age of fourteen weeks' (p. 7).

clue to Serval's disappearance is a manuscript entitled *The Crypt*. Unlike *La disparation*, the novel is not concerned with linguistic experimentation and instead, like Borges and Eco before him, Perec explores the idea of metafiction as evidence. The unfinished detective novel is an expression of Perec's own memories of military experience and a retrospective analysis of recent French history. Perec's anti-authoritarianism is prescient from the opening pages of the novel wherein Perec describes the continuation of a state of affairs much like colonial Algiers wherein the military and the police are corrupt, and in co-ordination with one another. He describes the former French colony in a liminal state. Algeria's fictional counterpart continues to be subject to deep repression after liberation from the French government. This appears to be a common problem in many countries following decolonization. For instance, as Jean and John Comaroff note of South Africa: 'the burgeoning violence endured by segregated black communities under apartheid has, especially since the late 1980s, spilled over into once tranquil, tightly policed, "white" cities and suburbs' (2004: p. 801). Perec presents an impoverished country broken by decades of colonial subjugation and extraction of natural resources, demonstrating that Algeria is struggling to exist as anything more than a former colony. The novel is littered with references to its history under French occupation which, Perec appears to suggest, is inextricably linked to its modern existence. It opens by describing a repressive response to a demonstration, which, without the context that Perec later provides, evokes the paramilitary and police responses to FLN<sup>7</sup> protests that continue to haunt the imagination of those who lived through the years of 1958-1962 (p.3):

The army and the police are **still** patrolling the city.

Ten days ago for the twentieth anniversary of independence, the miners of Cularo held a rally in Avenue de la Présidence-à-Vie which left eight dead, amongst them a woman and child.

Perec's integration of a lingering French presence and the translator's choice to use the French language to accentuate this mirror-image of post-Independence Algiers serves to demonstrate that although the country continues to be free from direct control of the French government, relics of that

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<sup>7</sup> Front de libération nationale or 'National Liberation Front'

control continue to linger. Perec re-emphasizes this, using the protagonist as a mouthpiece to muse contemplatively on an object recognizably attached to French identity; a bottle of wine. He describes how ‘French wines proper and true [...] are not what they should be when they get here. Few travel well, and the cellars are either sweltering, or abominably refrigerated’ (p. 8). Just as French wine has no place in an ex-colony, nor does the continuation of colonial French attitudes. After their separation, France and Algiers should run parallel to one another and yet, they are inseparable. Perec plainly and explicitly states this in the manuscript’s second half, which largely acts as an analysis of the first (p. 119):

It’s all there in the opening lines: the city under military patrol, the stage of emergency: of course it’s just the lamentably ordinary picture of a police state- but it’s also France under the Occupation, with the Flying Squad, the “Resistance” (of café waiters) and even a curious allusion to the “patriotic choice” of “good French [wines] and true”

This paragraph builds upon the opening sentences of the novel, re-emphasizing Perec’s intention to compare Vichy France and instances of repression in Algiers which harken back to its former life as a French colony. It self-consciously affirms that Perec’s experience of Algiers emerges from a Eurocentric point of view where the events of WWII are the writers’ primary framework of comparison. This underlying sentiment of a contradictory co-existence of French and Algerian culture and language has been commented on by those from former French colonies. One indispensable example of this, and one which aligns itself well with Perec’s depiction of post-Independence Algeria is Kamel Daoud’s *The Meursault Investigation*, a detective novel from the point of view of a character seeking justice for his brothers’ murder by the anti-hero of Albert Camus’s *L’etranger*. Daoud’s work is one of few detective novels written by non-white, European or American writers about subjugation to colonial oppression. Much like other texts discussed in this chapter, it explicitly and self-consciously uses the detective novel’s form to critique power. Daoud describes how, at first, post-Independence Algiers relished in the optimism to rebuild a sense of its national identity. The novel’s protagonist describes the way in which he will ‘write back’ against Camus, asserting that he will ‘do what was done in this country after Independence: I’m going to take the stones from the old houses

the colonists left behind, rebuild them one by one and build my own house, my own language’.

However, Daoud notes how the initial optimism of this began to peter out with time, describing how (2015: p. 2)

the country’s littered with words that don’t belong to anyone anymore. You can see them on the facades of old stones, in yellowing books, on people’s face, or transformed by the strange creole that decolonization produces.

This notion that language is out of joint with human experience in Algeria is a testament to its struggle to construct an identity following decolonization, and its struggle to express a century of brutal repression in clear prose. Though Algiers is freed from French control, the legacy of its role as a former colony continues to be a spectre on its politics and literature.

### **From Colonialism to Nazism: The Influence of Papon’s Legacy on the Work of Perec and Daeninckx**

In 1981, ‘hundreds of documents were found by accident in the recesses of Bordeaux town hall, among them the deportation orders’ (BBC, 2007) signed by former officials of Vichy France. The papers incriminated one Maurice Papon when his signature was found on documents approving proposals to deport Jewish families to death camps stationed in Europe. At this point, Papon had enjoyed a relatively stable political career in post-war France and had served as prefecture of the Paris police between 1958 and 1967. He was holding down a role as a budget minister at the time of the discovery. Shortly after the papers were found, they were published by ‘the satirical magazine *Le Canard Enchaîné*. Legal proceedings began and Papon was forced to leave public life because of the scandal’. In 1983, charges were levelled at Papon for crimes against humanity, however these were ‘dropped because of legal technicalities in 1987’ (BBC, 2007). These ‘were changed to complicity in crimes against humanity in 1995’ and in 1998, Maurice Papon was sentenced to ten years in prison for the deportation of over 1,600 Jews from France as a bureaucrat in the Vichy regime (BBC, 2007).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, Papon would serve less than three of the years he was sentenced to due to his deteriorating health.



Papon's role in post-war France as prefecture of the Paris police took place during the Algerian War of Independence, meaning the former Vichy official was responsible for both the 1961 and 1962 massacres. Indeed, it is generally acknowledged that Papon personally administered the order to use force against FLN protestors who had refused to adhere to a curfew that he, himself had imposed in 1961. Some have argued that Papon's experience as a Vichy official informed his practices as head of the Paris police. Nabila Ramdani, writing for *The Guardian* on the fiftieth anniversary of the massacre remarks that (2011)

the most memorable – and vicious – atrocities saw policemen herding panicking crowds on to Paris's bridges, where many were tossed into the Seine [...] many of the killers had been Nazi collaborators who learned their crowd control methods from the Gestapo.

Such comments invoke a comparison between genocidal fascism and the brutalizing enforcement of colonial rule during the Algerian War. As Max Silverman points out, however, this an argument which has been used tactically, though unsuccessfully, to defend Nazi officials on trial. Silverman is keen to highlight that it has been 'used by the lawyer Jacques Vergès to absolve his client, the Nazi Klaus Barbie, by creating an equivalence between Barbie's crimes and those of France as a colonial power in Algeria' (2008: p. 425). Silverman argues that adhering to such arguments can relativize the Holocaust and exploit it for 'for revisionist ends and can fuel an insidious culture of competition for victim status' (p. 426). Nonetheless, Silverman is quick to weigh up a counter argument, suggesting that it 'could be said that any representation of a major traumatic event today cannot help but make reference (if unconsciously) to the frames already provided by representations of the dominant traumatic event of our age'. Silverman then suggests that 'the framing of the Holocaust itself is not devoid of narrative features of previous events' concluding that 'each representation is an 'imaginative creation' caught up in a complex network of cultural production' where 'transmission and circulation in which transference, substitution and endless displacement' are the dominant means of expression (p. 427). Silverman's indecision is a testament to the difficulty of negotiating an appropriate analysis of our subject matter and the ethical implications of analysis itself.

While Silverman is correct to point out that often the Holocaust is often misused as a framework, either by comparison or narrativization, to describe the weight of human suffering non-Jewish minorities are subjected to by dictatorial regimes, his argument that doing so ‘creates a competition for victimhood status’ lacks nuance and flippantly negates the severity of the treatment of Algerians by the French state. The use of the verb ‘compete’ specifically implies that Algerians are striving to be recognized as victims without a legitimate basis. Michael Rothberg, in an essay which uses the work of Holocaust survivor and former member of the French resistance Charlotte Delbo to debate the intersections of the Shoah and the Algerian War, more carefully evaluates the binary between the two groups. He argues against the idea that ‘too much emphasis on the Holocaust is said to block other traumas from view or, inversely, adoption of Holocaust rhetoric to speak of those other traumas is said to relativize or even deny the Holocaust’s uniqueness’ (2006: p. 161). He describes Delbo’s approach in displaying the two events as overlapping and not entirely separate as a helpful and ‘productive, non–zero-sum logic in which memories emerge in the interplay between different pasts and a heterogeneous present’ (p. 162). He terms this idea ‘multidirectional memory’, clarifying that it refers to the ‘overlap and interference of memories’ that ‘help constitute the public sphere as well as the various individual and collective subjects that articulate themselves in it’ (p. 162). Rothberg, like Foucault before him, presents an analysis of discursive structures within society, and how these constitute the subject’s understanding of collective engagement with expressions of trauma, whether that be through the written word or by historical testimony.

Rothberg continues to outline examples in Delbo’s work, *Les Belles Lettres*, to illustrate his argument. In one powerful instance, he quotes from the testimony of a survivor interviewed by Delbo at the time of the Algerian War who refused to have a television in his living room because of the ability of news footage of the Algerian War to trigger flashbacks: “We don’t have television. One sees too many horrors. We used to have it, but when it broke down Jean didn’t have it fixed. It was during the war in Algeria. Uniforms, soldiers, machine guns” (Delbo, quotd. in Rothberg: p. 175). The central thesis which Rothberg extrapolates from Delbo’s work is that the power of description and testimony can challenge unjust systems which enable the harm of others. As an example, he notes that ‘forms of

resistance taken by some opponents of the [Algerian] war—refusal to serve in the army and active support for the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN)’ were often met with dictatorial methods of ‘criminalization, censorship, and torture’ (p. 169). He argues that testimony is an effective political tool which exhibits a profound influence on how we engage with history and collective trauma. He invokes instances of radical literature circulated during the Algerian War and attempts to intercept or censor such works (p. 174-175):

testimony ultimately becomes part of the historical record and larger democratic debates, as it also potentially enters the field of legal justice. But [...] questions of history and legality were secondary to the battle over the very contours of public space. Delbo’s desire to recirculate testimony derives from a recognition that the politics of testimony involves the creation of a public; the importance of testimony’s public face lies in the possibilities for action that are created by circulation.

This practice, according to Rothberg, proves its effectiveness through its ability to construct a community orientated toward protest. He dubs this the ‘counterpublic’ and gives such examples of anti-Fascist practices of Vichy and the student protests of May 1968 to support the case he makes. Rothberg implies that the effectiveness of testimony to interrogate cultural trauma is proven by the French state’s awareness ‘of the power of public circulation and used all means at its disposal to limit the “address, temporality, mise-en scène, [and] citational field” of resistant discourses’” (p. 175), appearing to suggest that the authoritarian response of those in high office to such practices identifies their guilt in the war crimes of which they are accused.

Nonetheless, it stands to reason that artistic expression can function as testimony in instances of collective traumatic experience. One lesser known title that is relevant to the study at hand and one which Silverman mentions in his article and exemplifies Rothberg’s idea of a ‘counterpublic’ is a work by Didier Daeninckx; a detective novel entitled *Murder in Memoriam*. Published in 1984, one year after officials moved to prosecute Papon for crimes against humanity; the novel details the murders of a young history teacher named Roger Thiraud, a passerby mistaken for a protestor during the events of the seventeenth of October 1961 and of his son Bernard twenty years later. The novel is

an exploration of the way recent history can repeat itself and is exemplary of the *néo-polar* phenomenon which links Perec and his peers. It scrutinizes French government repression via the form of the detective novel. It achieves this by presenting its protagonist with the task of uncovering the cause of Roger's death to determine Bernard's killer. The novel features a thinly veiled indictment of Papon and policing practices in 1960s Paris which it highlights through the unresolved trauma the Paris massacre had upon protestors and their families. The novel features many insightful and vivid eyewitness accounts of the massacre, with Papon's prosecution concluding the novel. Daeninckx focuses upon those responsible for the massacre to 'uncover interwoven strands of French history [...] reveal[ing] a tangled web of oppressive state power and racialized violence never far from the surface of everyday life in a rapidly modernizing France' (Silverman, 2008: p. 420). The novel interrogates a situation, similar to that described by Rothberg, in which the public are subject to brutal treatment by the police. Indeed, David Fraser comments that the novel's protagonist is exemplary of the post-1968 *néo-polar* because his quest 'to uncover the 'truth', for memory, always remains outside the law, but in the service of justice' (p. 243).

The novel frequently questions the ethics of its narrative methods by nodding toward other established detective writers and characters. It is acutely self-conscious of whether using the detective novel's sensationalism to discuss trauma is ethical, and of the place the detective has within mass culture. Daeninckx repeatedly suggests that the ideal of a benevolent detective is inextricably bound to the mythology of policing and that a simple acceptance that this is the case is often wrongfooted. For instance, when Daeninckx's narrator notes the shock of a colleague upon arriving at a crime scene, he scathingly remarks that 'He must have been brought up on Conan Doyle and Richard Freeman' (1991: p. 39) and in another instance, when it is revealed that Roger Thiroux had attended a screening of a film shortly before his death the protagonist remarks that if his name 'was Hercule Poirot, I'd note down the ticket number and be off to the National Cinema Centre to check the precise date this ticket was sold' (p. 66). Such devices call attention to Daeninckx's novel as a work of fiction with historical grounding. Its combination of testimony and fiction help to create an underlying sentiment of protest directed toward police brutality, as well as the militarization of law enforcement. The eyewitness

accounts of the massacre shatter the illusion of a gritty, yet ultimately benevolent police force. In one instance, a character recounts the delight officers appear to take in exceeding their authority. They state that ‘Within fifteen minutes I counted six corpses [...] the whole area was a battlefield’, claiming that policemen were ‘armed to the teeth! Rifles, tear gas launchers, hand guns and not counting the truncheons. They all wanted their pictures taken before they got down to it’ (p. 77), a reminder that public awareness of abuses of power were raised partly as a result of photographs circulated by the ‘counterpublic’ which involved scores of dead, injured or terrified FLN protestors.

Silverman makes the assertion that this novel by Daeninckx bears similarities to another work by Perec entitled *W ou la souvenir dans l'enfance* [W or a Memory of Childhood]. While *W* is not a work of detective fiction, Perec, like Daeninckx, explores the interconnected fates of those subjugated to French colonialism and lives lost during the Holocaust and Second World War. In part, it uses the style of a colonial narrative to explore the notion of an accurate practice of remembrance in the context of the Holocaust and wider trauma caused by racism. However, unlike some - such as Silverman - have theorized, the novel should not be read of comparative of the experiences of the victims of both the Algerian War and Holocaust. Perec, due to his personal circumstances, would have been acutely aware that both events were to be understood as separate. These impacted France as a nation and Perec as an individual in such profoundly different ways. To draw simplistic comparisons between Nazi brutality and French colonial brutality would be downright unhelpful. Bellos takes care to note that Perec was acutely conscious of the Algerian War's brutality, noting that he was ‘shocked’ upon reading an essay which, as Rothberg notes, exemplifies his idea of a counterpublic; ‘Henri Alleg’s “La Question”, a report on torture published in a banned issue of *Force ouvrière*’ (p. 188).<sup>9</sup> *W* features dual narratives; one is a work of auto-fiction wherein Perec, under the acronym ‘Gaspard Wrinckler’ recounts memories of the incursion into France by the Nazis. This narrative begins ‘I have no childhood memories’ (1989: p. 6), a sentence which demonstrates Perec’s stunted emotional growth. The narrator has no childhood memories because he is still living as a

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<sup>9</sup> This is an essay that Rothberg, incidentally, cites as an example of counterpublic testimony during the Algerian War.

child; his memories have been voluntarily blotted from his mind, leaving him unable to confront the past. Perec compares his memory to ‘unjoined-up writing’, asserting that it is ‘made of separate letters unable to forge themselves into a word [...] or like the dissociated, dislocated drawings whose scattered elements almost never managed to connect up’ (p. 68), an oblique metaphor for the novel at large and one which also suggests an affinity with *La disparation* in the way trauma can derail conventional writing.

The novel’s second narrator tells of his ‘voyage to W’ (p. 1) in a register which imitates the style of novels such as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and various works by Kipling. However, inverting the common understanding of colonized nations as bound to the authoritarian rule of an exterior colonizer, Perec makes it apparent that the laws of the island are Fascist. The imagery Perec uses to illustrate the practices on those of the island borrows from Adolf Hitler’s propagandistic manipulation of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, Chilean Dictator Augusto Pinochet’s use of its national stadium as a concentration camp in 1973 (the year before the novel was published), as well as the Vel’ d’Hiv Roundup – a Nazi directed mass-arrest of French Jews where victims were held by the French gendarmerie in the Vélodrome d’Hiver stadium. The second narrator remarks that ‘W today, is a land where Sport is king, a nation of athletes where Sport and life write in a single magnificent effort’ (p. 67). The second half of the book is abound with double meanings appearing to protest policies that promote racial segregation. Perec invents ‘officials appointed by Central Authority’ named ‘race managers’ which are ‘not to be confused ‘with “sports manager” or “team manager” responsible for training athletes and keeping them in shape’ (p. 73). Those who are placed at the bottom of society by the Central Authority are consistently abused at both a legislative and public level. Perec remarks that they have produced ‘a whole set of discriminatory measures which can be divided roughly into two main groups’. The first ‘are announced at the start of each meeting’ and ‘consist of positive or negative handicaps imposed on individual Athletes, on teams or occasionally entire villages’. The second type of measure is ‘unpredictable’ and sinisterly, ‘left to the whim of the Organizers and, in particular, the Race Managers’ (p. 112). Stadiums, meanwhile, appear to be highly reminiscent of concentration camps. Athletes are described as separated from the ‘adult world’. Perec claims that

they sometimes hear ‘far-off shouting, thunderclaps, trumpet blasts; they see thousands of coloured balloons floating by overhead or magnificent flocks of doves’ knowing that they will be part of ‘celebrations some day’ (p. 138). Attendants, meanwhile, yell thinly veiled racial epithets toward athletes, referring to them in ‘spectators slang’ as ‘the “footsloggers”, the “Cattleshed” or the “Nignogs’ (p. 118). It is language reminiscent of both the Islamophobia of the French public during the Algerian revolt and the virulent anti-Semitism of the German public during Hitler’s reign. In melding a critique of colonialism and fascism, Perec’s *W* is an exemplary instance of multidirectional memory. Like Delbo, Perec sees French colonialism and domestic fascism as informing each other though, also like Delbo, he is careful not to blur the differences between them.

As well as bearing common ground in drawing parallels between colonialism and Nazism, both Perec and Daeninckx are united by the common theme of the disappearance. *W*’s focus is upon literal deportations of French Jews to death camps under the Vichy regime, as well as the figurative loss of humanity and memory. Simultaneously, the protagonist of Daeninckx’s detective novel attempts to expose a cover up involving missing persons and missing evidence. Daeninckx demonstrates through eyewitness accounts how many of the family and friends of protestors who occupied Paris on the 17<sup>th</sup> of October 1961 continue to be unaware of the fate of their loved ones. They have disappeared.

Likewise, Perec’s *La disparation* implicitly draws parallels between varieties of political disappearances. The novel’s primary focus is upon the lives figuratively ‘lost’ in the Second World War, and those murdered in the Holocaust. The exemption of the letter ‘E’ in the novel is a symbol of childhood trauma generated by the loss of the author’s parents. However, the novel was written at the height of political turmoil in France where civilian protestors and political opponents were continuing to disappear in a variety of ways. As I have mentioned previously, Perec was horrified by the French army’s use of torture during the Algerian War of Independence. Such a practice inevitably involved abductions of protestors, insurgents and key political figures. Disappearance, a common trope of the detective novel, therefore becomes political in nature. Perec acknowledges this early in the book by drawing a parallel between the fictitious disappearance of Anton Vowl (The emblematic ‘E’) and the Moroccan activist Medhi Ben Barka, the case often understood as the primary cause of Papon’s

resignation as prefecture of the Paris police. Like other leftists in Paris during the 1960's Barka was 'considered a dangerous revolutionary by many' and was 'about to chair the first international meeting of Third World liberation movements when he disappeared' (Samuel, 2009) speculation persists as to the 'involvement of French intelligence agents, the CIA and Mossad' with accusations levelled directly against the French secret services in 2009 (Samuel, 2009). The case of the activist's disappearance is highlighted early in the novel, with the novel's protagonist, Amaury Conson, warning to Ottaviani that 'Lipp is simply crawling with cops!' before Ottaviani begins to speculate on their presence, claiming that 'not too far off is an individual who the country's top brass want, shall I say... to go missing' (Perec, 2008: p. 55), a 'Morrocan' (p. 56) which Conson mistakes for another key character in the novel, 'Ibn Barka' (p. 57). Ottaviani explains the events of Barka's fictional counterpart in clear terms, explaining that the kidnapping was a 'total cock up from start to finish' which led to a nationwide scandal (p. 57-58):

*Paris-Soir*, a right-wing rag that was normally of a rampantly colonialist bias, sought to stir things up by publishing a lot of juicy, malicious rumours. Public indignation was at boiling point. Diplomats would go to ground, politicians usually avid for publicity would abruptly drop out of sight. Papon took an oath that it had nothing to do with him.

Perec's use of this case furthers the political undertones of the novel's meditation on the essence of the disappearance, a key element of the detective novel and of government repression. Perec's assertion that Papon 'took an oath that it had nothing to do with him' highlights the contradictions of illiberal persons holding administrative positions within branches of government that are supposed to exist, primarily, to uphold liberal institutions but are continuously subverted for colonialist or Nationalist purposes.

### **Perec and Protest: May 1968**

Tensions between public opinion and French government policy exploded in May 1968. The student movement, and the general strike that followed was representative of the resentment felt by the French electorate under De Gaulle. It was a loud, fleeting moment in French history which marked the



commencement of a shift toward a more explicit, public questioning of the role of dictatorial practices in France. It also provides the backdrop for Perec's *La disparation*, allowing foregrounding the dominant themes of protest and anti-authoritarianism in the novel and self-referentially signposting its anarchic structure in the process. Phillippe Artières describes the May '68 protests as 'a moment when people who had never spoken of their work conditions, life conditions, the way that they were alienated, spoke up and were given a voice. Women, workers, immigrant voices were given a say' (Chrisafis, 2018). The events of May 1968 allowed a voice to those who had been stifled previously and provided a platform for traumatised idealists to air their grievances with Gaullism. The student movement began with 'revolutionaries and left intellectuals like Jean-Paul Sartre [who] denounced capitalism, bureaucracy, and the forces of order' (Birch, 2018). May saw demonstrations which protested Imperialism and the perceptible growth of authoritarianism and consumerism in France. Many were sceptical of how 'American capitalist practices gradually spread throughout French society. Consumerism grew rapidly, based largely on a 'credit culture'', which some saw as consistent with the dangerous and rapid expansion of the American military within Europe (Flower, 2008: p. 48). A general strike in mid-May 'led to factory occupations, which sparked a weeks-long general strike of as many as 10 million workers', making it the largest in European history. Unlike the student movement whose outrage was focused heavily upon growing voices of governmental forces of 'law and order' in France, the general strike was an expression of resentment by workers who had 'seen their average weekly work-hours increase substantially as employers rushed to fill the labour shortages produced by rapid economic growth. By the mid-sixties, many routinely worked upwards of fifty hours a week' (Birch, 2018). A combination of ineptitude on behalf of those trying to contain protestors and the ingenuity of their completely erratic, or 'wildcat' nature eventually led French president Charles de Gaulle to leave the country, fearing for his life 'to meet secretly with his army leaders across the border in West Germany' (Birch, 2018).

Student demonstrations were largely influenced by the work of intellectuals such as Herbert Marcuse, particularly his book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), and the first two volumes of Henri Lefebvre's *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1947 & 1961). Marcuse feared that consumerist society would reach a

state of advancement where ‘the technical rationality of production and consumption is so dominant that people forget about alternative values and ways of organizing themselves’ and the ‘wealthy and powerful rely on destructive resource extraction and war to support a consumerist economy and suppress global opposition’ (Box, 2011: p. 170). These anxieties were shared in exactitude by the student movement. However, Lefebvre provided a more optimistic framework to express this. Unlike much of Marxist theory, Lefebvre’s work strikes a tone of conciliatory optimism in its demand for change. Lefebvre’s assessment of the everyday argues that Marxist critique has ‘the capacity to provide the foundations for the kind of critical understanding of the everyday which might lead to its revaluation’ (Sheringham, 2006: p. 134), insisting that it would be necessary to retake the idea of the quotidian from its bourgeois appropriations, understanding the concept ‘in terms of the failure to realize the plenitude of human possibility expressed in the notion of ‘l’homme total’’ (p. 137), that this bridge between the ‘everyday’ in common representations of it and the actual emotional experience of human beings are two very different things. Perec’s work is symptomatic of a deep resentment of colonial authoritarianism and as his role in *Lg* proves, Perec cared a great deal about the value of Marxist theory and its implementation.

Perec, like Marcuse and Lefebvre, was critical of the influence of Americanized capitalism in Europe throughout much of his writing career. Perec’s first novel to gain acclaim was a direct critique of this strain consumerism in France. *Things: A Story of the Sixties* is a near exact literary expression of Lefebvre’s *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, the founding text behind France’s student movement of May 1968. Perec’s novel stands opposed to the aforementioned ‘credit culture’, presenting a ‘world that [...] is characterised by a consumerism and superficiality from which there appears to be no escape’ (Flower, 2008: p. 61). This is supported by the way in which Perec introduces the protagonists, Sylvie and Jerome (who in an oblique metaphor for the novel’s messaging, are both market researchers by profession), as a couple who ‘would have liked to be rich. They believed they would have been up to it. They would have known how to dress, how to look and how to smile like rich people’ (1999: p. 27). As Flower also describes in that same sentence, the individuality of the protagonists of the novel appears to have ‘been lost and they will continue to live in a dreamland of

consumerism that will not disappear until the true values determining their lives have been rediscovered', which aligns with Lefebvre's own notion of the understanding of the self within modern capitalism as an essential force to drive social change. As David Bellos notes in his introduction to *Things*, the novel 'aims to exhaust all that can be said about *fascination*, and more particularly, to explore what words like *happiness* and *freedom* can mean in the modern world – the world of consumerism as it was emerging in France' (1999: p. 8), noting that Perec's central aim was to 'explore the way "the language of capitalism is reflected in us"' (p. 9) as a way to challenge it. Perec was highly influenced by Lefebvre after having stayed with him for some weeks in 1958. Bellos notes that conversation between the two was 'heady and brilliant' and that they touched upon subjects such as 'alienation, music, fiction [...] Lefebvre thought Perec the most enigmatic young man he had ever met, and never knew whether he meant his sparse remarks to be taken seriously or not' (1995: p. 193). This, as I have argued, is not exempt from Perec's detective fiction. *La disparation*, is not only saturated in the radical politics of the 1960's, but is highly critical of the detective novel as a consumerist object, dismantling its form by experimentation with language, and therefore, one of the chief means of communicating internal logic and analysis – the guiding principles of detection and investigation.

It is of course worth mentioning that Perec was nor a student or an overworked citizen. He was holding down a comfortable job as an archivist and was mid-way through the first draft of *La disparation* when the Latin Quarter, the epicentre of the student revolt, bore witness to violent clashes between protestors and police. The 'clumsy handling of student demonstrations by the police and the CRS led to barricades and pitched battles, a brief revolt that for a moment seemed set to become a revolution' (Bellos, 1995: p. 400). Public opinion was initially conservative, focused upon maintaining order. One weekly paper, *Minute*, suggested that the 'leader' of the student movement, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, 'must be taken by the scruff of his neck and carried to the frontier without any formality', suggesting that if 'our authorities do not have the courage to do so, we know a certain number of young Frenchmen itching to perform this task of public health...' (Singer, 2013: p. 119), a comment especially wretched in the context of everything I have discussed thus far in this chapter,

given that Cohn-Bendit and his family were of Germanic-Jewish heritage. Public opinion gradually shifted to the side of the protestors as the ‘middle classes were shocked by reports of police brutality’ which, as in the case of the Paris Massacre of 1961, ‘could not be concealed’ (p. 130). Perec was supportive of the protestors from the beginning though chose not to join them. Nevertheless, the anarchic sensibility of the protests makes an incursion into the pages of *La disparation* from its very opening. Perec depicts France on the verge of collapse after a food shortage, pontificating that ‘You’d kill your own kith and kin for a chunk of salami, your cousin for a crust, your crony for a crouton and just about anybody at all for a crumb’ (p. viii) amidst complete social chaos. Perec quickly reveals that this is a depiction of the student revolt through setting his depiction of social collapse in ‘this particular May’ (p. ix), evoking the students’ occupation of the Sorbonne and the general strike within the first paragraph. He depicts how ‘ordinary hard-working folk harassing officials’ begin ‘cursing capitalists and captains of industry. Cops shrink from going out on night shift. In Mâcon a mob storms a municipal building’ (p. vii). Indeed, the novel remains critical of the Paris police - not just for their heavy-handed response to protestors which, if nothing else, vastly inflamed the situation – but also, endemic racism and corruption within the force. Perec often achieves this indirectly. One instance in the opening describes the upper-class Parisian suburbs taking matters into their own hands, restoring the function of the Paris police by forming ‘pogroms’, which, in this instance, refers to state-approved ethnic cleansing at a civilian level (p. viii).

Another instance which occurs mid-way through the novel sees Amaury Conson discovering a journal belonging to Vowl wherein his notes observe the riots of the Latin Quarter. The description contains a reference to ‘a battalion of cops’ who ‘attack a crowd of anarchists, communists and sundry radicals’ who, in act of defiance, react by taking ‘Paris by storm, brandishing black flags and crimson flags and shouting anti-dictatorial slogans’ such as ““Down with Gaullism”” and ““CRS-SS”” (p. 49-50), a reference to the continuity between the CRS and the Groupes mobiles de reserve (GMR), a police force created by the Fascistic Vichy government. In the very same instance, Perec self-consciously berates the ability of the police in matters of detection. Shortly after deducing that the existence of the journal is proof that Vowl could not have killed himself, protagonist Conson takes the evidence to a

police officer who replies, stubbornly between mouthfuls of ‘York Ham’ that Vowl committed suicide: ‘Your pal vows to blow his brains out and did blow his brains out. So that’s that, isn’t it? If not, why would anybody say such a thing? Am I right or am I right?’ which leaves Conson ‘aghast at such a crass, buck passing’ (p. 51). Perec uses the novel’s self-awareness of its place within the detective genre to critique how investigations are commonly dealt with by public officials while simultaneously presenting us with a series of mysteries which cannot be understood by their protagonists because, if they do become aware of their origin, they disappear themselves. This aspect of the plot therefore serves as both a meditation on the nature of fictitious characters, and a metaphor for the workings of authoritarianism.

## **Conclusion**

‘I established a theoretical model of thought. How could I have anticipated that people would want to implement it with Molotov cocktails?’ was the rhetorical question posed by Theodor W. Adorno (Quotd. in Jeffries, 2017: p. 1) to an interviewer in 1969, shortly before his death. The rebuttal which Adorno delivers seems extremely odd given the context in which it was given. The comments appear in correspondence with Herbert Marcuse as part of a bitter debate over a series of protests directed towards an anti-democratic and classist university admissions policy. Jeffries (p. 342) remarks that Marcuse believed that ‘critical theory’s cause was really the same as those of the protestors. If he was right, then the Frankfurt scholars ought to have checked out of the Grand Hotel Abyss and joined the students at the barricades’. Instead, Adorno chose to chastise protesting students, describing the barricades as ‘a game’ and decrying the university, or the ‘lords of the manor’, for allowing the ‘gamesters to go on playing’ (p. 342). The debacle demonstrates that which is said but rarely seen, a time-old adage that although many academics and artistic types are leftists, few are practicing ones. Adorno did not inspire the protests, nor did he take part in them; hence why the quote which opened this paragraph is so absurd.

Should we judge Perec’s inaction similarly? Perhaps his deliberation at great length upon whether to serve in the Algerian War of Independence implicates his sympathy for the Colonial system which

France sought to enforce. Perhaps my suggestions of how Perec's left-wing beliefs are demonstrated by *La disparation* are overblown and Perec's writing was intended to be reflective of French society. Certainly, the same cannot even be suggested for Daeninckx, who was a self-described Communist and an extremely outspoken anti-fascist for all his life. However, accusations that Perec was turning a blind-eye to abuses of power appear do not hold given the author's background and the content of his underacknowledged polemical/satirical writing. The author's fictional works are understated in their critique these forces play in twentieth-century politics and Perec is a political writer. However, he is a writer whose politics are continually implied and only occasionally stated in clear terms. Mediation by means of biographical material and exposition of historical circumstance are nearly always necessary. Perhaps to his credit, Molotov cocktails are not his *forte*, and yet, neither is writing about politics. Apart from his novel *W; Or a Memory of Childhood*, any political point which Perec is attempting to make must always be chased to the more obscure corners of his work. That does not mean it is absent. Perec's work is littered with signifiers which point toward his left-leaning sympathies. This means that the points he makes are rarely ever finalized. *La disparation* and *Murder in Memoriam* are rare examples of detective fiction which are not only concerned by their central detective narratives but also of the wider realities of policing. Where the thrust of Daeninckx's argument is clear, the arguments which Perec makes or wished to make are unfinished in favour of literary experimentation. The result is a representation which is reflective rather than plainly critical. The darker history of policing, paramilitary or otherwise is presented as an everyday reality rather than a domineering and invasive force. Some might judge this to, perhaps, be a more effective mode of writing. The shadow of the Paris police looms long over the work, frozen in motion, ready to strike. Detective novels like *La disparation* and *Murder in Memoriam* ultimately exhibit a direct theoretical engagement with policing as anterior to detecting; proposing it can contribute to social problems rather than solve them.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Conclusion: Hegemony, Power and Truth**

In the second chapter of his most famous work *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault interrogates the role of the death penalty and public torture as a means for confirming guilt in the public eye through the Middle Ages until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century where, as Foucault argues, such practices began to be denounced by public and elected officials as ‘barbaric’, outrightly calling for their abolition. He writes that (1991: p. 43)

It was the task of the guilty man to bear openly his condemnation and the truth of the crime that he had committed. His body, displayed, exhibited in a procession, tortured, served as the public support for a procedure that had hitherto remained in the shade; in him, on him, the sentence had to be legible for all.

Foucault argues that for the public, this display of pain was synonymous with the truth of any given verdict. Public executions and torture were spectacles of punishment which legitimated the role of government prosecutors as the defenders of order. Crucially, Foucault’s analysis critiques the view that ‘guilt’ is synonymous with a truth of any given crime. He makes the case that confessions were, and still are, obtained by the prosecution in private and through questionable means such as prolonged torture, a practice so unreliable it implies the confession’s illegitimacy. Foucault terms this practice the ‘production of guilt’, writing that ‘Guilt did not begin when all the evidence was gathered together; piece by piece, it was constituted by each of the elements that made it possible to recognize a guilty person’ (p. 42). Foucault argues that confessions can still be and have been forced by disingenuous means by the prosecution to sustain power over the public sphere, with the evidence properly measured and arranged against an individual to narrativize and support any given verdict.

What might a Foucauldian detective novel look like? If concepts such as truth and guilt are contested in detective novel, will the genre unravel? Does the crime become irrelevant? The detective novel may even fall apart at its seams. However, such contestations of truth in crime fiction run through

many of the novels this dissertation has examined. Much of postmodern detective fiction demonstrates that truth is not immovable and fixed, it is instead is fluid and subjective. Though, as we have discussed, questions of power and class are more than often side-lined for a focus upon form in postmodern fiction. This comes with some exceptions, however, this philosophical outlook certainly encapsulates ‘guilt’ as Foucault conceives of it; not certain, but open to challenge. If Foucault ever wrote a detective novel it could surely be described through David Fraser’s theory of the *néo-polar*, and would likely be representative of the ‘counterpublic’ theorized by Michael Rothberg.

Perc appears to grasp that truth is interrelated with power to a greater extent than many other writers of detective fiction. Perc’s work exhibits a clear understanding of the machinations of power and crime, as well as its abuses which would later be highlighted by Foucault. He, like Foucault, takes the view that all crime is political in nature. Perc achieves this through demonstrating the biases of the Paris police force and the abuses of their authority. Meanwhile, the central vanishings of *La disparation* appear to the reader as ambiguous. The reader is continually unsure whether the central disappearances of the novel are disappearances, whether they are politically motivated kidnappings or murders. Perc thus defies the most basic convention of traditional detective fiction. A common characteristic of the thriller is that there should be a “reveal” in the final pages. Instead, Perc presents a mess of overlapping and intersecting narratives. Perc could have made an appearance toward the end of the novel as the perpetrator of the novel’s central disappearances, however he does not. The reader is instead presented with a bogus intertextual conspiracy which runs contrary to evidence they are presented if they investigate the text.

Perc’s novel is therefore anti-authoritarian in terms of its both form and content. A large body of Perc’s work demonstrates that he was politically conscious, albeit this is often addressed, much like the subject matter of *La disparation*, indirectly. Nonetheless, in this dissertation I have used Perc’s own work as a springboard to address the ethics and the limits of comparison of racism implicit in colonial attitudes, as well the anti-Semitism of Nazism and the risks therein of understating and overstating specific facets of both.



Perec's engagement with authoritarianism can be compared to more explicit other, more explicit twentieth-century polemics of hegemony. For instance, Frantz Fanon's essay 'Concerning Violence' incites a similar comparison between Colonialism and the occupation of Europe by the Nazis. He suggests that 'Deportations, massacres, forced labour and slavery have been the main methods used by capitalism to increase its wealth, its gold or diamond reserves and to establish its power. Not long-ago Nazism transformed the whole of Europe into a veritable colony' (2001: p. 80). Though the fundamental point that Fanon wishes to make is understandable, it is not a particularly nuanced one. The clue to why Fanon's essay still enjoys a wide readership is perhaps in its title; violence. Like Fanon's, Perec's anger is at times overwhelming. His comparisons exist to express frustration. Fanon, like Perec, speaks to theories of trauma provided by Rothberg and Silverman. The essay is a clear an example of how testimony can inform a history of collective trauma. Any study of the Algerian crisis should necessitate reading 'Concerning Violence'. In such studies, Perec and Daneninckx can often be overlooked, though they appear to be similarly compelled to make such comparisons in their writing. Daneninckx's writing incites the same comparison as Fanon through the central figure of Maurice Papon. Where *W* links the two subjects by means of its narrative structure; the intention of both is to make an anti-fascist statement.

Meanwhile, political readings of *La disparation* that focus upon the role of the Paris police and the way in which Perec's description of protest ('CR-SS!') reminds the reader of institutional discrimination suffered by the Jewish people of twentieth century Europe can prompt comparisons between De Gaulle's administration and the Nazi regime. However, any attempt to directly compare these two separate strands of thought in academic study is doomed to inaccuracies – not in the least because a police and military response to the Algerian revolution, no matter how horrific, is necessarily different from attempted mass genocide.

Both Perec and Daneninckx make productive contributions to understanding intersections of policing and detecting and their subsequent effect upon the public imagination. Both authors' depictions of the intersections of detecting and policing are indispensable, with both writers fundamentally suggesting that though the various 'branches' of policing are separate, yet heavily interlinked by their co-

operation. Perec and Daneninx lambast the CRS and Paris police force's propensity toward suppressive and militaristic approaches which have included quashing protests and killing unarmed civilians. Though Perec did not part-take in the protests of May 1968, the anti-authoritarian influence of their sentiment is written into his most famous detective novel.

Critiques of hegemony are integral to Perec's writing, even when it appears to be apolitical. The writer manages to tackle themes such as neo-liberal capitalism, ethnic cleansing and Imperialism under our very noses, all the while toying with the narrative conventions of novels which support the very structures he is lambasting. *53 Jours* and *W; ou la souvenir dans l'enfance* adopt the form of 19<sup>th</sup> century novels of Empire set in far off, exoticized lands which acted a form of reportage to those who would never see them. *La disparation* is a novel which is anti-capitalist in nature by means of its contempt for the genre fiction machine. Likewise, *Les Choses* [Things] is a Lefebvrian study of the sixties' commodity culture. The novel I have deliberately neglected talking about, *La Vie mode d'emploi* [Life, A User's Manual], even has a catalogue for every commodity mentioned in the novel as an appendix. The work of Georges Perec and many others I have listed in this dissertation invites the reader to do something unique and oxymoronic; to reflect on the forces at play in our everyday lives that we often fail to notice. To indirectly quote the epitaph to his most celebrated work: We must look.

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