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The Absence of Closure in the Metaphysical Detective Story

Antoine Dechêne

- 1 As Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney rightly pointed out in their 1999 groundwork entitled *Detecting Texts*, one of the major characteristics of the metaphysical detective story as a literary genre is the “absence, falseness, circularity, or self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation”.¹ Michael Holquist had already highlighted this feature in his article “Whodunit and Other Questions,” published in 1971, arguing that the metaphysical detective story is “non-teleological, is not concerned to have a neat ending in which all the questions are answered, and which can therefore be forgotten”. Although he preferred the terminology of “anti-detective fiction,” William V. Spanos also remarked, in 1972, that the “formal purpose” of such a subversive genre “is to evoke the impulse to ‘detect’ [...] in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime”. In other words, the metaphysical detective story is defined by an absence of closure or, at least, by the subversion of the traditional solution that used to be provided in “classical” detective fiction. In this context, the work of Edgar Allan Poe is a case in point since this prolific author was obsessed with *dénouement*, a central concept of his “Philosophy of Composition”. He was also fascinated by what happens when a text is deprived of its final conclusion. Edgar Allan Poe has indeed been hailed by many critics, including Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, as the father of both classical and metaphysical detective fiction. Stories such as “William Wilson” (1839) and “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) predate the Dupin trilogy and display a kind of investigation that deals with the chaos of the world, which is both sinister and alluring, feeding man’s endless curiosity with beauty and terror. Accordingly, one may argue that the detective story was born from Poe’s attempt to dominate this reality, to impose his principle of “ratiocination” onto the irrationality of life in order to provide an end, a solution to its deepest mysteries.
- 2 Edgar Allan Poe thus created the first self-conscious fictional detective, “Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin” to be the protagonist of three decisive texts: “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842) and “The Purloined Letter” (1845). E.A. Poe’s French sleuth, unlike the *flâneur* of “The Man of the Crowd,” does not confront

reality directly and avoids merging with it. He is a detective who watches the world “objectively” and passionlessly from above with the firm and reassuring belief that there “are no mysteries [just] incorrect reasoning”. Sooner or later, however, that method had to reveal its limits and failures. E.A. Poe’s stories deal more with “analysis”² than with crime and Dupin himself is not flawless in this exercise, as Priestman reminds us: “Dupin’s two most important cases hardly concern crime at all, and his one attempt to solve an actual murder (‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’) shows him at his least effective”. This is perhaps why Poe did not write more Dupin stories but rather turned to darker themes, trying to better represent the arbitrariness and immorality of a world governed by chance in which the self struggles to create meaning, or as Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney aptly summarize: “Rather than definitely solving a crime, then, the sleuth finds himself confronting the insoluble mysteries of his own interpretation and his own identity”.

- 3 Even though the critics mentioned above consider the metaphysical detective story mainly as a postmodern phenomenon, whose “strategy of decomposition,” in Spanos’s words, “exists to generate rather than to purge pity and terror” ; one might also argue that such “strategy” existed long before the parodies and subversions that characterize the postmodern era. Writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, E. A. Poe, but also Herman Melville and Henry James, already sensed that the need to provide a cathartic ending was somehow artificial and did not correspond to reality.³ In their view, the writer’s task does not consist in fulfilling all the readers’ expectations. On the contrary, one of their many aspirations is arguably to reveal that emotionally and intellectually gratifying resolutions create zones of comfort that have nothing to do with human experience. The absurd, the grotesque, the sensation of disgust, the uncanny, the irrational, are all concepts that cannot be ignored when one is confronted with what Mikhail Bakhtin described as “the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being”, a phrase that points at one of the most enigmatic of human mysteries, which itself remains unsolved.
- 4 In this perspective, Samuel Beckett’s trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* probably represents one of the best examples epitomizing the disintegration of the self. *Molloy* is particularly interesting here since it seems to reach the ultimate nothingness that the pseudo-investigator of the metaphysical detective story has to face when he starts questioning and reflecting upon his own quest. This gap in cognitive experience materializes in Beckett’s novel, revealing that language and knowledge are arbitrary constructions based on the false belief that words can in some way convey absolute truths.
- 5 In this sense and in order to avoid dead-end postmodern interpretations, it is relevant to find a concept liable to describe texts which cast doubt on the capacity of language to apprehend and convey the full range and complexities of human personality, emotion and experience. The concept of the sublime and the many theories attached to it appear as relevant tools to describe those texts which, in Edmund Burke’s words, excite the ideas of pain, danger and terror, producing “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling”. As Philip Shaw has argued, returning to Burke’s initial thought, “we resort to the feeling of the sublime” as soon as “experience slips out of conventional understanding, whenever the power of an object or event is such that words fail and points of comparison disappear”. In other words, the sublime is a concept used to characterize an excessive and/or traumatizing experience.

- 6 Whether it is metaphorically described as a powerful passion, a privation, or as a dark abyss, the sublime is a helpful concept to analyze the different aporias that lie at the heart of each metaphysical investigation. In this way, the sublime marks, in the context of the metaphysical detective story, “the limits of reason and expression together with a sense of what might lie beyond these limits”. In other words, the sublime represents the idea of a “cognitive failure”, of a breakdown of reason which, rather than pointing at a “higher [...] spiritual realm”, reveals a terrifying void. Most theorists of the sublime have acknowledged its conceptual potential as a metaphor for the ungraspable nature of human experience. The common denominator between the different definitions of the concept is the idea of an overwhelming emotion born from a cognitive failure in front of unanswerable questions related to the formation of the self and the construction of identity — i.e. the metaphysical mystery of origins forming the very background on which metaphysical detective stories are based.

“Is it happening?”

- 7 To sum up in a few lines a concept that has troubled Western philosophers from Edmund Burke to Jean-François Lyotard via Kant and in the context of the metaphysical detective story, it seems possible to argue that the feeling of the sublime occurs when nothing comes next, that is, in a state of privation. More specifically, for Jean-François Lyotard, the sublime in art and literature becomes a way to deal with and delineate the “unpresentable.” It translates a “desire for limitlessness” by formulating, through endless investigations, “Ideas of which no presentation is possible [...] [which] impart no knowledge about reality”. Thus understood, the sublime characterizes extreme cases of quests for truths that cannot succeed. The sleuth is deprived of his, until then, flawless capacity to solve mysteries. This privation generates terror, anxiety as well as an expectation: it triggers one’s curiosity. For the subject in a state of contradictory sensations, the privation is at the same time painful and relieving, a “negative pleasure” that Edmund Burke was the first to point out and called *delight*. Accordingly, the readers of detective novels constantly foresee what will happen next because they are very much aware of the genre’s various conventions. The metaphysical detective story questions the genre’s ability to provide a fulfilling closure by depriving the text of its solution, thus revealing a void that the detective tries to fill with the same consensual narrative that the readers are expecting in the first place. But as the sleuth tries to do so, as he tries to read the world through the lens of ratiocination, the absence of meaning eventually turns his investigation into an obsession that forces him to plunge once again into the city crowd, readopting his former nature as a *flâneur* and a voyeur, whose curiosity inevitably leads to madness and/or death.
- 8 There is a gap in texts such as, for example, Hawthorne’s “Wakefield,” Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd,” Melville’s “Bartleby” or James’s “The Figure in the Carpet,” a lack in the interpretation of the grotesque behaviors of their characters and the unexplainable mysteries that they bring about. Beckett’s *Molloy* epitomizes a process of dehumanization, the perpetual disintegration and privation of the human becoming inhuman. It is that same inhumanity that gave its title to Lyotard’s collection of essays in which he states that:
- Terrors are linked to privation: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of

objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. What is terrifying is that the *It happens that* does not happen, that it stops happening.

- 9 The metaphysical detective story is precisely defined by something that “does not happen,” by a denial of closure that is difficult to accept and understand for the reader.
- 10 To a certain extent, the experience of the sublime is negative and even traumatizing. Pain – and the fear that derives from it – is a feeling more powerful than pleasure. For Burke, pleasure is solely positive whereas terror represents the climax of fear, a “passion” that prevents the mind from acting or reasoning: “For fear being an apprehension of pain or death, it operates in a manner that resembles actual pain”. What excites those “ideas of pain” might be described as a fear of the unknown. It is an expectation never fulfilled, but terrifying because of its imminence. The fear of death and the realization that human life has no higher meaning are sublime because they cannot find relief in a rational explanation. Words are simply not enough. The essence of such an experience as death cannot aptly be described or comprehended with words.⁴ It is this uncertainty that is truly terrifying because it deprives the investigator/reader of the possibility of a satisfying resolution; it is a form of privation and as Edmund Burke, followed by Jean-François Lyotard, remarked: “All *general* privations are great, because they are all terrible; *Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude and Silence*”.
- 11 Den Tandt further investigates those privations, using the metaphor of an abyss, and concludes that language is possibly one of the greatest voids that prevents human beings from reaching any kind of firm knowledge. He explains that, on a more formal and syntactical level:
- This urge to rephrase ceaselessly the distinction between the outside of language and the actual sentence universe constitutes as much a sublimity speech act as any pictorial invocation of the void; the confrontation with the “abyssal non-being” between the sentences is impressed rhetorically on the reader, who struggles to catch up with the discontinuities of the argument.
- 12 The reader, like the detective, tries to solve the mystery that he is investigating but language deceives him and he cannot make sense of the clues he finds. In fact, he tries so hard to reach a solution that he believes – not unlike the classical detective – that anything is relevant or a source of meaning.
- 13 The “nothing happens,” which becomes “the nothing *that* happens” in Beckett’s trilogy, the sublime gap between “two pieces of information” and the anxiety that “this word might be the last,” trigger a desire to keep on reading, just like the plot of a good detective novel urges one to. This time, however, the absence of resolution generates a “negative pleasure” within the readers who are torn between their desire to know and the sensation of “painful relief” felt when they realize that the quest cannot end. Delight always seems to be closely related to terror in the metaphysical detective story since its very structure in the form of a “strange loop”⁵ denies all hope of reaching a fulfilling ending and even, in most cases, negates the possibility of a beginning. This is, for example, what is implied in another of E.A. Poe’s tales entitled “Mesmeric Revelation.” In that story, the mesmerist narrator named P. is talking with his mesmerized patient Mr. Vankirk who complains about not being questioned properly, the most difficult part being to find where to start:
- P. I wish you would explain yourself, Mr. Vankirk.
V. I am willing to do so, but it requires more effort than I feel able to make. You do not question me properly.
P. What then shall I ask?

V. You must begin at the beginning.

P. The beginning! But where is the beginning?

- 14 In this perspective, it also seems important to note that a text such as *Molloy*, because of its narrative loop, turns upside down the order established by Todorov in his famous *Typology of Detective Fiction*. A metaphysical detective story indeed does not usually contain “two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation” which “in their purest form [...] have no point in common”. *Molloy* clearly parodies this artificial division through its two *a priori* distinct parts. By the end of the narration, the reader feels rather disorientated because the second part of the novel, in a perverse loop, seems to introduce the first part, opening on what are in fact the final lines of the book: “I am in my mother’s room”.
- 15 This deceiving teleological circle in a way repeats Kant’s idea of an “absolute totality” towards which the mind gears without being able to present it “objectively”. The task of reason is to create meaning in an endless cognitive process that engenders the emotion of the sublime “whenever we realize that human reason is liable to produce an idea of infinity that cannot be objectified by our understanding and our imagination”.
- 16 In this context, when E.A. Poe writes in “The Man of the Crowd” that his story “does not permit itself to be read,” leaving the “essence of all crime [...] undivulged”, he already seems to be aware that the enigmas of human experience displayed in mystery tales could be partially and artificially answered thanks to the creation of a method that is only an artifact, an illusion in which he himself rapidly stopped believing. The same fatalism or absence of faith in the power of language to convey absolute truths is also at stake in Henry James’s famous story “The Figure in the Carpet” and, of course, in Beckett’s *Molloy*; two texts that will now serve as enlightening examples of the lack of closure in metaphysical detective stories.

The Burden of Knowledge

- 17 Henry James’s tale symbolizes the perverse and destructive curiosity of a literary critic, an anonymous homodiegetic narrator, who desperately tries to grasp the secret of Hugh Vereker’s writing, an author he greatly admires without really being able to know why. This secret which is, in fact and according to Vereker himself, the essence of his art that is “naturally the thing for the critic to look for”, causes the death of all the characters — including the writer — who were let into the secret and leaves the others — including the narrator — in a state of endless craving in front of a sublime gap that cannot be closed. In this story, the detectives have become “the victims of unappeased desire”, unable to give up on “what might come next” and trying to console themselves with the fact that, as Vereker declares: “Nobody sees anything!”.
- 18 The figure in the carpet is a burden too heavy to bear. It triggers a curiosity defined in the text as madness, a disease, an obsession, “the familiar torment of [one’s] consciousness”. When the narrator’s friend, George Corvick, understands what the secret is all about, he describes it in the following terms:
- It was immense, but it was simple — it was simple, but it was immense, and at the final knowledge of it was an experience quite apart. He intimated [Corvick] that the charm of such an experience, the desire to drain it, in its freshness, to the last drop, was what kept him there close to the source.

- 19 This pure knowledge remains out of reach for the narrator who has to take care of his sick brother for three months only to hear about Corvick's accidental death later on without having been able to write the secret down. Corvick's fiancée, Gwendolen, escaped the tragedy. She also seems to be in the confidence but will not reveal the secret out of a kind of malicious selfishness and greed. The narrator even thinks of marrying her in order to solve the mystery but he wonders: "Was I prepared to offer her this price for the blessing of her knowledge? Ah! That way madness lay". Gwendolen eventually marries another man, Drayton Deane, whom the narrator meets a year after Gwendolen actually died. Vereker, Corvick and Gwendolen dead, Deane has become the only possibility of salvation for the narrator. Much to his surprise, and despair, he unfortunately realizes that Deane has never heard of the secret: "Vereker's secret, my dear man – the general intention of his books: the strings the pearls were strung on, the buried treasure, the figure in the carpet". In the end, the narrator has to face "the absurd truth" that this "infinitely precious" knowledge has disappeared into the abysses of human consciousness. The narrator's only consolation is to have shared his obsession with Mr. Deane who soon is also devoured by a desire to know the secret. "The Figure in the Carpet" thus reflects the ultimate privation and the terrifying experience described by Jean-François Lyotard when nothing seems to be happening next. In this sense, James's text is about the narrator's incapacity to bridge the sublime gap of his existence, which leaves him crazed and helpless when confronted with the meaninglessness of (his) life.
- 20 This lack of answers creates a frustration that maddens the detective who cannot reach the "meta" level of his cognitive quest. In other words, he is unable to cope with the awareness of his ignorance and is even less ready to accept his human limitations. In fact, the protagonist never stops believing in the possibility of cognition. This is what keeps him alive. The secret's holders, on the other hand, are dead.
- 21 "The Figure in the Carpet" thus provides a reflection on the possibility and the nature of knowledge. By focusing on the epistemological failures of its protagonist, James shifts the perspective from the object of knowledge to the knowing subject: the question is not what can be known but rather how can one know or simply, can one know? As long as the detective is asking the wrong questions, he cannot be appeased. The metaphysical, or rather, the "metacognitive" dimension of such a text thus consists in knowing how to know, as Todorov puts it: "Henry James's secret (and, no doubt, Vereker's as well) consists precisely in the existence of a secret" and this "secret is by definition inviolable, because it consists in the very fact that it exists. The quest of the secret must never finish, because it is identical with the secret itself". James's text is the only "figure" one has access to. In this sense, the secret is indeed very concrete: it is the pages that the reader holds in his hands. The perverse loop thus also works on a meta level. Once the reader who holds "The Figure in the Carpet" enters the story, he follows the quest of an inquiring critic looking for the figure in the carpet thus sending the reader back to the very text he is reading and to which the narrator has no access, therefore remaining in the dark. The readers' frustration is arguably less extreme than that of the protagonist because they have not spent several years of their lives expecting to find the figure. Like the narrator, however, the readers have no other choice than to infinitely return to the text they have just read and make the best of its closing aporia. In the same way as in Poe's "The Purloined Letter," what matters is not the content of the sought object but the method used to find that object. Ultimately, what matters is the question of whether one, as Corvick claims, can really "get at" it.

When Nothingness Happens

- 22 In many ways, Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* shapes nothingness into two quests, which, although they artificially structure the text into two separated parts, inevitably blend in the novel's narrative loop. The book opens with Molloy writing in his mother's room about the time he has spent searching for her. After an introductory paragraph about his current situation, Molloy announces that he is about to tell his story: "Here's my beginning [...] Whereas now it's nearly the end", and launches the narration of his mother's quest. The loop thus appears, in Samuel Beckett's novel, as the structural element that encourages the metaphysical sleuth to keep on enquiring. The loop is the form of the quest that never stops beginning again, hence the second part of the novel begins with a similar scene: special agent Jacques Moran is writing the report on his Molloy investigation and after a few introductory words, he starts telling his story in a rather classical way: "I remember the day I received the order to see about Molloy".
- 23 Both protagonists are writing about their own investigations, interiorizing their quests to such an extent that the structure of the detective story only works as an empty hardware which seems to refer to very little beyond the description of its own narration and speculations. This "absurd and dreadful non-end" quest for the self in *Molloy* could be seen, in Spanos's terms, as a "measure of modern Western man's need to take hold of the Nothing [...] that is crowding in on him". Such a quest can only collapse into an endless loop that fill in the gaps of the investigation with traumatizing failures, the only things "that actually happen" once the last words are written. But these last words in *Molloy* are in fact the first words of the novel: "I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there". The two parts of the novel begin with their endings, thus denying their possible closure and also foreshadowing their final outcome, the impossibility for the characters to "solve the crime of their own existence".
- 24 *Molloy's* composition is interesting in many ways. Despite its appearance as an unstructured text very much reflecting Molloy's own invertebrate body, the novel does not lack structure in itself. Its narrative tone, close to that of the "traditional quest-romances" and, more importantly, of the "detective-story pursuit", renders the narration more graspable to its readers. Of course, Beckett subverts the public's conventional expectations with a cutting irony and the use of grotesque digressions. Molloy's narration in fact only draws attention towards itself; it is a story made of and about language with no meaning outside itself. As Pavel noticed, Molloy's "[a]utonomous monologues [...] do not bother to depict the outside world too faithfully. Technical details such as lack of paragraph division and punctuation suggest the free flow of thoughts and images and forces the reader to pay much more attention to every twist and turn of the text". But again, behind this apparent lack of structure lies a narrative that is well divided into two main parts, which are equally separated into a certain number of episodes designed to "accommodate the mess".
- 25 What is more, Molloy himself seems to be a character "without end," stuck in a process of non-becoming. As the protagonist writes on, his main purpose is to "finish dying" and, like his questions and doubts, his existence seems interminable.⁶ As in many other passages, Molloy reflects upon the meaninglessness of his life, merging its beginning and ending into one same grotesque and ungraspable infinity: "My life, my life, now I speak of it as something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same

time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?”. If Molloy’s life cannot have an end, then his interior quest cannot either and, in this way, the feeling of the sublime insinuates itself in Beckett’s narration since the only absurd and terrifying thing that happens to Molloy is a dark “nothing,” the infinite mystery of the self.

- 26 This idea corresponds to Burke’s conception of ignorance as another possible source of the sublime:

I think there are reasons in nature why the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting than the clear. It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little. It is thus with the vulgar, and all men are as the vulgar in what they do not understand. The idea of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have, and yet perhaps there is nothing of which we really understand so little, as of infinity and eternit.

- 27 Poetry, as Edmund Burke understands it, is the most suitable literary medium to try and grasp the depths of human existence. Knowledge, if it can be achieved, is not remarkable for Burke. It is the awareness of one’s own ignorance which truly excites the mind. In fact, ignorance is not as much a problem as uncertainty in metaphysical detective stories. The problems occur when one’s curiosity is triggered by a burdening question that disrupts what was once considered the normal course of things, revealing the arbitrary nature of reality.

- 28 Moreover, Molloy and Moran are highly identical characters, if not exactly similar, a pair of doubles which only exist, like E.A. Poe’s “William Wilson,” in order to justify the existence of the other. Moran thus thinks: “A natural end seemed unlikely to me, I don’t know why. But then my own natural end, and I was resolved to have no other, would it not at the same time be his?”. Moran’s investigation mirrors Molloy’s and is doomed to remain caught in an eternal state of “finality without end”.

- 29 This idea is also linked to Moran’s role as a private sleuth. At first, Moran seems to adopt the method of the armchair detective — although his ratiocinative method is, more often than not, contaminated by his daydreaming and his imagination — but he soon has to leave his house and lose himself on Molloy’s trail, becoming a *flâneur* again, “apparently oblivious to everything and in reality missing nothing”. Like any metaphysical detective, Moran repeatedly forgets the purpose of his investigation — “What was I looking for exactly? ”— and like Molloy’s, Moran’s body rapidly starts to decay and eventually prevents him from moving at all. Condemned to immobility, Moran plays a little game which symbolizes the whole enterprise of the detective attempting to find meaning in a story which increasingly plays with the foundational tropes (the unsuccessful sleuth, the labyrinthine text, the meaninglessness of clues, the double, the absence of closure, etc.) of the metaphysical detective story:

And to kill time I asked myself a certain number of questions and tried to answer them [...] And the answers did not always follow in the order of the questions. But while looking for the answer, or the answers, to a given question, I found the answer, or the answers, to a question I had already asked myself in vain, in the sense that I had not been able to answer it, or I found another question, or other questions, demanding in their turn an immediate answer.

- 30 He eventually seems to foresee that all this questioning is pointless since, as Merivale aptly stated: “What the world ”really“ is, or who ”I“ really am, are questions not only unanswerable, but essentially not even formulatable”. In the end, Moran has to face the sublime gaps opened by his quest and he feels “powerless to act, or perhaps strong

enough at last to act no more. For I had no illusions, I knew that all was about to end, or to begin again". This *mise en abyme* of the novel as an endless and obsessive loop not only highlights the inherent absence of closure in the metaphysical detective story but it also reveals its absence of beginning, thus playing with Todorov's famous statement that the "first story" (of a crime), in traditional detective fiction, is "the story of an absence" since it is not "immediately present in the book". Here, this very absence is put forward because there is no crime, nor any reasonable explanation to justify the investigation, which forces the readers to ask themselves: "Why has all this started?" As for Molloy, he quickly concludes that: "it was a bad beginning, because it left me with persisting doubts".

- 31 On the whole, the sublime seems to be a relevant concept to shed a different light on the metaphysical detective story as a literary phenomenon not solely related to the postmodern era. Stories such as "The Man of the Crowd," "The Figure in the Carpet," and *Molloy*, do not only "[parody] or [subvert] traditional detective-story conventions" ; they also radically undermine the very system of thought — seamless and teleological — on which detective fiction is based. By countering the readers' aspirations to knowledge, those texts tend to represent the lack of meaning inherent to human experience, built through language, itself an arbitrary and abstract construction. If reality is governed by chance, then there is no way to know what might come next, and if as Lyotard stated, what is terrifying is that nothing happens next, it seems even more disturbing that this nothingness takes shape, materializes in an endless quest for the self which remains unanswered. In different but related ways, E.A. Poe, Henry James and Samuel Beckett convert uncertainty and absence into an object of speculation and interpretation which takes the enquiry to a different "meta" level, incompatible with the very possibility of a teleological explanation.
- 32 Closure is one of the main features of the classical detective story and it only seems logical that the metaphysical genre would undermine this need for *dénouement* by frustrating the readers' expectations. Indeed, as Eyal Segal demonstrated, closure and openness are "basic cognitive and existential needs" that both excite and satisfy the reader's curiosity: "On the one hand, there is the need for openness, so that life (or its narrated image) would not become too boring and predicable; on the other hand, there is the need for closure, so that it would not become uncontrollably chaotic". The metaphysical detective story, however, highlights the artificial nature of *dénouement* — an idea already challenged by Poe in his "Philosophy of Composition" — by revealing the text's processes of composition, that is, by showing how the "web" of the investigation was "woven" in the first place.
- 33 Metaphysical detective stories "dramatize the void", they lead to the edge of an abyss that this study has described through the concept of the sublime. This "void" or absence of meaning is symbolized by the impossibility for the detective to reach a rewarding ending. As such, the investigation no longer consists in building a narration that would explain (on the last page) the dead body that was found (on the first page). In fact, the crime seems to be ongoing, and it deepens in the endless process of its (non-)resolution, as Moran elliptically reports: "What I assert, deny, question, in the present, I still can. But mostly I shall use the various tenses of the past. For mostly I do not know, it is perhaps no longer so, it is too soon to know, I simply do not know, perhaps I shall never know".

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NOTES

1. In their introduction, Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney emphasize the "proto-postmodern" elements of parody, readerly identification, metafiction and self-reflexivity of the metaphysical branch of detective fiction: "A metaphysical detective story is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions — such as narrative closure and the detective role as surrogate reader — with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about the mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machination of the mystery plot. Metaphysical detective stories often emphasize this transcendence, moreover, by becoming self-reflexive (that is, by representing allegorically the text's own processes of composition)".
2. Poe conceives the activity of the analyst/the detective, in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," as his ability to "[throw] himself into the spirit of his opponent;" a method which, Dupin's narrator friend warns the reader, is only accessible to beings of "superior *acumen*".
3. This is also what Gilles Deleuze sensed when he wrote about "Bartleby" that the behavior of Melville's scrivener did not need a justification: "Why should the novelist believe he is obligated to explain the behavior of his characters, and to supply them with reasons, whereas life for its part never explains anything and leaves in its creatures so many indeterminate, obscure, indiscernible zones that defy any attempt at clarification? It is life that justifies; it has no need of being justified."
4. In "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," Jean-François Lyotard provides a very short and yet precise definition of the purpose of the sublime in art and especially in pictorial art: it has to be

“the expressive witness to the inexpressible” and consequently, for Lyotard, “[t]he sublime is perhaps the only mode of artistic sensibility to characterize the modern”.

5. Douglas Hofstadter defines the form of the “strange loop” in the following terms: “What I mean by ‘strange loop’ is [...] not a physical circuit but an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling-around, there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive ‘upward’ shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one’s sense of departing ever further from one’s origin, one winds up, to one’s shock, exactly where one had started out. In short, a strange loop is a paradoxical level-crossing feedback loop”.

6. He indeed talks about his “life without end”, his “interminable existence”, his “enormous history” or “enormous age”, his “astonishing old age”, etc.

ABSTRACTS

This essay examines the ways in which metaphysical detective stories subvert one of detective fiction’s most emblematic features: the investigation’s resolution and the subsequent narrative closure. In the “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), the father of the genre, Edgar Allan Poe, already introduced mysteries that “[did] not permit [themselves] to be read.” Such texts enact quests for knowledge that cannot reach any kind of intellectual or emotional closure and are, instead, rewarded with more unfathomable questions. The sublime appears as a relevant concept to describe the “gaps” left open in the cognitive process of looking for answers, which will hopelessly remain beyond the detective’s — and the reader’s — reach. Including close readings of Henry James’s “The Figure in the Carpet” (1896) and Samuel Beckett’s *Molloy* (1951), this essay proceeds to show that the “metaphysical” character of these texts lies predominantly in their lack of faith in language as a reliable tool to convey the multiple and shifting identities of the unsuccessful sleuth confronted with the meaninglessness of his investigation.

Cet article s’attache à décrire les différentes façons dont le roman policier métaphysique subvertit l’une des caractéristiques emblématiques du genre policier: la résolution de l’enquête et la fin de la narration qui en découle. Dans « L’Homme de foules » (1840), le père du récit d’enquête, Edgar Allan Poe, introduisait déjà des mystères qui « ne se laissent pas lire ». De tels textes présentent des quêtes de connaissance qui ne peuvent atteindre une conclusion, tant intellectuelle qu’émotionnelle, et qui se soldent même, à l’inverse, par plus de questions insondables. Le sublime apparaît comme un concept intéressant pour analyser les vides laissés ouverts dans le processus cognitif de la recherche de réponses qui échapperont au détective comme au lecteur. Incluant des analyses du « Motif dans le tapis » de Henry James (1896) et de *Molloy* de Samuel Beckett (1951), cet article tend à démontrer que le caractère métaphysique de ces textes réside principalement dans leur remise en question du langage comme outil capable d’exprimer les identités multiples et changeantes du détective infructueux confronté au manque de sens de son enquête.

INDEX

Keywords: Metaphysical detective fiction, the sublime, closure, Poe, James, Beckett, knowledge, loop, irresolution

Mots-clés: Roman policier métaphysique, le sublime, fin, Poe, James, Beckett, connaissance, boucle, indécision

AUTHOR

ANTOINE DECHÊNE

Université de Liège (CIPA, Belspo)

Antoine Dechêne holds a PhD from the Université de Liège, Belgium. His research deals with all aspects of the metaphysical detective story in the USA and in France. Most notably, he co-edited with Michel Delville the first volume dedicated to the genre in French: *Le Thriller métaphysique d'Edgar Allan Poe à nos jours* (Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2016). His first monograph, *Detective Fiction and the Problem of Knowledge* will be published by Palgrave MacMillan as part of the Crime Files series in 2018.

Antoine Dechêne est docteur en Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège. Sa recherche porte sur le roman policier métaphysique aux USA et en France. Il a notamment co-édité avec Michel Delville le premier ouvrage dédié au genre en français : Le Thriller métaphysique d'Edgar Allan Poe à nos jours (Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2016). Sa première monographie Detective Fiction and the Problem of Knowledge sera publiée chez Palgrave MacMillan (Crime Files series) à l'automne 2018.