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## CHAPTER ONE

### An Uncertain Space: (Dis-)Locating the Frenchness of French and Australian Detective Fiction

ALISTAIR ROLLS

Much about detective fiction is uncertain. There are, for example, all the various genres and sub-genres of which it is composed.<sup>1</sup> It is often difficult to find agreement on what would appear the most basic generic distinctions, such as those between detective and crime fiction, and the whodunit and the thriller; and there are those who would argue that other closely related categories—such as *noir*, which has become, for others, synonymous with crime/detective fiction, and particularly the hard-boiled variety—do not constitute genres at all.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there are also the certainties, which it has become de rigueur to mention at the beginning of volumes such as this. It is, for example, quite certain that critical interest in this literary ‘genre’ has flourished in recent years; it is also clear that, in spite of its continued categorization in bookshops as separate from ‘literature’, ‘crime fiction’ sits comfortably amongst the most popular types of fiction read today.<sup>3</sup>

In France, this genre (new or otherwise, genre or not) has a new *valeur sûre*: Fred Vargas, whom Éditions Viviane Hamy are proud to present as the undisputed queen of the French detective novel (*la reine du polar français*). And, for the purposes of the present study, Vargas’s latest best-selling novel has an intriguingly reflexive-sounding title: *Un lieu incertain*.<sup>4</sup> Within the novel this uncertain place turns out to be a plot of land in twenty-first-century Serbia, whose location is markedly a non-French zone or a marker of geographical uncertainty. It is the place where, according to legend, the body of a vampire was buried some centuries earlier.<sup>5</sup> As such, it is tempting to posit this place somewhere between myth and reality, but it becomes apparent that it is a double space, both myth and reality, either by turn or in different degrees. As is always the case in Vargas’s novels, and perhaps more

<sup>1</sup> See for example Stephen Knight’s guide for future authors “What Kind of Ghoul Am I? Genre and Subgenre”, in Marele Day (ed), *How to Write Crime* (St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1996), pp. 1-17.

<sup>2</sup> James Naremore, for one, prefers to speak of mood rather than genre when discussing the films that loosely make up the corpus of film noir. See James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Even as I write these lines I realize that this separate classification needs to be reconsidered. Certainly, the distinction from ‘traditional’ literature is currently more a tribute to crime fiction’s popularity than a stigmatization or marker of its difference. In today’s bookshops it simply allows the reader to cut more quickly to the chase in her search for the next book. Indeed, in airports, those quick-guides to popular reading tastes, the crime-fiction category is the first one the reader comes to and is far bigger than the ‘literature’ or ‘fiction’ section. In the multi-storey bookshop in Brisbane, where I purchased my copy of *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, crime fiction has its own floor.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Vargas, *Un lieu incertain* (Paris: Viviane Hamy, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> The British counterpart of this uncertain European place in Vargas’s novel is Highgate Cemetery, which is renowned as a space of opening and disclosure as much as it is of internment and enclosure. In this way its role in the early chapters acts proleptically to map both Adamsberg’s entombment and his subsequent release from the vault in Serbia. For a comparison of Vargas’s version of the Elizabeth Siddal story and other tales of exhumation and desecration in Highgate’s notorious West Cemetery, see Judi Culbertson and Tom Randall, *Permanent Londoners: An Illustrated, Biographical Guide to the Cemeteries of London* (London: Robson Books, 2000), especially pp. 197-201.

especially so in her Adamsberg series, physical space offers a reflection of the uncertain mental space, or imaginary, in which Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg's navigation seems to owe more to that quintessentially Parisian practice of *flânerie* than to the deductive reasoning of a high-ranking detective. It is through Adamsberg's action in the novel that a Parisian space becomes mapped onto uncertain (or non-)space. For if Adamsberg's walking—he walks for miles in Paris and exports this practice wherever the investigation takes him, or perhaps wherever he walks the investigation—has carried him increasing distances from his jurisdiction in Paris as Vargas's series has progressed, Paris is always his point of departure and return. We shall therefore begin by examining the ways in which Adamsberg can be said to function as a *flâneur*.

### Parisian Space

Clearly, space in Vargas's novels is uncertain because it is a point of intersection; it is where the contemporary confronts, stands out against and very nearly merges with the primeval and the mythical. In this particular way, this uncertain space recalls modernity itself, which, far from coinciding neatly and exclusively with the modern or contemporary, expresses a critical stance with regard to it. In this way the protagonist is prompted by the trauma of the present to gaze back on the past. As David Harvey comments, "[o]ne of the myths of modernity is that it constitutes a radical break with the past."<sup>6</sup> Yet if modernity is not a break with the past, neither is it a realization of continuity. The trauma of the modern world causes us to act as fetishists in relation to the past, reading the truth of our contemporary existence through a remembrance of the past that takes the form of a reworking or mythologization. And nothing prompts such conflict between present and past as powerfully as the modern metropolis. We should certainly agree with Elizabeth Rezniewski for whom the *flâneur* incarnates the problematic relationship of the artist to the city, which is at the very heart of modernism.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, the *flâneur* points up this problematic relationship; he embodies the point of intersection—between the mundane and the Ideal, the modern and ancient—navigating it without synthesizing away its contradictions. And whilst this critical stance, with its absence of resolution, would appear at odds with the problem-solving role of the detective, the two tropes have tended to be conflated in analyses of Parisian narratives of modernity. Indeed, Rob Shields, for whom the *flâneur* in addition to being "a specifically Parisian term" is "always as much mythic as it was actual", suggests nonetheless that he "is like a detective seeking clues who reads people's characters not only from the physiognomy of their faces but via a social physiognomy of the streets."<sup>8</sup> For Rezniewski, however, the *flâneur* differs from the detective to the extent that the latter personifies the rational: "[t]he detective tries to make sense of the patterns of the city [...] to dominate its mysteries (its crimes) in order to reveal patterns that are rational, that are susceptible to argument and evidence." The *flâneur*, on the other hand, "is not seeking to make sense of the city nor to explain events rationally in a way that all can understand"; instead "he brings a uniquely personal perspective to the interpretation of the clues, the traces and the actions of others, for his own purposes of

<sup>6</sup> David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York; London: Routledge, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Rezniewski, "When and Why did the *Flâneur* Die? A Modern Detective Story", *Literature and Aesthetics: The Journal of the Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics*, 17.2 (2007), 90-103.

<sup>8</sup> Rob Shields, "Fancy Footwork: Walter Benjamin's Notes on *Flânerie*" in Keith Tester (ed), *The Flâneur* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 61-80 (p. 62, 63).

re-creation. Against logical explanation he affirms the rights of mystery.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than suggesting that the flâneur is both like and unlike a detective (although in his blend of rationality and irrationality there is a way in which this is the case), we should like to suggest that Rechiniewski’s description of his difference from the detective in fact opens up new possibilities for reading detectives and detective fiction. A detective who worked ‘against logical explanation’, solving crimes by ‘affirming the rights of mystery’ would be a flâneur-detective. And the *modus operandi* of Vargas’s own fetish detective appears to follow this precise model. By aligning himself with Rechiniewski’s description of the flâneur, and not simply by being a detective who goes for walks, Adamsberg becomes the very model of a flâneur-detective.

In Vargas’s novels the *commissaire*’s flânerie-detection takes the form of an internal struggle between two spaces, which invariably leads him into danger before the resolution of the case. We should argue, however, that Adamsberg is not led so much as he leads; he does not react to or detect external space, or model his investigation appropriately to fit events as they unfold. Instead, external space (the mystery) is driven by—or maps—the internal space that is Adamsberg’s flânerie. In short, he becomes a caricature of the detective who stuns readers with his amazing revelation of the truth; rather than producing a reading of events that is so powerful that it coincides exactly with the truth, he quite literally writes the crime as it unfolds. The following description from *Un lieu incertain* is an unofficial medical prognosis of Adamsberg’s condition:

Une absence quasi totale d’angoisse. C’est une posture rare. En contrepartie bien sûr, l’émotivité est faible, le désir pour les choses est atténué, il y a des difficultés avec l’entourage, des espaces muets. On ne peut pas tout avoir. Plus intéressant encore, un laisser-aller entre les zones du conscient et de l’inconscient. On pourrait dire que le sas de séparation est mal ajusté, que vous négligez parfois de bien fermer les grilles. Veillez-y tout de même, commissaire. Cela peut fournir des idées de génie semblant venir d’ailleurs—de l’intuition, comme on dit à tort pour simplifier—, des stocks immenses de souvenirs et d’images, mais aussi laisser monter en surface des objets toxiques qui devraient coûte que coûte demeurer dans les profondeurs.<sup>10</sup>

As it turns out (and turn away now if you have not yet read the novel), this description is offered by the criminal whom Adamsberg is pursuing. It can be read, then, as a warning not to protect Adamsberg from himself but the murderer from Adamsberg. For Adamsberg does not really live his condition as an internal struggle; rather, he negotiates the opposing poles of a case just as the flâneur embodies the paradoxical nature of modernity. This polarization, which in Charles Baudelaire’s *Petits poèmes en prose*, for example, juxtaposes ideas with things and poetry with prose, extends to the *commissaire*’s investigating team, which Vargas divides into two camps: the *mouvement rationnel positiviste*, whose members react as traditional detectives and seem to offer a counterpoint to Adamsberg’s daydreaming, and *les pelleteurs de nuages*, comfortable in the myth-bound direction of his investigations; and it is these detectives who struggle with the need to synthesize out the truth.

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<sup>9</sup> Rechiniewski, p. 91.

<sup>10</sup> Vargas, p. 200.

Adamsberg, for his part, only appears to coincide with his daydreaming persona; in fact, like Baudelaire's protagonist of the prose poems, for whom the infinite lines of the poetic are continually fragmented into precise instances of the prosaic, his line of flight takes him through the clouds only to allow him greater insight into the connections between earthly facts. He is neither entirely prose nor poem but instead brings together the two, comfortable in the knowledge that they do not and cannot come together in singular space.

In *Un lieu incertain* this perverse position is also occupied by someone else. In Serbia the myth of the local vampires is explained to Adamsberg by Arandjel, whom the former describes as being like his second-in-command, Danglard, by virtue of his encyclopaedic knowledge. Unlike Danglard, however, Arandjel shares Adamsberg's ability to maintain simultaneously the incompatible states of belief and disbelief:

[Aradjel] est au courant que tu as nettoyé et regardé la stèle—tout le monde est au courant. Il dit que tu ne dois pas jouer avec cela sans savoir, ou tu vas mourir.

— Tu disais qu'Arandjel n'y croyait pas.

— Ou tu vas mourir, répéta Vlad, qui vida le verre de rakija et éclata de rire.<sup>11</sup>

Here knowledge—*le savoir*—is offered in opposition to death: it is by knowing that one can avoid death. It also opposes belief—*la croyance*—and the myth of those who cheat death. Whereas in Paris the believers are outnumbered by the positivists, in Vargas's Serbia, Arandjel appears to be the only member of the local community not to believe in the myth of the vampire. Like Adamsberg, however, he 'affirms the rights of mystery', knowing that not to believe is to face death, which turns out to be exactly what happens. This form of detection, functioning as it does along the same principles as Baudelaire's prose poems, is fetishistic; it allows Adamsberg to maintain his belief in a myth whilst, at the same time, knowing that it is not true.<sup>12</sup>

If we proceed syllogistically we can demonstrate that Adamsberg's fetishistic detection is synonymous with his sphere of action: no matter how far he moves from the capital, he will always resolve the crime in a Parisian space. In his essay on Baudelairean poetics Michel Covin demonstrates how Paris itself encapsulates the oxymoronic juxtaposition of the prose poem.<sup>13</sup> First, he considers both title and subtitle of the prose poems—*Le Spleen de Paris: Les Petits poèmes en prose*—which, to the extent that it forms a chiasmus, seems to offer Paris as poetry to Spleen's prose. Covin's preferred reading, however, suggests that Spleen itself should be considered as the tension between the two sides of the poetry-prose dichotomy, which leaves Paris outside the mechanics of the title and, as such, emblematic of the whole process. In short, Paris becomes prose poetic space or, quite simply, prose poem. As we read *Les Petits poèmes en prose* we encounter two Parises at the same time (if the balance differs from poem to poem or as a poem progresses, no prose poem is entirely poem

<sup>11</sup> Vargas, p. 256.

<sup>12</sup> Freud offers the same model of dual belief/disbelief in his essay on Fetishism (1927). I have elsewhere developed the theory of the prose poetic, or fetish, detective into a model for reading French noir fiction. See Alistair Rolls and Deborah Walker, *French and American Noir: Dark Crossings* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>13</sup> Michel Covin, *L'Homme de la rue : Essai sur la poétique baudelairienne* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).

or prose):<sup>14</sup> the Paris of everyday life, the one we walk in and which is presented to us, and the ideal Paris, which is the stuff of imaginings and which we represent to ourselves as we negotiate real space. This is also the nature of the modern city for Ross Chambers. For him the city, insofar as it is simultaneously in front of us and in our mind's eye as remembrance, is "haunted".<sup>15</sup> According to this interpretation Vargas's uncertain space speaks not only of the location or setting of the detection but also of the detective act itself.

Already double, this idea of detective text as Parisian space is given another dimension as early as the cover image of Vargas's book, which shows lights appearing against a night sky and forming skeletal shapes and luminescent bats. The title of the photograph is given simply, albeit in a mix of French and English that adumbrates the cross-Channel linguistic jousting of the early chapters, as "Détail de Australia Northern Territory Matarauka". The syllogism that equates oxymoronic space with detection with Paris appears to be undermined by this eerie vision of Australia. We should argue, however, that the way in which the novel's cover stands in opposition to the physical spaces of its plot is in fact suggestive of the dichotomized Paris that we have been discussing. This paratextual geographical setting, therefore, not only increases spatial uncertainty (we already move between London and Paris, and France and Serbia), it also provides another mythology: present-day Paris is now opposed to the myth of *la vieille France* and, potentially, the otherness of the New World, or Terra Australis. So, if Vargas's uncertain space is framed by Australian imagery, we should ask ourselves in what ways French detection can be mapped onto Australian space, and *vice versa*.

### Australian Space

One possible answer lies in the question of the origins of French and Australian detective fiction. Simon Kemp, who is keen to establish a long tradition of French detective fiction against which he can plot the deviation of his defective inspectors, finds his starting point in Émile Gaboriau, whose name will be familiar to scholars of Australian detective fiction:

Since the time of Émile Gaboriau [...] crime fiction has been immensely important to French literary and cultural production. From the clue-puzzle mysteries of Gaston Leroux and Maurice Leblanc in the early twentieth century, to the more psychology-based investigations of Georges Simenon and the growth of American-influenced *romans noirs* in the 1930s and 40s, to the violent, radical *néo-polar* in the later decades of the century, the detective story has remained at the heart of French popular fiction...<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Even a prose poem composed entirely of the stock images of verse poetry retains the prosaic edge that is conferred by its non-verse format; it remains a 'prose poem'. Later in this essay we shall turn to Sartrean Existentialism, and it is our suggestion that Sartre's model of the human condition (the being-for-itself) is prose poetic in this way: nobody can achieve a state of pure consciousness because everybody has a body. The ideas of facticity, of situatedness and of consciousness always being 'of something' all share this prose poetic duality.

<sup>15</sup> Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), *passim*.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Kemp, *Defective Inspectors: Crime Fiction Pastiche in Late-Twentieth-Century French Literature* (London: LEGENDA/MHRA and Maney Publishing, 2006), p. 1.

According to Kemp, then, if French fiction is not exactly synonymous with detective fiction, there is at least a strong detective tradition in France. And whilst American influence plays a crucial role in its development, it is clear that this French tradition both draws on and defines literary traditions and identities that are Franco-French. As we shall suggest later, however, Frenchness itself will depend on a certain way of being other, of being simultaneously French and non-French. In the same way, Kemp, whilst seeking to establish a model of detective fiction that is strong enough to support the articulation of recognizable pastiche, admits that the reflexivity of his chosen *pasticheurs* is already present in ‘mainstream’ detective fiction and indeed that it is one of the genre’s defining elements. Vargas’s works are clearly a case in point. Let us return for the moment, however, to Gaboriau. For, whilst Kemp places him on the scene at the time of the detective story’s beginnings in France, he is also famously at the origins of the Australian model. His stories were, after all, the inspiration for Fergus Hume’s famous Australian classic *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886). And as we shall see, the Australian detective story presents another uncertain space.

Opinions as to the point at which detective fiction began are as numerous as the critical studies of detective fiction in which they appear; indeed, the origin of the detective story is another aspect that it is de rigueur to cover in critical work on the genre, and all the more so when one’s aim is to interrogate the idea of a national detective fiction. For his part Benjamin states quite categorically that the anonymity of the crowded nineteenth-century metropolis, into which anybody can dissolve unnoticed, “lies at the origin of the detective story.”<sup>17</sup> From the outset *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* situates itself in the tension of the uncertain space: on the one hand, the text aligns itself with the metropolitan beginnings of detective fiction, as set out by Benjamin in relation to Paris; and on the other hand, it goes against Benjamin’s guiding principles, suggesting an Australian twist to a French theme: “[I]t is impossible that the body can remain long without being identified by someone, as though Melbourne is a large city, yet it is neither Paris or London, where a man can disappear in a crowd and never be heard of again.”<sup>18</sup> By adopting this antagonistic position to European detective fiction, the novel seeks to shroud itself in mystery. Its title suggests as much, and it becomes apparent that the crime that takes place in the hansom cab and the mystery surrounding it are discrete elements: “It is of the utmost importance that the mystery in which the crime is shrouded should be cleared up, not only in the interests of justice, but also in those of the public—taking place as it did, in a public conveyance, and in the public street.”<sup>19</sup> This idea that it is “the mystery in which the crime is shrouded” rather than the crime itself that must be cleared up suggests that it is the city itself that is to be saved, and perhaps the Australian city, which must not be allowed to become like Paris. Throughout the early pages of the novel continual reference is made to the outrage of murder in the street, as if murder is, or has until now been, a private affair, a crime committed in enclosed spaces. The uncertainty of the crime space leads the detective to reflect on fiction and, particularly, “one of Du Boisgobey’s stories, entitled ‘An Omnibus Mystery’”.<sup>20</sup>

It is precisely this connection to the opening of space—both public and textual—that links the mystery of detective fiction to the mystery of Hume’s famous

<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, edited by Michael W. Jennings, translated by Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 71.

<sup>18</sup> Fergus Hume, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Hume, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Hume, p. 6.

murder. If French and Australian detective fiction do not exactly arrive on an omnibus, they are at least well travelled. Benjamin locates the beginnings of French detective fiction within a web of translation: “[T]he detective story, whose interest lies in its logical structure (which the crime story as such need not have), appeared in France for the first time when Poe’s stories ‘The Mystery of Marie Roget,’ ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue,’ and ‘The Purloined Letter’ were translated.”<sup>21</sup> Of course, we have twisted Benjamin’s words to suit our purpose: where Benjamin is talking about the appearance of the detective story “in France”, we are introducing the term French detective fiction. Our reasons for doing this spring from our understanding of the origins, in the twentieth century, of the *Série Noire*, which also arrives in France in the form of a translation project. And if we are so keen to see in the *Série Noire* a model of French detective fiction, it is because, and not despite the fact that, it is translated; and furthermore, because it echoes the nineteenth-century French preoccupation with modernity and bears an uncanny resemblance to Benjamin’s description of the French reception of Poe. Paris is thus the site *par excellence* of the detective story’s development, and thus the development of French detective fiction, be it Edgar Allan Poe’s vision of the capital or the allegory offered of it by Marcel Duhamel.

For its part, the birth of Australian detective fiction is anthropomorphized in Fergus Hume, whose biography is caricatured in *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* in Frettlby’s appraisal of the mystery surrounding the murder victim’s identity: “he was comparatively little known here, as he had been out from England such a short time”.<sup>22</sup> Not only is this a thinly veiled reference to the author’s own history (as is the ending, which sees the protagonist return to the British Isles), it is also a complication of the suggestion that a man cannot disappear in metropolitan Australia. Clearly, this is not the case, as will again be shown when a key witness vanishes into thin air. There is, then, a way in which Australian detective fiction is not only defined in opposition to Parisian space but also by its coincidence with it. Which brings us back to Gaboriau.

Whilst usually celebrated for being the first Australian crime novel, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* was also amongst the best-selling crime novels of the nineteenth century, according to Simon Caterson, out-selling both Arthur Conan Doyle and Wilkie Collins.<sup>23</sup> The story of the novel’s conception is well known: Hume was a trained barrister and aspiring playwright for whom a best-selling novel would represent a way to pay the bills. He thus decided to model his work on the most popular books of the day in Melbourne, which, according to the bookseller whose advice he sought, were the Lecoq detective novels of French author Émile Gaboriau, who was himself influenced by Poe.<sup>24</sup> In short, it is well known that Australian detective fiction’s debut drew on French literary sources. It is also well documented that Hume was “born in England to Scottish parents in 1859 and taken in his infancy to New Zealand.”<sup>25</sup> It was there that he was admitted to the bar, and he only moved to Melbourne in 1885. *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* was published one year later, whereupon, like the novel’s main characters Brian Fitzgerald and Madge Frettlby,

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<sup>21</sup> Benjamin, p. 73.

<sup>22</sup> Hume, p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Caterson, “Fergus Hume’s Startling Story” in Hume, pp. v-xiv (p. v).

<sup>24</sup> It seems likely that the bookseller in question is Samuel Mullen, to whose store ‘Mullen’s’ passing reference is made in Hume’s novel.

<sup>25</sup> Caterson in Hume, p. vi.



who, as Caterson notes, “were keen to leave Melbourne”,<sup>26</sup> Hume himself left. By 1888 he was in England, and in a career boasting some 130 novels, whilst others have Australian settings, only one was written in Australia. And although written in Australia, where it met with staggering commercial success, Hume’s novel was clearly not designed with an Australian audience in mind, as the following excerpt reveals: “A hot December day, with a cloudless blue sky, and a sun blazing down on the earth, clothed in all the beauty of summer garments. *Such a description must sound strange to English ears*”.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, this first Australian detective story turns its back not only on Australia but also on a myth of the bush that will later prove far harder to shake off. Indeed, its metropolitan setting is quite at odds with the model for which Australian crime fiction will become associated. Claude Mesplède and Jean-Jacques Schleret, discussing Australian contributors to the *Série Noire*, certainly have a different model in mind: “La fuite dans la brousse et l’épopée des grands espaces restent des sujets de prédilection chez les romanciers australiens.”<sup>28</sup>

One of the ways in which Hume takes a French model of detective fiction and Australianizes it is by taking pains to construct an authentic locale. For example, Caterson praises the research that took Hume into the gutters of Melbourne. The results included his perception that the hansom cab “was perfectly designed for murder, since the crime would be concealed from the driver”.<sup>29</sup> In seeking a fairer distribution of fame amongst the great nineteenth-century crime writers, and to give this Australian tale the credit it deserves, Caterson notes that Sherlock Holmes only made his own debut, in *A Study in Scarlet*, a year after Hume’s novel was published. And whilst the inference to be drawn is left to the reader’s imagination, Caterson reminds us that the plot of *A Study in Scarlet* hinges on these very particularities of the hansom cab.<sup>30</sup>

Benjamin is, as we have seen, careful to draw a distinction between the detective story and the crime story, the latter of which does not necessarily have the former’s logical structure. For Kemp, who is less concerned with this distinction, it is Gaboriau’s works that mark the beginnings of French crime fiction. In fairness to Kemp, what he says exactly is “since the time of Émile Gaboriau”, which leads us to consider some other French authors of the mid-nineteenth century. Opinion as to the origins of the crime story are themselves divided, but various Internet sites dedicated to nineteenth-century French fiction cite Paul Féval as a key pioneer. Interestingly and perhaps tellingly, popular Internet sources also tend not to make Benjamin’s distinction between the two genres. So, whilst Féval is named as one of the fathers of modern crime fiction, his novel “*Jean Diable* (1862) can claim to be the world’s first modern novel of detective fiction”.<sup>31</sup> This is more interesting still when one discovers what is scarcely more than a throw-away comment made by Benjamin in the course of his work on Baudelaire and Parisian myths: “Even earlier [than Alexandre Dumas, père’s *Les Mohicans de Paris*], Féval had involved a redskin in the adventures of a metropolis. While riding in a fiacre, this man, whose name is Tovah, manages to scalp

<sup>26</sup> Caterson in Hume, p. vii.

<sup>27</sup> Hume, p. 185 (our emphasis).

<sup>28</sup> Claude Mesplède and Jean-Jacques Schleret, *Les auteurs de la Série Noire : Voyage au bout de la Noire 1945-1995* (Paris: Joseph K., 1996), p. 295. (The reference here is to the work of Edward Lindall, whose novel *Northward the Coast* (1966) appeared in the *Série Noire* the following year as *Flèche au nord*.)

<sup>29</sup> Caterson in Hume, p. vi-vii.

<sup>30</sup> Caterson in Hume, p. xiii.

<sup>31</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul\\_F%C3%A9val,\\_p%C3%A8re](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_F%C3%A9val,_p%C3%A8re) (accessed 10 September 2008).

his four white companions so stealthily that the coachman suspects nothing.”<sup>32</sup> Whilst this act of scalping refers back, as clearly does Dumas’s novel, to James Fenimore Cooper’s novels, such as *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), it is curiously reminiscent of the plot of *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*. Indeed, we cannot help but wonder whether French novels did not represent the entirety of Hume’s research. This can only be speculation, of course, but as an anecdote it is of interest, as perhaps is the fact that Émile Gaboriau worked as a ghost writer for Féval in Paris in the decade following Tovah’s antics in the fiacre.<sup>33</sup> What is beyond doubt is Hume’s recognition of the debt he owed to French detective writing, an allusion to which creeps into his novel in the form of a comment made ostensibly about popular music: “Then [Madge] sang a gay little French song about love and a butterfly, with a mocking refrain which made Brian laugh. [...] ‘We certainly can’t touch the French in writing these airy trifles.’” Once the laughter has died down, Brian feels compelled to offer a perverse defence of the airy French trifle: “De Quincey says there is no moral either big nor little in the *Iliad*, so these light chansons are something similar.”<sup>34</sup> Whether detective fiction can equally be deemed as unimportant, or indeed as important, as the classic texts of antiquity, its popularity and influence are indisputable.

There emerges from this brief review of the background to this first example of Australian detective fiction a muddying, if not an explicit problematization, of national boundaries. Furthermore, this border-crossing can be traced backwards from Hume’s novel to the classic Parisian ones that serve as its model. In his discussion of Dumas’s famous work of 1854, *Les Mohicans de Paris*, which is incidentally the source of that most famous of lines “Il y a une femme dans toutes les affaires ; aussitôt qu’on me fait un rapport, je dis ‘Cherchez la femme’”, Benjamin highlights that phantasmagorical aspect that is so typical of Paris, and which will make it the *lieu de prédilection* of the Surrealists in the early twentieth century: “[n]o matter what traces the flâneur may follow, every one of them will lead him to a crime. This is an indication of how the detective story, regardless of its sober calculations, also participates in the phantasmagoria of Parisian life.”<sup>35</sup> And yet, this novel, whose essence, like that of Hume’s perhaps, can be said to lie in its “[f]orensic knowledge coupled with the pleasant nonchalance of the flâneur”,<sup>36</sup> presents its Frenchness to the reader indirectly, through allegory. For as early as Dumas’s novel, Paris is seen through an American lens.

The following description of the cover of *Les Mohicans de Paris*, again from Benjamin, indicates just how readily myths of America, its crimes and its wild natives, can be transformed into allegories of Paris: “The woodcut used as a frontispiece in the third volume shows a street overgrown with trees and shrubs that was little frequented in those days; the caption under the picture reads: ‘The primeval forest on the rue d’Enfer.’”<sup>37</sup> As we shall see shortly, this use of American myth as an allegory of Frenchness and American literature as a model for French fiction will be repeated, more famously still, in the twentieth century, at which time the great myth

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, p. 73.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.online-literature.com/gaboriau> (accessed 10 September 2008). Also of anecdotal interest is the key role played by Australia in Féval’s two-volume novel *Les Mystères de Londres*. The plot revolves around the attempt by the Irish-born count Rio Santo to overthrow the British Empire. This revolt takes shape when the count is deported to Botany Bay, and it is there that he recruits his most important allies before returning to London.

<sup>34</sup> Hume, p. 253.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, p. 72.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, p. 72.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin, p. 72.

of French detective fiction (that it is a borrowing or translation of an American tradition) will be internalized and held up as fact. What we should carry away from Benjamin's comments on French detective fiction is its deliberate and careful use of America as an allegorical device. And what is *essentially* French, in its very exploitation of American motifs and images, will be all the more so in 1945. For when Duhamel inaugurates the *Série Noire* in 1945, he resumes where Dumas *et al.* left off, using America as a vehicle for French detective fiction.

## French Space

Whilst it is clear that there are such things as French and Australian detective-fiction traditions, both would appear to have transnational origins. We can say two quite distinct things about them, then, each of which appears to contradict the other: first, there are national traditions of detective fiction in France and Australia; and second, the similarity between the two traditions lies in an exchange, which crosses national boundaries (which is perhaps most obvious when authorial intent reveals the influence of an author of another nationality) or defies the very notion of such boundaries (which is implicit in the intertextual exchange that must mark any literature). If we are to analyze these traditions, or to attempt to give them some useful definition, it is necessary first to challenge the legitimacy of such national labels.

In *Postcolonial Postmortems* Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen offer a transcultural perspective drawing on the work of Stephen Knight, a scholar famous for his work on Australian crime fiction; their vision is of crime fiction as an "interwoven and international body of writing".<sup>38</sup> An obvious contemporary example of such an international phenomenon is Andrea Camilleri's Inspector Montalbano series. Camilleri himself lives in Rome whilst his novels are set in Sicily, making liberal use of local dialect, which poses problems for his English translator, Stephen Sartarelli, who, in return, uses these difficulties in a celebratory way. The result, in English translation, is a text that revels in its translated identity, explaining away the cultural allusions and, thus, taking the reader, quite self-consciously, on a cultural journey around Sicily. The text is very much Sicilian, therefore, but always reflexively, always as seen from the outside. Or indeed 'as seen on TV', since the Montalbano books have been turned into telefilms, which have developed a certain cult status (perhaps one that depends on the quirks of unabashed 'foreignness').<sup>39</sup> Critical praise for the novels includes such descriptions as the following: "Both farcical and endearing, Montalbano is a cross between Columbo and Chandler's Philip Marlowe, with the added culinary idiosyncrasies of an Italian Maigret [...] The smells, colours and landscapes of Sicily come to life."<sup>40</sup> Here the product's national, or more precisely regional, identity is established through a deterritorializing or cross-referencing with other identities. This also plays out in the texts themselves, where narrative and detective practice merge as Montalbano solves the crime through a highly developed sense of intertextuality.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen "Postcolonial Postmortems: Issues and Perspectives", in Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen (eds), *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective* (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 1-16 (p. 2-3).

<sup>39</sup> On a recent visit to the UK I discovered that the television series did not have the same renown there as in Australia where it has been championed by the SBS network.

<sup>40</sup> This quotation is just one blurb featured on the inside cover of Andrea Camilleri, *Excursion to Tindari*, translated by Stephen Sartarelli (London: Picador, 2006). The source is the *The Guardian*.

<sup>41</sup> At the end of *The Scent of the Night*, for example, Montalbano realizes that he is co-writing the end of his investigation with William Faulkner. Again, the detective novel is reflexive, intertextual and

National and/or regional identity are important in detective fiction, even if their primary importance often hinges on a transgression or obfuscation of that identity. So, whilst we should agree with Matzke and Mühleisen when they state that the “regional boundaries of the classic crime novel [and the traditional understandings of ‘English’ and ‘American’ varieties] no longer hold [...] and probably never did in the first place”,<sup>42</sup> our aim is to analyze the way that the idea of intentional space, or space that is always already in flux, lends an allegorical function to crime fiction, such that it uneasily coincides with itself—perhaps there is no such thing as crime fiction that is not conscious of its mechanics, perhaps it is always, to use Kemp’s terminology, metatextual—and extends beyond its plots and devices into the situation of its publication and readership. In this way, detective fiction always has something to say about nationality, but our parameters for judging how to define this nationality are not so easily set. Matzke and Mühleisen point to the complexity of this question when debating whether “practitioners of ‘ethnic’ detective fiction need to be ‘ethnic’ themselves in order to be ‘truly’ representative”. Their answer is very much in the spirit of our approach here: “[W]e believe that an inquiry into postcolonial crime fiction calls for more than a mere postmortem of the investigator’s ethnicity.”<sup>43</sup>

Nowhere has this difficulty reared its head more obviously than in attempts to locate the origins of the French *roman noir*. Excellent studies by such scholars as Robert Deleuse and Claire Gorrara, which trace the sources of the tradition back to the gothic novel via the influence of the American thriller, agree that the first novel that can legitimately be classified as a French *roman noir* is Léo Malet’s classic Occupation thriller *120, Rue de la Gare*.<sup>44</sup> The arguments provided for this choice are convincing and seem incontrovertible. It is only when the development of the French *roman noir* is traced afterwards, in the post-war years, that one understands what the epithet ‘French’ is used to signify in this instance. According to Gorrara the next major exponents of the genre are Serge Arcouët and Jean Meckert. Whatever happened, however momentous, between the publication of *120, Rue de la Gare* in 1943, which Gorrara labels “a watershed in the history of French detective fiction” and a model “for a specifically French *roman noir*”,<sup>45</sup> and Serge Arcouët’s *La Mort et l’ange* in 1948 is excluded from the category of French *roman noir*. Not that Gorrara denies the importance of the intervening years, for if Arcouët and Meckert are important names in the history of the French *roman noir* it is precisely because they are published in the most important and famous French series of crime novels to appear in the twentieth century: their very acceptance as major authors, as authors of French *romans noirs*, was due to their publication in Duhamel’s *Série Noire*, which, since its inception in 1945, has become synonymous with the French crime novel. As such, its name, which owes its simplicity to the novels’ black covers, casts retrospective connotations onto the *roman noir* and pushes forwards into film noir,

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ultimately just as much about fiction as detection: “All at once he understood. [...] He realized he was living inside a fiction. He’d been transported inside a short story by Faulkner he’d read many years before.” Andrea Camilleri, *The Scent of the Night*, trans. by Stephen Sartarelli (London: Picador, 2007), p. 220-21.

<sup>42</sup> Matzke and Mühleisen, p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> Matzke and Mühleisen, p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Deleuse, “Petite histoire du roman noir français”, *Les Temps Modernes*, 595 (1997), 51-87; Claire Gorrara, *The ‘Roman Noir’ in Post-War French Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) and “Cultural Intersections: The American Hard-Boiled Detective Novel and Early French *Roman Noir*”, *Modern Language Review*, 98.3 (2003), 590-601.

<sup>45</sup> Claire Gorrara, “Malheurs et ténèbres: Narratives of Social Disorder in Léo Malet’s *120, Rue de la Gare*” *French Cultural Studies*, 12 (2001), 271-83 (271).

which latter term is used to describe the belated arrival in the summer of 1946 onto French cinema screens of a certain number of American films (at which time the term itself grows out of a series of trans-Atlantic exchanges). The logic is simple if not a little perverse: *La Mort et l'ange* is a French roman noir because it is published in the Série Noire. Boris Vian's *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, on the other hand, is published by Éditions du Scorpion and is dismissed, despite being published two years earlier, in 1946. Of the two novels, Vian's is the more famous (although infamous might be a more appropriate term, its renown owing more, it is generally considered, to scandal and courtroom drama than literary merit); indeed, it is arguably the most famous French roman noir of all. It was presented to the public as the work of Vernon Sullivan, the words *traduit de l'américain* being considered an imperative if a thriller were to achieve good sales in post-war France. It was also a glaring work of pastiche and as such could fit into the remit of Kemp's studies of French *pasticheurs*. Of course, the very same thing can be said of *La Mort et l'ange*, which was, after all, presented as the work of Terry Stewart (just as Jean Meckert's works are better known under the name John or Jean Amila).<sup>46</sup> The difference is simply the prestige of Duhamel's series.<sup>47</sup>

So why does publication within this prestigious series not confer the status of French roman noir onto those novels that famously opened Duhamel's account in 1945? The answer is that, unlike *La Mort et l'ange* and *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, *La Môme vert-de-gris*, *Cet homme est dangereux* (both by Peter Cheyney) and *Pas d'orchidées pour Miss Blandish* (James Hadley Chase) were 'genuine translations'. This is true, and we should argue that it is precisely the nature of the translation work involved that makes the three novels published in French in 1945 in the Série Noire such key texts in the history French detective fiction.<sup>48</sup> First, the difference between the English 'original' and the French translation is more than a simple matter of 'feel'; rather, Duhamel makes the French text his own, not seeking simply to improve the text (which is decidedly poor in English, primarily because Cheyney was a British author attempting to write an 'American' thriller) but to make his text 'French', not in a purely linguistic sense nor in terms of ostensible setting (key sections of the novel are set, tellingly, in uncertain waters), but as an allegorical parable for a nation emerging from the Occupation and through Liberation as a result of a victory won by Allied troops. Second, Duhamel uses his allegory as a vehicle for establishing a noir literary tradition that will appeal and respond to the overwhelming mood of his French readers: the tainted victory of the noir detective is directly comparable to that won by the French in the Second World War, a victory in a war that, perhaps most poignantly in Occupied France, had seen the distinctions between right and wrong muddled and 'noired'. And third, Duhamel's Série Noire establishes a tradition of French noir fiction in which the detective relies on gut instinct and weighs up ideal conceptions of Woman against real-world examples of women in tough situations. In this way, the series that Duhamel establishes is predicated on a fetishistic world-view that reaches back, via the Surrealists (we may think particularly of Louis Aragon's *Le*

<sup>46</sup> Additionally, there is a strong argument to be made that *La Mort et l'ange* is a reprise of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*.

<sup>47</sup> It was just such prestige that Boris Vian, as a result of a dare, was aiming to achieve for Scorpion with the sales of his own novel, which is in itself proof of the cultural importance of the Série Noire.

<sup>48</sup> For a detailed reading of Peter Cheyney's *La Môme vert-de-gris* within the context of French noir fiction and, more particularly, reflexive, allegorical fiction, see Alistair Rolls, "Throwing Caution to the French Wind: Peter Cheyney's Success Overseas in 1945", *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 43.1 (2006), 35-47.

*Paysan de Paris*), to Baudelaire and the flâneur's ambivalent reaction to the traumatic pace of change in the modern world.

In positing the Série Noire novels of 1945 as an echo of Baudelaire's prose poetry, our aim is similar to Kemp's, i.e. "[to] trace longer trajectories of literary development" and to "show late-twentieth-century crime fiction pastiche as [...] a changing form within the developing continuum of modern French literature".<sup>49</sup> We should go further than Kemp, however, in arguing that the boundaries between detective fiction and pastiche are even more blurred than he suggests.

In *Defective Inspectors* Kemp considers the extent to which, in the work of certain *pasticheurs*, "familiar themes and tropes" deviate from what he considers the "original purpose" of detective fiction.<sup>50</sup> If this is true (and it would be a perverse reader indeed who did not agree with Kemp: the works that are the object of his study, which include books by Perec, Robbe-Grillet and Echenoz, are clearly of a different nature to the works that we generally understand to be detective fiction) then there must be something that detective fiction is identifiably about. By his own admission, "reflexivity has always been present in the genre", which suggests that that something that detective fiction is always about is itself; indeed, "certain crime fiction writers stray into metafiction to such an extent as to imperil the very notion of pastiche".<sup>51</sup> It would appear an analytic truth that detective fiction is fiction about detectives; we might also suggest, however, perhaps as a synthetic truth, that detective fiction, just like any other textual production, is always already 'about' something else. And, just as French literature has always had a deep-seated obsession with otherness, so too French detective fiction is always already an expression of this, and since the Second World War, this attitude to self and otherness has manifested itself through the establishment—or, in the light of Benjamin's discussion of the French crime novels of the 1840s and 1850s, the reinstatement—of a dichotomy opposing France's relationship to its principal other, the United States, on the one hand,<sup>52</sup> and its reconnection with a pristine and essential identity on the other.

By challenging the notion of a clear opposition between detective fiction and its pastiche, a challenge that Kemp himself endorses, we find ourselves again in Vargas's uncertain space. Duhamel's translations of Peter Cheyney and James Hadley Chase extend this uncertainty, this troubling of binary oppositions, which is the stuff of modernity; in so doing, they take hold of Frenchness and extend it beyond its own borders. By painting France allegorically, they fetishize it, making it both indirect and easier to contemplate. Just as the stark light of Liberation was famously too much for human eyes (as depicted in Paul Colin's poster of 1944, 'Libération', in which Marianne, even as she emerges from the rubble of the Occupation, has to shield her eyes from the bright light of the new world order), the most effective literary portrayals of Frenchness were oblique. In the case of Peter Cheyney's *La Môme vert-de-gris*, the novel that opened the Série Noire, this meant setting the novel in neutral territory, and more precisely beyond territorial waters. As Stephen Knight has observed, such active deterritorialization is a motif that is also common to Australian detective fiction. He notes, for example, that

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<sup>49</sup> Kemp, p. 1-2.

<sup>50</sup> Kemp, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Kemp, p. 16.

<sup>52</sup> Kristin Ross's seminal study of France's ambivalent relationship to the United States gives ample evidence of the way Frenchness expressed itself in opposition to American stereotypes. See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 1995).

[A.E. Martin's] *The Misplaced Corpse* (1944) is elusive in several ways: it has the idiom and attitude and vague location of Peter Cheyney's then very popular Lemmy Caution stories, whose quasi-American style he seems to be imitating—but unlike Cheyney, Martin did not pretend they were set in America, but left it quite unclear which English-speaking nation was host to Rosie Bosanky's exotic personality.<sup>53</sup>

Knight refers to this widespread feature of Australian crime fiction as the 'zero setting': "The Australian zero setting novels are simply blank, not so much a space on the map as a failure, or refusal, to map at all."<sup>54</sup> He suggests a desire to generate sales for these novels beyond Australian shores—shores which, he adds, are a long way from the major Anglophone or European markets—as a possible motive for such anti-settings. He does not go as far as to state that the zero setting could be another kind of mapping, an allegorical distortion, which only gains in power by its ostensible distance from the signified. The allegorical potential of crime fiction can certainly be inferred from Knight's ideas on the development of postcolonial consciousness, however. Indeed, his understanding of crime fiction as "co-extensive with the expansive and appropriative societies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries",<sup>55</sup> and as such allegorical of England's colonial invasion of Australia, can be compared to the role played by the *Série Noire* in the reconstruction of French identity in the immediate post-war years. Whereas Australia was, as Knight reminds us, declared *Terra Nullius*, or the "land of no-one", France in general and the occupied zones, including Paris, in particular moved in quick succession, in the national psyche at least, from German to Allied domination. If France had taken part in its own Liberation, it also seemed to have lost itself along the way. It is not entirely inappropriate to consider that France, by virtue of its awareness of its non-coincidence with its own mythology (the idea of *la vieille France*), was itself in 1945 a *Terra Nullius*. Within the framework of Knight's study, the privileged property of crime fiction is its tendency to "operate within a country and its cultures as a way of recognizing quasi-colonial oppressions".<sup>56</sup> In terms of our reconfiguring of French detective fiction, the term 'quasi-colonial oppression' has a certain resonance with the forces driving Duhamel's project in 1945. The modernism of the *Série Noire* lies in its capacity to tap into age-old myths of Frenchness whilst operating within the codes of the most contemporary literary forms. By celebrating it as other (French detective fiction as translation, as a literature written by non-French authors and with non-French plots), Duhamel, in effect, appropriates and transvalorizes *Terra Nullius*.

In Australia detective fiction has appropriated a similar otherness. Xavier Pons notes how it functions as a "counterpoint to celebratory national narratives", defamiliarizing Australia by "foregrounding its strangeness" and "describing it as

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Knight, *Continent of Mystery: A Thematic History of Australian Crime Fiction* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne Press, 1997), p. 153. We should like to point out that Knight's comments about Cheyney's texts, whilst generally fair, are not accurate depictions of the two novels chosen by Duhamel to inaugurate the *Série Noire* in 1945: *Le Môme vert-de-gris*, as has been mentioned, pointedly takes to the sea for a key section of the plot; and *Cet homme est dangereux* is set largely in France.

<sup>54</sup> Knight (1997), p. 152.

<sup>55</sup> Stephen Knight, "Crimes Domestic and Crimes Colonial: The Role of Crime Fiction in Developing Postcolonial Consciousness", in Matzke and Mühleisen (2006), pp. 17-33 (p. 17).

<sup>56</sup> Knight (2006), p. 17.

alien.”<sup>57</sup> This otherness is not entirely internal, of course, being the result of colonial tension with England. Indeed, the idea of Australia as England’s penal colony, its convict other, is deeply embedded in contemporary myths of Australianness. Certainly, it is far from “a coincidence if there appears to be some kind of affinity between Australia and crime fiction”. For Pons this affinity takes two distinct but related forms: Australia is both the locus of the plots of a large, perhaps disproportionate, number of the novels of “contemporary overseas crime or thriller writers”, including French authors ADG and Hervé Claude, and the producer of “a bumper crop of crime writers of its own”.<sup>58</sup> Interestingly, Pons is content to discuss detective fiction and Australia in terms of an affinity between land and text; nevertheless, he does not engage in the discourse of national categories of detective fiction. Within our present framework, terms like ‘French’ and ‘Australian’ are more usefully employed in a less rigid way to denote cultural dynamics and not being bandied about as a form of literary land grab.

The model that we are proposing, according to which the term French detective fiction encompasses the allegorical translations of Marcel Duhamel, uses the terms French and Australian to refer to the ways in which those nations construct their own identities *in relation to* the world not *in isolation from* it. This is a (national and textual) difference based on movement (transnational and intertextual), in which otherness is always already built into the notion of self, and interconnectedness is presupposed. Hence the suggestiveness of the zero setting and the allegorical potential of text from which national markers seem to have been erased. The logistics of the crime itself, after all, become one with the narrative development of the detective story. Or, as Pons writes, “[i]f national cultures are located at the intersection of history and geography, it follows that Australia’s culture has a good deal to do with crime, which is no doubt why crime—and crime fiction—has a good deal to do with Australia’s culture.”<sup>59</sup>

The analytical latitude afforded by such an interconnected and deterritorializing understanding of detective fiction has the potential to undermine the thesis subtending Kemp’s work on pastiche. We should prefer, however, to dwell on the similarities between his work and our reconfiguration of the borders of national detective fiction(s) as fluid models of exchange. Kemp is keen, for example, to point out the time lag that exists between the hypertexts of his *pasticheurs* and the hypotexts on which they draw. For us, this gap is not only a marker of difference but also, and at the same time, a connecting film something like an existential negating strip or an intertextual membrane, across which, for example, an ‘original’ text and its ‘translation’ are situated inside each other.<sup>60</sup> The use of such models of the fundamental failure of the conscious identity to coincide with itself (in the form of Jean-Paul Sartre’s being for-itself) and the auto-antonymic nature of the intertext

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<sup>57</sup> Xavier Pons, “‘Redneck Wonderland’: Robert G. Barrett’s Crime Fiction”, in Matzke and Mühleisen, pp. 229-53 (p. 231).

<sup>58</sup> Pons, p. 229.

<sup>59</sup> Pons, p. 230.

<sup>60</sup> It is also possible to use Kemp’s idea of hypertexts and hypotexts more actively to support our reading of the translations of the *Série Noire* as French detective fiction. For example, if Echenoz’s novels are understood by Kemp as pastiche, it is because they remodel whodunits of the Golden Age. Duhamel’s texts, on the other hand, rework the hard-boiled novels of Cheyney and Chase, which were published in the years leading up to the Second World War, as post-war thrillers, whose allegorical potential is due precisely to the motifs of the hard-boiled genre. The ‘gap’ (which we wish nonetheless to read positively, as a connective membrane) is therefore a smaller one in terms of the novels we have been discussing above.



(which is such that any text is located both within in its own pages, and thus different or autonomous, and extended beyond its own pages, its identity tied up with and mapped onto that of all other text(s)) leads us to a critical examination of detective fiction that is *theoretically* French. That is not to say that detective fiction is only 'French' because recognizably French theoretical models can be used to interrogate it; there is also a way in which detective fiction is French because it is fundamentally conscious of its own otherness, is predicated on otherness and mirrors the split-personality traits that, whilst universal, are somehow particularly French. In this way, we should suggest, detective fiction is French to the extent that it fails to coincide with its 'original purpose'. Which, given the tendency of the genre towards reflexivity, is ineluctably the case.<sup>61</sup>

The idea that a concept can be at once universal and 'particularly French' takes us back to the Paris of the mid-nineteenth century—capital of modernity for some, of the world for others<sup>62</sup>—with its universal expositions and, of course, its flâneurs. For Chris Jenks "[t]he *flâneur* is essentially a product of modernity, it provides one image of how that state of being in time can be realized or, at least, understood. It is also an attempt to 'see' modernity; a metaphor for method."<sup>63</sup> The flâneur is, therefore, a trope that embodies Frenchness whilst providing a critical model for apprehending our relationship to modernity more generally (to 'seeing' modernity we should add both 'being seen by' and 'existing in'), be it the modern city or modernist text. His fetishistic gaze reflects modernity in the way that it faces the reality of the modern world as it is now with a gaze that is simultaneously directed towards a past that he knows never to have existed. If we can extend our understanding of the flâneur onto Benjamin's judgment of his importance in the genre's development in France, then we can locate the origins of the detective story in the establishment of a fetishistic world-view, which is adopted en masse in Paris at the time of Haussmannization (and repeatedly throughout the second half of the nineteenth century) and again after the Second World War. Whether the genre be whodunit-style or hard-boiled, this is a literature born as much in a traumatic splitting of the ego as in a discovery of empirical truth. Indeed, to take the model offered by the flâneur seriously as a means of analyzing detective fiction is to cast doubt over such generic distinctions. For the flâneur is both objective and subjective, gazing on the crowd and out of the crowd. The hard-boiled detective, who proceeds, like Lemmy Caution, by instinct and in ignorance of the facts, cannot be neatly opposed to the classic detectives like Hercule Poirot; instead, his reliance on myth and gut instinct is always already preceded by his knowledge of the truth (which is then both masked and symbolized by the erection of the fetish). And this is, after all, how detective fiction, even and perhaps especially of the whodunit style, functions: as

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<sup>61</sup> Patricia Plummer's discussion of genre boundaries and their blurring at the hands of writers sharing "a multicultural or cosmopolitan background" provides a useful re-examination of the 'other purposes' to which crime fiction can be put. "The actual murder investigation", Plummer writes, "becomes a prop in a plot which is more concerned with issues of gender, ethnicity and migration, the global vs. the local, and how these forces impact on and shape individual identities." Patricia Plummer, "Transcultural British Crime Fiction: Mike Phillips's Sam Dean Novels" in Matzke and Mühleisen, pp. 255-70 (p. 256).

<sup>62</sup> We have already mentioned David Harvey's work. Patrice Higonnet's *Paris, capitale du monde* is also an invaluable guide to the ways in which the city has been mythologized: *Paris, capitale du monde : Des Lumières au surréalisme* (Paris: Tallandier, 2006).

<sup>63</sup> Chris Jenks, "Watching your Step: The History and Practice of the *Flâneur*" in Chris Jenks (ed), *Urban Culture: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Volume 2 (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 26-43 (p. 30).

readers we see the truth *and* do not see it (amid numerous red herrings), and our pleasure is derived more from the telling of the truth than in its discovery.

### French Detective Criticism and/or French Detective Fiction

In spite of the prevailing tendency to understand French detective fiction as a form of writing practiced by authors of French nationality, it is no great leap to expand its corpus to include all the translated titles of such series as the *Série Noire*. Where French detective fiction is at its most creative, however, is where it coincides with French criticism. And this is perhaps the most important facet of Vargas's use of uncertain space. As has been suggested here and as will be further developed in Chapter Eight, her detective Adamsberg acts as a *flâneur* insofar as he maintains a balance between myth and reality, action and inaction, criticism (deducing the truth) and creativity (writing the truth). To the extent that the space of his investigations extends from 'cloud-digging' to action in the field, Adamsberg operates within the problematics of what Harvey calls modernity's "creative destruction".<sup>64</sup> In terms of textual analysis, creative destruction is at the heart of the Barthes's ideas of rereading, which discovers newness in old text. Indeed, for Barthes, to proceed always from a *tabula rasa*, and to limit oneself always to reading different literary works is to see the same text everywhere, which is to say that one does not take the time to read slowly enough for difference to emerge from the text, and one's reading (whatever the work being read) always follows the same—practical and efficient—model.<sup>65</sup>

Barthes's call for reading to be writerly, that is to say critical and creative, is one that exposes the essential fallacy of the whodunit, which appears to encourage the reader to participate actively in the discovery of the solution only, in its final pages, to crush her attempts beneath the weight of its Truth. This would-be model of the writerly, therefore, ultimately exemplifies the readerly: not only is its meaning clear to see, but its existence serves solely to frame the crushing authorial act of revelation. Hence the conundrum with which John T. Irwin begins his discussion of the analytic detective story: "Let me start with a simple-minded question: How does one write analytic detective fiction as high art when the genre's central narrative mechanism seems to discourage the unlimited rereading associated with serious writing?"<sup>66</sup> Irwin's essay on Edgar Allan Poe's story of "The Purloined Letter" takes as its focus the writing of detective fiction, but in so doing it does not adopt the position of the author; rather, it takes the position of the reader, with the story itself very much as a text to be read in the writerly sense. By continuing the poststructuralist tradition of playing on the meaning of reading and writing, and by analyzing Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Barbara Johnson's famous 'readings' of "The Purloined Letter" alongside Poe's story, Irwin effectively locates the critical essay within the same space as the creative act.

It is tempting to see in this coalescence of critical and creative discourses a new possibility for French detective fiction: by extending beyond the realm of the always already metafictional and taking on another original purpose, critical this time, the genre could encompass texts like Jacques Lacan's 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"'. This is underwritten by another syllogism: "Preformed in the figure of the

<sup>64</sup> Harvey, p. 1.

<sup>65</sup> This non-critical, and ultimately non-creative, speed of reading, and its prevalence in contemporary society, is the subject of much regret for Chambers in *Loiterature*.

<sup>66</sup> John T. Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges and the Analytic Detective Story* (Baltimore; London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1994 [1996]), p. 1.

flâneur is that of the detective”;<sup>67</sup> the flâneur offers a critical reading of modernity; therefore detective fiction is critical reading, and *vice versa*. If this is too far-fetched, we can perhaps use Barthes’s ironic tradition of inverting terms<sup>68</sup> to rephrase Irwin’s initial (ironic) premise: given the whodunit’s obsession with red herrings, or textual alternatives, no form of serious writing does more actively to *encourage* unlimited rereading.

It may well be standard practice amongst the characters of Agatha Christie’s novels to seek to mock Poirot by calling him ‘French’ (the term certainly marks their tendency to underestimate his abilities, for how could a Frenchman outwit the British police force), but he always wins out, reminding fellow characters and readers alike that he is the best reader of detective text by consistently ‘producing’ the truth. For even in these classic—indeed benchmark—whodunits, there is a strong sense that Papa Poirot does more than simply ‘discover’ the truth. His power is authorial, and he appears often to be co-writing the outcome alongside Christie. There is, then, some elbow room in these novels; there is a possibility that the writerly is not crushed underneath a ‘Truth’, but that multiple ‘truths’ (or, perhaps, ‘readerly herrings’) are always there to be found out and written in. And so, just as the flâneur has walked out of the Paris of the nineteenth century into universal space, the little Belgian has carried with him the dual arms of the critical reader: he objectively assesses the facts of the text, representing them like a voyeur, and subjectively engages in the text, acting in it alongside the characters. As Keith Tester says of the flâneur that he is “the man *of* the crowd”, Poirot is both aloof (outside) and motivated (inside), a man *of* the novel.<sup>69</sup>

When in 1998 one of the Poirot novels was rewritten—that is to say that one of its writerly possibilities was seized upon and published (as the Truth)—a tantalizing new avatar of French detective fiction was born. Pierre Bayard’s book, which was simply entitled *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?*, is perhaps the most powerful argument for an alignment of French criticism, or French critical fiction, and French detective fiction.<sup>70</sup> Bayard’s remarkable essay, which sets out to prove that Dr Sheppard could not have been the killer in Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), is presented as more than a work of exegesis. The French edition, especially the plain white-covered first edition, appears to be a novel, entitled *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?*, by a French author of detective fiction called Pierre Bayard. And given that much of Bayard’s essay addresses questions of authorial power and the possibility of producing writerly readings (although the main thrust of the essay is psychoanalytical, describing Poirot’s explanation of the case as a paranoid rambling), a translation or rewriting is exactly what this book is.<sup>71</sup> There is, we should suggest, a very strong comparison to be made between this work and the first titles of the Série Noire: like

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<sup>67</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 442.

<sup>68</sup> In *S/Z*, for example, Barthes develops the idea of literature as readerly text only to deconstruct it and reveal it, in fact, to writerly.

<sup>69</sup> See his introduction to his own edited volume. Tester, pp. 1-21 (p. 3).

<sup>70</sup> Pierre Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd* (Paris: Minuit, 1998).

<sup>71</sup> In a more recent essay on the subject of ‘non-reading’ Bayard denies that there is any difference between artistic creation and criticism. See Pierre Bayard, *Comment parler des livres que l’on n’a pas lus ?* (Paris: Minuit, 2007), especially the final chapter, which deals with Oscar Wilde’s essay “The Critic as Artist”. Wilde’s argument that the object of criticism is criticism itself can be compared to our suggestion that the primary purpose of detective fiction is to discuss, promote and, ultimately, just to ‘be’ detective fiction.

the latter, it reworks previously published text in order to fit it into a new (detective fiction) project.

Bayard's clear predilection for psychoanalysis notwithstanding, the major thrust of his Ackroyd project is a liberation of the text, a reminder that the myth of an omnipotent readerly truth cannot hide from the detective-reader (despite the exhortations of S.S. Van Dine *et al.*). As a rewriting of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, this appears very much to be a work of creative destruction, and one that neatly circumvents the dual authorial voice of Christie-Poirot. Continuing in the ironic tone of Barthes and Irwin, Bayard dethrones the authorial solution only to put his own truth in its place (this is clearly ironic, if powerfully persuasive, as he has placed his entire solution under the caveat of 'one possible interpretation'). Bayard's choice of murderer is Dr Sheppard's sister Caroline. Basing his deconstruction of Poirot's solution on a lack of means on Dr Sheppard's part, the motive that he finds for Caroline is one of sisterly love. Caroline is, Bayard points out, something of a red herring personified, a character almost entirely sacrificed to a function that is not overtly present in Christie's novel. Bayard makes this explicit, but does not add any clues that were not there in the original. As such, his reading tends to belie the axiomatic (and, again perhaps, ironic) description of detective fiction given by Irwin, according to which "it is a genre that grows out of an interest in deductions and solutions rather than in love and drama, the analytic detective story shows little interest in character".<sup>72</sup>

It should be noted that the uncertainty into which Bayard throws the authorial solutions of the classic whodunit is increased when *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?* is in turn translated. For the English translation arguably both enhances and undermines Bayard's project. On the one hand, the cover of *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?* is adorned with the striking image of a knife embedded in a keyboard, which suggests the assassination, if not of the author, then at least of authorial power. On the other hand, the English title is extended with the addition of a subtitle: *The Mystery Behind the Agatha Christie Mystery*, which—whilst it serves to cast mystery itself further into mystery, thereby supporting Bayard's thesis—points up the book's status as critical essay and thus undermines its potential for inclusion in the corpus of French detective fiction.<sup>73</sup>

To conclude our own exposé of the uncertain space of French detective fiction, we should like to take up the challenge that is implicit in Bayard's reading, which is to offer yet another possible suspect for the murder of Roger Ackroyd. Our own analysis is predicated on the same use of intertextuality as Bayard's own: Caroline's intertextual function in the novel is to point the way to Rudyard Kipling's "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi". Drawing on the motto of the mongoose, which is "Run and find out",<sup>74</sup> Bayard draws our attention to Caroline's lethal curiosity. His reading is strengthened by a close reading of "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi", which also reveals the mongoose's talent for entering houses at will (the murder of Roger Ackroyd hinges on the killer's ability to access his office). What Bayard's reading does not signal is the nature of the mongoose's associates, like "Chuchundra the Muskrat, who never comes out into the middle of the floor, but always creeps round by the wall" whilst "Rikki-

<sup>72</sup> Irwin, p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> Pierre Bayard, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?: The Mystery Behind the Agatha Christie Mystery*, translated by Carol Cosman (New York: New Press, 2000).

<sup>74</sup> Rudyard Kipling, "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" in *The Jungle Books* (London: Penguin, 1987), pp. 95-109 (p. 96). ("Rikki-Tikki-Tavi" was first published in *The Jungle Book* in 1894.)

tikki did the real fighting.”<sup>75</sup> It is precisely this creeping around walls that prompts us to promote another candidate for murderer. Caroline’s most loyal ally would appear to be Hercule Poirot himself, who appears to instruct her not to attend his revelation of the murderer, as if tradition dictates that he must nominate the killer from those assembled, and in order not to be proven the killer she has only not to enter that space. For, as we have seen, it is not clear that Poirot only discovers truth; rather, he weaves a narrative and surprises all gathered at the final scene when he ‘tells the truth’. In light of this, the murderer’s surprised expression is perhaps not as feigned as first appears. It seems quite possible that the murderer’s acceptance of the verdict is produced by the power of Poirot’s reading, and as we readers are also present at the final scene, the revelation of the truth can be considered a simple exercise in authorial power.

In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, however, Poirot does not restrict himself to “creep[ing] round by the wall” like Chuchundra the Muskrat. When he bursts into the novel, it is in the position of Rikki-tikki himself, who finds himself quite suddenly “lying in the hot sun in the middle of the garden path” and, when he has been revived and has looked around the garden, decides that it “is a splendid hunting-ground”.<sup>76</sup> For Poirot’s entrance is a most unusual one: rather than being called in to investigate, he is already on the scene, impatient to get things under way. His act of throwing a vegetable marrow over his wall at Dr Sheppard both begins the action and designates a scapegoat for a murder that he alone has the power to author. Poirot, like Rikki-tikki, is fighting for possession of a garden, and far from restoring the tranquillity of little England, he disrupts it. In short, Poirot exploits a stable situation, at both the level of the novel as story and as detective text, and, under the cover of truth and certainty, creates a space of possibility and uncertainty. And in this way, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, through its translation into French criticism, becomes an uncertain space, just one more body in the library of French detective fiction.

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<sup>75</sup> Kipling, p. 95.

<sup>76</sup> Kipling, p. 96, 97.