

Footprints in the Sands of Crime

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# FOOTPRINTS IN THE SANDS OF CRIME

BY HERBERT MARSHALL McLUHAN

*Ant. You have acted certain Murders here in Rome  
Bloody and full of horror.*

*Lud. 'Las, they were fleabytinges.*

WEBSTER.

*Murders have their little differences and shades of merit, as well as statues, pictures, oratorios, cameos, intaglios, or what not.*

DE QUINCEY.

*"This old man," I said at length, "is the type of genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd. It will be vain to follow; for I shall learn no more of him, nor of his deeds.*

POE.

*Had I followed and chosen what I had a decided talent for: police spy, I should have been much happier than I afterwards became."*

KIERKEGAARD.

*They only showed that Mr. Kurtz lacked restraint in the gratification of his various lusts, that there was something wanting in him—some small matter which, when the pressing need arose, could not be found under his magnificent eloquence.*

CONRAD.

*The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.*

YEATS.

*When did the ego begin to sink?*

PALINURUS.

THE popular verdict about the intellectual as an irresponsible person engaged in expressing petty spites with unintelligible solemnity is not without some foundation. In England and America, for example, intellectuals have been engaged in recent decades in supporting the abstract political slogans which are themselves the slavish reflex of abstract technology. They have been, however unwittingly, on the side of hate, as Benda explained in *La Trahison des Clercs*. It had never occurred to them to observe that from *Frankenstein* to Buck Rogers both the popular and esoteric imagination was unanimous in putting technology, too, on the side of hate and chaos. Owing to the particular circumstances from which technology emerged, it was developed by a reason which was enslaved to appetite. The appetite for unlimited power over man and nature. And this blind appetite was bred from pride, fear, and hate as the popular symbols of Tamburlaine and Dr. Faustus testify.

By an uncritical support of the political concepts which were themselves mere by-products or analogies of abstract technology, "liberalism" was beguiled, as De Tocqueville patiently explained, into hastening the new absolutism. Not the personal absolutism of the *ancien regime* which was the transitional phase from the older cadres of community, but the wholly sub-personal and sub-human absolutism of abstract organization. The organization demanded by the appetites of the abstract goods market (the army is the child of this) intensely absorbed in hurling up new competitive inventions in the race for monopoly. Thus De Tocqueville explains precisely why the doctrine of social equality, however just in itself, nevertheless begets at once "two tendencies: the one leads men straight to independence and may suddenly drive them into anarchy; the other conducts them by a longer, more secret, but more certain road to servitude." Both of these tendencies have been worked out in all their particulars in England and America since those words were written.

De Tocqueville obviously did not exercise his intellect on the

side of hate or any other passion. He had no more intelligence than hundreds of others since then, yet he proceeded more intelligently. But *la trahison des clercs* has been to subordinate detached critical intelligence to the servile functions of "political" evangelism. They are thus the inheritors of the sectarian enthusiasms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, presenting a scientific demonstration of Jung's social principle: "No psychic value can disappear without being replaced by another of equivalent intensity."

The most hopeful developments in social thought in recent decades have, therefore, been in the direction of exploring modes of thought and feeling rather than in the quarter where mechanical efforts to tinker the good society into existence have prevailed. And the reason that our best hope for social improvement lies in the analysis and evaluation of modes of social being, is simple. Today we not only live barbarously, (human community is little more than a memory) but emotional illiteracy is almost universal. And this has come about through the divorce of thought and feeling. Thus, after Descartes, all the arts tried to make themselves respectable by adopting the one-level mensuration and certitude of the physical sciences. That familiar blight has not spared one corner of American life. Neither athletics nor cooking. Neither the kindergarten nor graduate school. And the sign of that blight is the refusal to think constantly about the operative emotional pressures of daily life. Unremitting observation and analysis, conversational and literary, is the indispensable propaedeutic to human revival. Only this sort of patient exploration of feeling and thought can prepare the ground for community and conversation once more. Current sociology and social engineering, so far from being a source of hope or renewal of impulse, must themselves be studied as morbid symptoms. The impulses behind them are neither social nor rational, but technological derivatives.

Surely popular detective fiction is one of the most complexly challenging objects that ever fell under the eye of the restless

analyst. Its roots are at least as complex as those of the social strategy called "coeducation." And like coeducation it has been attacked and defended but never explored. (By comparison with these the imitation of human panic in jazz or jive yields its implications as readily as a bit of African sculpture.) And just as the naive emancipators of women regard coeducation as somehow running up the score for their side, so do many regard the passion for "police romances" as a natural and obvious virtue. A normal relaxation for noble minds. (Lincoln was devoted to Dupin.) Scientists in particular seem to be attached to the penny dreadful. Though before Hiroshima one might have hinted in vain at the obvious implications of this fact. There have also been those who pointed proudly to the great lack of interest in thriller literature in Germany and Italy. As though there were some flattering link between democracy and crime clubs. Detective literature may, indeed, be a prophylactic for suppressed rage. It may have saved us from Fascism or Communism by providing an armchair emotional cathartic for potential mob leaders. It may have brought all the prophecies of Marx to the bureaucratic parody we see today. And it may have been the opium which beguiled the proletariat into untimely slumber. But I think it can be shown to be very much more interesting than any of these possibilities suggest.

The procedure which I propose here is to provide the sleuth with a pedigree. When that has been done something can be said about the artistic status of detective fiction. But it must not be supposed that the artistic nullity of current detective literature attaches likewise to the literary products in which appear the antecedents of the sleuth. The supermen of Marlowe and the superman of Baker Street have a kinship which will be indicated; but no literary comparisons or contrasts are directly involved.

However, in taking the bearings of modern detective literature with reference to its Renaissance antecedents, several advantages accrue. First, the coherence of our civilization becomes

manifest in a new way, and our current obsession with crime takes on new social meaning. Only incidentally, therefore, is it to be observed that the subconscious and sub-artistic level of current crime pabulum is in startling contrast to the vigorous Renaissance confrontation of the same facts. But our own slackness about this low-grade lava of our imaginative lives may very well be the mark of our incompetence or indifference to the serious problems of getting order into our experience. We seem to have lost the power or the desire to contemplate our lives. Instead, we limply immerse ourselves in whatever is immediately available. And of all the mass-produced anodynes, detective fiction is as notoriously available as even the tepid Hollywood product.

In crime fiction it is not the challenge to acrostic ingenuity but rather the character of the sleuth himself which offers the main interest for the analyst. And the psychological and political significance of his spell over the modern reader must, I think, be appreciated in terms of his Renaissance origins. As the degenerate heir of Renaissance megalomania, he is in the line which begins with Leonardo and Machiavelli and ends in Chingachgook and Lord Peter Wimsey. But at no moment are any of these figures imaginable, nor could they for an instant have been focussed in the eye of their age except as reflexes of critical social stresses and dislocations. In fact, a main thread which leads the analyst from the Elizabethan malcontent to the recluse of Baker street was in the hand of Sir Henry Maine when he said that history has moved from status to contract. The sixteenth century malcontent, as much as Clarissa's Lovelace or Byron, Baudelaire, Poe, or Lawrence, localized his cynical despair in a moral revulsion from the commercial appetites which were obliterating status and personal values:

Shall a gentleman so well descended as Camillo—a lousy slave that within these twenty yeares rode . . . mongst spits and dripping pans. . .

*The White Devil*

The universal sense alienation from society in the sixteenth century expressed itself in many obvious ways. The sudden removal of many economic and political landmarks bred a sense of insecurity and confusion which in turn roused hostility towards the derelict society. That it was often quite inexpedient to give direct expression to the anger engendered from oppressive anxiety can readily be seen in the hatred towards men obliquely expressed in the prevalent fear of “devil worship” and in the popular doctrine of total depravity. Yet by very many the doctrine of total depravity was hailed as a blessed solace, a notion full of comfort like its later equivalent, “class war”. We can see today that for the non-status groups of society, the concept of depravity was also a social *carte blanche*. It automatically absolved everybody from any duty towards his neighbors at a time when it was highly expedient to be negligent.

Insurgent appetite, subversion of the rule of reason, assertion only of its own inherent necessities, suppression of the doctrine of the *mean*—this is everywhere the mark of the sixteenth century. But this chaos stood in such immediate proximity to the prestige of scholastic rationalism, to say nothing of the much older and more pervasive traditions of human community and obligation, that there was engendered a direct vision of horror which is everywhere in *Lear*, *Timon*, *Hamlet*, and *Troilus and Cressida*. Ulysses states the European tradition (“Take but degree away”):

Then everything includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;  
And appetite an universal wolf.

These words which provide a scientific formula for what was

happening, and what continues to happen, seem harmless enough today. But their implication for a sixteenth century audience was terrible, because the Elizabethan still accepted the doctrine of moral responsibility. Everybody except the Calvinists.

The figure of Revenge emerges from these circumstances of moral anarchy. His mind, like Hamlet's, reels with horror of the subversion of nature and the corruption of justice, not only in the courts but in the conscience itself. The famous speech of Vendice in *The Revenger's Tragedy* gets its intensity by exploiting layer upon layer of moral tradition in its metaphors:

“Does the silkworm expend her yellow labors,” etc.

No special insistence is necessary to explain the parallel between the character of the revenger and the modern sleuth. But the deeper connection between the sleuth and the Renaissance superman needs more pointing up.

In periods of special insecurity and confusion the ordinary human tendencies to emulation or obscurity are accentuated: either to make oneself invulnerable by knowing and possessing everything or else to learn how to “to take it”. Tamburlaine and Horatio, megalomania and stoicism, hero and valet. From this point of view it can also be seen that the hero will be obliged to provide an expiatory and vicarious spectacle for the valet, just as the heroic and omniscient sleuth, in one sense, compensates the Dagwoods for being submen. (Not that this function exhausts his *rôle*.)

Seneca was a natural for the Renaissance (he was very popular from the twelfth century onwards) because he combined heroic impassivity with catharsis *via* fictive horrors. Thus Stoicism is obviously a slave philosophy which in the Renaissance is curiously tied up with the masochism of the Petrarchan love modes:

Being your slave what should I do but tend  
Upon the hours and times of your desire?

That is, self-immolation or masochistic abasement before a tyrannical lover can easily ally itself with stoicism.

Parallel with the stoic tradition in its unbroken descent from Gorgias, Isocrates, and Cicero is the alternative to stoic endurance—the Sophistic power and conquest strategy. That knowledge was power over men the Sophists taught well before Socrates transferred the doctrines to the plane of self-knowledge and self-conquest. And the achievement of power over men, as well as physical nature, was inseparably tied up in the Renaissance with the vigorous cultivation of encyclopedic learning, political prudence, and eloquence. In short, the Ciceronian program. It is particularly as this aristocratic ideal is embodied in stellar figures like Leonardo, Castiglione, and Sidney or Bacon that it bears on the character of the modern sleuth. The encyclopedic virtuosity of Dupin, Holmes, and the rest is not, of course, a throwback to the Renaissance. It is the result of a tradition unbroken since the sixteenth century of gentlemanly education, and it has continued to be linked to the aristocratic type, at least in the popular imagination. (Mere mention of Lord Peter Wimsey's accomplishments serves to characterize the whole dandified crowd: he is a distinguished scholar, a musician, an athlete, a wit, a wolf, a diplomat, a consultant to the Foreign Office in times of crisis; and his Adonis-like appearance, like his ducal pedigree, qualify him for the pages of Ouida. He is invulnerable—consider the consternation when Doyle had the temerity to kill Holmes off—and his intellectual superiority, like his superiority to the petty bourgeois moral code, seems to reside in some elusively quintessential excellence: “In the course of a mis-spent life I have learnt that it is a gentleman's first duty to remember in the morning who it was he took to bed with him”.)

The rise of a calculating material prudence (indifferent to social and political prudence) in the sixteenth century middle classes then lent a stark intensity to the romantic figure of the aristocrat. The economic basis of his life was rapidly dissolving

during this period of shift from status to contract. And this shift made him sharply aware of the new motivations and human types in his world. A not unnatural anger led him to exaggerate the human qualities of social honor and obligation which were still associated with him—a fact which gives rise to the parody of inflexible disinterestedness in *Don Quixote*. (It seems to have been Butler's intention in *Hudibras* to transfer the Don's inflexibility to the religious sectary, while ridiculing by this juxtaposition the notorious sectarian contempt for social honor and obligation.)

For the English world Charles I will always be a symbol of opposition to the new tradesman *ethos*. He embodied the aristocratic poise of reason and passion familiar in the life style which Marvel sets in opposition to Cromwell's in his *Horatian Ode*:

He nothing common did or mear.  
Upon that memorable scene.

But the tradition is quite independent of King Charles' head, Pope is quite conventional in his appeal to a logic of heroic passion, superior to conventional morality, in his *Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady* with its echoes of Chapman:

Most souls, 'tis true, but peep out once an age  
Dull sullen pris'ners in the body's cage:  
Dim lights of life, that burn a length of years,  
Useless, unseen, as lamps in sepulchres.

The line from the Renaissance to Holmes is unbroken, but it is not untwisted. Some hint of just how involved the matter could become occurs in *Don Quixote*, which was designed by a courtly writer to amuse the middle classes. (Cervantes handles the problem of social revolution humorously. But humor, unlike satire, is the anodyne of a timid mind confronted with the

socially unpleasant. It is the deliberate suspension of intellectual standards equally in such figures as Elia, Pickwick, and Walter Mitty.) On the other hand, *Clarissa Harlowe* was a romance in the high style designed by a tradesman for the edification of tradesmen. *Clarissa's Lovelace*, that grotesque Restoration rake who embodies all that endangered commercial ascendancy, is also everything which they envied and craved with a kind of suicidal snobbery. So that when Lord Byron managed to en flesh this fancy, middle-class horror and bliss were equally satisfied. That Europe has since then produced a great number of dandies-cum-artist of the Byron-Baudelaire-Wilde variety depended (as it still does) on the existence of a pathetically shockable and emotionally immature commercial society. Too often the dandified artist has been able to satisfy himself as well with Lucifer-like exhibitionism, stunting thereby his powers of sympathy and development. (Is this not what happened to Joyce?) In the case of Baudelaire, however, the point of horror was reached at which pride is abandoned.

Certainly Poe's Mr. Allan was as much a type of this seemingly brash but deeply furtive tradesman *ethos* as Poe himself was the type of the rejected dandy-cum-artist. The poisonous gloom, the restless invention and dull greed which go with the "muddlecrass" sense of intellectual and social betrayal, inevitably produced their counterpart in an equally stupid bohemianism. And the past forty years have seen bohemia bulging with little artist-apes from Philistia forcing the genuine rebel back into "decent society".

Before completing the pedigree of Mr. Holmes, a word should be said about the events which finally provided him with his natural foil,—the police. Quite obviously the police are the product of that shift from status to contract which has been mentioned as occurring in the sixteenth century. (Hazlitt constructed into a machine that carries us safely and insipidly mourned that "the police spoils all. . . . Society, by degrees, is

from one end of life to the other, in a very comfortable prose style".) The police guard the sanctity of commercial contracts which the gentleman can only regard as a repulsive confederacy of knaves. Thus for the sleuth a cop is inevitably a stooge. He can not possibly have integrity since he is a flunkey of an usurping power. He is not a man but a function.

There is no need for present purposes to illustrate all the stages by which the police evolve from the moral and political despair reflected in a Machiavelli or a Hobbes. Both of these men sought to base political order upon something else than honor; that is, they could not discover an intact human nature as an operative vision of their age. But Hobbes's defence of royal authority was rejected by royalists because they saw that it was equally a defence of any kind of person who could seize power. The extremely complex states of mind reflected in the popularity of the Manichean outlook finally achieved a modicum of equilibrium about the time of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* with its paradoxical theme—"Private vices, public benefits". Of course, what men like Swift, Gay and Mandeville saw as a symbolic monstrosity was seized upon by Adam Smith as a happy formula for solving the Manichean psychological split of the time.

Equally symbolic in this connection is *Robinson Crusoe*. Tradesman Crusoe's wreck and insulation is a psychological-social event as the character both of the author and influence of that work illustrates. Crusoe's feverish industry and inventiveness, like his horror at the sight of the naked footprint, is easily understood in terms of the society he has betrayed, and which has also let him down: "When I came to my castle, for so I think I called it ever after this, I fled into it like one pursued." Bourgeois man is man cut off from being and love. Classical economics postulates "man on a desert island" quite in the manner of current eroticism. Henceforth, until Darwin and Freud peopled it with beasts and perverts, the Englishman's home was his castle. There, the pollutions he encountered and perpetrated

outside the pale of its cloistral purity, would have no place. At least, not until he suddenly began, like Alice, to dream of the beasts within its walls.

Perhaps one comes more directly to the heart of the police as symbol in Mill's essay *On Liberty*. As much as that of Adam Smith the thought of Mill is rooted in a bleak Manichean despair. The rational structure is mere exegesis of a mood:

The object of this essay is to assert one very simple principle . . . that the sole end for which mankind is warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection.

This is plain Hobbes again. Only Mill would put the police in place of the monarch. In this view Government is not a thing as natural and necessary to men as food or conversation. It doesn't reflect the exigencies of man's rational nature with its need for affectionate proximity and co-operation with others. It is merely a means of keeping the savages away from Crusoe's island.

The same grim despair, which is of the will and not the understanding, dominates the social and educational doctrines of Thomas Huxley. The world is a chessboard: "to the man who plays well, the highest stakes are paid. . . . And one who plays ill is checkmated—without haste, but without remorse. . . . Well, what I mean by Education is learning the rules of this mighty game." Kipling's *Kim* is given an elaborate education in this game which leads him to a chief position in the Indian police. Another version of the Mounties and the chessboard: Get your man!

There is no need to stress the monotonous recurrence of this poisonous analogy about the game of life and the various success formulas for getting your man. But it helps to establish the principle that an exorbitant appetite or fear in any society will set up reverberations which render all other activities in that

society mere analogies of the prevailing note. And the obverse is true—that energies released by a vitally rational vision of man's nature will create harmonious analogies in the most unexpected ways. (Thus it could be shown that the technique of hypothesis used in detective fiction in dealing with material evidence is also used by Henry James with psychological evidence). And in a social and political sense this principle points to the decisive effect of which minorities are capable.

The dandified sleuth, however, presents one remaining problem in genealogy. Until Poe's Dupin there had been no rebellious esthete who was also a man-hunter. Haters of conventional society the dandies had been and have continued to be, along with their cousins the sleuths. What could be more natural than their contempt for the police as well, since the police were directly called into existence for the protection of property? Some years before Dupin was conceived, *The Last of the Mohicans* had appeared. In this book Nature's aristocrat, the noble savage of salon fancy, had roamed the page. Uncas or Chingachgook, with faculties undimmed by conventional education or predigested food could tell you the life story of the man who had merely moved a leaf or bent a twig, or from facts which were imperceptible to civilized eyes. The dandified esthete and the noble savage thus united their anti-social instincts to produce the detective—a combination of schoolboy athletic hero and sadistic sophisticate. Between 1840 and 1887, that is, between the creation of Dupin and Holmes, the Cooper tale was eagerly read. And from a German jail Karl May turned out his tales of Old Shatterhand in imitation of Cooper, providing the basic nutriment for the youthful imagination of Hitler and his generation.

When we first meet Holmes in Baker Street, he is wearing his favorite head-gear—the stalking-cap of the American hunter. Nothing could be more revealing than the stock tale about Dr. Joseph Bell and the genesis of Holmes. It is not so much that the “scientific” mind of Dr. Bell suggested Holmes, as that Dr.

Bell had probably been reared on Cooper and penny dreadful, for which, indeed, the scientific fraternity commonly entertains a life-long taste.

Two claims made for the detective tale can be dealt with briefly. Ingenuity of plot, on one hand, and "smooth writing", on the other, are sometimes made the basis for an apologetic. But "plot" in the sense of puzzle, and "plot" in the sense of "action" are as remote in meaning as in importance from each other. The whodunits offer only the interest of an acrostic, a self-imposed tangle of deliberately tied knots. The problems offered for solution connect with nothing—certainly not with the characters. In fact the total absence of felt life in the action of thriller literature perfectly reflects the immaturity of our age, its failure to unify its experience. The pointless ingenuity of construction corresponds to our scientific skills divorced from contact with our emotional needs. In this respect the only satisfaction for the reader consists in identifying himself with the master-mind whose arbitrary actions are always prompted by intuition. What sleuth ever made a mistake? The sleuth is always a seclusive superman, a perfectionist, a virtuoso of all kinds of learning and skill, and thus alter ego for the reader whose daily life must be lived entirely in accordance with the demands and expectations of others.

Viewed merely as an escape valve, therefore, one need find no fault with this literature. It is a barometer for a deeply resentful and humanly wasteful society. However, when some degree of artistic excellence is claimed for it, the critic must demur. The term "literature" has been tacked to *The Maltese Falcon* of Dashiell Hammett. This is the way the book begins:

Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked

nose and his pale brown hair grew down—from high flat temples—in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan. He said to Effie Perine: “Yes, sweetheart?”

She was a lanky sunburned girl whose tan dress of thin woolen stuff clung to her with an effect of dampness. Her eyes were brown and playful in a shiny boyish face. She finished shutting the door behind her, leaned against it, and said: “There’s a girl wants to see you. Her name’s Wonderly.”

“A customer?”

“I guess so. You’ll want to see her anyway: she’s a knockout.”

“Shoo her in, darling,” said Spade. “Shoo her in.”

The “stylized” contours and gestures of this writing are familiar even from the comic strips, a fact which suggests the quality precisely. The writer is trading on stock that was already second-hand on other shelves, such as those of Noel Coward and P. G. Wodehouse. The air of hardboiled smartness is given by the cubist modelling and the epicene sex-slant of “blond satan” (Byron) and “shiny boyish face”. All the literary “influences” which are so easily traceable in this sort of glibness are unearned, like the Donne quotations which Miss Sayers uses for epigraphs for the thoughts and feelings of Lord Peter Wimsey. All this adds up to emotional illiteracy and confusion.

Better or fresher writing than the first page of *The Maltese Falcon* would be hard to find in the whole range of detective literature. A few short quotations from Leslie Charteris will serve both to illustrate the childish clichés and also to document the themes of this essay:

Mr. “Snake Ganning was neither a great criminal nor a pleasant character, but he is interesting because he was the first victim of the organization led by the man known as the Saint, which was destined in the course of a few months to spread terror through the underworld of London—that

ruthless association of reckless young men, brilliantly led, who worked on the side of the Law and who were yet outside the Law.”

And the artistic eye of Charteris and the rest seems to have been schooled in the Dickensian underworld: “Mr. Ganning was a tall, incredibly thin man. . . . His head was small and round and he carried it thrust forward to the full stretch of his long neck.”

Here is the superficiality of the Saint himself (the name is symbolic to Charteris of noble warfare against the world, and it takes no stretching to link up his hero's pose with the Royal Saint, Mr. Charles Stuart):

In what he called his “fighting kit”—which consisted of disreputable grey flannel bags and a tweed shooting-jacket of almost legendary age—the Saint has the unique gift of appearing so immaculate that the least absent-minded commissioner might have been pardoned for mistaking him for a millionaire duke.

In “gentlemanly disguise” the Saint is an ad man's dream:

His grey flannel suit fitted him with a staggering perfection, the whiteness of his shirt was dazzling, his tie shamed the rainbow. His soft felt hat seemed to be having its first outing since it left Bond Street. His chamois gloves . . . and he carried a gold-mounted ebony walking-stick . . . worn with that unique air of careless elegance which others might attempt to emulate. . . .

Simon Templar (the Saint) speaks:

I've had enough adventures to fill a dozen books, but instead of satisfying me they've only left me with a bigger appetite. If I had to live the ordinary kind of safe, civilized life, I'd die of boredom.

Note his name—*Simon Templar* (Knight Templar). Yet the medieval knight seems in this speech to be robbing the tycoon of some of his *persona*. The Saint in a tough spot:

Of course, he didn't know . . . the Saint except by reputation . . . He wasn't figuring on the Saint's uncanny intuition of the psychology of the crook, nor on the Saint's power of lightning logic and lightning decision.

(Note qualities of gambler, general, businessman here.) Perhaps the shrewd business operator who enacts before himself the *rôle* of a general gambling for imperial stakes, has been gradually affected by the sleuth pattern? Ordinary living is as much an imitator of bad art as fully aware life is the creative force in good art.

How much does Dostoievsky succeed in *Crime and Punishment* in rendering his theme? The answer to that does not fall within this essay because here the business has been only to provide Mr. Holmes with a pedigree worthy of his elegant pretensions. But it is not amiss to mention Conrad's extraordinary success in *The Secret Agent*. For Conrad injects a superb vitality and freshness into all the dismal and stale stuff of the thriller, and incidentally does a job of psychological analysis of police, criminals, and respectables alike, while evoking a world of comic tension and multiple implication, which is as bracing as it is enlightening. Each of his characters is insulated from himself and from society by pretences and evasions which nonetheless bring him into violent contact with people like himself. The whole thing is managed as a bitter comedy of sudden but fatal shocks of recognition. And in comparison with the cheap indulgence proffered by the current mystery-thriller something would certainly be said for the way in which Graham Greene exploits these motifs as a means of exhibiting the moral evisceration of all levels of society. The trouble is that he achieves this with a facility which betrays his basic lack of interest in what is too ostensibly the "moral".

And now, after producing the pedigree, the character, and the motives of the sleuth with some degree of completeness, I am about to propose an explanation of his vogue and character which so far has not been suggested at all, but which helps clarify everything that has been said. That Poe should be the means of delivering this final stroke is perfectly fitting; for his own penetration into the roots of crime gave us not only Dupin, but many deeper symbols of horror and despair relevant to the suffering of a poisoned society. (Is not Poe's anomalous combination of Romantic self-knowledge and rationalistic procedure somewhat the result of his anomalous Southern experience? Did not the curious time-lag created in the South by the belated strength of Jeffersonian rationalism produce a remarkable fusion of reason and romantic *angst*? In Europe that fusion never occurred in the same stark way because Rousseauistic attrition of the Enlightenment intervened. But in Edgar Poe one observes the unmediated union as it were of the attitudes of Voltaire and Novalis, of Shaftesbury and Lord Byron.)

The sailor in his story *The Maelstrom* is at first paralyzed with horror. But in his very paralysis there is another fascination which emerges, a power of detached observation which becomes a "scientific" interest in the action of the strom. And this provides the means of escape. Like everything else in Poe the recital proceeds in a casual off-hand manner. Like the chat of a well-bred man of the world. But in this parable Poe embalms the mystery of the sleuth himself. His sailor escapes from the strom by a trick of analysis. The sleuth produces the murderer in the same way. And at the same time the sleuth also enables the reader to "escape" from the horror of his own world by conferring on him the sense of detached power associated with the scientific attitude. To that extent at least the whodunits must be accredited with the formula for happiness which Swift noted as dear to man—the possession of being perpetually well deceived.