

Case Closed

Infinite listings generating infinite listings generating infinite...

Bényei Tamás: *Rejtélyes rend – A krimi, a metafizika és a posztmodern* [Mysterious Order – Crime fiction, metaphysics and postmodernism] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2000)

Writers are often rather partial to crime fiction. Géza Ottlik for example was a great aficionado of Agatha Christie, collected her works, read and re-read them with immense enthusiasm. This kind of love may be one of the driving forces behind the anti-detective novel's increased presence in twentieth century literature, the phenomenon when the formal and topical elements of the detective novel are incorporated into the works of high-brow or middle-brow literature. In these books the investigative process acquires a metaphysical and epistemological dimension, overburdening the traditional structure of the detective novel in such a way that the elements of the structure are bereft of functionality.

Tamás Bényei's book is an investigation into this relationship between the detective novel and the anti-detective novel, aiming to shed light on the intricate pattern of interaction

between the two. When Bényei begins his books with the ambitious list created by detective Mike Hoolihan, the investigator of Martin Amis's *Night Train*, he unintentionally describes his own method of investigation: Mike Hoolihan lists all the possible motives for the investigated murder and tries to attack the problem from different angles, until he is absorbed into the unsolvable mystery of sin. Something similar happens in Tamás Bényei's book. The vast amount of material, the manifold nature of the problem and the abundance of clues turn the investigation into an anti-detective exploration: the investigative process is transformed into attempts of describing the problem, like a postmodern detective attempting to gather enough material for indictment in an unsolvable case, where the investigation inevitably turns into a vast case-description, and the murder-book into a work of art, thus elevating the murder or murders on to an artistic level.

The first chapter describes the tradition of the anti-detective novel from a historical perspective, defining the problem of the relationship between the detective and the anti-detective novel by examining the tradition of the detective novel in relation with modernism and popular culture, relying heavily on a postmodernist approach to literary tradition. The

highly self-conscious and formalised nature of the detective novel made it into an ideal victim for the aspirations of the postmodernist literary tradition – and the crime was committed, the anti-detective novel evolved into being. Bényei's analysis mirrors the first chapter of a detective (or anti-detective) novel: by introducing the problem, he sets the scene for the subsequent investigation, and in the later chapters he will attack the problem from a multitude of angles, being fully aware of the fact that this case cannot be cracked, solved and shelved, yet persisting in his obsession, and in the process creating an impressive list of structures, patterns and similarities, which reads almost like a brief history of literary criticism, applying one critical method after the other to the original problem.

The list of the discussed authors is seemingly endless: the works of Paul Auster, Samuel Beckett, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Vladimir Nabokov, Umberto Eco, Michel Butor, Robert Coover, Martin Amis, John Fowles, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, A. S. Byatt, Muriel Spark, Lawrence Norfolk, Peter Ackroyd (and the list is far from complete) are all discussed and scrutinised for elements typical of the anti-detective novel. These typicalities could all be organised into another infinite list: repetition, reading, the

distortion of realism, structure, myth, the transformation of the victim, the transformation of the detective, chiasmus, metamorphosis, parody, irony, finite and infinite games. Like a tireless investigator on a routine assignment, Bényei tracks down each element of the list, and looks for corresponding elements between the two: each category serves as a point of origin for a brief analysis involving some names from the first list, and in the process the original category is elevated onto a metaphoric level. In the process he is aided by a third list, the list of critics and theorists containing such names as Hartmann, Freud, Kristeva, Moretti, Kermode, Foucault, Barthes, de Man, Fry or Gadamer.

The repetitive pattern of crime fiction implies and incorporates the process of reading, and on a meta-level it implies the process of analysis; the investigative process is nothing more than the recreation of the original crime, and accordingly when the anti-detective novel is analysed, the analysis may only result in a text which recreates the anti-detective novel. The listing of the relationship between the three lists is a fourth list, which is actually the investigation itself, an infinite and self-generating pattern which in a Borgesian matter emulates the subject of the investigation. And indeed, for Bényei Jorge Louis Borges

is the arch-villain and the arch creator, and the single handed perpetrator behind the whole process of anti-detective fiction turned into postmodernism, whose works are both iconic and typical of the whole process, constructing the point of origin and the culminating point of the anti-detective novel, manifesting almost all the elements from the first list, thus serving as an unifying thread leading the investigation.

The investigative process is defined by the field of the investigation and the method of the investigator, and when Bényei intentionally restricts his own field of investigation to the analysis of the traditional detective novel by excluding most of the hard-boiled crime fiction and modern crime fiction, where the mystery and the investigative process is no longer crucially important, he narrows down the problem to a more manageable proportion, but he also renounces any taking into account the developments within the realm of the modern crime fiction. This is regrettable, because the hard-boiled novel and the modern serial-killer mystery manifest many of the elements typical of the anti-detective novel, displaying a remarkable meta-

physical and epistemological inclination, and also some degree of self-conscious reflexivity. It seems that the reaction to the genre of traditional detective novel is not restricted to the field of literature: the transformation which has taken place within the realm of the pulp mirrors in many ways the development of the anti-detective novel. The works of Ed McBain, Thomas Harris, James Ellroy and Elmore Leonard are particularly interesting from this respect.

Success is not very typical of the post-modern detective, and when Bényei at the end of his book realises that the text he created is shot through by the influence of the anti-detective novel in such a way that it has become in fact a mirror image of the texts he analysed, admits himself in the ranks of the post-modern detectives: the list he has drawn up is an impressive and welcome attempt at solving a mystery, which cannot succeed, and succeeds in the gesture of failure. The list had to be compiled, and the minute and accurate description of the process passes for a solution. A post-modern case cannot really be closed, or it can only be closed to be re-opened.

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