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Andrea Goulet. *Legacies of the Rue Morgue: Science, Space, and Crime Fiction in France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 295 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-0-8122-4779-4.

Review Essay by Göran Blix, Princeton University

In *Legacies of the Rue Morgue*, Andrea Goulet has given us an immensely readable, informative, and erudite new study of the crime fiction genre in France, stretching from its classic inception with Edgar Allan Poe and Émile Gaboriau in the mid-nineteenth century to the most recent, genre-bending interventions of Maurice Dantec and Vladan Radoman in the 1990s. This book is not a comprehensive overview of the genre for non-initiates (it barely mentions Simenon) but features readings of a generous selection of works ranging from the classical mystery (Gaston Leroux) to the high-brow anti-polar (Michel Butor) to the popular crime *feuilletons* of the Second Empire. The superb readings on offer here spotlight a series of seminal works by Emile Gaboriau, Gaston Leroux, Maurice Leblanc, Léo Malet, Michel Butor, Sébastien Japrisot, Fred Vargas, Didier Daeninckx, Maurice Dantec, and Vladan Radoman in order to develop an overall argument about the pivotal role played by a handful of modern sciences in the development of the crime fiction genre. The sciences, which, for Goulet, underpin the genre and fuel its drive to map, master, and contain the criminality that threatens to disrupt the modern social order can be grouped into two semi-distinct categories (which, in turn, structure the book): the sciences of temporal reconstruction and those of spatial mapping, the forensic discovery of the past and the cartographic mastery of the present. Both are conceived, in a sense, as spatial sciences, with the one plunging vertically into the past and the other horizontally around the scene of the crime, but each deploying an arsenal of tools, ranging from the most empirical to the most abstractly deductive, to neutralize the act of violence. Goulet's elegant and concise readings demonstrate how crime fiction enlists the power and authority of such disciplines as geology, paleontology, evolution, psychoanalysis, and judicial cartography in its effort to map and contain violence.

One of the many great merits of Goulet's book is to document this claim convincingly, in great detail, by referring to contemporary science and by showing, for instance, how Cuvier's catastrophic geology was shaped by and in turn informed ideas about national history, trauma, revolution, and criminality; or how the stratigraphic study of stones and fossils shaped the modern hermeneutics of crime (imagined as underground, forgotten, repressed, located in catacombs and quarries); or how the modern theory of evolution gave literal force to the old bestial reading of human nature, and in the process spawned a series of theriomorphic fictions, notably ape-man stories, starting with Poe's famous orangutan in the "Murders of the rue Morgue"; or how professional maps of crime scenes, which also began to appear in crime fiction with Émile Gaboriau, emerged as crucial instruments in the investigator's arsenal of deductive tools. What Goulet gives us here, then, is a very illuminating scientific archeology of the modern crime fiction genre—but privileging, one should note, the sciences that can be understood in spatial terms along the two axes mentioned (the crime's archeology and its cartography) and leaving aside many of

the less savory discourses of nineteenth-century criminology which no doubt also shaped the crime fiction genre (such as anthropometry, phrenology, craniology, criminal psychology, etc.).

The overarching concern of Goulet's book, however, is with science, crime, and spatiality—with spatial models of deduction, inference, and control—rather than with the science of crime in general. And spatiality, as noted, is understood here in two ways: horizontally as the scene of the crime, and vertically as the historical layering of violent events, memories, and traces. Goulet's focus on space can be understood as an attempt to push back against a certain Cartesian, rationalist reading of the genre (inherited from the self-presentation of Poe's Dupin) as a theater of pure rational deduction, and an effort to resituate the genre instead within the messy contingency of particular, material spaces—be they catacombs, domestic interiors, specific streets, cities, or nations. Crime, she reminds us, inevitably occurs in a particular place and context (be it private or public, domestic or political, local or transnational), even if this very particularity has had a way of evaporating within the abstract, failsafe logic of the classical investigator. Goulet here locates a constitutive paradox of the genre: the idea that there is an unresolved tension between the ideal of rational modeling and the irreducible contingency of the violent event it tries to map, an idea implying that the algebraic solution to which the detective aspires in the end necessarily betrays the crime's reality. Goulet shows convincingly, along these lines, that the “closed circle” of deduction dear to an investigator like Leroux's Rouletabille turns out, in the end, to be just as fictional as the very “locked room” that it was meant to confront. The detective may see himself as a pure logician, then, or as a Galilean scientist, concerned with the immutable, unchanging laws of nature, but Goulet demonstrates how this rhetoric conceals a much messier, more accidental, and unpredictable encounter with the empirical world of singularities. She refers usefully here to the “evidential paradigm” identified by Carlo Ginzburg as the model for the science of reconstruction that emerged in the nineteenth century, and which, on the basis of traces, clues, and marks—such as the footprints left by a passing animal—succeeds in inferring a unique past event or state of affairs. Cuvier's reconstruction of extinct animals from mere bone fragments would be the paradigmatic example of this method in the nineteenth-century imagination.

Space, place, and material context, then, or rather the irreducible singularity of every violent crime, is what the posture of rational deduction erases. And this erasure, of course, would be deliberate: its purpose would be to exorcize the specter of criminality that haunts modern bourgeois society. Goulet turns this central conceit of the genre (its seemingly inherent conservatism) on its head, and reads it against the grain, by showing how often pure logic fails, or becomes fatally enmeshed in the fallible science of signs, traces, and spaces (such as map-making and stratigraphy) which necessarily confront the violent event more directly. While acknowledging this point, one might ask, in passing, whether the hollowness of the logician's posture in any way makes the “archaeologist” or “cartographer” of crime any less an agent of social order? Does it matter, politically speaking, whether the detective is a supreme armchair logician or an endearingly flawed archaeologist, if the point is still to make society safe for readers of crime fiction? It could be argued that it doesn't matter what kind of scientific authority the detective invokes—whether pure deduction or messy forensic data—since both presumably share the aim of explaining, mastering, and exorcizing crime. The opposition, indeed, would be hard to sustain in absolute terms since nothing could be rationally deduced in the absence of empirical data: i.e., even the pure visual logic exercised over a map would depend on the prior empirical observations encoded in the map. The reverse, of course, would also be true, namely that all onsite observation is guided by theory.

These two distinct paradigms of detection strike me as inseparable, then, in practice, even if there might be some political or literary reason for opposing them. An even stricter way of looking at the issue would be to say that Ginzburg's Galilean paradigm—concerned with law-bound, universal regularities—should in fact have no pertinence at all for such contingent and unrepeatable events as human actions. Be that as it may, what Goulet's study makes abundantly clear is how fragile the claim to mastery is that we see enacted in crime fiction: moving from the certainties of Poe's Dupin to Radoman's schizoid hit-man/poet-doctor/detective in *La ballade d'un Yougo* (2000) is to see that ostensible mastery unravel as an uncontrollable violence spills across temporal, geographical, and psychic borders. In a way, it could be said that Goulet's study illuminates the entire genre retrospectively, from the point of view of the more helpless, hapless contemporary detective, showing how weakness and ambiguity in fact haunt the genre from its inception.

In the course of this critical rereading, which builds on and prolongs much recent work on crime fiction, including the studies of Dominique Kalifa, Goulet makes a number of invaluable observations that enrich our understanding of the genre, showing it to be, not just scientifically informed, but also much more ambiguous, complex, and literary than might have been expected. I will only pick up the thread of one such ambiguity here: the fact that crime fiction, as Goulet notes, has often been read in conservative terms as a genre that depoliticizes crime by turning it into a purely private, domestic affair—unlike, say, Jean Valjean's theft of bread in *Les Misérables*, a transgression which, from Hugo's point of view, implicates the entire social order. But the *polar*, as Goulet reminds us, is of course also quite capable of politicizing crime, as happens in the second half of the twentieth century with Léo Malet, Sébastien Japrisot, and Didier Daeninckx, and, in a somewhat different way, with the more high-brow nouveau roman rendition by Michel Butor (*L'Emploi du temps*). But Goulet's study also shows how, long before this twentieth-century "subversion," crime fiction already possessed, from the start, a distinctly political dimension; the famous locked-room motif, for instance, so well exemplified by Gaston Leroux's *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* (1907)—and a topic that the book illuminates superbly—turns out to do double duty as the site of purely domestic disruption and as a broader political allegory for the *patrie*, or rather for the fantasy of securing the inviolable borders of the nation. From Poe on, the domestic crime has, if read attentively, political, national, even global resonances. Thus the popular "catacomb fictions" of the Second Empire, to cite another example, situate criminality ambiguously in an underground space where it coexists uneasily with revolutionary fervor.

While this political rereading of the genre seems useful and sensible, it also raises some questions about what should properly be called political fiction: does it even make sense, I wonder, to think of classical crime fiction as a genre grounded in some obvious "repression" of politics, which, with hindsight, it is the task of the forensic literary critic to expose? The colonial investments, national anxieties, social hierarchies, and racial ideologies that mark nineteenth-century Europe are necessarily also present in crime fiction—in one form or another—as much as they are in all other literary products of the age. But if that presence is oblique, minor, or marginal, does that mean that politics have been "repressed"? Would we say that politics have been repressed in those novels of Balzac and Flaubert which turn their attention chiefly to private dramas? Privatization is a characteristic of the modern novel itself, not just of crime fiction, and while the novel could thus technically be accused of depoliticizing reality, it would seem a stretch to speak in sweeping terms about repression.

Might the same be true of the crime novel? Is its largely “private” conception of crime necessarily a stratagem to cover up the social conditions of criminality? Charles Bovary may be a mediocre husband, but for Flaubert to highlight this failing does not mean denying, or silencing, the broader social causes of Emma’s dissatisfaction. There is another reason to wonder what the charge of “privatization” might really mean: it is that literature’s turn to the depiction of domestic life in the eighteenth century was itself a progressive political gesture that located substance and value in that which, precisely, fell below the radar of the public and political spheres. To suggest, then, as Goulet does, that Poe “inaugurate[d] a genre that cannot fully separate private crime from concerns of the State” (p. 162) may be an unnecessarily defensive gesture insofar as it paradoxically validates the “repressive” hypothesis it would appear to contest; the defense would at least be questionable in the sense that the modern novel’s primary focus on the private sphere has much less to do with repressing politics than with promoting the significance of everyday life. Additionally, private vice, as Balzac—the supreme domestic voyeur of the nineteenth century—knew abundantly well, was always potentially interesting (and hence potentially political) to a State keen on increasing its vigilance and surveillance.

If the line between what is a priori political and what is not turns out to be so blurry, then perhaps it does not make sense to regard crime fiction itself, as a genre, as either repressing or affirming politics. In any case, the textual elements that could be invoked to establish the political credentials of a crime novel often risk seeming rather arbitrary, as would seem to be the case with Adolphe Belot’s *Le Drame de la rue de la Paix* (1866), set amid the tumultuous February Revolution of 1848. A crime is not political simply because it occurs during a revolution—or even amid a revolutionary crowd—although such a context could certainly invest crime with gratuitous prestige or grant it a useful alibi. Perhaps the most prudent thing at the outset would be to avoid qualifying any crime as intrinsically and essentially political—unless of course its explicit motivation happened to be political (as with political assassinations)—and to view the crime’s political character instead as the discursive effect of a particular interpretive framework. There are of course genuinely ambiguous cases, such as the “crime d’Hautefaye,” which Alain Corbin explores in *Le Village des cannibales*, and in which the newly minted Republic strategically refuses to recognize the political character of the collective murder of a nobleman that occurred at a country fair in the last days of the Second Empire (in August 1870). Such borderline cases would suggest that some judicial litmus test might be invoked to determine the political character of a crime, and hence also of the novel in which that crime features—a procedure that might well make sense for the engaged *polars* of Didier Daeninckx, which tend to investigate crimes committed by state institutions, but which would unhelpfully qualify the vast majority of *polars* as politically repressed. Goulet’s book, of course, seems to me to work against that reductive view, and to raise the larger question, at least implicitly, of what it might mean (if anything at all) to call a crime novel political.

One unambiguously political dimension of crime fiction about which *Legacies of the Rue Morgue* has a lot to say is topography, and here Goulet’s book very insightfully maps out a series of criminal “chronotopes,” ranging from the underground (catacombs), to mysteries set in precise city locations (street names), to the emergence of peripheral and marginal spaces (the “terrain vague”). She shows how the epicenter of crime moved, by and large, in the aftermath of Haussmann’s transformations, from the city center to the periphery, or away from the gritty *île de la cité* made famous by Eugène Sue in *Les Mystères de Paris* and towards the *barrières* and vacant

lots on the outskirts of Paris. Goulet vividly documents this spatial metamorphosis in the imaginary map of crime and teases out its political implications. The association of the underground, for instance, not just with crime, but also with history, death, violence, amnesia, and revolution, locates criminality uneasily within a broader constellation of social practices and beliefs. Here I am led to ask what might motivate this topographical coincidence, which crime fiction so readily exposes and exploits? The popular feuilletons Goulet discusses (the “catacomb novels”) appear to offer no major insights on this score. It seems at times as if a broader investigation—one which looked beyond the strict boundaries of crime fiction—could help illuminate such questions. Certainly, Hugo reflects explicitly on the subterranean proximity of utopians and criminals in a famous chapter of *Les Misérables* (“La Mine et les mineurs”), and Zola’s mine in *Germinal* is of course at once (and inextricably so) the site of collective political revolt and of private violence. The underground motif also brings to mind Michelet’s redemptive popular geology, which situates, in the barbarian depths below civilization, a vital *chaleur* required to regenerate the world; do the modern barbarians who, in crime fiction, lurk in the quarries and catacombs, ever become carriers of such chthonic energies?

Many of the key sites Goulet invokes (such as the *barrières* and the *terrains vagues*) have an important symbolic presence outside crime fiction, and it is tempting to wonder how crime fiction might reflect, inflect, or oppose the broader symbolic map that is written in the period’s literature. The serious treatment of the *barrières* and the *faubourgs*, for instance, which we find in *Germinie Lacerteux*, would seem to echo but also potentially complicate the criminal map of Paris that can be derived from the feuilletons. One also wonders how the treatment of the *terrain vague* (in Zola’s *La Curée*, for instance, or in *La Fortune des Rougon*, both novels concerned with crime if not directly with detection) might resonate with the urban anxieties registered by crime fiction. Or what the “political” geology of coastal erosion, so beautifully evoked by Hugo at the outset of *Les Travailleurs de la mer*, might contribute to the “spatial logics” which, in Goulet’s insightful reading, mutually delimit and define the border between land and sea, nation and globe, in the fin-de-siècle crime novels of Leroux and Leblanc? Indeed, one wonders to what extent (and how and why) the topography of crime fiction might differ from the larger literary map of the period. To what extent does crime fiction simply tap into a widespread cultural *imaginaire*, and how far does it inflect, distort, or contradict this symbolic map?

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