

Mary Evans

The Imagination of Evil

Detective Fiction and the Modern World



C O N T I N U U M L I T E R A R Y S T U D I E S

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Introduction

Crime Writing

I think it is a mistake to assume from the content that this is purely a genre piece. I mean I guess it is a genre piece but what we were really looking at are major themes in modern American life . . . But it is my belief that The Wire story in American fiction and in American literature has become an essential genre since Chandler and Hammett and it is as elemental to our understanding of ourselves as the western was in earlier years of the twentieth century.

(David Simon, The Wire, Session One, Episode One, audio commentary)

'Sir Iain lived and worked by the same ground rules as a lot of villains swore by. He was selfish without appearing to be, full of arguments and self-justifications. He espoused the public good, but lined his pockets with the public's money.'

(Ian Rankin, Let it Bleed)

Crime is one of the central concerns of western societies, sometimes through a dramatic and sensational presence in the media, sometimes as a mundane part of twenty-first century life, but always a topic that excites attention and engages the attention of readers or viewers. The kinds of crimes that attract the most attention are generally those crimes committed by one individual against another (most obviously, murder) but other kinds of crimes – the swindle, the theft of large amounts of money – will also receive attention. Crime is, at least in its appearance in print rather than reality, hugely popular; as a recent fiction reviewer remarked: 'The murder rate just goes up and up'.¹ This book explores some of the many themes in western crime-writing of the past two centuries. But these themes are seen in terms of an argument about crime-writing: the argument being that crime fiction demands and deserves more public and critical attention than it is often given. Too often, crime and detective fiction is written as another sub-genre of fiction, similar, for example, to romantic fiction, a sub-genre that is perhaps interesting but not truly significant in the same sense as conventional fiction. It is this view that is rejected here on two grounds.

The first argument for elevating crime and detective fiction to a place of greater significance in our critical pantheon is that in doing so we might avoid the worst excesses of those tediously hierarchical views in western culture which distinguish between the 'high' and the 'low' in culture. Although the advent of more culturally democratic times has limited some of the more flagrant absurdities of this view (absurdities often based on the class position of readers rather than any intrinsic value of the fiction), there still remains a sense in which some forms of fiction, and crime and detective fiction is one, are afforded less cultural esteem. In this context, there is a real loss to the cultural and social world because as citizens we refuse the possibilities of the imaginative about those fractures in society that involve us all. Writers of detective and crime fiction inform their novels with debates about the collective world: about those subjects of social order, social morality and the various tensions between rich and poor that may form the context rather than the foreground of more conventional fiction. Above everything, detective and crime fiction is, by its very subject matter, about morality: its limits, its meaning and its value. We can trace, over the past 200 years of crime-writing, shifting relationships about the relationship of morality to the law. We can, for example, observe in the second half of the twentieth century the emergence of a perception, articulated very often by those most involved in the detection of crime, that there is a growing and considerable moral space between the legal views of 'crime' and crime itself and that those crimes against both the person and the social world, which are truly important, are often outside the formal remit of the law. The moral separation – the estrangement – of law and morality becomes a key theme in crime literature in the latter part of the twentieth century, just as writers in the early part of the twentieth century had argued through their various accounts of the causes of crime, that motives for crime were often social rather than particular. Thus, a significant tradition in crime-writing today suggests that our western construct of the law, and boundaries between legal and illegal, leaves untouched those crimes that have the most destructive impact on human lives.

It is this second argument that can make crime and detective fiction so relevant and so prescient; it is allowed (and it allows itself) the fictional space to explore not just the biography of one person but the biographies of whole groups of people, the people who, for example, run organizations such as the police force or political parties and the people, who may be viewed and interpreted as individuals but who are nevertheless part of a social world. Throughout its history, detective and crime fiction has also recognized the ongoing tension within bourgeois society: the tension between, on the one hand, a moral code, which presents itself as omnipresent and

relevant to all, and on the other, the very considerable differences in social power (and social influence), which are consequences of societies divided by class, race and gender. Of all forms of fiction, it is perhaps detective and crime fiction that is the most democratic of all fiction since the eighteenth century: it explores the world (and aspects of the world) that is largely ignored by much of conventional fiction. For example, in the western, Protestant societies of that time, which have long histories of assuming a coincidence of the homologous relationship of hard work and positive morality, detective and crime fiction gives us pictures of people at work and of their various relationships to that central part of most people's lives. It also provides two powerful correctives to conservative views of the social order: first, crime fiction allows the rich and powerful its due quota of human evil, and second, crime fiction has an honourable history of maintaining a social presence for radical views about crime and punishment. Thus, for example, crime fiction (certainly in Europe) was an early convert to the abolition of capital punishment; in the past 30 years, we have seen a number of detective writers (for instance, Ian Rankin and Henning Mankell) reawaken that theme of social, rather than individual, corruption, which Dashiell Hammett had developed in the 1930s. No longer do writers maintain the comforting view that the guilty party is merely the one rotten apple in the social barrel; now, there emerges a highly sceptical view about the health of the whole barrel. We are asked, by writers of crime fiction, to think of social questions that many people would rather ignore: questions about the origins of human actions and the social responses to both the merely unconventional and the more dangerous and damaging.

Crimes against others (be it murder, theft or fraud) are as ancient as human societies; writing fiction about them is rather more recent. The religions of the book (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) all contain numerous comments about how human beings should live and the kinds of punishments that they would suffer should their behaviour become transgressive. Each of the great books of these religions contains stories about various transgressors and the judgements meted out to them by diverse embodiments of righteousness. The Ten Commandments of Mosaic law are taken as the bedrock of moral laws of western society and the various sanctions in chapters 20 to 23 of the *Book of Exodus* (especially perhaps 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe') have echoed down the ages both as prescriptions for penal policy and legitimations for human revenge.²

Modern western societies have (with certain exceptions such as the United States) abandoned many of the more vengeful aspects of biblical law. However, no western society has abandoned either the practice of crime

or the pursuit of the criminal. Punishment has, at least in theory, shifted to an emphasis on the rehabilitation of the offender and a commitment to attempting to understand the causes of crime. Both these shifts can be discerned from the beginning of the nineteenth century, and although the shift did not occur overnight (and students of the popular press might argue that this transformation is still far from complete), there is a sense in which many of those professionally concerned with the arrest and identification of 'the criminal' have become markedly less retributive in their practises.

It would, however, be wrong to attribute this greater western attempt at understanding the origins of crime and the genesis of the criminal to a greater social toleration or enlightenment about the meaning of crime. Many people before the beginning of the nineteenth century understood very well that poverty and brutality as well as greed and envy were the 'causes' of crime; public executions were stopped in Britain less because of the greater humanitarian feeling of the public than the threat to public order, which these massively popular events created. State policy in Britain towards the criminal changed because it became apparent to many that various forms of the more physically violent punishments did not work. Pragmatism, in this context as in others, became the underlying dynamic of reform and change.

Parallel to this greater state interest in crime and its causes ran the emergence of a fictional exploration of the criminal. Again, the presence in fiction (be it prose or drama) of the 'bad' person was no novel development; the temptations of the world, and especially envy for the possessions of others in the world (whether they be persons, power or worldly goods), have always been considerable and the temptations that were never universally resisted. But the fiction about crime that emerged in the nineteenth century featured a new fictional person: the detective. Rather than evil-doing being unmasked and discovered through social events (the 'unravelling' of human actions), it has now become the case of a detective setting out to identify and arrest the criminal, whether they be murderer or thief or, quite often, both. What this new form of fiction did, quite as much as other new forms of fiction did for other possibilities of the human condition in other contexts, was to elicit in the reading public a tremendous enthusiasm for this novel form of social agency – that of detection. 'Clues' and 'evidence' became part of public and popular discussions of the world, various attempts were made to identify (before they could commit crimes) the criminal and, perhaps of the most long-term significance, certain social spaces and social

relationships became associated with the criminal. As the public imagination about crime grew, developed and acquired traditions and habits of its own, so this imagination would imprint upon the social world (and especially the urban world) those categories of 'dangerous' and 'threatening'.

In the early crime-writing (writing, for example, in Britain and the United States in the 1840s), the physical world of the city acquired, as the countryside had done through the pens of Romantic poets, a moral meaning of its own. This 'moralisation' of the social space has played a central part in the building and re-building of cities for the past 200 years. Thus, although it is often remarked that Paris was rebuilt by Haussmann in the late nineteenth century in such a way as to eliminate the risks of popular uprisings (and the making of barricades across narrow streets), it was equally the case that Paris and other cities were often remodelled in ways dictated by fears about 'breeding grounds' for criminals. Social hygiene demanded that cities become open to the gaze of the police and at the same time offer little in the way of places in which criminals might hide.

Reading fiction might have helped city planners to question their association of the criminal with the squalid and the poverty-stricken areas of the city. A degree of petty theft and vandalism may well have been part of the urban landscape of poverty but as any professional and sane thief would have remarked there was little or no point in pursuing one's profession among the poor; they had nothing either to steal or to kill for gain. The rich, on the other hand, had rather more to offer. This point was grasped by the writers of detective fiction from the first; although Edgar Allen Poe (often described as the first major writer of crime fiction) constructed various images of dark deeds in dark areas of the city, later writers, and certainly from Sherlock Holmes onwards, grasped the essential point that major crimes such as murder for material gain are more likely to occur among those who have been blessed with wealth. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that much writing about detective fiction expresses surprise that (and particularly in England) a great deal of serious crime (and especially murder) seems to take place in the drawing rooms of the wealthy. Where else, we might ask rhetorically, is it supposed that murder for gain might take place? The poor might murder out of rage at each other (or even at their condition) but given the long-term ghettoization of the European poor, it is unlikely that circumstances will effect a mingling of the social classes other than in those most rigidly defined contexts of domestic service or factory employment, where structures of command keep the most privileged from the most powerless. Indeed, given some of the demands made

upon domestic servants throughout Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, what is remarkable is that so few servants killed or robbed their employers.

The reality of relations between the social classes in much of Europe for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was often, in fact rather than in fiction, of a remarkable tranquillity. Notwithstanding events such as the Paris Commune of 1870 and strikes and civil disturbances, many European cities, particularly outside the capital city or the locus of state power, were, at least in terms of public events, relatively peaceful places. Yet evil, wrong-doing and danger were increasingly portrayed, in fiction, as the everyday reality of these places. It is this perception of *fantasy* evil, rather than its reality, which is the major concern of this book. The argument here is not about dismissing the various crimes, both social and individual, of the past 200 years. Such an argument in the face of the death and destruction of the twentieth century would be impossible to make. But what is argued here is that the imagination of 'evil' played a considerable part in the construction of fears and fantasies about possible threats to both the individual person and the collective way of life of western societies, as a result of which communities have turned to the endorsement of a built environment of separation and constraint. The desire to construct walls, barriers and various forms of safety against wicked outsiders is, again, no new thing in human history.³ But what is perhaps different, from the early years of modernity in the nineteenth century, is the enthusiasm with which considerable general social energy has continued to be devoted to the identification and pursuit of the disruptive, 'evil' person or persons in our midst. We have, as Keith Thomas has pointed out, abandoned the pursuit of witches, but instead of witches, we have 'witch-hunts', instances where often terrifying amounts of hatred are directed against either non-existent or largely harmless individuals or collectivities.⁴

It would appear, therefore, that the Europe of the period after the Enlightenment, although in many ways 'enlightened' and often moving towards the apparently more humane and thoughtful treatment of social outsiders and deviants, could not abandon its more ancient enthusiasm for 'imagining evil'. That imagination of evil gave rise, at its most vicious form, to the persecution (among others) of non-white people, Jews and homosexuals. At its most trivial form, it created various forms of social exclusion, from dress codes to bans on the entry of divorced people to elite social occasions. Keeping ourselves safe from others remains, even as we mock at these past forms of difference, a major social concern and, in the early years of the twenty-first century, a form of considerable commercial and

industrial enterprise in the provision of various forms (from global arms expenditure to household security systems) of defence against others.

Fiction about crime thus has two meanings: the first is the straightforward sense of writing, which takes the occasion and detection of a crime (usually, a murder) as the central theme of the plot. The second meaning, of considerable importance in the political and social worlds, is the public imagination about crime: our fears and our terrors about the dreadful acts that might be committed, both against us as individuals and against the social world in which we live. The great psychoanalyst Hannah Segal has spoken of the way in which the contemporary world is threatened less by actual wickedness than by 'a delusional inner world of omnipotence, and absolute evil, and sainthood'. These 'delusional' worlds both create and enlarge terrors: they perceive, for example, political terrorism when none exists and magnify (and radically misunderstand) real dangers. At the same time, the same world, and the same forces, encourages us to see both enemies and saints where neither is actually present.

So this study of detective and crime-writing in the past 200 years is both about some of the novels themselves but also about the contribution, which they made to our social understanding of 'evil'. It is, therefore, an attempt to offer through fiction, an ethnography of the way in which people in the west have imagined crime and 'evil'. What will become apparent in these pages is that it has not been the case that all detective and crime fiction is on the side of the rich and the powerful; in certain cases, the sympathies of the author are manifestly with the deprived and the powerless. Nevertheless, it is a characteristic of much western detective fiction that the people, who feature in its pages both as villain and pursuer, are generally white and middle class. Non-white people seldom appear in mainstream western detective fiction (although there is now, as Ruth Morse has pointed out, a sub-genre of 'post-colonial' detective fiction) nor that consistently criminal group: young, working-class men.⁵ To many critics, crime and detective fiction is a homogeneous genre, which is not altogether 'serious' literature. This view is not part of this book; on the contrary, an opposing suggestion is made: that of all fiction in the past 200 years, it is detective and crime fiction that has most vividly and often persuasively engaged with social reality. This is not to say that the great works of canonical literature have not explored the social world; they clearly have done this. But that exploration has often emerged from the class politics of western societies in such a way that only certain aspects of the social world have received full consideration and discussion. Moral questions, the questions about how to act in relationship to others and the wider community have widely informed all

imaginative literature, but crime and detective fiction has perhaps made a further unique contribution in its assumption that 'good' and 'evil' are part of the same moral continuum, with the same connections to the social world.

Many of the themes which are at the centre of detective and crime fiction are as old as human society and in this sense detective and crime fiction has a certain timelessness, which much of the other fiction does not have. Yet, while the themes might be timeless, the portrayals of the murderers and criminals are not, nor are the various explanations, which authors provide for the genesis of the crimes. Indeed, what much of crime fiction illustrates very well is Marx's dictum that '[t]he more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over and against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become and the less they belong to him'.⁶ Whether it relates to detective or villain, these remarks (written in 1844) have a considerable resonance to detective fiction. Most noticeably, many detectives in the fiction, written in the second half of the twentieth century, exhibit both a powerful sense of moral ambiguity about crime and a growing sense that the moral categories that they have been asked to police have any lasting value or significance. As we shall also see, the 'inner world' of many late twentieth century detectives becomes one in which the avoidance of emotional poverty is a constant battle.

Despite the increasing blurring of the lines between the world of the detective and the world of the criminal that becomes so noticeable in more recent detective fiction, many of the institutions of the 'real' world express opinions of increasing moral certainty and absolutism. Those Enlightenment values, which underpinned the more humane treatment of criminals are, for example, challenged by those media campaigns for the return to capital punishment and the public identification of those who have committed offences against children. The public's hunger for punishment sometimes seems to have weakened only slightly (if at all) from the days of public hanging; in Britain, for example, in recent years, sections of the press have been able to create considerable public fervour for more punitive regimes of imprisonment.

Detective fiction, however, does not have a single moral stance nor does it, in the main, actively encourage revenge and punishment outside the processes of law and order. In that sense, much of detective fiction exists 'within' the law. But, where it does not is, as we shall see, very often in the United States where the 'licence to kill' is taken literally by fictional detectives. The real nightmare of some of the worlds of contemporary detective fiction in the United States is not, therefore, that terrible crimes are committed but

that only physical, armed force can prevent the continuation of these crimes. This theme, however, is only one possibility which emerges from that important constituent of detective fiction: the fear of crime and the criminal. Of this, one researcher on the 'fear of crime' has written that '[p]ublic anxieties about crime thus have a long history; the "fear" of "crime" is not new'.⁷ The period, which that particular researcher considers, is limited to the late twentieth century but the argument here is that 'fear of crime' has a much longer history than is commonly supposed and has been vividly developed by various forms of literary invention. The pages that follow discuss the imagination of crime and at the same time how that imagination of crime offers highly pertinent but often largely ignored insights into social life.

Chapter 1

Making Crime

In the twenty-first century crime, fear of crime, prosecution of the criminal all make frequent headlines in the media; these subjects can dominate political debates and make or break governments. Anyone who watches television or film can detect the same preoccupation: set against the self-improvement sagas about house and person are the programmes about detection, about finding out ‘who done it’ and bringing that individual to justice. Corporate crime (or the kind of deception perpetrated by governments) invades the small or the large screen much less; it is typically an individual, who commits crime and who has to be tracked down by the detective. It is possible to predict that every day, on every television screen throughout the world, there is some version of the crime or detective story.

This phenomenon of the energetic engagement with the process of detection has changed little since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and this book is an attempt to engage with fictional accounts of crime and detection, and play detective with this form of fiction in the same way as the fictional detective plays detective with their audience. This is the literature in which we find those household names of Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot, or more recently Morse and Frost, men known, like God, only by their surnames. We watch and we read great quantities about detectives and their work, bookshops and libraries carry considerable stocks of both, and there is, as there is with general fiction, a world of awards and prizes, which rewards works of distinction.¹

In the bibliographies about detective and crime fiction, there are three studies that are generally mentioned, and a set of distinctions, which are equally frequently made. The texts are *Bloody Murder* by Julian Symons (first published in 1972 and revised in 1985), T. J. Binyon’s *Murder Will Out* (first published in 1990) and Ernest Mandel’s *Delightful Murder* (first published in 1984).² All these texts – although they are far from alone, and the critical literature on crime and detective fiction is now considerable – place the

origins of the genre at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and all of them cite distinctions between crime, detective and mystery fiction. These distinctions are challenged by Symons, and this author, as largely superfluous and of little interest or assistance in the discussion of the genre; the first chapter of Symons's text is an elegant challenge to those various authorities who assumed that strict distinctions are possible between crime, mystery and detection. The one subject that all writers in the genre seem to be concerned with is that something bad has happened in the social world and 'we', various collective interests in the social world, need to find out 'who did it'. At the same time, in social worlds, which seem to many people to be increasingly opaque and demand ever more complex skills of their citizens, 'detection' is perhaps becoming a social skill, which is demanded as much of every person as of the professional detective.

But, of course, the social world is not opaque to all of us. As Ernest Mandel reminds us, quoting Marx, western culture has a great deal to be thankful for in the person of the criminal:

The criminal produces an impression, partly moral and partly tragic, as the case may be, and in this way renders a 'service' by arousing the oral and aesthetic feelings of the public. He produces not only compendia on Criminal Law, not only penal codes and along with them legislators in this field, but also art, belles-lettres, novels, and even tragedies. The criminal breaks the monotony and everyday security of bourgeois life.³

The remarks may not seem relevant or appropriate to many victims of crime (and, for example, to victims of rape, they may seem even deeply offensive) but then Marx was writing (although less so Mandel) at a time when it was possible to write of 'bourgeois life' and assume a certain clarity of political understanding about its meaning. The theoretical certainties of the nineteenth and twentieth century had not yet given way to the uncertainties of the post-modern and the re-drawing of global politics after the 'fall' of the Berlin Wall and the attack on the World Trade Centre. The 'modern' criminal (and those writing about them) thus operated in what might appear to contemporary readers to be much more secure moral and political boundaries than those of their later counterparts. Whether or not this was actually the case, or whether this account of the past is yet another example of our nostalgia for vanished 'Edens', is a matter of some contention.

This study of crime fiction is thus an exploration of crime fiction in the West for the past two 200 years. It is also an exploration which sees crime

fiction as a far more important guide to our changing moral and social attitudes than is sometimes supposed, not in the sense that crime fiction 'reflects' our attitudes but in the way in which crime fiction often rejects or develops our views about crime. There is, throughout the history of crime fiction, both fictional writing about crime which does little more than exaggerate public concerns about the danger to individuals of 'evil' people, while on the other hand, there is writing about crime, which refuses the given boundaries between the criminal and the non-criminal worlds. In much of crime fiction, there is an ambiguity about our moral codes, which is not found in normative public discourses; crime fiction, therefore, can satisfy public demand for fiction which provides the reassurance of capture and disclosure, but it can also provide something of an imaginative bulwark about facile judgements of guilt and innocence familiar to many discussions of crime in the real world. In a contemporary political climate, which often suggests an obsession with the pursuit of 'evil', we need to ask if this is simply a continuation of what various critics see as a near pathological interest in that criminal world (a world which the majority of us never encounter), or some combination of this with the fictional representation of a world in which 'crime' is defeated and social order always restored. But together with these possible explanations, there is another possibility that reading fiction about crime is the most vivid account that we have of western societies' various fears and preoccupations. For this reason, this account does not follow the usual chronological account of authors but instead looks at the themes which have been central to crime and detective fiction and the way in which they articulate social concerns. For example, the detective and crime fiction of the nineteenth century is discussed in terms of northern Europe's terror and vicarious delight in the city, a dual morbidity which informs the work of Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins and others. In the same vein, we can read recent writing by female authors about crime as indicative of the long-standing dialogue between women about both the possibilities of emancipation and fears about it. For example, Mary Astell, the English essayist of the late seventeenth century, wrote eloquently in favour of more independent lives for women. At the same time, her politics remained, in the context of the world in which she lived, deeply conservative. We find this fault line throughout the subsequent centuries and no more vividly present than when women write about crime.

The questions are not therefore about how much detective or crime fiction we read and watch, but why this genre of literature has such a hold on the public imagination and why we are so concerned with the detection of events (most often murder) outside general experience. One of the most

salutary contributions of the academic study of crime in the past 30 years has been to demonstrate that most people living in the west will have little or no direct involvement in serious crime. Murders are seldom random; the idea and the fear of being attacked by a strange person are happily seldom realized.⁴ As ever, and as everywhere, the place where violent death (in peacetime) is most likely to occur is in the home or the immediate neighbourhood. Motives and emotions that are as old as human civilization (greed and jealousy most conspicuously) dominate the 'causes' of murder. We live, on the whole, lives uninterrupted by crime or premature death, assault or kidnap. For the great majority of western citizens, these events are only ever experienced at a distance, through fiction or media reports. Many western Europeans have lived, since 1945, in a relatively peaceful part of the world, in which violence between individuals themselves, and the state and individuals (at least in the domestic context) is limited. But we should also note that although we may think of the state in the past as hideously ruthless in its treatment of convicted murderers, there were, in fact, relatively few executions. In the year 1831, for example, 1,601 people were condemned to death in England and Wales, but of that number 'only' 52 were executed including 12 convicted murderers. What this statistic also demonstrates is that numerous offences carried the death penalty at that time, although the number of capital offences had fallen from over 200 in 1800 to merely 8 in 1831. We might congratulate ourselves that the western European state has become less punitive in its attitude to criminals than in the past (and clearly the abolition of the death penalty supports this view), but at the same time we need to recall that the numbers of people, who are incarcerated (particularly in the United Kingdom), shows little sign of decreasing and is often a matter of rabid public enthusiasm.

It is appropriate at this point to note that while the relative domestic and civic peacefulness and prosperity of our lives has been a feature of much of the west since 1945, we are nevertheless assured by various voices that we live in an age of 'anxiety' and a 'culture of fear'.⁵ Books on these subjects (which have extended the discussion to areas such as concerns by parents about their children and to individual fears about health) have filled the shelves of libraries, and something of a consensus has begun to develop that contemporary lives are ruled by fears and anxieties of various kinds. Much of this literature is simply ahistorical in the most extreme and simplistic sense: it grants no credence to the experiences of people in the past or indeed the condition in which they lived their lives. For example, the case of childbearing shows us how different are our expectations from those of our grandmothers or great-grandmothers, for whom this event was

surrounded by entirely justifiable fears about the actual survival of both mother and baby. Modern anxieties may focus on the effect of childbearing on, for example, personal relations or appearance, but very few people would include anxiety about actual survival in their list of worries and concerns. In the same way, the past, and the struggles of people within it to make better lives for themselves, is betrayed when it is assumed that contemporary concerns about debt and employment are some kind of historical novelty. Illness and unemployment are devastating today, but 100 years ago they brought with them the *certainty* of poverty and degradation in which no state safety net provided any kind of support.

The romantic view of the past (consistently intact families, happy children, home-cooked food and whatever other myths can be invoked) is today usually seized upon by various pundits (be they politicians or academics) when they wish to suggest a contrast with the dissolute or variously negative habits of the present day world. Avner Offer's *The Challenge of Affluence* is one such example of this argument.⁶ The book (in common with a consistent tradition within social history and sociology) describes a state of crisis (in Offer's book, a crisis of 'family breakdown, addiction, mental instability, crime, obesity, inequality, economic insecurity and declining trust') and then offers various reasons for this state of affairs. This tradition (of what might be described as 'crisis creation') has a heady appeal in modern western societies, since it largely entirely ignores material explanations for the nature of the world in which we live and suggests ideological reasons for our various crises and reasons that apparently allow us the freedom of changing the nature of our lives and those of others. Offer's work, and that of, for example, George Puttnam in *Bowling Alone*, is richly researched and entirely committed to the betterment of human existence; yet, it is also arguably part of that same rich vein of contemporary western culture, which offers us endless information about self-improvement and self-management.⁷ The 'psychic law and order' to which Elizabeth Wilson once referred when speaking about bowdlerized versions of psychoanalysis is as much part of this vein as more clearly scholarly works: all share a wish to work towards the creation of a culture that makes order and coherence out of the disorder, the inequality and the potential for social and individual aggression of global capitalism.⁸ Thus, those pundits who write of 'the age of anxiety' or the 'breakdown' of the social world do so with generally little to say about the context of these apparently traumatic states or the possibility that, perhaps, worry and concern are not inventions of the twentieth century. Although we can trace numerous examples, across historical time, of fear of social change, it is a remarkable feature of modernity that it is accompanied

by often furious resistance to the changes that it brings. Among those many examples are the terror which seems to have been produced in sections of various societies by changes in the gender order: the emancipation of women, even when manifested by relatively trivial examples such as the use of cosmetics, has produced intensely hostile comments.

So, why, we might ask, since most of us live generally safe, relatively prosperous and 'crime free' lives, are we so fascinated by the pathology of crime, by the process of identification of the murderer or the unmasking of the criminal? Is this interest, along with our interest in the health (or otherwise) of our bodies part of the social pathology of contemporary western societies, in which daily life has become generally predictable and in which we are drawn to the deviant by the very pressures and repetitions of our conformity? We may have, as some sociologists have argued, more personal freedom than at any time in our history (most notably in the relatively free choices of our 'personal' lives), yet at the same time what is expected of us in the workplace and indeed the home has become, arguably, more demanding. The state of society at the beginning of the twenty-first century is, like other 'state of the world' examinations, a divisive topic; as always, decline and decay has its protagonists; those holding this view are as passionate in their arguments as those who suggest positive change and greater human emancipation. The 'decline' of the west has been so long predicted that the reiteration of this view is never surprising, the only event, which truly has been surprising in recent years, has been the collapse of the old Soviet empire. Capitalism, as the historian E. J. Hobsbawm has suggested, has been left wondering what happened and how to construct a new defence of itself.⁹ The once straightforward defence, that we could partially justify capitalism in terms of 'defending the bad against the worse' (as C. Day Lewis famously suggested in the 1930s) no longer has the same enemy of wicked communist empires.¹⁰ It may be the case that 'terror' has taken the place of communism as the enemy of the west, but its boundaries remain diffuse and in the context of detective and crime fiction, this recent 'fear of terror' replicates much of the long lasting fears of terror, which have been part and parcel of the possibilities of urban life since the early nineteenth century. For many people, the city and the urban have always been saturated with 'terror' and 'evil'.

These 'big' questions, about the state of the world and our place in it, are usually overtaken in our everyday lives by the more local problems of our work, our health and our families, the long-standing questions of concern. Certainly, since the sixteenth century, and notwithstanding the greater control which we have acquired over the natural world, we have become more

concerned with our social 'performance'. Indeed, for many people living in the west, we have been required to become more concerned about how we 'perform' in certain social ways: the need for qualifications and credentials has massively increased and more educational provision (and a longer time spent in education) has much lengthened those years in which we have to worry about the quality of our scholastic achievements. Thus, just as we might, arguably, have reached a point at which the social world becomes both relatively safe and relatively reliable, we have also imposed upon ourselves a myriad of new anxieties, in particular, the question of how to live up to the expectations of an (apparently) highly qualified world, in which we are led to believe that the material rewards of the world are there for all to possess. Previous generations rightly fought to throw off the assumption that the rich man should be in his castle and the poor man at his gate, but that world view, with its hideous refusal of human capacity and equality, did not encourage democratic ideas about equal access to (and certain achievement of) general prosperity and status. Accustomed as we are to a society, which persuades us to assume that the world is everyone's oyster, the obvious state that this brings with it is anxiety about achievement and, of course, depression and a sense of failure if we cannot meet our professional and material aspirations. 'Affluenza' Oliver James argues, has made us all materially, and unhappily, ambitious.¹¹ The ancient endorsement of the idea that wealth does not 'buy happiness' has now been recognized, for western societies, by such pundits as Richard Layard.¹²

For many persons who are writing about the contemporary world, it is little surprise that the picture that they see is one of unrelieved gloom and social tension. This account of the western world is backed up by sophisticated forms of measurement of the social world: armies of social scientists are able to tell us how we live, how we feel and what we want. What they cannot do is to tell us how this differs from the past; the present is a well-measured country, and the past, for many people, is a hazy mixture of nostalgia and obscurity. There are numerous studies conducted in Great Britain in the first decade of the twenty-first century which demonstrate a profound ignorance about our own history, let alone anyone else's. Were it not for the fact that the Second World War appears (in the form, most predictably of the British fighting the Germans) on the British television screen on every week of the year, there would be almost no sense of the real past in the popular media, other than as a place to be (literally) dug up or to provide a context for emotional drama in period costume.

Except, of course, that the past is the backdrop to those hugely popular dramatizations of the crime novels of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers,

the sanitized version of the interwar years is the one in which the china is always impeccable and the clothes beautifully ironed. The real old steam train of the Kent town of Tenterden appears over and over again as endless heroes and villains arrive and depart. The steam from this train never appears to dirty the clothes of the characters, just as the physical build of the characters (the long and lean twenty-first century version of the ideal body) bears little resemblance to the rather more rounded (and certainly shorter) people of those years. We look back at this world, and see a place with clear boundaries of right and wrong, with vivid contrasts between innocence and depravity and with the promise (always fulfilled) of punishment for the evil-doer. As a refuge from much of the world of the twenty-first century, this world is a paradise as uncomplicated as the original Eden; unfortunately, as in the first Eden, there is a snake ('more subtil than any beast of the field') who attempts to destroy it. But Poirot or Miss Marple, and many others, are on hand to restore Eden to its harmonious state. Indeed, many detective novels suggest that the resolution of a murder brings with it a new state of liberation: at last, a certain truth has been discovered, and people can make their lives in a new sense of freedom. Yet, as in chapter 3 of the book of Genesis, 'what has been unmade is not the same when it is recovered:' Adam and Eve acquire knowledge and in the same way we, as readers, acquire both knowledge of the identity of the sinner and a reiteration of that biblical message about the punishment of the guilty.

One of the many questions which the book of Genesis leaves unanswered is the question of why the serpent had any interest in ensuring that Adam and Eve acquired knowledge. With knowledge – and this is made transparently clear in Genesis – comes binary categories (the first one we hear about is naked and clothed). The serpent, like many later perpetrators of evil, was somewhat overconfident in assuming that 'knowledge' would not turn somewhat critically in its own direction. Thus, the serpent becomes associated with evil, fear and characteristics that are hostile to human beings. Cultures might demonstrate that they can 'charm' snakes, but this reversal of the Bible story (the man, tempted by the woman who is tempted by the serpent, becomes the man who acquires a control over the seductive beast) does not disturb the essentially negative qualities of the snake. Nor, until the late twentieth century, has anyone bothered to ask how, in the original Eden, it was possible for two characters, Adam and Eve, who were supposed to live in a world untroubled by knowledge and presumably the knowledge of sexual difference, to have different vulnerabilities to seduction. It was, like much else about gender difference, just taken for granted that women were susceptible to temptation in ways which men were not. The great

paradox of the story, of course, is that it is Eve who is tempted by the idea of possessing knowledge, a capacity, which men later attempt to own for themselves.

The metaphors about Eden, and the seductive quality of knowledge, infuse detective and crime fiction from its earliest days, the days which are usually dated from the novels of Edgar Allan Poe, the author of classics such as *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. Poe, himself, never an inhabitant of any form of Eden, died at the age of 40 after a life whose end, his biographer Peter Ackroyd suggests, was as mysterious as the plots of many of his novels. Yet by that time he had achieved considerable fame and was recognized in both his native United States and in Europe.¹³ Among the first people to translate Poe was the French poet Charles Baudelaire and in that connection, we can trace links between Poe's work, on the haunting of the new urban space by the unknown and the monstrous, with the writing on the city and its people of both Baudelaire and that later reader of his work, the twentieth-century German critic Walter Benjamin.¹⁴ Within this same context, we can observe the depiction of the sense of menace in city spaces where human beings are unknown to each other, and where social life can only work if unfamiliarity is taken for granted.

In this sense, the city presents the context for all those fears about 'origins', which Marx and Nietzsche observed were characteristic of the bourgeoisie. For Marx, the unspoken 'fear' of the bourgeoisie was about the origin of their wealth; those energetic attempts of maintaining the façade of the civilizing process would come to nothing if awkward questions were asked about the ways in which money was accumulated. In much the same way, Nietzsche suggested that the bourgeoisie – as much as it did not like having questions asked about its wealth – did not like to dwell too closely on the origins of 'modern' values. The awful possibility, in this latter case, would be that modern values would be exposed as mere rationalizations of social convenience. To Marx and Nietzsche, we might add a third person, Sigmund Freud, who was also to make public connections that were thought to be best left unsaid, in this case that all of us owe our origins to a sexual act and that our sexual identity is made rather than given. This trio – Nietzsche, Marx and Freud – all took on the role of social detective; for each and every one, the purpose of their work was to uncover and to reveal the hidden structures and dynamics of the social world. The first question, which we have to ask about detective fiction, therefore, is whether or not it is the domestication of this general 'fear of origin', which we can observe in nineteenth century culture.

While we might ask this question, however, we have to recall that the dynamic of 'unmasking' is as old as the history of carnival and urban celebrations. Disguising our identity has long been one of the forms of play in diverse cultures and historical periods; in the same way as children 'dress up' so adults have for centuries made elaborate efforts to conceal their real identities in various forms of disguise. In doing this, rank and status (and occasionally gender) can be transformed and what cannot be said or acted out in other contexts acquires a degree of social freedom. While carnival or other forms of celebration allow us these possibilities, the narrative of masks and disguise is one in which there is always a final degree of revelation. Detective fiction takes on this narrative form: the murderer remains unknown throughout the novel, and it is only in the concluding chapters that his or her real identity becomes known.

At the same time as the murderer is finally revealed, what is also restored is social order, and it is possible to see this restitution of social order as the definitive contribution of the detective story to social unease about 'origins'. There is little detective fiction, which is not, in some sense or another, restorative; the 'bad apple' in the barrel is removed, and the calm of the social world is once more in place. Detection is, in this sense, a hugely healing and redemptive form of fiction and as such is immensely calming to what might be a general, if unspoken, unease about the potential chaos of the social world. When we can watch or read about the discovery of the mad, the bad and the dangerous in print, film and television, we can rest safe in the knowledge that restoration is possible and that the fault lay not in our created world but in an individual psyche. Nowhere is this more transparent than in public reactions to the murder or the abduction of children. Seldom is it suggested that the sexualization of our culture might play a part in these events; the problem is always the deranged or 'evil' murderer. For all its abandonment of sexual taboos and inhibitions, twenty-first century western society is singularly unwilling to consider what Freud asked us to consider: that children are sexual beings and that all of us, as both children and adults, can exercise and recognize that sexuality.

The attempt to 'un-mask' the social world, to discover the reasons for social change and social continuity, is generally assumed to be a product of the nineteenth century. Indeed, in terms of the development of the social sciences and the systematic study of social life, there is obvious evidence for this view. All the disciplines of the social sciences such as sociology, psychology, criminology and economics emerge as distinct and codified areas of study in the late nineteenth century. But, if we think about the investigation of the social world outside non-fiction, there are others, notably the writers

of fiction, who have claims that are at least as strong to be considered as the first real investigators of the social world. The discussion (and consequences) of human motivation is as old as written culture but arguably the narrative fiction of England in the eighteenth century is the cultural location of the most apparent shift towards the study of why people act in the way they do. In the fiction of Henry Fielding and more particularly Jane Austen, we find expressed, as an interwoven theme of their narratives, the view that the social world is full of puzzles and mysteries. In *Bloody Murder*, Julian Symons makes the point that puzzles are everywhere in western literature, but this does not constitute a detective story; Symons, unlike many other writers, accords the title of the novel which first strikes 'the note of crime literature' to *Caleb Williams* by William Godwin, which was first published in 1794.¹⁵ This choice of a novel by the partner of Mary Wollstonecraft and the father of Mary Shelley fulfils all possible expectations: both author and period exactly coincide with the beginning of what we think of as the 'modern' and in particular of the emergence of modern genre fiction.

But, I shall argue in the following chapter, what defines the beginning of writing about crime and murder is not to be found in one particular author but in the emergence, in the eighteenth century, of the idea of sensation and the sensational. This century saw the growth of a print culture, the development of an urban world, which was defined in part – and continues to be so – in terms of its cultural difference from the rural world. The city 'needed' ideas and the city, through the various associations which it nurtured, created ideas. One of the ideas, articulated through newspapers and pamphlets, the original 'popular' press, was that of the extraordinary event. This is not to say that there had been no such thing as an extraordinary event in previous history (the seventeenth century alone in Britain had seen civil war and regicide) but the novel 'extraordinary events' of the eighteenth century were increasingly about ordinary people, finding themselves in strange situations. In the twenty-first century, we speak of 'sensationalisation' and often decry it as a vulgar and vulgarizing form, but what the form established for us in the eighteenth century was the idea that the daily round, the ordinary event, the domestic and local social relations, could be transformed – by a single event or action – into something extraordinary. This, in itself, was arguably greatly enriching for our culture since it gave us a chance to see the way in which the 'quotidien' has richer (even if often darker) possibilities than we had previously imagined. Writing about crime and detection became the way in which the social world, as the normative and interventionist order of the state became increasingly omnipresent, could maintain an association with disruptive ideas and behaviour.

The Christian moral order of the west had been founded on the idea of original sin and the possibility of evil; as those beliefs became increasingly marginalized, it was, perhaps, increasingly necessary for there to be some social space for the exploration of both. This book is therefore concerned with the idea of the creation of the figure of the detective as a replacement for the figure of God and the 'text' of the detective novel as the place in which moral values are contested, debated and – at least in some senses and some ways – upheld.

As many other critics have pointed out, Christian ideas about morality and judgement have never fully disappeared from western culture. England is not alone in the west in continuing to fall back on explanations of 'evil' when faced with particularly problematic social events. However much we may assume that we know about the ways in which human beings can learn and acquire brutal behaviour, we do not easily accept that we are socially 'made'. Indeed, the resistance to this idea can be endlessly illustrated by the way in which 'nature' rather than nurture still holds a powerful explanatory hand in questions about 'innate' differences between women and men or differences in intelligence between children. Detective and crime fiction has continued to explore this idea throughout its history and perhaps the sharpest division within this literary genre is between those writers who view a capacity to murder or harm as 'naturally' given and those who view it as socially created. In the following pages, we will see how this dialogue continues in the pages of crime fiction and how different writers assign responsibility for savage and, literally, murderous behaviour. Yet, between these two accounts of human motivation, there remains a common thread: that the perpetrator of crime must be named and responsibility for crime made socially apparent. The ancient Christian dynamic of the naming of sin, followed by judgement and redemption, underpins all crime fiction. In this dynamics, the detective plays either the part of God or that of God's assistant: the evil-doer is brought to divine retribution through human agency and the detective is the person who reveals to the world the identity of the sinner and the way in which the 'rules' have been broken. The following chapters explore the various ways in which, through detective fiction, we have for some time clung to that ancient pattern of motive, crime, discovery and redemption and are only now coming to consider the possibility that the formal punishment of offenders is neither morally necessary nor of any great social value. More particularly, I want to suggest that once many of us had renounced the idea of the Devil, we had to replace him (or her). Thus, part of the hidden dynamic of contemporary western society is that of the endless re-creation of the Devil; in detective fiction, a largely harmless

exercise, allowing us a comfortable, and unthreatening, brief association with what we uncritically call 'evil'. But outside fiction, the dynamic is far more dangerous: our enemies, those who disagree with us, those who are violent towards us, become 'evil', 'little devils' and other titles beloved to sections of the media. This book, therefore, has as its main subject crime fiction, but it is also concerned with the social function of that fiction and of what appears to be a social dependence on the existence of the evil 'other'. In making 'evil' part of the threat which we are led to believe we confront in everyday life we construct for ourselves a moral world in which we (unless we are among the few who commit serious crime) are always innocent and can match our actions against those who are truly 'evil'.

This argument itself rests on the familiar idea that all societies have to organize themselves through some form of moral order. Whether or not we care for the moral order so created is a matter of politics and individual taste; what is universally the case is the way in which the social world cannot tolerate the absence of a socially agreed morality. As many writers have pointed out, from the beginning of the European Enlightenment to the present day, the loss of the authority of religion gives rise to the need for other forms of morality and ethics and to locations other than those of religions for the discussion and the validation of moral codes. It is not perhaps entirely coincidence that the emergence of the novel coincided in Europe with the coming of a more secular society. Although there are numerous material reasons for the development of prose fiction (for example, the emergence of reading publics through the growth of increasing leisure and literacy and urban life), the intellectual dynamic for the birth of the novel lay in the recognition that it remained necessary to discuss moral dilemmas. If Adam and Eve became yesterday's characters in the moral sagas of the west, so there was a cultural and social space for new characters, for characters who could embody the ordinary and demonstrate the moral quandaries which continued to beset human beings.

The detective (and the crime) novel did not immediately appear as a definitive sub-genre of fiction. But, there was from the early days of the novel an element of 'detection' in all fiction. This did not necessarily involve the detection of the identity of the murderer, but it did often involve other elements of detection (for example, of parentage in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*) or, more generally, in Jane Austen, the question of who actually loves whom. In all these instances, and other cases, the narrative depends upon revelation, on finding out the truth about the characters and their motivations. Indeed, that uncertainty about the self, which is assumed to be a characteristic of secular societies, is widely explored in eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction.

While the characters of Austen, the Bronte sisters, George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell search for a sense of themselves (or the partner with whom they can realize their sense of self) a parallel tradition in fiction explored the identity of the disruptive self, the self who does not bring about reconciliation but subverts and disturbs social order. Detection thus became – whether in its explicit form of the detective novel or in more general fiction – a central characteristic of post-Enlightenment literature. With it came, or continued, a continuing sense of the possibilities of ‘evil’, evil in the form of the wicked and the corrupt or evil in actions that arose out of ‘ordinary’ and commonplace human emotions. Evil took various embodiments, with the continuing appearance of outsiders of various kinds as the more likely perpetrators of evil. Moral panics, throughout the past 200 years, have always given rise to the creation and identification of characters who fit the characteristics of those most feared or demonized. One of the many useful lessons of reading detective fiction is to recognize that the ‘terrorist’ is not just a figure of the early twenty-first century: the evil outsider is an ancient figure in literature, as are the motives of greed, jealousy and obsession, which drive them. It is therefore the case that what follows is as much an investigation into ‘why they done it’ as into ‘who did it’ and why we appear to need them to continue to do so. But it is also helpful to recall the comment of Stieg Larrson in *The Girl who Played with Fire* (the second volume of his Millennium Trilogy) that ‘There are no innocents. There are, however, different degrees of responsibility’.¹⁶