

FRAMING THE DETECTIVE (GENRE): AN EXAMINATION OF HOW THE CITY FUNCTIONS IN TWO WORKS OF DETECTIVE FICTION

Michael Dixon

Writer's comment: Writing essays, to my delight and dismay, is what I've always done, what I love/have to do. I hold fast to the spirit of the essay laid out by Monsieur de Montaigne: to put on trial impressions or ideas that you feel are worth the trying. This paper for Comparative Literature 145 (Representations of the City) does nothing more or less: it tests a concept (of cityness and the "framed constraint") in two works of detective fiction. I don't purport to solve any problems, only to try the idea for its own sake. A dedication seems in order: this goes out to all who write for themselves and not the professor, for everyone who uses the first person pronoun and most importantly for all the essayists who spend days hunched over a computer/pot of coffee trying.

— *Michael Dixon*

Instructor's comment: In his final paper for Comparative Literature 145: Representations of the City, Michael Dixon perceptively examines the role of the city as a setting and frame for detective fiction. Focusing on two early examples, Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and Hoffmann's "Mademoiselle de Scudery," both set in Paris, his sophisticated essay illuminates the "cityness" or framed constraint that renders the city a backdrop conducive to murder—such as the city's crowded, constricted nature, promoting vertical rather than outward movement and increasing hostility and the fact that so much urban life occurs at night, a reversal of the natural order and facilitating illicit activity. He compels us to look in new ways both at the city and at detective fiction.

— *Gail Finney, German and Comparative Literature*

The Rue Neuve-Sainte-Genevi've in particular is like a bronze picture frame. It is the only frame suited to our story....

-Honoré de Balzac, P're Goriot.¹

*Here like has been ensepulchered with like;
some monuments are heated more, some less
And then he turned around and to his right;
we passed between the torments and high walls.*

-Dante, Inferno IX.²

The city, writes St. Augustine, “builds up a pilgrim community of every language [with] particular concern about differences of customs, laws, [and] institutions” in which “there is among the citizens a sort of coherence of human wills.”³ Put simply: the city is a sort of platform upon which “a group of people joined together by their love of the same object” work towards a common goal.⁴ What differentiates Augustine’s examination from other literary or theological treatments of the city is his attempt to carve out a vision of how the city operates-both the internal qualities and external features inherent within the concept of city-and not simply to define what those operations are.

It comes as no surprise that between Augustine’s time and the 19th century the vision of the city changes drastically (perhaps even disappears entirely). Yet the thrust of Augustine’s attempt to discern the city, to arrive at a fundamental notion of the city and how the city functions, is perpetuated in the way authors deal with the city and the role of the city in works of literature. The purpose of this essay will be to examine how the city functions in two works of detective fiction: Poe’s *Murders in the Rue Morgue* and Hoffman’s *Mademoiselle de Scudery*. It is, I believe, important not to regard the city as a backdrop or a stage but, rather, as a frame which structures the action within (and narrative of) the texts themselves. The aim of this analysis, then, is twofold: on the one hand, to reflect on the specific framing quality of the city-the textual condition of “cityness”-itself; and on the other hand, to analyze how this quality comes to manifest itself in each of the two works under discussion. It is, above all, the unique manner in which Paris is elucidated throughout the texts, which underscores the essential role the city occupies in structuring the very genre of detective fiction itself.

St. Augustine’s vision of the city as a place in which people come together to work toward a common goal is the most fundamental and useful starting point for our examination of Paris in the two works under examination. The narrator of “*Murders in the Rue Morgue*” speaks directly to this “staging” quality of the city when recounting his initial dealings with Dupin near the beginning of the work when he remarks, “seeking in Paris the objects I then sought, I felt the society of such a man would be to me a treasure beyond price.”⁵ Paris is presented as a kind of meeting place, a vast supermarket where desires and wishes can be fulfilled or acquired. Indeed, in its most general sense the city of Paris (or any major metropolis) is just such a meeting place: a locus of activity upon which people converge to “seek” whatever “objects” they feel they need to find in many forms on a myriad of terms. The inhabitants of a city work towards, if nothing else, the ever elusive fulfillment of personal “progress” and social “modernity” which has come to replace the common goal or specific aim of Augustine’s city.

In this vision, however, the city is relegated to the role of mere stage; the city becomes a platform upon which fortunes are made and lost and which allows actions to take place while not necessarily having contributed in any way (direct or remote) to those actions.

Such a description of the city (and especially the city of Paris) is much too narrow when considering how the city is portrayed in both “*Murders in the Rue Morgue*” and “*Mademoiselle de Scudery*.” Because both texts exemplify an early form of detective fiction, it is not surprising to find that murder lies at the

center of both narratives. Although it seems obvious that the genre demands some kind of murder (or other equally interesting and heinous crime) in order to function, the striking similarity (in the unusual ferocity of the murders themselves and, as we shall see later, the ways in which Poe and Hoffman present readers with those murders) points to something else, something about the city of Paris itself which insists, or in some other way structures, the type of crime at the heart of each narrative. The shared action of murder at the center of these texts and, more importantly, the way in which the murders are presented, speaks directly to an unspecific (yet somehow identifiable) quality of Paris extending far beyond the limited role of stage/backdrop for action-some quality of the city itself which makes the detective genre that focuses on these murders a repetitive and reproducible outgrowth of its very essence.

From this perspective Balzac's vision of Paris takes on a compounded degree of significance. Balzac's "framing" of the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Genevi've (which, in this analysis, is extended to Paris itself) takes the vision of Augustine one step further; by seeing the city as a frame he removes it from its function as mere backdrop or simple tableau against which actions are set. As a frame the city becomes a conditioning environment for actions-the murders at the center of each text-while not becoming an active participant in that action. In this sense, Paris as frame (defined by the OED as something which "shapes" and/or "directs ... to a certain purpose") holds to the general premise of Augustine while shifting a degree of responsibility away from its inhabitants and onto itself.⁶ Indeed, historically considered, Paris has stood as the epitome of this kind of molding and shaping (fashion trends, intellectual history, etc.) since long before the time in which either story is set, much less written.

None of this, however, develops so easily as is implied here. We might turn, therefore, to another distinct and useful definition of "frame" that further delimits the framing quality of Paris in relation to these two works of detective fiction. Paris can be seen as "a structure which serves as an underlying support or skeleton, or of which the parts form an outline not filled in" (OED 140). Although it is the second half of this definition that most clearly echoes Balzac's vision, both parts prove to be especially interesting in terms of the two texts. The frame is a definite structure with an ephemeral center, a center which is determined by the very nature of the "skeleton" and yet remains "not only manifold but multi-form" (Poe 31)-or as Poe's close friend and comrade in letters Charles Baudelaire writes, "form and multi-form."⁷ Inside the "outline" any picture can be painted and upon the "skeleton" any facade can be constructed; the picture or the facade, however, must fit within the outline and rest on the skeleton without overtaxing either. Thus, we can say that the frame of Paris structures a certain type of picture or a specific sort of facade (such as the detective genre) without having to actively influence either.

As a frame, then, the city of Paris straddles the line between a "character" (if we can entertain the possibility of a force like Paris being reduced to a mere character) participating in the narrative like any of the other characters and a stage or backdrop where the action simply takes place. The city is neither and both; rather, it is the site in which these murders are predisposed to occur. The city, then, has everything to do with the fact that these actions are occurring while not having anything to do with them. The city structures these actions, thereby allowing the detective genre (as we have been discussing it) to exist. Paris does not murder Cardillac nor does it kill the old woman and her daughter. As a frame Paris might be likened to a parent who brings forth a child over which it has no control. The child is certainly dependent on the parent for existence and the nature of both the mother and the father have much to do with the nature of the child (genetically and conditionally speaking), though not everything to do with its nature. The unique quality of the city, the "cityness" of Paris allows these actions to take place under a set of circumstances, which are quintessentially Parisian (insofar as Paris is portrayed in the texts themselves). It is exactly this notion of "cityness" exemplified in the frame of Paris which runs underneath every action which both texts seek to represent.

It is, paradoxically, the very notion of bringing together and shaping towards a common goal (put

forth by Augustine and deeply enmeshed in the notion of Paris as frame) which also pushes people apart and creates the environment in which “Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “Mademoiselle de Scudery,” specifically, can occur. Paris does not only function as a frame in these two works; Paris, rather, is a framed constraint or constriction. It is as a framed constraint that the city structures the detective genre specifically by suffocating the inhabitants and establishing the exact conditions requisite for murder and the solution of those murders. As the definition of constraint implies (derived from the Latin *constringere*, “to tie tightly together” (OED 791), the city doesn’t merely bring together, it binds to the point of constriction. The friction created by the pressing force of the city’s inhabitants is released in the form of the murders around which both texts rotate (in a manner which we shall discern below). Thus, the framed constraint occurring throughout the works moves in two directions at once: first, it brings together the mass of people and things which makes a city, which structures the very fabric of metropolitan life; second, it suffocates and restricts by “compressing” and “squeezing” (OED 793) the people it has brought together. The city proves to be a monstrous dichotomy moving in two opposite directions at the same time.

When we consider the thrust of both narratives, the importance of this dichotomy is multiplied to the nth degree. Because the two stories rotate around the an axis of very unusual and perplexing murders, we can look, perhaps adopting the analytical method of Dupin himself, to the city in terms of its framing and restricting qualities to find it observing, as if a spectator, the action of the two stories (and the detective genre) which it has brought into existence. It is, then, the “cityness” of Paris which functions in the creation of each narrative: the city orders and structures the very conditions which are necessary for the crimes in both stories to be committed and, further, the genre in which they appear.

Because the quality of cityness is both elusive and subtle (neither character nor stage), the city never comes to dominate either “Murders in the Rue Morgue” or “Mademoiselle de Scudery.” For this reason the quality and function of the city is difficult to assess in both of the works; it is almost taken for granted that *sans* Paris, the grotesque quality of both murders would (indeed, could) never occur. The explicit inconspicuousness of the city in both texts allows Poe and Hoffman to avoid personifying the city (which would eliminate true culpability) while, at the same time, reinforcing the integral though silent function it serves as framed constraint. The city is all pervasive in its framing of the narrative and, subsequently, so is the manifestation of its framing characteristics-lurking behind the smallest details of setting, peeking out only through Poe and Hoffman’s subtle use of descriptive language. Although there are a number of ways in which the unique function of the city comes to manifest itself in “Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “Mademoiselle de Scudery,” two are especially noteworthy. The first is the darkness in which a large part of each narrative (especially Poe’s) is set and the tone such a temporal setting bespeaks, a tone sharpened by the freedom which seems to accompany the night which the day does not afford; the second, a subtler and more important manifestation, arises out of the physical setting and, more specifically, the vertical manner of movement permeating the two stories.

Let us begin, then, with the temporality of the texts. Running tangentially to the framing of the city and the narratives themselves (as we have been discussing them thus far) is the temporality made manifest by that frame. Certainly the most striking element of Poe’s work (and not less significant in Hoffman’s) is the darkness shrouding the narrative-the nocturnal vision of Paris with which readers are presented and in which the characters can be seen shifting about for better or worse. Night is the important temporal locale of both texts. The initial theme of “midnight” which opens Hoffman’s tale, for instance, is never dropped; rather, it is picked up by the narrative again “in the night” (26) concealing the murders, developed further “in the moonlight” (27) of Desgrais nocturnal encounter and finds still another variation in the “dark thoughts” (66) of Cardillac himself which come to action only under cover of night. Poe’s insistence on twilight is less subtle. The narrator notes, “at the first dawn of the morning we closed all the massy of our old building ... until warned by the clock of the advent of the true Darkness” (Poe 33). Dupin goes so far as

to locate truth itself amongst the heavenly bodies visible only during his nocturnal activities: “the modes and sources of this kind of error are well typified in the contemplation of heavenly bodies” (41).

Certainly, such a mode of presentation is by no means limited to a major metropolis in any part of the world. Why, then, have both Poe and Hoffman set a substantial portion of their respective narratives (or at least a large portion of the substantial narrative moments) in the infinite blackness of night and all that the dark obfuscates? The answer is invariably linked with the constricting quality of the city framing the narratives. The city-by-day simply does not provide the adequate freedom and autonomy for the main characters; they are pushed into the night by virtue of their position in relation to the city itself. The temporal setting of the narratives epitomizes a reversal of some kind of “natural” order—a reversal necessitated by a city which restricts instincts, desires, and activity throughout the day.

The same constraints inextricably linked with the structure and order of the city itself, then, can be said to push Cardillac and Dupin out into the night (or structure the conditions for such an action). Night, as the narrator of “Murders in the Rue Morgue” makes clear, is the time when the two men enjoy the most liberty, indeed, the only time when they are truly free:

By the aid of these we then busied our souls in dreams—reading, writing, or conversing, until warned by the clock of the advent of true Darkness. Then we sallied forth into the streets, arm in arm, continuing the topics of the day, or roaming far and wide until a late hour, seeking, amid the wild lights and shadows of the populous city, that infinity of mental excitement which quiet observation can afford. (33)

By day Dupin is surrounded by a swarm of banal and mediocre policemen who don’t seem able to tell the difference between open and shut. In Hoffman’s work, for apparent reasons, it is also during the night when Cardillac encounters the greatest “freedom”—it is the only time he can “give in” (Hoffman 66) to his desires no matter how depraved or maniacal. Once away from the private rooms of women like Madame de Maintenon, the city-by-day of Hoffman’s tale becomes a swirl of restriction and banality. The streets are full of agitated, “gaping crowds” (40) with nothing better to do than “wildly embellish” (28) the day’s news like vultures while “shouting [and] making an uproar” (42) at any hint of scandal. (Going so far as to descend like a swarm upon the coach of Mademoiselle de Scudery because the “invention was still so new” [40] and causing Martini’re to “faint against the cushions” [40].)

In both cases the city-by-day does not provide the latitude of license which these men require. Contrarily, at dusk the city opens up before the protagonists; in an odd twist, the natural setting of light, the day, which increases clarity, visibility and offers a better climate for mobility, is usurped by the night. The obfuscating and mystifying night becomes the site of freedom. It is the very nature and organization of the city itself which removes the natural setting for freedom and, indeed, clarity itself (if only by virtue of the light which the sun provides). The obvious restrictions on sight and clarity accompanying the night are what becomes the utmost freedom for the characters. This unnatural reversal is ordered by nothing other than the temporal and qualities of the city itself; for, by framing the day as a time of constraint the city leaves only the night for freedom.

The unnaturalness of the night as freedom and liberator from the day, is a reflection of the way in which the city itself has constructed a site of friction and hostility in the name of progress and modernity. Little, at best, and nothing, at worst, is very natural about the city. The constructs of (and constructions within) the city are, by and large, far from the natural world, far from the organic order of wilderness or the “non-human.” The unnatural quality of the characters’ dispositions (especially in Poe’s work), then, may owe something to their personal whims as the narrator tells us; it also, from the standpoint of how Poe and Hoffman present the night/day split, owes at least as much to the city of Paris itself. The second, and more important, manifestation of the framed constraint constituting Paris is the way in which both Poe and Hoffman represent the manner of movement within the city. Unlike the wide expanses of land in the country which allow for a great deal of mobility horizontally in many directions at once, the essential

movements characteristic of the city portrayed in these works is more often than not along a vertical axis. Thus, Hoffman's tale begins with the sounds of knocking heard "down below" (17). This orientation continues with the ascent and descent of Cardillac into and out of his secret passage. Poe's mystery, likewise, relies heavily on the manner of ascent and descent of the Ourang-Outang. (This movement is so critical to the solution of the mystery, in fact, that Dupin's analysis rests on just this point.) Such movement is in keeping with the upward growth of any major metropolis of which Paris is certainly one of the earliest. The essential nature of this movement (the preeminent position it has in each of the stories) is structured by the framed constraints of the city's spatial quality, building it in to the narrative and the concept of the detective genre.

From this perspective, though, it would seem as if the city of Paris were nothing but a tower, a labyrinthian structure running along some kind of narratological z-axis from the site of the crimes to the locale of their solution. Indeed, there is horizontal movement in the city; what horizontal movement there is, however, is framed in terms of an even greater constriction than that afforded to the ups and downs of Cardillac or the Ourang-Outang (and not nearly as important in terms of the crimes themselves). The crowds and mobs discussed above certainly apply here, illustrating the spatial constriction as well as the temporal constriction in "Mademoiselle de Scudery." The constrictive quality of the spatial setting of "Murders in the Rue Morgue" is manifest only in the subtle, though increasingly more pervasive, use of language. When walking along "a long dirty street" (34) Dupin recounts for the narrator the path of his thought:

You kept your eyes on the ground-glancing, with a petulant expression, at the holes and the ruts in the pavement ... until we reached the little alley called Lamartine, which has been paved, by way of experiment, with the overlapping and riveted blocks. (35)

Poe's language here is undeniably metropolitan. What's interesting is the way in which the "little alley called Lamartine" regressively assimilates the value of the street. Further, the street is tattooed with "holes and ruts which become "overlapping blocks." The nuances of the language here, as elsewhere, are highly constrictive, evoking a strong sense of physical compactness as well as friction.

It is exactly this friction that aids and abets the atrocities committed in both of the stories. Paris itself structures an oversaturation which simply cannot contain any kind of balance and which leads to the crimes. The frame of the city setting is not entirely dissimilar from Dante's own infamous anti-city: people packed together with no space for substantial movement. There is nowhere to go, too many people without anywhere to go creates the perfect condition for murders central to the detective genre to occur. Paris is not a jungle, for if it were the Ourang-Outang would simply have receded into the trees and bothered nobody. Instead, the animal, acting strangely like the crazed, blood-thirsty Cardillac descends into the city and "rubs" up against a situation from which the only outcome can be death. Readers are never in doubt as to the constrictive force of Paris. At every turn in the streets of Paris, Mademoiselle de Scudery is met with hostile crowds while the protagonists of "Murders in the Rue Morgue" are squeezed out by the very diction of the text itself.

By way of conclusion it must be said that the treatment of the framed constraint of the city (and the role it plays in structuring the detective genre) is cursory, based only on the two works under discussion. A further analysis might reveal, for instance, that the detective genre fares well in the country as well as the city (although it is doubtful). Such an analysis, however, is beyond the limited scope of this investigation. Further, considering the position of these two works as the "founding" texts for the genre itself, it can be said that the function of Paris as a framed constraint in each work has "given birth" to the genre, and that without the unique properties of the city portrayed in each of these works, the genre may never have been born at all. Although such suppositions are dangerous, the striking similarity between both the matter at hand and the manner of its presentation in "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "Mademoiselle de Scudery"

points to some element of the genre itself which has built in these properties (darkness, constriction, etc.): the city. A world away from Augustine's vision, then, there still lies a city framing literature which brings people together; a frame underlying the detective genre and many others which brings a myriad of opinions and critical readings together to work towards, perhaps, some small degree of truth (if not resolution).

Works Cited

- ¹ Honoré de Balzac, *Père Goriot* (New York: Penguin, 1962) 9.
- ² Dante, *Inferno* (New York: Bantam, 1982) 83.
- ³ St. Augustine, *The City of God* (London: Oxford UP, 1963) 348.
- ⁴ Robert Pinsky, "Foreword," *Inferno* (New York: Noonday, 1994) ix.
- ⁵ Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue, The Gold-Bug and Other Tales" (New York: Dover, 1991) 33. All future references will appear in the text.
- ⁶ *The Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989) 140. All future references will appear in the text.
- ⁷ Charles Baudelaire, "The Moon's Favors," *Paris Spleen* (New York: New Directions, 1970) 79.
- ⁸ Hoffman, "Mademoiselle de Scudery," *Tales of Hoffman* (New York: Penguin, 1984) 17. All future references will appear in the text.
- ⁹ The term is borrowed from linguistics, referring to the process by which the specific nature of a given sound in a particular word changes or assimilates the sound preceding it.