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Variations on Darwin

Lawrence Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle*

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REFERENCES

Lawrence Frank, *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence: The Scientific Investigations of Poe, Dickens, and Doyle* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, [2003] 2009), 249 p., ISBN 978-0230-23030-9

- 1 *Victorian Detective Fiction and the Nature of Evidence* has recently been republished in paperback, and it is a very good opportunity to present Frank's argument to those who are still unfamiliar with it, as interdisciplinary approaches are increasingly in vogue in the humanities. Indeed, Frank's study sets side by side detective fiction and the history of science, probing the connections between the two through the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle. At a time when the vision of the universe was increasingly materialistic, Poe, Dickens and Doyle, Frank argues, promoted a far more secular and naturalistic worldview than the vision of the universe advocated by Natural Theology. In fact, through their detectives, Poe, Dickens and Doyle raised new epistemological and narratological issues inspired by certain nineteenth-century historical disciplines, most particularly those which attempted to reconstruct the past from fragmentary evidence or inadequate evidence, as in geology, archaeology, paleontology or evolutionary biology. Of course, Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* is central to Frank's study, which considers Darwin's text as "one that anticipated and sanctioned the kind of paleontological reconstructions" (8) in which he engages. For Darwin, the geological record was a history of the world imperfectly kept, an idea

which Frank relates to the imperfectly kept stories detectives deal with to reconstruct past crimes. For Frank, the detection story “appeared at a moment of social and intellectual crisis that is both recognized and defined” (30), when Natural Theology started being challenged by a positivist science. Hence the detective’s new preternatural powers in his ability to reconstruct thoughts and deeds, creating “a chronological, an associative, and, implicitly, a causal sequence of ideas based on the assumption that law governs not only all natural phenomena, but also the workings of the human mind” (32).

- 2 Frank does not simply look for evidence of the scientific controversies of the day in the texts he analyses, however. There is a dialogue between fictional and non-fictional texts, as for instance when he explains how Hugh Miller (1802–1856), a popularizer of geology and a defender of Natural Theology, criticized Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852–53) and *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) in their subversion of Natural Theology, as other works of detective fiction which challenged Creation. To better stress the potential links between these emerging nineteenth-century sciences and literature, Frank also reminds us of the Romantic origins of the fictional detective—a solitary, depressed, secretive and often drug-addicted individual, most like the Romantic rebel. By pointing out the connection with romanticism and romantic conceptions of consciousness, Frank moves away from former analyses of detective fiction, such as Stephen Knight’s *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980), Dennis Porter’s *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (1981) or later D.A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police* (1988) and Ronald R. Thomas’s *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (1999), which link the detective novel to bourgeois ideology, producing discourses that limit individual autonomy. Still, there are echoes of such previous analyses, as Frank seems to follow in the footsteps of Thomas’s examination of the origins of detective fiction and forensic crime through his examination of Dupin’s use of Cuvier’s comparative anatomy, for instance—at times giving the impression that he is not adding anything new to the discussion.
- 3 Frank’s book is divided into three parts, the first one on Edgar Allan Poe, the second one on Charles Dickens and the last one of Arthur Conan Doyle. Chapter 1, on “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, shows how the universe is denied design and purpose through the skeptical implications of the nebular hypothesis of Pierre Simon Laplace (1749–1827) and its speculations of the origins of galaxies and solar systems. Chapter 2, on “The Gold-Bug”, underlines further how the fictional detective is defined as a practitioner of nineteenth-century historical disciplines, such as geology or archaeology. William Legrand, like Dupin in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, who reconstructs the workings of the human mind through causal chains of ideas, is another detective who has discovered a piece of parchment and turns a series of coincidences into a causal chain. Indeed, Legrand deciphers hieroglyphic inscriptions leading to a buried treasure by relying on fragmentary evidence and turning the natural world into a text.
- 4
- 5 The second part, on Charles Dickens’s works, opens with a study of *Bleak House*, which is also read within the context of the nebular hypothesis. Frank focuses on the novel’s incipit and the description of Victorian London seen through the filter of cosmology, geology and paleontology, arguing that the opening suggests Dickens’s knowledge of John Pringle Nichol’s Laplacean argument in *View of the Architecture of the Heavens* (1837) or Robert Hunt’s *The Poetry of Science* (1848). Frank also mentions Dickens’s awareness

of the controversies of the day, as exemplified by his defense of Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* in the 9 December *Examiner* review of Robert Hunt's *The Poetry of Science* (1848) (which criticized Chambers's anonymous book). As Frank contends, the novel's allusions to the extinction of species and to fossils recall contemporary debates promoting evolutionary hypotheses and anticipating evolutionary biology. The narrative's use of the language of geology, paleontology and nebular cosmology, constantly underlining the implications of a universe denied design, is furthered in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), which Frank analyses in Chapter 4. Edwin Drood's disappearance spurs a detective quest recalling geological and archaeological attempts at reconstructing a temporal chain of events. As a matter of fact, Frank relates Dickens's novel to Charles Lyell's *Antiquity of Man* (1863), which particularly emphasizes the unreliability of fragmentary evidence.

- 6 Part three, on Arthur Conan Doyle, aims to illuminate the transformations of the views of the universe through a writer who was born in 1859 and wrote when the uniformitarian conception of geology had reached the realm of living organisms. Holmes's universe is a Darwinian one in which extinction and change rule. In Chapters 5 and 6, Frank also looks at the way Holmes's investigations are branded by geological and paleontological ways of reconstructing the past. However, this time, the chains of natural causes and effects the detectives imagine serve to reconstruct living men. Aligning the detective with the comparative anatomist, Frank foregrounds the arbitrary and hypothetical aspects of detective analysis and the elusive nature of evidence. He links the places Holmes examines, such as the gravel walk of the Yew Alley or the Grimpen Mire in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901), to Lyell's and Darwin's works, most especially as the scientists often compared geological record to pages in a book that men could read. The universe of Holmes's stories are marked by a struggle for survival and the threat of extinction, while Holmes's unmasking of criminals erases all distinctions between brutes and primitives and civilized man.
- 7 Frank's book is a clear and well-researched study which attempts to offer a new perspective on detective fiction. Though the reader might perhaps have liked a choice of, perhaps, more neglected detective narratives, Frank's view of the forms and "genealogy" of detective fiction will certainly prove valuable to scholars and students of the Victorian period looking for critical approaches which stand at the cross-roads of literary studies and the history of science.

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Mots-clés: Darwin, géologie, hypothèse de la nébuleuse, paléontologie, roman policier

Keywords: Darwin, geology, nebular hypothesis, paleontology, detective fiction

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