

## “Metacognitive Mystery Tales at The Ohio State University”

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This talk is a great opportunity for me to conclude my short stay as a visiting scholar at The Ohio State University. I have been working here for two months thanks to an international partnership between Project Narrative and several universities and research centers in Belgium as part of the Interuniversity Attraction Pole program (IAP) entitled “Literature and Media Innovation” and financed by the Belgian Science Policy Office. This paper’s aim is to present a general outline of the results of two years of research and reflection on what has been called the “metaphysical detective story.” I would like to share some of my ideas on the subject with an American audience to get as much feedback as possible and return to Belgium with a clear methodological approach and a comprehensive theoretical background on which I will be able to develop my dissertation’s final structure.

According to Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, the co-editors of the groundwork *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism* (1999), the “metaphysical” alternative to the classical detective story is largely a postmodern phenomenon which is best represented by writers such as Borges, Nabokov, Robbe-Grillet, Eco and Auster. Merivale and Sweeney also highlight the prominent role played by the founding father of classical detective fiction, E. A. Poe, who, in stories such as “William Wilson” (1839) and “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), introduces mysteries that “[do] not permit [themselves] to be read.” (475) Indeed, these texts enact a quest for knowledge that cannot reach any kind of intellectual or emotional closure. The “metaphysical” character of the stories lies predominantly in their lack of faith in language as a reliable tool to convey the multiple, shifting identities within the labyrinthine city, a space in which certainties and firm answers are always postponed in a strange loop which has been associated with certain trends of metafictional narratives.

In this perspective, I would like to add further precursor texts to Merivale and Sweeney’s canon, stories which, as Dieter Meindl has argued in his work entitled *American Fiction and the Metaphysics of the Grotesque* (1996), manage “to combine the discipline of metaphysical questioning with the art of storytelling” (11). In this respect, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Wakefield” (1835), Herman Melville’s “Bartleby” (1853) and Henry James’s

“The Figure in the Carpet” (1896), embody enigmas which test our interpretational abilities. Their capacity to question rather than state accepted notions of subjectivity reveals unfathomable mysteries that lie at the heart of the processes of cognition as well as of our aptitude to reflect upon the conditions which determine the acquisition of knowledge.

I would like to present a paper dealing not so much with metaphysical detective stories as such but rather with a corpus of texts that are best described as “metacognitive mystery tales.” The wide range of authors that I propose to study, from the first half of the nineteenth century to the end of the postmodern era, hopefully reflects both the comparative dimension and the thematic coherence of my project. Indeed, my dissertation wants to offer a comparative overview of “unreadable” texts, trying to understand why and how these tales are indecipherable. To answer these questions, I will use other theoretical concepts and literary devices often encountered in the metaphysical detective story but not examined, I feel, according to the prominent role they play, especially in the way they offer other possibilities to avoid an exclusively postmodern perspective. I will, for example, use space theories by Bakhtin, Bachelard, de Certeau and Westphal as well as Situationist concepts to describe the wanderings of Wakefield or The Man of the Crowd in the modern labyrinthine city. Because of his refusal of language, Bartleby – like Beckett’s protagonists in his trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* after him, or Bolaño’s César Vallejo character dying of the hiccups in *Monsieur Pain* – ironically asks for a more linguistic approach, focusing on the arbitrariness of signs described by de Saussure et al. together with a study of the grotesque aspect of such a ghostly figure, both horrific and comic; an empty body which refuses to open itself to the exterior world. Finally, I will deal with a concept that I would like to call the perversion of knowledge or knowledge as perversion. This idea is certainly well symbolized in a story like “The Figure in the Carpet” in which the endless quest for knowledge, deprived of any moral considerations, turns into an obsession, an addiction that leads to madness and/or death.

These metacognitive stories always seem to be pervaded by a sense of the sublime and what can be associated with the more disturbing sides of the grotesque. Such stories all deal with “excessive, unmanageable, even terrifying” experiences (Shaw 4) which exceed a possible linguistic representation. The sublime and horror-provoking struggles for solutions often come close to the “dark” grotesque, as defined by Wolfgang Kayser, a mode of representation emphasizing the “nonrational dimension of life as such” (Meindl 15), the feeling of terror and of mental alienation that one encounters when confronted with the arbitrariness of meaning.

On the whole, this paper can be seen as a brief overview of my PhD research, which attempts to contribute to the study of the metaphysical detective story as a literary genre through an investigation of a corpus that exceeds the postmodern debate, conveying a metaphysical questioning – that is both epistemological and ontological – as well as a true *mise en abyme* of the process of cognition, taking the form of a perverse quest for knowledge in which, to quote “Wakefield,” “by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever” (298).

#### Works cited

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