

“Obsessive Quests: From Metaphysical Detective Stories to Meta-Cognitive Mystery Tales”

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.” Indeed, these texts enact an obsessive and nearly pathological quest for knowledge that cannot reach any kind of intellectual or emotional closure. The “metaphysical” character of the stories lies in their lack of faith in language as a reliable tool to convey the multiple, shifting identities within the labyrinthine city.

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, Hawthorne’s “Wakefield” (1835), Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (1840), Melville’s “Bartleby” (1853) and 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 “meta-cognitive mystery tales”; stories that have anticipated a kind of cognitive uncertainty that continues to affect more recent texts such as, for example, Paul Auster’s *New York Trilogy* (1987).