CHAPTER I

# *The devices of truth*

> We are far removed indeed from those accounts of the life and misdeeds of the criminal in which he admitted his crimes, and which recounted in detail the tortures of his execution: we have moved from the exposition of the facts or the confession to the slow process of discovery; from the execution to the investigation; from the physical confrontation to the intellectual struggle between criminal and investigator.
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> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

> I must admit, Watson, that you have some power of selection which atones for much which I deplore in your narratives. Your fatal habit of looking at everything from the point of view of a story instead of as a scientific exercise has ruined what might have been an instructive and even classical series of demonstrations.
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> Sherlock Holmes in *The Adventure of the Abbey Grange*

In the opening pages of one of the first Sherlock Holmes stories Doctor Watson discovers Holmes engaged in what the doctor describes as "a pathological and morbid process."[1] With his "nervous fingers," the self-proclaimed architect of the "science" of detection is injecting his customary 7 percent solution of cocaine (I: 89). He is doing so, he maintains, because he "abhor[s] the dull routine of existence." "Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere," Holmes says in defense of his behavior. "That is why I have chosen my own particular profession, or rather created it, for I am the only one in the world" (I: 89–90). Here, the great detective represents himself as self-invented and his "profession" as at once both escapist and transformative. As an alternative to reality and to cocaine use, the "exact science" of detection and the technological apparatus for that enterprise he has assembled in his laboratory grant him the authority to tell a truth

that is otherwise undiscoverable (I: 33). Watson, the narrator of these tales, has just returned to England to nurse a wound he had suffered in the colonial campaign in Afghanistan where he served as a medical officer. He, too, escapes a pathological condition in Holmes's chosen profession by writing these stories about it. Their bodies bear the marks of their engagements with and their escapes from the peculiar historical circumstances in which they live, and in their adventures of detection they translate those anatomical marks into quests for some elusive truth.

When Watson comes upon Holmes injecting his cocaine, the detective is also reading a book. These three activities – taking a drug, being a detective, reading a book – are presented as substitutions for ordinary life and as symptoms of some unnamed nervousness. Together, these devices point back to a very real "pathological and morbid process" at the center of Holmes's professional identity – and at the heart of this popular nineteenth-century literary form. In this same scene, Holmes will reprove Watson for his overly romantic literary account of an earlier case, just as Watson had reproved Holmes for his drug use. But the two activities are really manifestations of the same pathology, and the book we are reading implicates us in that failing as well. The Sherlock Holmes stories, like any detective narrative, function as our cocaine, our diversion from some historical reality. But they are also our work, written and read to transform what have become the unexamined routines of political life and the sometimes criminal cravings that leave their tracks upon the body. In *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science*, my task is to analyze the complex process of exchange that takes place in this "escapist" literature invented during the nineteenth century in America and England, and to understand how a specialized body of scientific knowledge was employed in that literature to convert disturbing historical facts into a new kind of narrative.

At the center of virtually every detective story is a body upon which the literary detective focuses his gaze and employs his unique interpretive powers. His goal is to explain an event that seems to be inexplicable to everyone else. At stake is not just the identification of a dead victim or an unknown suspect, but the demonstration of the power invested in certain forensic devices embodied in the figure of the literary detective – the fingerprint, the mug shot, or the lie detector, for example – all of which enable the detective to read the clues to a mystery that is written in the suspect body. Following Edgar Allan Poe's lead, writers as different as Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, Joseph

Conrad, Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler would create investigators endowed with the capabilities of devices such as these to read the secret truth of the past in the bodies of the victims and perpetrators of crime. Like the inquiry of the detective, this book begins here: with the strategies of interpretation and authentication the detective brings to bear on the body of the criminal and the victim alike. I attend in particular to the authority the literary detective claims for himself through the "devices" by which he discovers the truth and defines an identity, calling attention to the way those technologies relate to broader questions of subjectivity and cultural authority at decisive moments in the evolution of the genre in nineteenth-century England and America. In this enterprise, the history of detective fiction is deeply implicated with the history of forensic technology.

My aim is to investigate how certain forensic devices enable the body to function both as text and as politics in these narratives. I am especially interested in the ways a literary genre preoccupied with resolving questions of personal identity also speaks to questions about national identity. Invariably, the mangled corpse the literary detective scrutinizes reveals a code that his trained eye is uniquely capable of reading; or, alternatively, the body of the suspect betrays its own guilt in some visible signs that are legible only to the eyes of the detective. The conventions of the form generally require the detective to explain what seems to be his uncanny act of second sight as the simple application of a technique, or even a technology, to the variables of the present occasion. The literary detective's power, that is, is consistently represented as a new kind of reading, just as the genre which produced him was regarded as a new kind of writing in the nineteenth century. The systematic medicalization of crime in criminological discourse during this period corresponded to the literary detective's development into a kind of master diagnostician, an expert capable of reading the symptoms of criminal pathology in the individual body and the social body as well.

The forensic techniques that make up this new literacy, however scientifically represented, often prove to have a political genealogy that becomes inflected into the act of analysis the detective practices and promulgates. It may be the detective's matching of a suspect with a fingerprint left at the scene of the crime that suggests a racial or even national set of differences. It may be the discovery of a chemical substance in the body that could have originated only in an exotic colonial setting. It may be the recognition of certain features in a foreigner's photograph that correspond to the facial characteristics of a

"typical" criminal as delineated in current anthropological data. Each of these detective devices – fingerprint technology, forensic profiling, crime photography – is itself a nineteenth-century invention designed to convert the body into a text to be read. Each also serves as a potent analogy for the literary detective that deploys it. Through these detectives and their devices, the mysteries of individual anatomy and personal identity come to represent the general condition of the body politic itself.

This book does not provide a comprehensive history of the genre of detective fiction or of forensic science. Rather, it offers a series of investigations into the way technological developments in the field of forensic science directed a preoccupation with the history of persons within the genre. Controlling the historical account is, indeed, the objective of most detective stories: the detective's goal is to tell the story of a past event that remains otherwise unknown and unexplained by fixing the identity of a suspect and filling in the blanks of a broken story. While the specific historical circumstances of the detective's narrative may not be evident in a given text, they are important to understanding the work's appeal and effectiveness. Detective fiction as a form is generally recognized as an invention of the nineteenth century, coincident with the development of the modern police force and the creation of the modern bureaucratic state. This context was crucial in shaping the way detective fiction developed and in determining the kind of cultural work it performed for societies that were increasingly preoccupied with systematically bringing under control the potentially anarchic forces unleashed by democratic reform, urban growth, national expansion, and imperial engagement. This book reads those conditions back into the detective story, tracing them in the linked histories of the criminal body and forensic technology.

While the narratives of writers like Poe, Dickens, and Conan Doyle often reflected and popularized contemporary scientific theories of law enforcement, the detective stories they wrote also sometimes anticipated actual procedures in scientific police practice by offering fantasies of social control and knowledge before the actual technology to achieve either was available. At times, these texts seemed to call those technologies into being. It became commonplace for early criminologists to attribute inspiration for their theories to the methods of a Sherlock Holmes or an Auguste Dupin. In developing what he called "a new police science" which focused on the examination of microscopic particles on the criminal body, for example, the pioneering French forensic

scientist Edmond Locard went so far as to instruct his colleagues and students "to read over such stories as 'A Study in Scarlet' and 'The Sign of the Four'" in order to understand the basis of the principles he was recommending.[2] Articles written to present theories on the atavistic physiology of the criminal type or on a new medical invention that could diagnose criminal pathologies might appear in the same volume of a popular magazine, inserted between a Sherlock Holmes mystery about an aboriginal savage criminal from India and a regular feature on "News from the Empire" that offered thrilling accounts of British military heroism in the colonies. Constructions of the criminal body around a "science" of racial typing made legible by new developments in medical technology could appear along with political explanations of brutal imperial policies to confirm and justify one another conveniently. Both could find a fitting cultural imaginary in the new literary form of the detective story.[3]

*Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* examines points of intersection within that body of knowledge – literary, legal, scientific, and political – at critical moments in two national settings. I attend specifically to the production and dissemination of narratives that established the authority of a class of experts that could read someone's body like a text with the precision of a machine. By being so striking, Philip Fisher has argued, popular cultural forms often become quickly settled in the perceptual frame of their civilization, and therefore appear obvious or even invisible in retrospect.[4] But in fact, such forms may require more intense critical analysis than do "higher" art forms, because they have so subtly invaded and ordered massive, unsorted psychic and cultural materials from the historical moment in which they appeared.

Detective fiction's emphasis on the scientific aspects of criminal investigation best exemplifies this ordering activity in a popular literary form. Each section of this book makes that case by focusing upon three critical points in the history of the literary detective: the invention of the figure by such writers as Poe, Dickens, and Collins in the 1840s and 1850s; the refinement of such literature into a genre by Arthur Conan Doyle in England, together with its parodying by figures such as Mark Twain in America during the 1890s; and the establishment and subsequent rejection of the "golden age" of the English literary detective in the 1920s and 1930s by such writers as Agatha Christie, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler. While the focus of the book throughout is the nineteenth-century culture that invented this literature, each major section concludes with a reading of an early twentieth-century

reflection upon its predecessors and the detective devices they employed. As I will show, these developments in literary history correspond to periods of intense scientific theorizing about the origin and nature of human life that were often shaped by particular political anxieties. They also coincide with periods of unprecedented inventiveness in developing practical forensic devices that extended the power of the human senses to render visible and measurable what had previously been undetectable.

My interests focus upon the way detective stories help to provide reassurances at these junctures by continually reinventing fictions of national and individual identity to respond to rather specific historical anxieties, often invoking the authority of science to do so. But the narratives in question did not simply or consistently reassure; they also exposed, and in so doing they sometimes challenged the emerging culture of surveillance and the explanations of individual and collective identity it promulgated. In this respect, the detective story may act less like an enforcer of legitimate cultural authority and more like a force of resistance to such authority. Rather than tracing a single through-line in the genre's evolution, therefore, each of the three major sections of this book explores a complex and sometimes contradictory response to a different technology for establishing criminal identity in texts spanning the first 100 years of the modern detective story. Each section returns to the same historical moments from a new vantage point, each one focusing on the invention of a different technique for investigating, identifying, and interpreting the criminal body. Unifying these investigations is the claim that in the post-Benthamite world of what Foucault called the "panoptical machine," where the individual is not so much repressed by the social order as fabricated in it, the literary private eye offers both a potent demonstration of and a critical investigation into the technologies of truth-making that were incarnated in this popular literary form that helped replace the "execution" of the criminal with his "investigation."[5]

The crucial issue is not the way in which detective fiction deploys these devices (though that is sometimes the case), but how detective fiction at once resembles and resists them in the ways it produces the truth and reinterprets a dark deed from the past. The detective story often functioned as a kind of lie detector redefining truth for its culture, or as a rogues' gallery of mug shots sketching out a portrait of the typical criminal, or as a fingerprint manual discriminating the unique identity of an individual in the traces of his body. My inquiry focuses on how two

national traditions developed and made use of these technologies in the nineteenth century, and then reevaluated their usefulness in the twentieth. Rather than seeking to establish a definitive point of commonality or difference between the development of the form in America and England, my aim is to demonstrate how specific cultural conditions demanded and produced different incarnations of the private eye, equipping that figure with a variety of technologies with which to detect and make visible the public enemy that threatens us all.

Even as detective fiction was first making its appearance on the scene – an occurrence normally traced back to Poe in America and to Dickens in England – it was being viewed with a suspicious eye by critics. Anthony Trollope condemned its unrealistic preoccupation with plots that were too complex and characters that were too simple.[6] Mrs. Oliphant warned about the dangers of its implicit celebration of criminality and rebelliousness.[7] Henry James regarded detective fiction and its twin, the sensation novel, "not so much works of art as works of science."[8] Indeed, some of the most ardent articulations of the aesthetic and moral attributes of high Victorian realism were occasioned by condemnation of the cheap effects and immense popularity of nineteenth-century detective and sensation fiction. Modern defenders as different as T. S. Eliot, Raymond Chandler, and Edmund Wilson countered these suspicions with their variously-pointed admirations for the form. More recent critics have continued the debate over the moral and literary merits of detective fiction, its status as a literary genre, its ideological affiliations, and its evolution as a form of popular culture.

Contemporary literary scholars have also repeatedly returned to detective literature to illustrate new waves of critical methodology as they come into fashion. In recent decades, detective stories have provided the demonstration pieces of choice for critics working in narrative theory, gender studies, popular culture, ideological critique, psychoanalysis, the new historicism, and cultural studies. If Peter Brooks sees in the Sherlock Holmes stories an allegory of plot that reveals the double logic of death and desire that drives all narratives, Jacques Lacan detects in "The Purloined Letter" an allegory of the signifier that reveals the paradoxical logic of the text of the unconscious.[9] Franco Moretti views the detective story as a contest between the individual and the social organism in which the ethic of bourgeois culture is erased from the consciousness of the masses. Michael Holquist reads it as the preeminent literary model for postmodernism's exposure of the subterfuge of order and the fundamental truth of chaos.[10]

Such extensive critical attention has complicated what we mean by the term "detective fiction," and challenged its traditional relegation into a specifiable generic category all its own. A considerable debt is owed to critics like John G. Cawelti who, from the perspective of popular culture and formula literature, established detective fiction as a reputable genre and kept alive a tradition of taking its merits seriously. These critics made possible studies of the relationship between detective fiction's broad ideological implications and its formal properties in work such as Dennis Porter's *The Pursuit of Crime* (1981) and Stephen Knight's *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (1980). Later in the 1980s, scholars focused with more precision and specificity on the genre from theoretical points of view, best represented in the collection of essays edited by Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe in *The Poetics of Murder* (1983) and those on the semiotics of detective fiction collected by Umberto Eco and Thomas Sebeok in *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce* (1983).

Together with the rise of cultural studies, critical legal studies, and the critique of the canon, modern criticism has begun to grant detective fiction a more prestigious place in the house of "legitimate" literature. As a result, valuable contributions to the study of (especially) nineteenth-century detective fiction also appear in criticism that is not centrally concerned with setting it aside as a special category of literature. Some of the most useful new work on the subject reads detective texts in the light of traditionally respected literary and cultural materials, treating them as equal participants in an emerging culture of knowledge and power in the period. One example of this critical realignment may be seen in Martin Priestman's *Detective Fiction and Literature* (1991), which considers classic detective texts by Poe, Collins, Conan Doyle, and Chandler together with works by Aristotle, Sophocles, and Henry James.[11] At least from the point of view of making literary discriminations, my approach to the subject is in accord with these aims. One of my principal goals is to demonstrate how the classification and marginalization of popular forms like the detective story may be read as an effect of the culture of knowledge and power that produced them. Indeed, this investigation of the criminal body as a site of interpretation and enforcement in nineteenth-century British and American fiction argues that the detective narrative is integral rather than peripheral to the novel's crucial project of self-fashioning in the period.

The centrality of the detective narrative for the nineteenth century is based on its crucial role in the process of making and monitoring the modern subject. Theorists of the novel from Georg Lukacs to Ian Watt

to Edward Said have defined the novel as an essentially biographical form that came to prominence in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, largely in response to the breakdown of institutions of broad cultural authority. Lukacs argued, for example, that the novel "seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct the concealed totality of life" in the interiorized life story of its heroes.[12] The plot of the novel is the protagonist's quest for authority within, when it cannot be discovered outside. By this accounting, there are no objective goals in the novel, only the subjective goal of seeking the law that is necessarily created by the self. The distinctions between crime and heroism in the novel, therefore, or between madness and wisdom, become purely subjective ones. This condition comprises the novel's "givenness," according to Lukacs, a condition in which telling the story of the quest for form is the story itself. In that story, the individual subject is a kind of romantic criminal who constructs his or her own authority, as we see in the great autobiographical novels of the nineteenth century such as *Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, or *Huckleberry Finn*.[13]

The invention of another biographical form later in the century – the detective story – maps the limits to the subjective authority of the biographical novel, imposing what Said might call the "molestation" of its "authority."[14] Though it is often regarded as a cerebral form that appeals to the reasoning faculties of its readers, the detective novel is fundamentally preoccupied with physical evidence and with investigating the suspect body rather than with exploring the complexities of the mind. Accordingly, detective fiction – generally dismissed as being inadequately concerned with the development of character – also may be viewed as a corrective countergenre evolving along with (and within) the biographical novel. By reasserting an objective – even if unofficial – social authority over individual freedom, the detective story imposes restrictions on the autonomy of the individual voice by identifying that voice as criminal. In the detective story, a designated cultural authority – the literary detective – rises to power, corresponding in time with the invention of the science of modern criminology. He stakes out the precise place where heroism ends and criminality begins – the very boundary obscured by the subjective focus of the biographical novel as defined by Lukacs. The detective hero's function is to identify that contested narrative space and to occupy it with his truth-telling voice, with his "solution" to the case. Any version of the story told by the figure the detective identifies as a criminal is then transformed into a criminal act itself. Equipped with his devices, the detective thereby converts the

romantic tradition of the criminal biography into evidence, or alibi, or testimony, or confession, or proof of some other story – all subject to an objective social authority located outside the individual. As these literary detectives demonstrate, that act of narrative transformation may also be regarded as a political act, taken in defense of broader communal interests to challenge the authority of the individual self and to secure the endangered authority of the culture at large.

The literary detective takes his place as a performer on the cultural stage, then, speaking not his own part but that of his society, a part vocalized through the otherwise mute figures the culture designates as both its criminals and its victims. He does so with the aid and imprimatur of the forensic technologies I call "devices of truth." Franco Moretti has described detective fiction as "radically anti-novelistic," pointing out that its aim "is no longer the character's development into autonomy" but the character's repression and control.[15] I will argue that detective fiction is not "radically anti-novelistic" but both collaborative with and critical of the achievements of the nineteenth-century biographical novel, conspiring with it to produce a complex set of discourses on subjectivity for the nineteenth century. Because it stakes out and enforces the limits of individual autonomy as they were developed in the biographical novel, therefore, detective fiction might more accurately be described as "novelistically anti-radical," even as it is a product of radical conditions. Seen in this light, detective fiction must be regarded as an equal accomplice in the important cultural work often ascribed to the biographical novel in this period.

Significantly, Anglo-American detective fiction appears in a post-revolutionary environment when the heroic status of the rebel or the criminal is transferred to the detective and the police.[16] Since these narratives generally involve the identification of some criminal singled out as a distinct "other" who poses a threat to a new sense of the social order, they must also be seen as part of the history of nationalist discourse during a critical period of the nineteenth century. "As with modern persons, so it is with nations," Benedict Anderson says in his analysis of nineteenth-century nationalism in *Imagined Communities*. The new nineteenth-century awareness of "being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of 'forgetting' the experience of this continuity," Anderson explains, "engenders the need for a narrative of 'identity'."[17]

As the nation was a differently imagined "state" in America and Britain during this period, however, the threat to it was also differently