

H-France Forum

Volume 11, no. 5 (2016), No. 2

Andrea Goulet. *Legacies of the Rue Morgue: Science, Space, and Crime Fiction in France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 295 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 978-0-8122-4779-4.

Review Essay by Aaron Freundschuh, The City University of New York, Queens College

In a 2010 manifesto entitled *Cultural Mobility*, Stephen Greenblatt lamented the persistence of traditional assumptions about culture. Only decades ago, recalled Greenblatt, critics in the humanities and social sciences believed themselves “to have bid farewell once and for all to the heavily guarded borders of the nation-state and to the atavistic passions of religious and ethnic identity.” Nevertheless, fictions of “ethnic authenticity,” social purity, and stasis have endured and continue to shape “a global political landscape in which neither nationalism nor identity politics shows any intention of disappearing.”[1]

It is no secret that the field of literary history was complicit in the making of the very mythologies of national culture to which Greenblatt alludes. In nineteenth-century France, literary historians (like their colleagues in the newly created university discipline of history) came to prominence by yoking their project to national sentiments. They plumbed French letters to recover the so-called *esprit français*, an ahistorical construct that today’s prominent literary scholars—Andrea Goulet among them—are dismantling, namely by rethinking French literature as a form of transnational culture. Christie McDonald and Susan Suleiman, in their introduction to the collection of essays entitled *French Global* (also published in 2010), proposed conceptual roadmaps to “reread the whole sweep of French literature in a world perspective.”[2] This new global approach, grounded in a historical sensibility, has breathed life into the traditional subfield of genre history. As Jernej Habjan offered in another recent edited volume, “literary genres might be able to serve as the window on the transformations that literary history shares with the history of globalization.”[3]

To begin her remarkable history of the French crime genre, *Legacies of the Rue Morgue*, Goulet aligns herself with this scholarly program by asserting that Edgar Allan Poe spoke what we now call “Global French,” and that the narrative form he ushered into Western literature subsequently touched “postcolonial and non-Western contexts” (p. 1). Goulet is hardly the first to credit Poe as the inventor of detective fiction, and the colonial undertones in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” were highlighted by Uri Eisenzweig in a path-breaking article published thirty years ago.[4] It is instead the expansive use that Goulet makes of the “seeds” contained in Poe’s first ratiocination tale that make her book’s arguments so original. *Legacies of the Rue Morgue* traces an arc, as she puts it, from the “*chambre close* in a nineteenth-century Paris street to the technonetwork of postmodern world-space” (p. 35). Along the way, Goulet reminds us that the hermetically sealed “locked room,” a narrative gambit that first appeared in “The Murders,” has always shown itself to be a false promise in the end. Although fictional crime stories bend toward resolution, they inevitably thwart fantasies of spatial closure and stability as instantiated, for instance, in a fortress wall.

But Goulet's intervention moves far beyond the statement of a programmatic vision for the transnational study of crime fiction: she has built a full-scale model to grapple with 150 years of writing. It is not a model designed to track or celebrate globalization as such. Rather, this study is fundamentally about cultural anxieties caused by disruption—or, more precisely, the concealment and revelation of disruption within texts. And disruptions come in many forms. Noteworthy, in view of the genre in question, is Greenblatt's prescription for the undoing of stubborn parochialisms: "To write convincing and accurate cultural analyses—not only of the troubled present but of centuries past—requires, to paraphrase *Hamlet*, more a chronicle of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts than a story of inevitable progress from traceable origins." [5] By definition, crime fiction centers on such transgressive acts. The genre is also, as Goulet observes, "particularly 'phantomatic'" (p. 23). Like *Hamlet*, the fictional detective investigates haunted grounds and "digs up the truth, connecting buried bones to violent history." In crime fiction, buried bones are always secrets that someone has labored to keep hidden, and the question of national identity is "at stake in even the most private-seeming investigations into the criminal underground" (p. 21).

As this claim would suggest, admirers of Goulet's erudite first book, *Optiques*, are in for more of her provocative and theoretically rigorous treatment of the historical evolution of literary practice. In some ways, *Legacies of the Rue Morgue* is a continuation of *Optiques*, which also dealt with detective fiction. In her second book Goulet has added a spatial component to her examination of the impact of scientific innovation, broadly defined, on the crime genre.

In terms of literary works, Goulet had to make her selections from a sizable trove. This is because, from the 1840s onward, crime fiction attracted an enormous readership in France, where Poe's characters, foremost C. August Dupin, inspired generations of emulators and innovators. In fact, the French obsession with real and imagined crime stories has proven deep enough to sustain diverse research agendas. Dominique Kalifa, Robin Walz, and Luc Boltanski (to name just a few recent examples) have drawn connections between crime narrative and phenomena such as the flowering of modern journalism, the rise of the French nation-state, and the inception of twentieth-century literary modernism in Paris. [6]

Goulet is a crafter of intricate lenses, a master investigator with an ear for spatial metaphors. Her incisive readings unfailingly avoid the whiff of anachronism by working within the cultural and linguistic legacies that were created or absorbed by the genre's authors and critics. Jacques Derrida, who analyzed Poe's writing, is a strong theoretical influence. Goulet persuasively challenges several of the binary tensions thought to characterize Poe's "The Murders," among these: rationality and spiritism, savage beast and civilized man, the domestic and the exotic, the fantastic and the realistic, materiality and abstraction, sensationalist pulp and the putatively pure reasoning of the *roman policier*. Goulet also subtly shifts focus away from the question of crime fiction's fundamentally conservative roots. Poe's own political views have been studied, and a great deal has been written about the patently racial implications, in the context of the antebellum United States, of his escaped orangutan. [7]

By re-spatializing "The Murders," Goulet casts a different light on both story and genre, opening a variety of new interpretive sight lines. Crime novels fall along vertical (archeohistorical) and horizontal (cartographical) axes. Goulet demonstrates, for example, that the achievements in the

scientific fields of paleontology and geology contributed to the configuration of early crime writing. The great digs that were ordered in Paris under the Second Empire inadvertently exposed “deep” geological time and pre-historic remains that seemed to tell of catastrophic shifts and violent human interaction. Contemporary writers associated the “caveman stereotype” with a segment of the city’s modern criminals, who, according to popular ideas about the *bas-fonds*, lived and worked literally underground, a space hollowed out by catacombs and caves (p. 43). Readers will appreciate this supplement to Donald Reid’s classic study of hygiene and the Paris underground, as well as to Kalifa’s cultural history of the *bas-fonds*, both of which, like *Legacies of the Rue Morgue*, pay an obligatory visit to the subterranean world of *Les Misérables*. [8]

In thoroughly limpid and alluring prose, Goulet makes a case for crime fiction as a vital cultural mode within the discussion of trauma. Her claim that the French crime genre took a crucial turn in 1909—the year Gaston Leroux’s *Parfum de la dame en noir* brought the “geological imaginary” into the “realm of the psyche”—counts among this book’s most powerful insights. In investigating the “psychic topography” of twentieth-century crime fiction, Goulet follows Claude Lévi-Strauss, who remarked that Freud’s conception of the mind accorded with the imagery of geology, “a layered terrain, with its strata and substrata, fissures and breaks, eruptions into violence” (p. 20). In Goulet’s readings, fiction explores a terrain where past and present overlap, and where what is buried beneath the surface continues to menace political and psychic order. What traces do the traumas experienced by prior generations leave on those who live in the present? Goulet finds this question puzzled out in the work of the Parisian writer Fred Vargas. Mobilizing the psychoanalytic theory of the “Transgenerational Phantom,” she shows how Vargas’s *Pars vite et reviens tard* “relates the subterranean geologies of violence to a specifically linguistic model of the uncanny,” in part through Vargas’s creation of two characters, a psychoanalyst and an historian, to aid a sleuthing protagonist (pp. 148-9).

Goulet is equally trenchant when she turns her attention to the mapping of a city “poised between the constraints of the traditional polity and the networked open-ness of an emergent global economy,” like the Paris we find in the work of the experimental crime writer Léo Malet (p. 215). Malet, argues Goulet (with reference to David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*) was a trailblazer of postmodernist forms and space. Malet’s urban maps were of a piece with the anti-rationalist and anti-urbanist critiques of the 1960s and 1970s; as “visual add-ons,” the maps sit uneasily in relation to the text that they accompany, thereby resisting rational spatial order (p. 223).

A heightened sense of disorientation came after the Cold War, the fallout of which included warring violence in the heart of Europe. At the same time, anxieties about the “dark side” of an increasingly connected world inscribed itself in France’s *noir* fiction. Reading *La ballade d’un Yougo* (2000), a trilogy of novels by the Serbian-born writer Vladan Radoman, Goulet highlights the “cartographic confusion” and “shattered spatiality” that occurred when Yugoslavia broke up in the 1990s, and the threat to French identity that these implied (pp. 224-5). Radoman’s antihero, Vic Toar, is a former “rapist-killer special agent” from Belgrade who sheds his skin and settles in the French city of Nice as a poet and physician. But his violent impulses do not remain in Belgrade. His horrific past effectively splits his mental space in two. In a narrative parallel, the landscape of Nice becomes a “shadow-space” of Vic Toar’s former home (p. 235), foretelling a collapse. Later in the story, the war in the Balkans folds back into sun-drenched Nice, bringing the city’s complete ruin.

It is here that I raise a minor objection to this otherwise exquisite piece of scholarship. Why, on the heels of such a rangy and multi-dimensional course, does *Legacies of the Rue Morgue* offer so little in the way of concluding remarks? Having carried the subject squarely into the twenty-first century, the book trails off with an anodyne couple of paragraphs reporting what many readers may already know: crime fiction remains a commercial success today. We are thus left wondering what the author would make of the genre's permutations in light of the new century's defining crimes and traumas.

NOTES

[1] Stephen Greenblatt et al., *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1.

[2] Christie McDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman, eds., *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), xiii-ix.

[3] Jernej Habjan and Fabienne Imlinger, *Globalizing Literary Genres: Literature, History, Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 3.

[4] Uri Eisenzweig, "Madness and the Colonies: French and Anglo-Saxon Versions of the Mysterious Origins of Crime," *L'Esprit Créateur* XXVI, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 3-14.

[5] Greenblatt et al., *Cultural Mobility*, 2.

[6] Luc Boltanski, *Énigmes et complots. Une enquête à propos d'enquêtes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012); Dominique Kalifa, *L'Encre et le sang: récits de crime et société à la Belle Époque* (Paris: Fayard, 1995); Robin Walz, *Pulp Surrealism: Insolent Popular Culture in Early-Twentieth Century Paris* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

[7] See, for example, J. Gerald Kennedy and Liliane Weissberg, eds., *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[8] Donald Reid, *Paris Sewers and Sewermen: Realities and Representations* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993); Dominique Kalifa, *Les Bas-fonds* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

Aaron Freundsuh
The City University of New York, Queens College
Aaron.Freundsuh@qc.cuny.edu

Copyright © 2016 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. H-France reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in

electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Forum* nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum

Volume 11, no. 5 (2016), No. 2