

The Critic of Modern Life and Edgar Allan Poe's “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”

Modern Hayatın Eleştirmeni ve Edgar Allan Poe'nun “Morg Sokağı Cinayetleri”

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe's oeuvre has undoubtedly been pioneering in the field of detective fiction not only for American literature but also for various literatures across the world. With his detective stories, Poe introduced the eccentric figure of Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin—synthesizing ratiocinative capabilities with imaginative faculty. This article focuses on Edgar Allan Poe's ambivalent characterization of detective Dupin in the short story “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” The main point is to examine the emergence of the detective figure as a reaction to the rapidly changing world of mid-nineteenth century urban modernity. While focusing on the first detective story of its kind, this paper argues that the portrayal of Dupin's partial attachment to the past and his temporal dislocation as a displaced individual in the predominantly bourgeois society is used as a means to provide a critique of the modern world and to reveal the ambivalence of modern man confronted with conflicting forces between the past and the present. While the first half of the article focuses on the detective's alliance with both the past and the present values by examining specific illustrations of this ambivalence, the second half, borrowing from the works of Foucault, Benjamin and Moretti, discusses the theoretical ramifications of the detective's embodiment of modern surveillance culture.

Keywords: Detective fiction, Edgar Allan Poe, The Murders in the Rue Morgue, nostalgia, surveillance

Öz

Edgar Allan Poe'nun eserleri kuşkusuz sadece Amerikan polisiye türünde değil dünya edebiyatındaki örnekler için de öncü bir rol oynamıştır. Yazdığı dedektif hikâyelerinde Poe, mantık ve düşgücünü sentezleyebilen bir karakter olan Dupin'i yaratmıştır. Bu makale, Edgar Allan Poe'nun “Morg Sokağı Cinayetleri” adlı kısa hikayesinde çelişkilerle dolu bir dedektif karakteri olarak resmedilen Dupin'e odaklanacak ve dedektif figürünün ortaya çıkışını ondokuzuncu yüzyılın ortasında hızla değişen dünyanın modernleşmesine bir tepki olarak inceleyecektir. İlk dedektif öyküsü olarak kabul edilen bu eseri inceleyen makaledeki amacım, Dupin'in geçmişe olan kısmi bağlılığının ve burjuva toplumunda yerinden edilmiş bir aristokrat olarak resmedilişinin modern hayatın bir eleştirisi olarak kullanıldığını ve geçmiş ile günümüz arasında sıkışıp kalmış olan modern bireyin yaşadığı çelişkileri ortaya çıkardığını tartışmaktır. Makalenin ilk yarısı dedektif karakterinin hem geçmiş hem de günümüz değerlerine bağlılığını metinden spesifik örneklerle incelerken ikinci bölümü, Foucault, Benjamin ve Moretti'den örnekler ışığında, dedektif karakterinin modern gözetleme kültürünün bir simgesi oluşunu tartışır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dedektif roman, Edgar Allan Poe, Morg Sokağı Cinayetleri, nostalji, gözetim

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Edgar Allan Poe wrote only a few detective stories featuring the enigmatic figure of Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin; yet, these stories have served as milestones in the creation of the genre of detective fiction. After Dupin, various eccentric detective figures such as Sherlock Holmes, Monsieur Lecoq, Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple were generated by writers from diverse socio-historical contexts. Despite differences, what these characters share is a certain state of dissatisfaction with contemporary life and a longing for the past when the social conditions were supposedly much better than the present. Indeed, nostalgia has long been generically associated with detective fiction. While focusing on "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," which is the first detective story of its kind, this paper argues that Poe's portrayal of Dupin's partial attachment to the past and his temporal dislocation as a displaced individual in the predominantly bourgeois society is a means to provide a critique of the modern world and to reveal the ambivalence of modern man confronted with conflicting forces between the past and the present. Poe fervently protests the alienation generated by the emerging capitalist economy, against which he posits Dupin's pseudo-chivalric world.

Being one of the three "tales of ratiocination" ["The Mystery of Marie Roget" (1842); "The Purloined Letter" (1844)], "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) opens with a long description of analytical reasoning. Disconnected from the rest of the story mainly because of its omniscient third person narrator, the function of this opening section is to describe and uphold rationality as the combination of intelligence, intuition and good observation skills—precisely those abilities that are harmoniously synthesized in the figure of the detective. What follows the opening setup is an introduction of the charismatic detective by the unnamed narrator who briefly mentions how he met Dupin in a library in Paris, became friends with him and proposed to live together. Having access to Dupin's mind and to the progression of the story through the first person narration of the unnamed narrator facilitates the valorization of the detective especially since the unperceptive narrator, who clearly admires the detective's wit, narrates Dupin's actions without fully grasping his reasoning. Because the story is presented through the narrator's perspective, Dupin stands detached from the reader as well, and poses as an enigma. Structurally speaking, the narrative helps the celebration of the detective's control mechanism.

While describing the "true detective story as Poe conceived it," J. Brander Matthews argues that "it is not in the mystery itself that the author seeks to interest the reader, but rather in the successive steps whereby his analytic observer is enabled to solve the problem" (85). Located at the center of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," Dupin imposes a controlling gaze over the story in which action is limited to the minimum and the emphasis is on Dupin's step-by-step approach to solve the mystery. What follows the long introduction on analytical reasoning and the background of the main characters is a further engagement with texts and the act of interpretation—the reader rarely sees the detective "in action." Dupin's review of the newspaper clips and the witness reports of the crime is only briefly interrupted by a short visit to the crime scene and the gathering of the clues: throughout the story Dupin mostly sits, reads, or converses with the narrator, eventually explaining every detail that he has meticulously followed in his step-by-step analysis while comfortably seated in his armchair. As unbelievable as it sounds, the two victims, Madame L'Esplanaye and her daughter have been brutally murdered by an orang-outang that has been brought to Paris by a sailor who recklessly failed to control the impetuously provoked animal. Tension is maintained through the contrast between the detective's extremely powerful mechanism of reasoning and what seems as the least likely, the most absurd of crimes, committed by an orang-outang. The irrationality behind the fact that the criminal

turns out to be an animal helps to firmly strengthen the scientific logic of Dupin whose rationality can solve even the most unthinkable murder by a nonhuman. Hence, the aim of the story is to bring to the foreground the ratiocination capabilities of this brilliant human brain.

In contrast to his analytical capacity, Dupin's personal life is given as one of gradual decline, loss and depletion. As we learn from the narrator at the beginning of the story, Dupin is a descendant of an "illustrious family," which has lost its aristocratic power and wealth (381). Living on a "small remnant of his patrimony" and sustaining himself through "rigorous economy," Dupin, the misplaced aristocrat fallen from grandeur, does not hold a regular job (381). Living together with the narrator in "a time-eaten and grotesque mansion, long deserted through superstitions" (382), Dupin's secluded lifestyle in which he leisurely reads, writes, talks to the narrator and strolls around the city isolates him from the mainstream society and middle class norms of living. The eccentric couple's Gothic mansion contrasts with the vibrant, if chaotic, urban life in central Paris where the murders have been committed. In the story, Dupin and the narrator have to take an extended walk to Rue Morgue, "one of the most miserable thoroughfares a quarter that is ... a great distance from that in which [they] resided" (393). Crime disrupts not only the routine of Parisian daily life but also seeps into the habitual comfortable aristocratic existence that has long been pushed aside to continue its parasitic existence in the peripheries of urban life. As the narrator relates,

Had the routine of our life at this place been known to the world, we should have been regarded as madmen—although, perhaps, as madmen of a harmless nature. Our seclusion was perfect. We admitted no visitors. Indeed the locality of our retirement had been carefully kept a secret from my own former associates; and it had been many years since Dupin had ceased to know or be known in Paris. We existed within ourselves alone. (382)

Decked with romantic gloom and a heightened state of contemplative mood, or what the narrator calls "wild fervor, and the vivid freshness of ... imagination" (382), the way Dupin is portrayed in this part of the story is not a far cry from a Byronic hero who is susceptible to forbidden passions and mysterious habits, with which the narrator unhesitatingly complies:

At the first dawn of the morning we closed all the massy shutters of our old building; lighted a couple of tapers which, strongly perfumed, threw out only the ghestliest and feeblest of rays. By the aid of these we then busied our souls in dreams—reading, writing, or conversing, until warned by the clock of the advent of the true Darkness. Then we sallied forth into the streets, arm in arm, continuing the topics of the day, or roaming far and wide until a late hour, seeking, amid the wild lights and shadows of the populous city, that infinity of mental excitement which quiet observation can afford. (382)

Belonging to the nocturnal rather than diurnal aspects of city life, Dupin is paradoxically associated with the urban world as he is with his Gothic "castle." He takes as much pleasure in his solitary aristocratic existence as he takes in his regular nocturnal urban perambulations throughout the city.

Dupin's isolation can be seen as a social commentary on the socio-historical conditions Edgar Allan Poe witnessed during his lifetime. Poe, like Conan Doyle and a number of other detective ficti-

on writers, writes at a time when aristocratic values are in decline. Poe seems to partake in a certain category of detective fiction in which upper class values are firmly protected in the glorification of the superiority of the mind of the detective who stands for the financially deceased aristocratic class that has nevertheless preserved its "mental supremacy." As Jon Thompson comments,

Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin exists as a projection of the aristocratic ideals found in the antebellum South. . . . Dupin's acute faculty of reasoning, superior to the mere calculating ability of the prefect and the unimaginative bourgeoisie in general, stands as an emblem of the superiority of the aristocracy to the leveling effects of democracy. Dupin's patrician intellect alone is capable of penetrating the mysteries of bourgeois society. Thus the aristocracy, of which Dupin is the proud descendant and representative in an otherwise-tarnished age, figures as the implied utopian resolution to the contemporary failures of industrial democracy and the polluted agrarianism of the South. (48-56)

While it is possible to draw a connection between Dupin's conservative politics and the social context of the age in which he emerged, it is also equally possible to relate his fictional status to the changing economic conditions of the mid-nineteenth century. In a similar way to Poe's experience of the traumatic transition from the old to the new order, one could define Dupin through his homelessness: not fully belonging to an archaic past, nor to the emerging modern present, but dwelling on the threshold. As J. Gerald Kennedy argues,

Estrangement figures importantly, of course, in Poe's narrative scheme, and his isolated, reclusive protagonists rarely participate in the activities of a larger society. While this tendency may be ascribed to his Gothic models, it also reflects contemporary cultural and socioeconomic changes. The foster son of a dry-goods merchant, Poe witnessed the 'market revolution' (as Charles Sellers term it) that saw a family-based subsistence economy give way to an aggressive capitalist system bringing entrepreneurial opportunity but also cutthroat competition and profit-driven exploitation. (8)

Thus, though Dupin emerges out of the conditions of mid-nineteenth century America, it is possible to locate his dilemma within the larger context of the modern world.

Dupin's ambivalence between the past and the present is most visibly evident in his relationship with the metropolitan space and in his peculiar methodology in dealing with crime and urban chaos. As at odds as he is with modern metropolis, Dupin is equally its product. In the stories, Detective Dupin not only relies on an archaic methodology but also effectively makes use of modern metropolitan facilities to overcome urban chaos. The modern mass medium of the newspaper, which functions as one of the basic forms of mass communication in the nineteenth century, serves as a crucial source of knowledge for Dupin's methodology. The detective is portrayed as a figure who takes advantage of the urban network and the modern methods of communication, not only through the way he learns about the crime but also through his operative use of *Le Monde* to post an advertisement, which enables him to reach the owner of the ourang-outang; hence, bring the murder case to a resolution.

However, his method simultaneously reveals an archaic, old fashioned worldview since Dupin brings together a peculiar mixture of the modern means of communication with a somewhat naïve belief in a small—almost provincial—community in which everyone is assumed to be in possessi-

on of common information through limited means of communication. In defiance of the increasing alienation and standardization in the city of Paris, Dupin insists on personal relations and partially counter-urban practices both in his methodology and in his initial involvement with the murder case. He relies on personal connections in the police department in order to get permission to inspect the crime scene, which posits a sharp contrast to the purely impersonal methodology applied by the police in charge of the murder case. Moreover, even under straining conditions, the reason why he decides to work on the murder case is neither related to financial concerns nor to the requirements of a regular job but to purely personal reasons, as the narrator recounts:

..let us enter into some examinations for ourselves, before we make up an opinion respecting them. An inquiry will afford us amusement, [I thought this an odd term, so applied, but said nothing] and besides, Le Bon once rendered me a service for which I am not ungrateful. We will go and see the premises with our own eyes. I know G — — , the Prefect of Police, and shall have no difficulty in obtaining the necessary permission. (393)

To be sure, the decision to pursue a case for “amusement” reflects a potentially self-centered, even parasitic existence enabled by an abundance of leisure at the expense of the labor of others. Yet, one could also see Dupin’s bohemian existence as a rejection to participate in the capitalist economy in which leisure and amusement are increasingly eliminated. As an alternative to the predominant money economy, Dupin proposes the old system of barter: in return for the service he has received from Le Bon, who has been unjustly accused of murder, Dupin decides to solve the mystery and prove Le Bon’s innocence.

In his denial of all forms of societal norms, Dupin’s greatest rival and enemy is surely the police department. In posing the detective and the policemen as foils and then portraying the latter as miserably defeated, Edgar Allan Poe valorizes a specific type of rationality. What is extraordinary about Dupin is not only his rationality, but a coeval capability for imagination and artistic vision, which verges on irrational, almost supernatural powers. At the beginning of the story, for instance, the narrator draws attention to the co-existence of “the creative and the resolvent” in Dupin when he is able to read the mind of the narrator through mathematical logic *and* intuition—a heavy-handed foreshadowing of how he will eventually solve the murder mystery (383). The manner in which Dupin appears to the narrator in such moments when he reads others’ minds is far from the self-possessed individual engaged with calculated reasoning. Indeed, the detective is described almost in a state of trance or hysteria: his manner is “frigid and abstract,” his eyes are “vacant in expression,” and his voice rises “into a treble” (383). The degree of the contrast between the detective and the police is exacerbated in the clear difference between the two sides’ engagement with the investigation. The detective’s archaic sense of honor and justice is irreconcilable with the modern methods of legalization maintained by police officers. Although both the detective and the police rationalize, categorize, and list things, the latter’s method is too reductionist and goal-oriented—a reflection of nineteenth-century positivistic thinking: “We must not judge of the means ... by this shell of an examination. The Parisian police, so much extolled for acumen, are cunning, but no more. There is no method in their proceedings, beyond the method of the moment,” Dupin scorns the policemen (392). Indeed, the desire to achieve quick results mislead the officers into arresting the bank clerk Le Bon despite lack of substantial evidence against him: the money which Le Bon has brought from the bank to the apartment in Rue Morgue with Madame L’Espanaye is left untouched after the

murders. As Dupin, patiently and carefully pursuing the case, will reveal, Le Bon is as little involved with the crime as all the other witnesses in the neighborhood. In contrast to Dupin, the police Prefect's major flaw is to opt for rapid progress as demanded by the contemporary profit-driven, result-oriented world, and impose arbitrary results to the murder case.

The control mechanism applied by Dupin and the police department can be seen as different—though not opposing—modes of disciplinary society. As Jon Thompson argues,

...in the person of Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, Poe creates a figure whose omniscience is comparable to that of a panopticon. ... The chief significance of Foucault's notion of the disciplinary society for Poe's detective fiction, then, is that it articulates a desire for a complete form of knowledge, a desire that ultimately becomes a structural element of the genre. This desire for knowledge is not an immutable feature of detective fiction but changes with the transformations in the genre. At the same time, however, Poe's stories reject the empirical, 'scientific' mode of knowledge that was doing so much to revolutionize existing technologies and industry, recasting them into a modern industrial, capitalist, and democratic mold. (44-45)

Though Poe's detective fiction is critical to contemporary values, it also aptly mimics the surveillance culture of the mid-nineteenth century embodied in the figure of the detective. Detective fiction's reliance on and confirmation of certain mechanisms of surveillance has been pointed out by various critics who have mostly drawn on the principles of panopticism as illustrated by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*. Foucault's archeological method illustrates the shifting perspectives on the publicization of power from absolutist regimes to modern governments. During the course of the nineteenth century, Foucault notes, a significant change in the method of legal punishment has been observed when modern institutionalized methods of surveillance and trial replaced public executions. In other words, public display of power became more subtle though not less enforced.

Viewed in this light, the imaginative control applied by detective fiction parallels the emergence of such institutions of spectatorial power that render all segments of society visible. In *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, Walter Benjamin demonstrates that physiologies, which are individual sketches of various human types that are encountered in the streets of Paris anticipate and serve as forerunners for the detective story whose content "focused on the obliteration of the individual's traces in the big-city crowd" (74). These physiologies, on an imaginative level, transformed the anonymity of the urban crowds into a recognizable group of individual types. Using the Foucauldian paradigm, Benjamin's methodology reveals the control process that can be observed not only in literature but also in everyday practices. The obligatory numbering of houses, for instance, enforced for the purposes of standardization (78), simultaneously bolstered the encroachment of the modern French government. Equally inhibiting were the consequences of technical developments such as the invention of photography (79), and alterations in social life such as the replacement of the arcades with the department stores. Hence, Benjamin underlines the parallelism between literary developments and various other practices employed in mid-nineteenth century Paris.

In his analysis of Sherlock Holmes stories, Franco Moretti also makes a strong case to present detective fiction as an extension of the surveillance culture of the mid-nineteenth century. Commenting on a famous Holmes story, "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches," Moretti draws attention to the

detective's approach to his "art" as Holmes defines it as "an impersonal thing—a thing beyond myself" (qtd. in Moretti 141-142), which is metaphorically displayed through Holmes' self-destructive habits such as "endless series of disguises, sleepless nights, and inability to eat during an investigation" (142). Like Dupin, Holmes stands for the dehumanized, abstract mechanism of control: "the great doctor of the late Victorians, who convinces them that society is still a great *organism*: a unitary and knowable body" (145). In Moretti's interpretation, detective fiction ultimately upholds the "totalitarian aspiration towards a *transparent* society" (136), and the detective figure is portrayed as the embodiment of this aspiration. Indeed, Moretti refers to Holmes as "culture" which "will reach you anywhere" (143).

Poe's criticism, however, falls short of being a transformative commentary of on modern society that urgently calls for reformation: it is confined to a mere reflection of the debilitating effects of urban life and the surveillance culture of the century. The main purpose of the story is to prove the victory of analytical reasoning rather than to evoke social responsibilities. The focus of the story is how the detective solves the crime rather than how the criminal commits the crime (or how the animal has been brought from the colonized lands to Paris, in this particular case). In other words, Dupin is neither interested in the reason why society produces criminals nor in the background of the criminal (indeed, it could even be an animal). In his discussion of the ideology of rationalism in the story Jon Thompson argues that "Nowhere is it suggested that crime may have a social cause or a class character; for Poe it is an abstract puzzle, an intriguing deviation from an otherwise smoothly running social mechanism" (49). Ridding crime of its social dimension, Poe turns it into an analytical problem. Detective Dupin is by no means concerned about the fair treatment of all: after all, Dupin does not hand the guilty sailor over to the police. The end of the story narrates a brief scene at the bureau of the Prefect of the Police, where Dupin announces Le Bon's innocence, who is "instantly released" (409). The mystery is resolved. Dupin is equally disinterested in the background of the victims: Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter are given as ordinary people—perhaps too ordinary as to attract Dupin's attention, which enables him to focus only on the crime event as a problem. After solving the mystery, Dupin will go back to his usual eccentric habits; hence, keeping urban crime almost as an object to be observed at a distance away from the hectic and dangerous urban life.

The anxiety about the potential danger of urban space is exacerbated in the story so that Dupin steps into this unstable world as if he is a rescuer, reminiscent of a 'knight' figure from the medieval world. The gloomy portrayal of nineteenth-century-Parisian life, in which people living in the same neighborhood or in the same apartment side by side for years are in fact strangers to each other, is intensified by the horrifying fact that such an abominable crime was rendered possible amidst this indifferent crowd caught up in the maelstrom of urban life. The element of the grotesque, now standing both for the typical seclusion of the Gothic characters and condemnation of the metropolitan life, seeps into Poe's tale of ratiocination with the graphic details of the horrifying crime: Madame L'Espanaye's body is so mutilated that her head is severed from her body; the daughter's corpse is found inside the chimney, turned upside down. Dana Brand argues that, "The nature of these murders is such as to imply that, in the metropolis virtually anything can happen to anyone at any time" (226). Brand notes a similar degree of anxiety in "The Mystery of Marie Roget," the other detective story featuring detective Dupin: "The brutalization and decomposition of the corpse suggest here the mangling and obliteration of human identity in the metropolis" (228). One could consider the decay of the corpses as metaphors for urban anonymity, which is posited as a problem in detective fiction that is temporarily solved when the criminal is identified at the end of the story.

That the city breeds anonymous crowds of people is also emphasized in the content of the newspaper clips, particularly the witness reports that point at lack of communication as a fundamental crisis in the emerging urban world. Such miscommunication is a serious urban problem. While the horrifying (yet solvable) murder provides a distraction from the permanent troubles of metropolitan life, it also gives the false impression that urban chaos is only related to crime; hence, making the city a legible space. The cosmopolitan Parisian crowd, portrayed as an exaggerated version of the modern Tower of Babel, provides little help to the investigation since they all define the criminal's 'shrill voice' as belonging to a national speaking a language different than their own. For instance, while the English tailor William Bird claims that the voice belongs to a German despite his lack of familiarity with the language, the Italian confectioner Alberto Montani, not being conversant with the Russian language, still identifies the shrill voice as that of a Russian (389-390). The recurrent pattern in such illegibility of urban dwellers to each other is to mark the criminal as the other/the foreigner. Moreover, none of the witnesses is able to provide substantial information about the two women other than repeating the basic fact that Madame L'Esplanade and her daughter lead an isolated life, admitting few visitors—which echo the secluded life of Dupin and the narrator. Hence, the story implies the potential for creative energy imbedded in the diverse population of modern Paris and their means of communication, but it also points at the destructive forces behind the urban reality.

Roughly put, Poe liberally unleashes violence in his story and then suppresses it by controlling and containing it within the story. "[T]his controlled exposure to urban anxiety" (Brand 229) provides a cathartic effect on the reader and a ground to cope with the changing world. As Brand argues, "The structure of the detective story permits the reader to experience both the thrill of epistemological and physical anxiety in the city and the pleasure of its resolution" (229). In the story, the city is given as a text to be read and interpreted; hence, contained. Indeed, the way Dupin pursues the case is quite textual: sitting at home, he reads the newspaper, looks up an encyclopedia as he ponders over the mystery of the city text. Part of the function of the detective is to soothe the readers and offer a temporary shelter from their enervating metropolitan existence. Though the genre can easily be dismissed as 'escapist' and anti-mimetic, it also bears significant potential to provide grounds for alternative readings of the modern experience because of its oppositional stance against contemporary values. Although Poe's social criticism—perhaps partly to do with his reactionary politics, or with the narrative limits of an emerging literary form—eventually fails to serve as a politically committed constructive commentary, Poe nevertheless plays a pioneering role in introducing the detective fiction as a potentially subversive form of the coming century.

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