

## Confronting Mystery with Method

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The Doomed Detective: The Contribution of the Detective Novel to Postmodern American and Italian Fiction. By Stefano Tani. Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1984. 199 pp. \$17.95.

That optimistic baby had come on so like the private eye in any long-ago radio drama, believing all you needed was grit, resourcefulness, exemption from hidebound cops' rules, to solve any great mystery.

But the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on.

--The Crying of Lot 49<sup>1</sup>

Like the Thin Man, the Shadow, and optimistic Oedipa, the literary critic confronts mystery with method. Like Raymond Chandler, both Oedipa and the literary critic are seeking "not for a specific criminal, but for a *raison d'être*, a meaning in character and relationship, what the hell went on, rather than who done it."<sup>2</sup> Unlike the radio detectives, or Oedipa, or Chandler, however, the critic does not usually aim to solve a mystery once and for all, but rather to illuminate one aspect of a text, a genre, or some other literary phenomenon, to suggest one way of understanding the subject, but certainly not to eliminate all other ways. The critic who aims for more is bound "sooner or later [ . . . ] to get beat up on."

There is no need to beat up on Stefano Tani. The Doomed Detective is an intelligent, engaging, and appropriately modest book, a fine example of the very important kind of work that Thomas Kuhn (whom Tani quotes) calls normal science. By combining a convincing argument with a number of sensitive readings of familiar and unfamiliar works, it contributes to our understanding of both of its subjects, the detective novel genre and the postmodern mode of writing, without claiming to revolutionize our views on either.

In his opening chapter, Tani presents a brief history of the detective story in English and in Italian, and then suggests that postmodern writers have chosen to plunder this tradition rather than develop it, to "use the form as a scrapyard [. . .]; the detective novel clichés are like the spare parts of an old car that cannot run any more but, if sold as parts, can still be worth something" (34). Drawing on the work of Jurij Tynjanov, Tani argues that postmodern "anti-detective" writers make parodic use of certain elements of detective fiction in their efforts to construct a new sensibility and a new mode of writing. These writers take, for example, a mystery or puzzle, a detective-figure, and/or a process of deduction, and combine them with the promise of a solution and the suspenseful delay of that solution. Such a combination allows them to take advantage of the expectations these devices arouse in the reader, whom they can then disappoint in interesting and significant ways.

Tani classifies the ways in which this is done as either "innovative," "deconstructive," or "meta-fictional." The innovative anti-detective novel makes use of the detective novel conventions for its own purposes without subverting them completely; it provides a solution to the mystery, but this solution is for some reason unsatisfactory. Tani's discussions under this heading of John Gardner's *The Sunlight Dialogues* and especially of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* are too brief (six pages on Gardner; six-and-one-half on Eco) to provide more than a few aperçus about those texts. His somewhat longer treatment of Leonardo Sciascia's marvelous little novel *A ciascuno il suo* (*A Man's Blessing*) is more satisfying in its textual analysis and its examination of the way Sciascia uses the detective novel form for social commentary and metaphysical meditation. In Tani's convincing reading, the novel exposes the social and moral effects of the Sicilian "conspiracy of silence" (61), the traditional *omertà* which allows violent crime to go unpunished and fosters the activities of the mafia. Its investigator's mistake is to believe that finding out who is responsible for a certain double murder will somehow purge the community of guilt and reestablish social order. What he doesn't realize is that most of the community know who is guilty already,

and are too wise to say anything about it. Instead of furthering the cause of justice, the investigator's efforts only bring about another murder, this time his own.

Tani's chapter on the deconstructive anti-detective novel is of special interest to Pynchon readers since it contains analyses not only of Sciascia's Todo modo (One Way or Another) and William Hjortsberg's Falling Angel, but also of The Crying of Lot 49. Tani writes that this branch of anti-detective fiction frustrates readers by pretending to follow the conventions of the classic genre, but then refusing to provide the solution they lead us to expect. Whereas innovative anti-detective novels use the closed form of the classic version but question the value of the closing solution, deconstructive anti-detective novels remain open and deny the reader the satisfaction of any solution at all.

The application of this formula to The Crying of Lot 49 is clear enough; it has, in fact, become a commonplace of Pynchon criticism to point out the parallels between this novel and detective fiction.<sup>3</sup> Tani's reading of the novel contributes more to the credibility of his own overall thesis than it does to the wide world of Pynchon studies. It is concise and practically unexceptionable; my only quibble is with the unexplained personification of Tristero, the suggestion that as "the fictional, mysterious 'author'" "he" is "almost the same person" as "Thomas Pynchon (the real, mysterious author)" (98). Apart from this curious contention, Tani's treatment of the novel does provide original insight into the tantalizing effect of its "overrichness of clues" (96) and the doubleness of an ending that embodies "structural nonsolution (the open-endedness) and an emotional solution (Oedipa's growth to maturity and compassion)" (95). His pages on Pynchon are worth looking at, but unlikely to provide any revelations for the Pynchon scholar.

The section on the meta-fictional detective novel is the most sustained in the book. Tani's analysis of Calvino's If On a Winter's Night a Traveler is an invaluable guide to that novel, whose levels of discourse and narration it lays out most clearly, and whose language it explains in a lucid way, even for

readers with no Italian. His reading of Nabokov's Pale Fire is equally impressive, though his suggestion that Kinbote actually arranged John Shade's murder (142-44) strikes me as unconvincing and, in the end, unnecessary.

In his Introduction, Tani suggests that two of the hallmarks of postmodernism are that it is "de-structuring and asymbolic" (xii) and that it is therefore the formal obverse of the highly structured detective novel, whose every detail is at least potentially imbued with meaning. Tani has chosen his terms carefully, but only one of them works for Pynchon and, I think, for postmodern writing in general. Pynchon's texts are certainly not unstructured. They may be understood as de-structuring in Tani's sense of the term. To say that they are asymbolic strikes me as not quite right and as too limiting a definition for postmodern literary art in general. Merce Cunningham has been making asymbolic dances for years, and a whole generation has followed his example; non-objective, symbolic art was old news long before V. was even a gleam in Pynchon's eye. Asymbolic literary art, however, is hard to find, and even harder to read (see, for example, the texts of Phillippe Sollers). Post-modern literature certainly problematizes the relation between the signifier and the signified, but it does not abandon signification or the symbol altogether. It is not surprising, therefore, that Tani focuses more on structure than on symbol. This is a wise choice, and it helps define both the value of his book, and its limitations. As a study of literary evolution, the history of a genre and the structure of postmodern narrative, The Doomed Detective is most valuable. It is not, however, nor does it pretend to be, a definitive analysis of postmodern textuality. Such an analysis would have to rely on a more sophisticated understanding of symbolization than is evident here.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (New York: Bantam, 1967), 91.

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker, Raymond Chandler Speaking (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 57.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Tony Tanner, Thomas Pynchon (New York: Methuen, 1982), 56; Edward Mendelson, "The Sacred, the Profane, and The Crying of Lot 49" (1975; rpt. in Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 123-24; Geoffrey Hartman, "Literature High and Low: The Case of the Mystery Story" (1972; rpt. in The Poetics of Murder, eds. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 215, 218-19.