'The Impotence of Human Reason': E.C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* and the 'Anti-Detective Text'

Abstract

This article considers the parodic subversion and self-conscious deconstruction of the analytical detective format in E.C. Bentley's *Trent's Last* Case (1913). Exploring the text's problematisation of concepts such as logic and reason and its disruption of the detective's ocularcentric interpretative framework, the author highlights the ways in which *Trent's Last Case* unsettles delineations between the classic analytic detective story and the 'metaphysical' or 'anti' detective text.

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Described by Agatha Christie as "one of the three best detective stories ever written"[i], E.C Bentley's classic 'whodunit' *Trent's Last Case* (1913) is often heralded as a prototypical 'Golden Age' detective novel. Featuring an urbane, ratiocinative detective and located within the typically closed, almost claustrophobic domestic environment, Kenneth Van Dover argues that Bentley's novel anticipates and heavily influences the later and "more fully realized" works of classic golden age writers such as Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers (32). This perception of Bentley's novel as being one of the inaugurating texts in the tradition of the

golden age novel is fairly typical of many critical discussions surrounding both the text's significance and lasting impact. Jessica Mann for instance is one of a multitude of critics that has similarly emphasised the impact of *Trent's Last Case* on the development of the detective format, not only describing the novel as a "masterpiece" but also hailing Bentley as both "the regenerator of the long detective novel in England" and as the creator of a new narrative "model" that greatly influenced the genre's "post-war renaissance" (38).

Despite such pronouncements, it is fair to say that *Trent's Last Case* seems to have slipped between the cracks of academic interest. Although frequently mentioned, albeit in passing, in many studies on crime fiction, prolonged critical analyses of Bentley's novel are few and far between. Jessica's Mann's description is fairly typical of the majority of theoretical discourse concerning *Trent's Last Case*, most of which tends to emphasise its connection to the "glory days of the rule bound literary detection that arrived during the 1920's and 1930's" (Rzepka 13). This is especially surprising considering the ways in which Bentley's text self-consciously parodies, subverts and deconstructs many of the generic expectations that have come to typify the golden age detective novel, particularly those later formalised by S.S. Van Dine in 'Twenty Rules for Writing detective stories' (1928). Not only is amateur sleuth Phillip Trent unable to successfully solve the central mystery, but the novel pushes the parameters of 'fair play' to such an extent that it is similarly impossible for the reader. Notions of logic and causality are replaced by chance and coincidence, whilst seemingly concrete clues become volatile and open to interpretation.

In this respect, *Trent's Last Case* arguably counters many of the basic principles that underlie the logic of the 'classic' or 'golden age' detective formats, deconstructing rather than affirming "the value of scientific reason, logic and teleology" (Chambers 31). Such a catastrophic failing of these basic rules and constructs untimely causes one to question the extent to which - outside of its golden age furnishings - *Trent's Last Case* can really be

considered a classic or golden age detective novel at all. Due to its self-conscious and parodic disavowal of many traditional genre conventions, it could in fact be argued that *Trent's Last Case* has more in common with the tradition that has been variously been known as the 'postmodern', 'metaphysical' or 'anti' detective narrative[ii].

In their edited collection *Detecting Texts: The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodern,* Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney attempt to map the emergence and development of the 'anti-detective' text since before Poe's first tale of ratiocination. Considering the various manifestations of the form, they define the metaphysical detective narrative as a "text that deliberately parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions - such as narrative closure and the detective's role as surrogate reader - with the intention, or at least effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot" (2). This term 'metaphysical' was first utilised in conjunction with the detective narrative by Howard Haycraft in his seminal text *Murder for Pleasure* (1941), as he sought to distinguish between the classic positivistic detection of Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and the "philosophico-theological" variant created by G.K Chesterton (Merivale & Sweeney 4). For Haycraft, Chesterton's Father Brown stories offered a "philosophical" variation on the traditional detective narrative, magnifying the "moral and religious aspects of crime" rather than the systematic processes of detection itself (76). Although Father Brown still utilises logic and deductive reasoning to some extent, Chesterton's texts acknowledge and espouse the existence of divine mysteries beyond the grasp of positivistic detection and scientific methodology.

Merivale and Sweeney appropriate this term to refer to a genre of predominantly Post-War experimental fiction that utilises the detective format to explore questions surrounding subjectivity, interpretation and the limits of knowledge[iii]. Centralising its discussion upon some of the key structural, thematic and textual features of the form, *Detecting Texts* focuses

primarily on the metaphysical detective text's "kinship to postmodernist and modernist fiction" (Merivale & Sweeney 1). This perceived synergy between the 'anti' or 'metaphysical' detective text and the cultural-aesthetic preoccupations of postmodernity is predominantly predicated on the form's frequent utilisation of parodic literary stylistics, as well as its tendency to explore epistemological and ontological anxieties that stretch beyond the central narrative itself.

Merivale and Sweeney's text is symptomatic of a number of comparable critical approaches that have emphasised this correlation between the 'ant-detective novel' and postmodern. In his essay 'the Detective and the Boundary' for instance, William Spanos defines the anti-detective text as "the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination" (154). He begins by establishing a correlation between the 'classic' detective novel and enlightenment philosophy, arguing that the ratiocinative detective emerged out of a new desire to exhibit the "susceptibility of nature to rational explanation" (157). Through the staunch application of scientific rationality and reason, this deductive, analytical style of detection therefore operated to validate the assumption that reality can be tangibly structured into a "well-made cosmic drama" (147, 150). By deliberately frustrating the causal format of the whodunit and refusing to solve the central crime, Spanos argues that the anti-detective novel therefore rejects the notion of a preordained or teleologically determined structure of the world, and thus mirrors the social, political and epistemological anxieties that underpin postmodernity.

This view is further echoed by Michael Holquist, who asserts that postmodernism deliberately exploits and modifies the parameters and expectations of the detective text in the same way that modernism appropriates and adapts the potentialities of psychology and myth. Referring to writers such as Borges and Robbe-Grillet, Holquist identifies the erosion of concepts such as causality and "syllogistic" order as a fundamental precept in postmodernist deconstructions of the classic detective story (155). He asserts that "Post-Modernists use as a

foil the assumption of detective fiction that the mind can solve all", only to twist expectations to the point that the very "opposite becomes the case" (155). Thus, in much criticism concerning the development of the detective narrative, the word 'metaphysical' has almost become a synonym for postmodernity, the terms being essentially transposable due to this perceived synergy between postmodern aesthetics and the subversive tendencies of the 'anti' or 'metaphysical' detective text.

Although I am not looking to dispute this association between postmodern literary and cultural anxieties and the increasingly transgressive practices evident in the detective format in Post-World War two fictions, I will contend that there is a tendency within academic discourse to historicise the development of the detective novel too rigidly, limiting the scope of what can be considered an 'anti-detective' novel. This paper is in agreement with critics such as Laura Marcus, who argues that articles such as Holquist's tend to provide a too "fixed and rigid" account of the classical detective novel, overlooking the ways in which "earlier detective fiction can be opened up to 'strangeness' rather than 'familiarity'" (251). As such, she suggests that it is possible to identify a "relatively coherent category of Twentieth Century texts, gaining momentum in the post-war period, which simultaneously deploy and subvert traditional detective story-conventions" (252). Crucially, the temporal polarisation between classic detective fiction and anti-detective fiction is often too myopic, overlooking earlier transgressions that have similarly utilised the epistemological structure of the format to raise larger question about the nature of reason and the limits of knowledge. This paper will aim to go some way towards redressing this imbalance, exposing the ways in which *Trent's Last Case* can be seen to disrupt this often rigid, canonical chronology of the detective novel's development.

That is not to suggest that *Trent's Last Case* should be definitively co-opted by the 'metaphysical' tradition. Such attempts to retrospectively expand the parameters of the

metaphysical detective novel have been made before, and can often lead to problematic readings. In his text *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodern* for instance, Kevin Dettmar offers an intriguing yet thorny analysis of Joyce's short story 'The Sisters'. Describing the text as "postmodern mystery story", Dettmar argues that Joyce's text represents a "conscious defiance" of the "ideological underpinnings of the traditional detective story" (64). Despite his claims, aspects of Dettmar's argument are slightly troublesome. Merivale and Sweeney for instance are particularly critical of Dettmar's terminology, highlighting the inherent paradox of attempting to apply the term 'postmodern' to a text published before World War One (Merivale & Sweeney 3).

Although Dettmar's taxonomy is indeed problematic - and demonstrative of the kind of anachronism I seek to avoid in this essay - his argument nonetheless magnifies the importance of re-exploring and/or defamiliarising earlier manifestations of the detective text in order to open them up to "strangeness" (Marcus 252). Moreover, it seems that the very contention raised by Merivale and Sweeny concerning what texts should or shouldn't be considered 'metaphysical' stems from the inherent ambiguity that metaphysical detective fiction highlights in the genre. In other words, how far can you push the generic rules and principles of the classic detective novel – i.e. such as that of logic and the infallibility of reason - without transforming it into something else entirely? At what point does a text become an 'anti' or 'metaphysical' detective novel?

Whilst for some *Trent's Last Case* merely offers a tweak on the classic golden age narrative, I will contend that is simultaneously raises some typically metaphysical questions, ones that should not be overlooked. Yet, rather than attempting to definitely align Bentley's novel with a particular paradigm or tradition, this paper will instead utilise *Trent's Last Case* to highlight the inherent instability of the detective genre and its sub genres. Ultimately, I will contest that Bentley's text exposes the volatility of the boundary "between the postmodern

metaphysical detective story and its mainstream cousin", highlighting both "the shared legacy and the many precursors of postmodern tendencies within "straight" detective fiction" (Pyrhönen 245).

'Keen Eyes': Parodying the Holmesian, Ocularcentric Detective

Trent's Last Case opens with a somewhat enigmatic rhetorical question, one that immediately anticipates the issues of interpretation and perception that will emerge later in the text. The narrator asks: "Between what matters and what seems to matter, how should the world we know judge wisely?" (Bentley 1). Whilst on one hand the narrator is questioning the larger significance of millionaire Sigsbee's Manderson's death beyond its effect on the international money markets, these words equally prefigure the difficulty of "distinguishing what, hermeneutically, matters and does not matter in the pages to follow" (Kermode 57). The Manderson murder is the central mystery in the text. The misanthropic millionaire's body is mysteriously discovered on the grounds of his country house estate, killed by a single gunshot to the eye. No murder weapon is found, however the body does exhibit signs of a struggle, with scratches and bruises around the wrists. There are also other idiosyncratic anomalies surrounding the discovery of the body; Manderson's pocket watch is discovered in the wrong pocket, his false teeth are missing and he is oddly dressed in a combination of day and evening clothes. This is of course a shocking sartorial irregularity according to Manderson's servants, who all testify to him being such a neat and discerning dresser.

With the police unable to distinguish any clear suspects or discernible motive for the attack, charismatic artist and amateur detective Phillip Trent is summoned to intervene, having recently solved a case "much like Poe had done in the murder of Mary Rogers", using nothing but "the newspapers to guide him" (Bentley 34). Bentley immediately establishes Trent as a comparable figure to archetypal armchair sleuths such as Poe's Auguste Dupin, able to solve

the most impenetrable mysteries through a reliance on his superior powers of deductive logic and observation. This parodic imitation of previous paradigmatic detectives continues when Trent begins his investigation, utilising his bizarre expertise in obscure fields of knowledge to assemble the disparate clues of the case, a methodology distinctly reminiscent of that employed by Sherlock Holmes. Trent uses his familiarity with "good shoe leather" to perceive the slightest incongruities in the structure of Mr Manderson shoes, perceiving an unexplainable split in one particular pair (Bentley 63). Fortunately, it just so happens that [Trent is] "a judge of shoes" and is therefore able to deduce that "someone who was not Manderson had worn" that particular pair on the night of the murder (126). This acute, idiosyncratic knowledge is distinctly reminiscent of the way in which Holmes employs his "special knowledge of tobacco ashes" in 'The Boscombe Valley Mystery', implicating Mr John Turner for a seemingly unsolvable murder based predominantly on his preferred brand of tobacco.

Like Holmes, Trent's techniques of detection are almost entirely ocularcentric[iv]. Early on in the text, the narrator comments on how Trent's training had taught him to "live in his eyes" (86), and this reliance on the power of observation is potently dramatised during his investigation of the Manderson crime scene. The text is inundated with references to Trent's scopic techniques and expert vision - "keen eyes" (37), "questing eye" (63), "expert eye" (64), "authoritative eye" (68), "his eyes roamed" (70), "his eyes narrowed" (63), "his eyes began to wander around the room" (39) - all of which reinforce the equivalence between sight and knowledge that underpins the hermeneutic logic of the analytical detective text. Identifying the magnifying glass as a symbolic embodiment of Sherlock Holmes's "heightened vision", Peter Messent argues that the image of "the seeing eye" has become "the very sign and signal of detection" (61). The analytical detective novel in particular continually exalts sight as a conduit to knowledge and truth, arguing for "the readability of all objects and signs that enter the field of vison" (Smajić 93). It is perhaps unsurprising then that the scopic deductive techniques and

analytical detachment of the Holmesian detective are often equated with the emergence of various technologies of vision, particularly the camera. Ronald R. Thomas argues that Holmes functions as a "literary embodiment of the elaborate network of visual technologies that revolutionised the art of seeing in the nineteenth century" (19). Bentley represents Trent in an identical fashion. Not only does he use an actual camera to photograph fingerprints left around the crime scene, but he himself functions as a type of mobile lens, a panoptic human camera that operates as an instrument of supervision, observation and inspection:

> A row of shoes and boots was ranged beneath the window. Trent crossed the room and studied them intently; then he measured some of them with his tape, whistling very softly. This done, he sat on the side of the bed, and his eyes roamed gloomily about the room.
> The photographs on the mantelshelf attracted him presently. He rose and examined one representing Marlowe and Manderson on horseback. Two others were views of famous peaks in the Alps. There was a faded print of three youths – one of them unmistakably his acquaintance of the haggard blue eyes – clothed in tatterdemalion soldier's gear of the sixteenth century. Trent, mechanically taking a cigarette from an open box on the mantelshelf, lit it and stared at the photographs. Next he turned his attention to a flat leathern case that lay by the cigarette box (Bentley 70).

Mechanically and panoramically roaming the space of the room with his eyes, Trent embodies both the analytical detachment of the camera and the broader scopic regime of modernity[v]. Drawing attention to the pictures on the mantelshelf, Bentley establishes a potent correlation between the framed prints and Trent's own photographic observation, reinforcing the "ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era" (Jay 114). Trent's search for truth is predicated on a sight centred structuring of the world, one which, as Rosemary Jackson writes, equates the "real with the visible and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs" (Jackson 26). As Jackson continues, "knowledge, comprehension, reason, are established through the power of the look, through the *'eye'* and the *'I'* of the human subject whose relation to objects is structured through his field of vision" (27).

This scene is characteristic of a number of early sections in the text that vividly dramatise Trent's decisively ocularcentric hermeneutics. Emulating this Holmes-Dupin paradigm of the infallible ratiocinative detective, Trent continues his investigation, interviewing everyone associated with Mr Manderson's estate. Despite the chaotic assortment of disparate clues that confront him, Trent remains assured in the power of empirical science and the efficacy of his ocularcentric methodology to decipher the chain of events that precipitated Manderson's murder.

> As Trent mounted the stairway outside the library door he seemed to rise into certainty of achievement. A host of guesses and inferences swarmed apparently unsorted through his mind; a few secret observations that he had made, and by which he felt must have significance, still stood unrelated to any plausible theory of the crime; yet as he went up he seemed to know indubitably that light was going to appear (Bentley 61).

Trent embodies the enlightenment philosophy of the Holmesian ratiocinator, the indubitable belief that "through reason, we can master the world" (Alexander 66). Bentley uses this 'stairway' imagery as an allegory for Trent's faith in causality and his reliance on the existence of a visible interconnectedness between the seemingly incongruent clues of the case. Trent is certain that if he can assemble them into a progressive narrative, the clues, like the stairway, can only produce one final destination, one singular, definitive end point where the "light" will invariably "appear" (Bentley 61). This emphasis on visibility and observation once again reiterates Trent's immutable faith in, and advocacy of, the hegemony of vision.

'He gazed with eyes that saw nothing': The Ocularcentric Detective in Crisis

Trent's conviction ultimately leads him to create what he perceives as a satisfactory hypothesis, one that implicates Manderson's secretary Marlowe. He deduces that Marlowe was motivated by a secret affair with the entrepreneur's wife Mabel, and thus deliberately massaged the evidence to render his guilt almost imperceptible. The case is complicated further by Trent's own affections however. Having also fallen in love with Mabel and fearing that she may have

been complicit in the murder, Trent submits his summation of the case directly to her rather than to the authorities, so that she can decide whether the facts are to be revealed publicly. In the 'classic' detective text, traditionally the detective's summation of the events prompts a confession from the guilty party, one that inevitably leads to the closing of the case and the denouement of the narrative.

Yet, this is where Bentley's text begins to transgress convention. Trent's summary instead acts as the catalyst for the second half of the text, one that deconstructs the conventional structure established in the first half. After a short period spent travelling and convalescing in Europe, Trent returns to England and once again crosses paths with the widowed Mabel Manderson. After a few brief meetings, Mabel contests Trent's version of events surrounding the case, assuring him that he made an incorrect judgment concerning her relationship with the secretary Marlowe. With this revelation, the motive for the murder instantaneously evaporates. Here Bentley provides us with what Frank Kermode describes as a "false bottom" (58). Despite the fact that almost every clue has been "caught up into a satisfactory pattern" (Kermode 58), Trent begins to question the validity of his original summation of events.

Trent subsequently confronts Marlowe, who is also able to absolve himself of any involvement in the murder. Marlowe reveals that he was in fact the victim of a sadistic plot, whereby the unstable Mr Manderson attempted to frame the secretary for his own intended suicide, having also (erroneously) suspected an affair between Marlowe and his wife. Having discovered Manderson's body on the golf course along with a number of clues implicating him in the millionaire's death, Marlowe proceeded to obscure any evidence that would point to his guilt. Thus, any clues left (including the removal of the body to the grounds of the house), were a direct result of Marlowe's attempts to conceal the conspiracy set against him by the crazed millionaire. The minute details that Trent perceives such as the damage to the Manderson's shoes, or the placement of particular finger prints, were merely the disparate remnants of

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Marlowe's attempts to escape the plot he was caught up in. The clues are fundamentally arbitrary, redundant by-products of Marlowe's frantic mission to absolve himself of guilt.

Although Trent is correct about certain facts related to the case, he is wrong in the interpretations he bases upon those facts, misreading and failing to observe the clues and causal links that led to Manderson's murder. Trent's ocularcentric method of detection begins to erode, as it becomes demonstrably clear that things are not as they appear. Trent's false assumptions are predicated on the clues he perceives with his supposedly "knowing" eye, yet his sight centred epistemology fails to coherently structure the sequence of events. In this disavowal of the hegemony of vision, *Trent's Last Case* forcibly disrupts the relationship between the seen and the known. As such, it becomes clear that the nature of Manderson's death - i.e shot through the eye - operates as a symbolic manifestation of a wider denigration of vision within the text. Such scopic mutilation foreshadows the failure of the 'all seeing all knowing' ratiocinate detective, a blinding that becomes emblematic of Trent's inability to assert visual authority over the case. As such, this literal violence directed against the eye mirrors the text's emblematic assault on the authority and power of vision.

In the final chapter of the text, Trent meets his friend - and uncle of Mabel Manderson - Mr Cupples for a celebratory dinner, during which Trent ponders his "aimless enquiry" and queries the efficacy of positivistic notions such as reason and logic as conduits to truth.

> It was so obvious that no man would do himself to death to get somebody else hanged. Now that is exactly the answer which the prosecution would have made if Marlowe had told the truth. Not one juryman in a million would have believed the Manderson plot (Bentley 221-223).

Bentley illuminates the chasm between empirical logic and fact, as the application of reason would have undoubtedly arrived at an erroneous truth, implicating Marlowe for a murder he did not commit. As Cupples cryptically informs Trent that there are many "remarkable things going on all around us if we will only see them", Bentley aptly introduces one final,

unpredictable and unperceivable twist. Whilst reviewing the case with Trent over dinner, Cupples suddenly reveals that it was actually him who killed Mr Manderson in an act of self-defence when the crazed millionaire attacked him on the grounds of the golf course he was arbitrarily walking on. Cupples's coded allusion to Trent's lack of visual perception once again reiterates the failings of his ocularcentric techniques.

As in much metaphysical or 'anti' detective fiction, "chance suddenly intervenes" (Ewert 184). Manderson's' death is ultimately entirely unrelated to the sequence of events Trent deduced in his original summation of the case. Trent finds himself caught in a conjectural labyrinth, attempting to apply logic and reason to a murder that is predicated on chance and coincidence. Manderson's death is arbitrary and chaotic, a random act of self-defence indecipherable by any cogent process of investigation. Trent is faced with a myriad assortment of signs, unable to decipher which have direct relevance to the case and which do not. After Cupples's revelation, Trent decries "the impotence of human reason" (Bentley 228) renouncing all belief in the ability of logic and deduction to effectively structure the inherently disordered nature of the world. Trent ultimately admits his defeat and vows to "never touch a crime mystery again" (Bentley 228)[vi].

Conclusion: Situating *Trent's Last Case*

In his critical text *Murder for Pleasure*, Howard Haycraft discusses the evolution of the detective narrative in the works of "E.C Bentley, Dorothy Sayers" and "Dashiell Hammett", and ponders the possible variations that may develop in the future:

> If we accept this cycle theory, and recollect as well that all previous changes went unrecognised until some years after their occurrence, it is even possible that the seeds of a new movement are already present in the contemporary detective story... (Haycraft 323)

Through this reading of *Trent's Last Case*, I have attempted to demonstrate that at the very least, what Haycraft describes as the "seeds" of the metaphysical or anti detective text are

certainly evident in Bentley's narrative. The frequency with which *Trent's Last Case* is comfortably placed within the often rigid historical model of the development of the detective novel (i.e as a paradigmatic example of golden age fiction), is not only simplistic but extremely problematic. Parodic and deconstructive, *Trent's Last Case* is a deliberate "exposure of detective stories" (Paul 197), one that utilises the epistemological structure of the form to exhibit the limits of knowledge, reason, and of a sight-centred epistemology.

Bentley's narrative is therefore symptomatic of an ongoing need to return to and revaluate earlier classic detective fiction, exploring the ways these narratives subvert, rather than conform to, typical conventions and codes. Whilst *Trent's Last Case* superficially exhibits some of the generic tropes and narrative features of the golden age novel, its simultaneously destabilises expectations by problematising and deconstructing many other basic principles. Crucially, *Trent's Last Case* highlights the malleability of the boundaries between the straight detective novel and its metaphysical offshoot, whilst simultaneously magnifying the problems that arise when attempting to formally separate these two modes. The desire to temporalize and affix a too rigid chronological trajectory to the development of the detective novel arguably stems from the same interpretive logic that energised the emergence of the classic detective novel to begin with, i.e. a steadfast belief in order, causality and teleology. Not only has the metaphysical detective novel exposed these philosophies to be fundamentally volatile and flawed, but my reading of *Trent's Last Case* has endeavoured to magnify the very instability of such a separation between the detective genre and its sub genres. To varying degrees, all detective fiction could be arguably considered 'metaphysical'.

Ultimately such rigid categorisations of the detective novel often prevent us from going back and rereading older texts for the way that they transgress rather than affirm certain rules and paradigms. More emphasis must therefore be placed on what Laura Marcus describes as the "relationship of reciprocity between popular and 'metaphysical' detective stories" (252).

By doing so, we can begin to analyse texts such as *Trent's Last Case* in new and potentially enlightening critical frameworks, finally opening them up to "strangeness rather than familiarity" (Marcus 251).

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Notes

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[i] The source of this Christie quote is little obscure, however it has become a much used adage in critical discussions of Bentley's novel. It is also on the cover of the 2001 House of Stratus edition of the novel (see bibliography)

[ii] For a comprehensive summary of these various terms, see pages 2-4 of Merivale & Sweeney's *Detecting Texts.*

[iii] Merivale and Sweeney do go some way towards disrupting what I later describe as the often rigid association between the metaphysical variant and the postmodern. Indeed, the term metaphysical was coined as a way to try to circumvent a strict historicisation of the format (in contrast to something like 'postmodern detective fiction'). In her rereading of Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' for instance, Patricia Merivale attempts to situate Poe's story as the first text in their 'genealogical taxonomy'. Through its exploration of themes such as identity, urban anonymity and unachievable knowledge, Merivale argues that Poe may have created the metaphysical detective story a year or so before the detective story proper. Nonetheless, the book is still unequivocal in its attempts to locate metaphysical detective fiction as a genre of largely "twentieth-century experimental fiction" (1).

[iv] This term is often used to refer to a 'a privileging of sight' that many critics see as a central precept of modernity. For a discussion of both ocularcentrism and the hegemony of vision in western intellectual thought, see Levin, David. "Introduction." *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*. Ed. David Levin. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993. 1-29.

[v] For a detailed discussion of the link between vison and modernity, see Martin Jay's *Force Fields: Between Intellectual History and Cultural Critique*. In chapter 9 entitled 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', Jay discusses the privileging of the sight in the modern era, a privileging that was, he suggests, "abetted by such inventions as the telescope the microscope" amongst other technologies of vision.

[vi] Although Trent asserts that this will be his last case, Bentley does bring him back in two more texts: *Trent's Own Case* (1936) and *Trent Intervenes* (1938). These texts are as reactionary as *Trent's Last Case*, offering more conventional 'whodunit' mysteries.