

Postmodern Ambivalence of Identities, Moralities and Law(lessness): The Detective-Criminal Continuum in Caleb Carr's *The Alienist*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims at highlighting a major pattern of differences between classic realist and postmodernist detective fiction by arguing that whereas the former, in spite of occasionally foreshadowing future developments in this respect, generally tends to retain an ideological split between people operating from the right and the wrong side of the moral/state law, the latter derives its narrative force from a sweeping and tumultuous ambivalence functioning at the core of the ideology of these two supposedly heterogeneous categories of characters. A preliminary survey of a few selected texts shall denote the premise of the proposed distinction between classic and postmodern detective fiction, followed by a comparatively detailed analysis of this trope in Caleb Carr's critically acclaimed historical thriller *The Alienist* (1994) to illustrate how the merging of identities of the detective and the criminal in a continuum contributes to a substantial problematization of value system in postmodern detective fiction.*

Keywords: Postmodernism, detective fiction, Caleb Carr, *The Alienist*, narrativity, ambivalent identities and morality

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The ostensible ideology of a traditional text of detective fiction mostly implies a fundamental binary division of the criminal (often a murderer) and the detective as representatives of two mutually exclusive moral orders. This paper explores a strain of difference between classic and postmodern detective fiction by arguing that whereas the former generally tends to retain an ideological split between the two halves of this binary defined sometimes by moral law, at others by state law, and sometimes by both, the latter derives its narrative force from a sweeping and tumultuous ambivalence functioning at the core of the ideology of these two supposedly heterogeneous categories of characters. One critic pinpoints the critical importance of the issue by stating that whether the detective's character is "morally admirable or semi-criminal" (Horsley 5) is one of the features encoding "significant formal and ideological shifts" (Horsley 4) that "can affect every aspect of the crime narrative" (Horsley 5).

In the context of differentiating between these two broadly defined categories of detective fiction, Caleb Carr's novel *The Alienist*, published in 1994 with its story set in the Gilded Age (the New York of 1896), is analyzed in this paper as a representative of postmodern detective fiction. As the story goes, Theodore Roosevelt, working as New York's police commissioner in 1896, recruits the help of a controversially innovative psychologist (Dr. Laszlo Kreizler, the *Alienist* of the title) and a journalist crime reporter (John Moore, the novel's first-person narrator) to catch John Beecham, a notorious serial killer of boy prostitutes. He also deploys three of his subordinates from the police force, the detective Brothers Issacson and Sara Howard, to assist the other two in the hunt. The entire team shares a progressive zeal for sociopolitical reform in a variety of fields like prison system, forensics and psychiatric care, which generates the deadly hostility of exponents of older social structures against them. They are helped throughout by Dr. Kreizler's three household servants: Stevie Taggert, Cyrus Montrose, and Mary Palmer, all of whom have had a traumatic past. The conservative institutional authorities, like the corrupt police official Connor, oppose the protagonists to preserve the status quo dovetailed with the society's ineffective and morally decayed structures.

It is contended here that *The Alienist* subscribes to the postmodernist strategy of problematizing textual ideology by substituting the good/bad and hunter/hunted binary divisions with ambivalent facts. Whereas the philosophical conundrums of referencing the "good" and the "bad" as ideological constructs are too intricate to be handled within the

scope of a paper of this kind, the terms are used here only to signify their elementary parallelism with legal-moral vindication and condemnation respectively. This is to say, for example, that assertions made in the speeches of a "bad" character would in most cases be automatically interpreted in a traditional crime narrative as antagonizing the omnipresent author's own voice and – by extension – what may pass as the core of the professed textual ideology.

"One of the first ways," declares Dr. Kreizler at an early stage of the investigation, "in which we can know our quarry is to know his victims . . ." (113). These words have a deeper meaning than may be apparent at first sight for they contain the key to the demolition of the hunter / hunted binary and their readjustment into a continuum in the text. The murderer's victims are the society's 'other' in being both prostitutes and immigrants; the murderer himself is no less a symbol of otherness in being a monster produced by the society that is eager to deny its existence. John Beecham's psychological identity partakes of roles of both the hunted and the hunter as information given to detectives by his brother reveals. His assumption of a false name to formalize the killer's identity within him was actually a slightly modified version of George Beecham, the name of the man who had first befriended and then raped him at the age of eleven (424—425). A further illustration of this argument on demolished binaries surfaces as the plot draws to a close and detectives' hypotheses begin to be consolidated by hard evidence. At one point they conclude that the killer's "anger had crossed sexual lines, becoming a sort of hybrid, or mongrel; and it had found its only release in destroying boys who embodied, in their behavior, similar ambiguity" (461).

Building on this ambiguity, one may turn to an analysis of the identities of the detectives and then have a closer look at the relationship between them and the murderer. In traditional, classic realist texts, the narrative incorporates binary divisions as a general rule with the ostensible objective of denoting a play of irreconcilable opposites. Most nineteenth century crime fiction, therefore, tends to project a rather arbitrarily conceived ideological consistency in dualities of the hunted and the hunted, the lawful and the unlawful. Hence their equivalence of the binary of the good and the bad with the detective and the murderer respectively may have appeared glib to many twentieth century readers. Postmodern discourses, on the other hand, concentrate on the elusive character of meaning by highlighting the interchangeable nature of a supposed binary's constituents. As such, a fundamental feature of their thought is a generally skeptical attitude towards unconditional

compartmentalization of concepts, which often leads them into confronting the confusion that results from tiered convergence of two ideological polarities. Thus they have a tradition of invalidating the ideological division between people operating at the two sides of the official law.

For this reason, ambivalence is a keyword for representing the fluidity of value systems in Caleb Carr's *The Alienist*. In fact, it projects ambivalence in a manner that validates the claim that in postmodernity "[d]isorientation becomes a virtue" (Lyon 98). The following two dimensions of postmodern relativism are very noteworthy in determining the complex interrelation of disorientation and ambivalence in this study. R. D. Laing, the founder of anti-therapy, was one of the first to challenge the rational supremacy of the so-called normal behaviour over the so-called deviant behavior. In the second preface to his seminal *The Divided Self*, he stated, "In the context of our present pervasive madness that we call normality, sanity, freedom, all our frames of reference are ambiguous and equivocal" (11). A few decades after Laing's proclamation, this relativism from the abstract field of psychological theory was integrated by postmodernists into the socio-political field of the operability of law: "Postmodernity has undermined our belief in the universality of law or in the ability of an ideal equity to ground its operations" (Douzinas 196). The first of these quotations denotes the destabilization of the binary division of sanity/madness, while the second one does the same to that of law/lawlessness. It is the conjunction of these two positions that frequently leads postmodern detective fiction into problematics of the foundering of the ideological basis that presumes a good/bad binary among characters. Some of their ideas and actions have an ambivalent signification that undercuts and overtakes the text's ostensible ideology – hence the deference of the ultimate meaning of the texts. According to a scholarly critic, the thriller by definition "exaggerate[s] the experience of events by transforming them into a rising curve of danger, violence or shock" (Glover 137) owing to which its world "is radically uncertain" (Glover 138). The mechanics of this uncertainty, as shall be seen in the following analyses, are governed in postmodern detective fiction to a great extent by the said continuum of detective-criminal identities.

The distinction suggested here between two chronological divisions of crime fiction verbalizes a generalization whose critical scope may accommodate many exceptions depending on the perspectives guiding a study. In spite of the fact that the possibility of an opposite claim has frequently been probed by critics, this view can easily be established

in the light of comments made in many reputable and scholarly appraisals of crime fiction. Given the provocative nature of the distinction, a review of some relevant comments by critics seem important by way of defense. Equally, the postmodernity of the fuzziness of this ideological boundary between people from the right and the wrong side of the state/moral law needs to be established to avoid the misconception about what may appear at first sight a duplication of this phenomenon in nineteenth and early-twentieth century detective fiction. This shall be accomplished by highlighting the moral essentialism that acts as the ideological basis of two of the foremost British fictional detectives that define the canon: Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown. After that, what appears to be an apparently similar fusion of moral-legal polarities would be contrasted with its dynamics in a thriller by David Morell and one of Ruth Rendell's more recent mysteries to bring out the contemporary western understanding with reference to relativist position of morality in crime fiction.

A very distinguished scholar of crime fiction, Stephen Knight, has noted that even Elizabethan and Jacobean crime stories, set in "a world of powerful morality, with heavy assertions about sin and crime made by the narrators" (4), reveal on closer inspection ideological complexities regarding justice and responsibility. However, he sees the later emergence of the central figure of the detective as a moral anchor, filling a "gap in both law and ideology" (9). So, in the analysis of a famous nineteenth century text, he regards the detective's resort to "an ethical judgement" (35) to circumvent the state law as defining a general norm. Even more definitively, while analyzing another text of the same age, he comments on an ambiguity in the detective's socio-moral relationship with the law in these words:

This type of complicity is a powerful element of later crime fiction, especially the American private-eye tradition, *but is not seen much in the early period* even though detectives like Vidocq and Richmond have been on the wrong side of the law: it is, though – another sign of Poe's prescience – clearly foreshadowed in the resemblance between Dupin and D. in 'The Purloined Letter'. (49, emphasis mine)

Linden Peach, in developing a thesis about how and why "Victorian crime writing was often unequivocal in the causes of female criminality" (82), analyzes a number of texts and takes into account moral ambivalence in such female characters as Nancy in Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, who retains a streak of purity in spite of being "a criminal and a prostitute" (85). The

assertion that frames Peach's thesis is that such phenomena issue from Victorian elision of "criminality with . . . female emotional weakness" (83). As such, he sees such female criminals as exceptional figures who "injected a note of dissent into an otherwise politically conservative genre" (82).

Occasionally, in Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories there are vivid suggestions of the potential proximity of the identity of the detective and the murderer as in Dr. Watson's following speculation on observing his friend busy in deductive investigation of a crime scene: "So swift, silent, and furtive were his movements, like those of a trained blood-hound picking out a scent, that I could not but think what a terrible criminal he would have made had he turned his energy and sagacity against the law, instead of exerting them in its defense" (Doyle, "Sign of Four" 112). Holmes himself acknowledges this potentiality when he tells Dr. Watson, in another story in which the two break into a blackmailer's house for stealing some compromising letters in his possession, "You know, Watson, I don't mind confessing to you that I have always had an idea that I would have made a highly efficient criminal" (Doyle, "Charles Augustus Milverton" 577), before proudly displaying to his friend "a first-class, up-to-date burgling kit" ("Charles Augustus Milverton" 577). And as the two illegally enter the grounds of the criminal's house, Dr. Watson says, "An instant afterwards he had closed the door behind us, and we had become felons in the eyes of the law" ("Charles Augustus Milverton" 577). But in both of these cases, ideological dichotomies between the right and the wrong are not threatened because in the first example, the narrator's observation incorporates a comparison in order to reinforce rather than undermine how the detective's moral status is opposed to that of the murderer in spite of affinity between an aspect of methodology. The same is true of the second case in which he undertakes the dangerous venture only after Holmes has convinced him "that the action is morally justifiable, though technically criminal" ("Charles Augustus Milverton" 576). The morality invoked here is fully absorbed in and passively warranted by social norms and conventions and Dr. Watson, as a chronicler, is always purposefully mindful of not divulging any secrets that may shed unsparing light on the seamier side of the Victorian notion of respectability or nobility. This is emphatically illustrated by both the last words of this story in which Holmes "put[s] his finger to his lips" ("Charles Augustus Milverton" 582) when confronted with the danger of Dr. Watson verbally identifying the widow of a "great nobleman and statesman" ("Charles Augustus Milverton" 582)

as a killer, as well as at the end of the story entitled “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client” when Dr. Watson is astounded at accidentally learning the identity of their client but is checked from verbalizing it by the “restraining hand” (999) of Holmes. This aspect of Sherlock Holmes stories has been deliberated over by critics; Catherine Belsey, for example, noted how in “Charles Augustus Milverton” “[t]he sexuality of . . . three shadowy women motivates the narrative and yet is barely present in it. The disclosure which ends the story is thus scarcely a disclosure at all” (111).

Similarly, G. K. Chesterton's Father Brown – a Catholic priest by profession – is especially well-known for his “knack of ‘thinking’ himself into the part of the murderer” (Smyth and Ludwig 84), thereby “looking at the world with the killer's distorted vision . . .” (Smyth and Ludwig 84). But a thorough examination of his position would reveal a complete lack of moral confusions in this process of psychic projection. In one of his most famous stories, after successfully luring a criminal into apprehension through a series of brainy ruses, he declares he learned his tricks from repentant criminals who confided in him during confession, “Has it never struck you that a man who does next to nothing but hear men's real sins is not likely to be wholly unaware of human evil?” (Chesterton 18). In this case, the symbolic importance of Catholic priesthood asserts the detective's role as God's anointed representative and, since the premise of similar actions is worked out through the ritual of confession, it has been made clear that the detective associates with wrongdoers only so that, being an emissary of goodness, he may bestow salvation upon them. Accordingly, a critic has noted that in Chesterton, “the detective is the conserver of the best morality that men have devised . . . In Chesterton's world, where power comes directly from God or the Devil, the forces clearly are Good and Evil, and men are only the agents of these sources of power” (qtd. in Cook 77).

The detective's identification with the criminal's methods/thoughts are in Father Brown's case a strictly disinterested theoretical concern, very different from the mind-altering potential of such an activity in postmodern thrillers, as can be demonstrated through the example of David Morrell's *Long Lost*. The criminal and his victim-hunter are brothers in Morrell's novel, the former himself an avenging victim of traumatized childhood. The latter's detective methodology incorporates “a theory of substitution” (Morrell 107) that reinterprets the criminal's lies as half-truths. As such, the binary in which the moral and the immoral is reversed as a careful theoretical exercise is threatened by

the ambivalence of half-truths. Most significantly, the supposedly upright detective's maneuvers are eventually successful because he completely adopts his quarry brother's persona in every possible way in order to allow his mind to think like his brother. In doing so, he consciously submits himself to the danger of permanently effacing his own personality. Therefore, the significant difference between a Chesterton and a Morrell is that in *Long Lost*, the hunter's identification with his quarry is established through a radical process of enacting an impersonation when the purpose of a morally untainted Father Brown is adequately fulfilled through a highly controlled cognitive exercise that cannot in any way impinge on the detective's orthodox value-system.

Ruth Rendell's *End in Tears* deals with the ideological conundrums of the detective-criminal continuum in such an involved manner that it can be analyzed with reference to this debate as a postmodern text. Its moral, legal and methodological relativism, as shall also be seen in the analysis of *The Alienist*, does not limit itself to an isolated character's strategic thought-process but emerges as an essential feature of a socio-cultural environment. It depicts a society in which cultural relativity has flowered to an extent that all values are in a flux, subject to incessant revision. The result is that Inspector Wexford, Rendell's famous detective protagonist, can virtually claim morality only in his adherence to officialdom and duty, while the keynote to the novel's moral world is stuck in his following half-serious observation:

Vice has changed, hasn't it. It's no longer adultery that's the crime, let alone fornication. Beat someone up and no matter if he never walks again, you're out after two years inside . . . Smoking dope is 'what everybody does' but have a cigarette and you're a pariah, though that's nothing to eating a fry-up in a greasy spoon. That's the ultimate sin. (Rendell 184)

Female murder victims in Rendell's novel are seen by the detective as having somewhat disreputable characters on account of being guilty of surrogacy arrangement. But, as a direct parallel to the story of the murder investigation, Inspector Wexford's own daughter volunteers to become a surrogate parent by producing a child to have it adopted by her ex-husband and his girlfriend, moved as she is by radical feminism in the face of the moral judgments of tradition. Wexford's wife blames him for being "too lenient" (Rendell 159) with his daughter, while he also privately fears that his daughter's behavior can wreck his family (Rendell 170) and even her own young sons nearly ostracize her for this "affront to society and custom and families" (Rendell 321). The detective's

viewpoints seem intended to encourage identification with those of the reader though they are thoroughly riddled from first to last with the confusion essentially rooted in his culture: "There was something distasteful to Wexford in this present-day matiness of ex-wives with current girlfriends and ex-husbands with their one-time wives' lovers, yet when he examined what he felt, he had to confess that discord and spite would be far worse" (Rendell 102). Over and over again, various subplots highlight this moral confusion, until at the very end, Wexford's daughter is made into a conformist almost against her will as her ex-husband's girlfriend refuses to adopt her child. At the same time, the text ends with a gigantic rift in morality as the criminal in the murder mystery is discovered to be a young childless woman who had her step-daughter killed only in order to be able to adopt her child. Thus the motif of familial love is intermingled with that of surrogacy to produce a cultural framework in which values cannot possibly be reduced to a dichotomy of good and bad: the murder victims are immorally lacking in human love but the murderer is the one who craves the satisfaction of being a caring mother, while the detective's own family is threatened by the conflict between morality and radical humanism.

However, while in Rendell's novel the detective's internalization of moral confusion threatens the good-bad binary, he is still able to validate a formal degree of correctness by singularly adhering to the fulcrum of legal and illegal actions. Howsoever acutely self-doubting his view of moral conduct may be, he is able to come to terms with his vocation by always doing the right thing as dictated by state laws.

Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* goes a step further and may be regarded as a quintessentially postmodern example of detective fiction since it projects as complex a dualism surrounding state laws as moral laws, with the detectives – always led by humanistic zeal for doing good – teetering on the fringes of both.

Dr. Kreizler's perceptive injunction (repeated several times in the novel) on knowing the victims in order to know the quarry (113) establishes a hunter-hunted continuum that works also between the murderer and the detectives. The latter share a marginal, silenced status in the society with the former and his victims, living lives not only outside but positively antagonistic to the mainstream of the society's recommended behavior.

The narrator, John Moore, was in the past fired from his job—symbolizing the code of bourgeois respectability—for his "defense of

Roosevelt during his battle with the patronage system in the Civil Service” (Carr 67). But far more significantly, he is a loner who has virtually cut himself off from most of his family members ever since his younger brother’s death. The death has resulted from alcoholism and morphine addiction, which he strongly believes to be “the result of growing up in a household, and a world, where emotional expression of any kind was at best frowned on and at worst strangled” (198). Repression is therefore as important a keyword in the domestic environment of his early years as in the murderer’s case according to the testimony of the latter’s brother. It is consistent with his early conditioning that John Moore settles into the job of a police reporter, which requires him “to visit many of the city’s seamier districts and houses and consort with some less than savory characters” (9).

The policewoman Sara Howard has known similar sufferings as, in her past, she has spent some time in a sanatorium after the untimely death—probably by suicide—of her father (112), and has grown into, more than a vehement feminist, an Ibsenite rebel. References to her vigorous feminism scattered throughout the novel are numerous enough to ascertain her permanent status of an outsider in the society. For example, she smokes cigarettes (487) and asserts her right to respond to invective like a man (257). The inflammatory unconventionality of her job at the Police Headquarters is, understandably, encouraged only in isolated progressive circles like Roosevelt’s household as the latter’s daughter tells her, “I know that a lot of people think it’s scandalous that women are working at headquarters, Miss Howard, but I think it’s *bully!*” (467). The fierceness of her faith in being as good a policeman and detective as any man makes her resistant to even the slightest “patronizing air” (538) by Roosevelt, her boss. More than this, even the possibility of her homosexual leanings is slightly hinted through the fact that she has “no interest in marriage” (435), has “little enough interest in men at all” (435), and has consequently “constructed her entire life around the idea that a woman can live an independent, fulfilling existence” (435).

Likewise, the Isaacson brothers are selected by Roosevelt to be on the team precisely because they have been “unassociated” (122) with the system patronized by their old-order superiors. They have been victimized both because they “studied abroad” (122) and are Jewish, the latter a fact they could not even bring themselves to pronounce any more specifically than in the extremely hesitant and obscure phrase, “our—background” (122).

Equally active members of the team in an unofficial capacity are Dr. Kreizler's three household servants—all of them most pronouncedly segregated from the mainstream of New York society. Significantly, these revelations of the marginalized, start being detailed at the very onset of the narrator's adventure in the novel's second chapter. The boy Stevie Taggart is first introduced as "the bane of fifteen police precincts" (10) who was condemned at the age of ten by the police as "a thief, pickpocket, drunkard, nicotine fiend, feeler" (11) and then in the prison

attacked and badly maimed one of the guards on Randalls Island, who he claimed had tried to assault him. ("Assault," in the newspaper language of a quarter-century ago, almost invariably meaning rape.) Because the guard had a wife and family, the boy's honesty, and finally his sanity, had been questioned—which was when Kreizler . . . had made his entrance. (11—12)

This reference to Stevie's past at the very beginning of the narrative finds a very obvious parallel towards the end of the plot when the murderer is discovered to have been a rape-victim in his early childhood. The parenthetical and ironical reference to the so-called decorum of newspaper language of the times also contains a pithy comment on the silence to which the lives of such characters is subjected by social conventions. The extent to which Stevie was once imagined unfit for society can be guessed by the narrator's exclamation that he himself "thought Laszlo quite crazy" (12) when he employed the boy as his driver and general errand boy, though he reformed amazingly within a year's time.

Cyrus Montrose, Kreizler's valet, is one of his former patients (34) who, as a black boy in New York, "had seen his parents literally torn to pieces during the draft riots of 1863" (41—42) at the hands of white men and women. Afterwards, he served as a "piano player in a brothel that proffered young black women to white men of means" (42). There he once reacted to the "bigoted abuse from the house's customers" (42) by killing one of them, interestingly a policeman, with a large butcher knife. Knowing this background, the narrator confesses to feeling "more than a little nervous" (34) in his company.

Mary Palmer, Kreizler's house keeper and eventually the woman he loves, is another of his former patients who once again, the narrator informs us, "made the visitor who knew her full story a bit uneasy" (106). Considered idiotic by her family since birth because of her inability to speak coherently, she burned her father, "a respected schoolmaster"

(107), to death at the age of seventeen. Subsequently she was committed to a lunatic asylum, from where Kreizler was able to obtain her freedom after making it known that “her own father had been sexually violating her for years before the killing” (107). So she shares with Beecham the murderer both an “outwardly respectable father” (253) and the crime of patricide (478).

Finally, there is Dr. Laszlo Kreizler, who is at the surface level supposed to be the antithesis of the murderer, but encodes hunter-hunted ambivalence to such a substantial extent that it can safely be said that the text metonymically represents the fragmentation of American society itself in the ambivalent continuum of the detective and the murderer. His status as an alienated outsider in the society is an abiding trait that begins to be highlighted with the very title of the book—*The Alienist*. The text starts with a prefatory note by the author that defines the word thus: “Prior to the twentieth century, persons suffering from mental illness were thought to be “alienated,” not only from the rest of society but from their own true natures. Those experts who studied mental pathologies were therefore known as *alienists*.” Even before the narrative begins, the reader is made aware of the infinitesimal switch of inflection that divides the alienated from the alienist, a trope further reinforced by Kreizler’s claim that John Beecham was sane, not mad (242), that is proven correct at the end of the novel.

Dr. Kreizler’s manners are “[a]s inscrutable as [those of] any Chinaman” (26) and, when he speaks, his very accent, betraying his German descent, marks him as a man “of foreign extraction” (374). The Mayor of New York, ironically a self-professed champion of progress, voices the public sentiment about Kreizler’s innovative learning in a direct address to him thus, “Decent people have no use for your work, sir, for your abominable opinions of the American family, or for your obscene probing into the minds of American children” (116).

Just like Beecham’s traumatic relationship with his mother, Kreizler absorbed the trauma of a troubled relationship with his father in his childhood (470). Because of this, he feels an unconscious identification with Beecham that makes his colleagues suspect that he has “some sort of personal stake” (232) in their investigation. The mystery is solved only when Sara Howard locates a document proving Kreizler to have been a victim of violence in his childhood at the hands of his drunk father (301—302). She and the narrator burn the document, hoping that his “behaviour would never again warrant investigation into his past” (303). This hope, as can be expected, is short-lived.

Before looking in detail on the repercussions of Dr. Kreizler's emotional involvement in the case, and how it deconstructs his affiliation with the very theories of psychology he exploits to catch the murderer, it is very important at this point to analyze the philosophical side of deference of meaning throughout the novel. The team of detectives is single-mindedly devoted to thwarting the evil designs of the murderer. But the ultimate signification of most of their strategically crucial expressions and gestures remains uncertain as their acts have the potential of reversing the desired effect and causing more trouble instead of helping to curb it. Examples of this uncertainty abound throughout the text but one especially conspicuous one occurs when the narrator, John Moore, intends to communicate with a young boy prostitute, one of Beecham's prospective victims, information that may assist him in being on his guard. There follows a debate among the detectives about whether disseminating this kind of information would be "wise" (306) since this may become a loophole in their plans for springing a trap at the murderer's next attempt. Secondly, after a general agreement is reached between them for editing the information in the interests of setting "this trap carefully" (306), a further concern is voiced by Kreizler. He warns the narrator that "while you may be helping the boy by warning him, you may also put him at great risk if you're seen in his company. Avoid it if you can" (307). This episode shows the good to be potentially self-annihilating in not one but two ways: warning a victim against danger may make him more vulnerable and also cast a doubt on the detectives' wisdom in formulating their plans for catching the quarry. It is only two hundred pages later that the potential danger is realized and, when the boy does get murdered, the narrator suffers from the most harrowing feelings of guilt. At this point his following admission is illogical in the light of Kreizler's earlier warning: "I had tried to prepare him for every possible danger—but how could I have foreseen that the greatest of those dangers would be to speak to me in the first place?" (529). The narrator importantly interprets this event in direct connection with Dr. Kreizler's withdrawal from the investigation following the murder of Mary Palmer, the woman he (Kreizler) loved. His self-doubts conclude in terms that denote the ultimate unpredictability of the novel's value-system: ". . . in our dash to defeat evil, we had only given it a wider field in which to run its own wretched course" (529). This obviously leads to a deep ambiguity about the very nature of how far one may evaluate the value of ideological polarities in terms of good and bad and perhaps contributes more than anything else to direct attention to the text's postmodern stand on value-systems.

If the meaning of good and evil is subject to unpredictable revision, the reader is equally drawn by the text into the debate about the extent to which deviant behaviour may be made predictable through a scientific approach to the discipline of psychology. Postmodern thrillers frequently proclaim the open-endedness of this debate in their denouements, a very remarkable example being Walter Marks' novel *Dangerous Behaviour* (2002). A comparison between this novel and *The Alienist* can be deeply helpful in understanding the issue of the open-ended nature of a postmodern text's ideological postulates. The most important theme of *Dangerous Behaviour* is its emphasis on institutional ineptitude and the ideological focus on the superficiality of the police as well as psychologists who recline on computer-programmed studies of human character. Accordingly, the position that it vindicates in the final analysis "regards institutionalized operations of both psychiatry and legal justice with skepticism because they sabotage humanity by overemphasizing theories and systems" (Tanvir 91).

In *The Alienist*, as in Marks' novel, while psychological and criminal investigations are indistinguishable from each other, the text's alleged ideological stand incorporates numerous pleas for giving both a methodical orientation, free of non-empirical assumptions. Dr. Kreizler, like his historical contemporary Adolf Meyer, adamantly views "the origins of consciousness primarily in terms of formative childhood experience, and only secondarily in terms of pure physical function" (162). This leads him to the conclusion that the "killer's path from birth to savagery had not been the random result of physical processes that we would have been powerless to chart but rather the product of conceivable events" (162). In the same vein, at one point, he favourably mentions William James' theory of man becoming a "mere walking bundle of habits" (268). So as a psychologist, he believes that everything can be symmetrically arranged into a network of cause and effect and propagates the need of not being deceived in his analyses by what appears, either in people or situations, unnatural. One is tempted to refer to the second of Carr's novels featuring Dr. Kreizler, *The Angel of Darkness*, for one of the finest expressions of this trait of Dr. Kreizler. He responds contemptuously to his associates' reluctance at one juncture in it to accept a hypothesis about their quarry on the basis that it appears "Unnatural" (Carr, *Angel of Darkness* 282). His learned admonition is, "I really do urge you to dispense with that word . . . All of you. It isn't worth the breath its utterance requires . . ." (Carr, *Angel of Darkness* 282). This outlook is equally a keystone to the detectives' success in *The Alienist*

since its plot is spun around a systematic construction of the killer's portrait through deductive conclusions.

However, towards the very end, Dr. Kreizler virtually deconstructs this trajectory when, answering the narrator's assumption that he felt he knew the murderer, because of the context of his life, he shakes his head and says

You can't, John. Not that well. You can come close, perhaps, close enough to anticipate him, but in the end neither you nor I nor anyone else will be able to see *just* what he sees when he looks at those children, or feel *precisely* the emotion that makes him take up the knife. The only way to learn of such things would be . . . to ask him. (531)

At the same time, we return to the text's subversion of its overt ideology through an ambivalent stance about what knowledge is and the continually regressive intrusion of Dr. Kreizler's own emotionalism in the face of his professionalism. Kreizler starts the hunting campaign guided by a firm conviction that opposes the non-professional emotionalism of other protagonists. He tells them not to let the eyewitness' overwhelming "sadness, anger, and horror" (192) caused by the murders affect "a descriptive analysis of the mental context of the man responsible" (192). But as the plot deepens and the psychologist is drawn nearer and nearer to personal tragedy, his comrades ironically come to feel distressed at "Kreizler's increasingly emotional involvement in the case" (272). The high watermark of this basic inconsistency in his character is visible during the conversation in which, while dissecting their subject's mind, Sara Howard vehemently conjectures that a woman may have played an actively corrosive role in the formative phase of the murderer's psyche. Dr. Kreizler, in a "rather shocking outburst" (270), firmly rejects this opinion saying, "The whole notion is absurd, there is *nothing* in the literature to suggest it! . . ." (270). The literature here represents the established academia and the officially warranted body of knowledge. The argument ends in a bitter row between the two and the narrator records his opinion in a very uncharacteristic dismissal of Kreizler, "The Isaacsons and I traded more perturbed looks, but there was no need to say anything. We all knew that Sara had been right and Kreizler inexplicably, pigheadedly wrong" (271). This observation contains a deep irony about the very basics of the psychologist's character. The available literature is symbolic of the predictability of human behavior since it embodies researched knowledge produced for the purpose of future reference. But the whole enterprise of Dr. Kreizler

has the aim of going beyond the known and so he apparently starts making blunders the moment he chooses to depend on the available literature rather than first hand inquiry. The text itself attests the truth of Kreizler's mistake: "Almost every one of Sara's hypotheses . . . had been borne out by what Laszlo and I had heard in Dury's barn . . ." (460).

In this conflict, the novel's theme of the rejection of academic authority is voiced all the more forcefully because this team of detectives is at first vigorously and fastidiously trained by Dr. Kreizler in the art of deducing scientifically about the murderer's psychological profile. They, accepting their status of novices in this art, knowingly put themselves into the doctor's hands with the understanding that their "terrible learning" (224) would amount to nothing if "some of Kreizler's basic assumptions . . . [were] wrong" (224). This is a way of saying that at the moment of the argument between him and Sara Howard, he stands in exactly the same relation of academic authority to other detectives as the available literature of psychology stood in relation to him. So, for him to make a mistake when relying on authority at the same time that novices make correct conjectures when defying the authority that he himself represents proves he cannot sustain his professionalism after literally bestowing this gift on his teammates. In a second twist to his character, therefore, the narrator only gradually discovers that Dr. Kreizler's rejection of Sara's hypothesis is actually an impulsive rather than a rational one. It is moved by the forces of the unconscious rather than consciousness, and is based on personal biases rather than impersonal analysis.

So after some deep self-reflection, Kreizler regretfully admits having been a victim of what William James describes as the "psychologist's fallacy," i.e., "[t]he business about a psychologist getting his own point of view mixed up with his subject's" (302). This fallibility is apparently infectious for at an emotionally stressful moment only a few pages later, the narrator suffers from self-doubt concerning whether or not he was himself "suffering from Professor James' famous fallacy" (307).

Even after this recognition, Dr. Kreizler cannot opt out of the necessary stimulus-response mechanism of his mind and his emotions continue to guide the course of the story. When confronting the danger of imminent death, therefore, he gives his silver watch to the narrator with instructions to pass it on to Mary Palmer. The narrator makes an ostensibly reductive summation of his character: "A rank sentimentalist, just as I always suspected" (432). He later tops it up with a complete

reversal of his scientific teacher-reformer identity by asking him “to explain that schoolboy gesture” (434).

This shows how Kreizler's behaviouristic stipulation about a personality being nothing more than a construct within its past experiences invites ambivalence in a most unexpected fashion. The text, by the very fact of pinpointing and making Dr. Kreizler realize his aforementioned mistake, makes a being's propulsion by its past conditioning tautologically insignificant in the following way. Postmodernist uncertainty invades the doctor's character through a multiplicity of the very past conditionings that constitute the totality of his mind. He displays one level of conditioning to go by as a scientist and another by which to respond emotionally. Thereby, his character encodes an assemblage of opposites as a disinterested scientist and an emotional human being without nullifying his theory of human predictability. In this way, behaviourism functions in the text's ideology only within a more expansive concept of relativity. Kreizler himself recognizes this fact as another keystone in the detectives' search when he insists it is just the shifting of one's “point of view” (192) that diametrically changes one's perception:

Imagine, he said, that you enter a large, somewhat crumbling hall that echoes with the sounds of people mumbling and talking repetitively to themselves. All around you these people fall into prostrate positions, some of them weeping. Where are you? Sara's answer was immediate: in an asylum. Perhaps, Kreizler answered, but you could also be in a church. In the one place the behaviour would be considered mad; in the other, not only sane, but as respectable as any human activity can be. (192)

A practical demonstration of this mercurialness in the interpretation of a physical place occurs when the narrator, during a visit to Kreizler's humane Institute for psychiatric care of children, notes “the fact that the Institute was . . . a bit of a zoo” (81). An application of this shift of perspective on Kreizler's own personality provides an explanation for how, when observed from one angle, he is true to his training as a psychologist and, from another, equally predictable in the context of his human dilemmas.

From yet another viewpoint, the dispossession of Dr. Kreizler's expertise, which starts with the afore-mentioned quarrel with Sara Howard, culminates in the continuation of the investigation after his emotional setback at the murder of Mary Palmer forces him to withdraw

from pursuing the case. John Moore the narrator fully knows that, along with grief, self-doubt emerging from Kreizler's childhood trauma has caused his withdrawal: "He's full of doubts about his own judgment and abilities. I never really understood before how much he's tortured by that—self-doubt" (470).

With Kreizler's withdrawal from the detectives' search, Moore is at first convinced that their inquiry can no longer continue but Sara Howard succeeds in persuading him otherwise. She says, "Remember what Kreizler himself taught us—context. We don't need to know everything about psychology, or alienism, or the history of all similar cases to finish this job. All we need to know is *this* man, his *particular* case—and we do, now . . . Dr. Kreizler was important, but he's gone now, and we don't need him" (455). On one level, this is entirely in keeping with the text's ideology of repudiating academic authority but, on another, innovation is here seen in a postmodernist dissociation from its own root sources. The fact that Dr. Kreizler reappears at the very end to bring the case to a brilliant denouement does not negate the logic of the position expressed here by Sara. The nature of Dr. Kreizler's teachings is such that it not only allows but actually facilitates the continuation of the inquiry without its initiator. In structural terms, this suggests that the narrative is so deeply grounded in reinvention that it can propel itself forward after alienating from itself the all-important alienist of its title.

Dr. Kreizler's belief in the murderer's self-tormented psyche (242) cannot have materialized without a deep laid empathy for the object of his inquiry. Similarly, the narrator—who is originally incredulous at the doctor's hypotheses (242)—eventually accepts "self-hatred" (461) as the murderer's prime mover. For a short time he becomes an unequivocal convert to that empathy as their investigation nears its end, marveling at his own credulity thus, "It was odd, after all I'd seen and been through, to think of *his* torment; odder still to realize that I had some sort of vague sympathy for the man. Yet the sentiment was in me, and it was understanding the context of his life that had put it there . . ." (510). Such an exclamation makes ample room for the suggestion that a psychologist's / detective's own personality is at least to some degree liable to modification as the price of a profound identification with an ostensibly degenerate mind. In the process, the reliability of either's belief system is made questionable.

Finally, the plot propels itself to a typically postmodern, inconclusive and irreducibly polyphonic denouement. With a lot of foreshadowing, the stage for the moment of resolution is set in the final,

face to face encounter between the detectives and the murderers. Near the end, Dr. Kreizler persuades the narrator John Moore to join him in springing an unofficial trap on the murderer, alienating professional policemen even among their zealous, iconoclastic team-mates in the process, so that the doctor's quest for analyzing the murderer's mind may not be hampered by red tape. Several quick twists follow during the encounter in which ideological alliances and hostilities are framed by ambivalence. After the murderer is accidentally killed, a cunning czar of the city's underworld admits to the narrator that he had secretly chosen to patronize Dr. Kreizler's maneuvers at this stage because he sees the doctor as a vital threat to the society's status quo, a fact that blends perfectly with his own illegal designs.

Therefore, the denouement, in keeping with the flippancy of values embodied throughout the novel by the murderer, his victims, and the detectives, foregrounds a confusing multiplicity and mystification of associations and sympathies, thereby deconstructing both moral and state law into lawlessness. This deconstruction, by demonstrating one aspect of a general principle – that “[h]istorical and narrative continuity and closure are contested . . . from within” (Hutcheon 12) in postmodern discourse – brings attention to the crucial role that ideological patterns in crime fiction can play in understanding the deeply problematic and frequently ambivalent relationship between classic-realist and postmodern fiction.

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