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The Metaphysical detective fiction of G.K. Chesterton: "This is not a story of crime"

This article proposes to confront the tenets of metaphysical detective fiction, a sub-genre of experimental fiction associated with Postmodernism, with Chesterton's *Father Brown* series, with which the genre of metaphysical detective fiction was first identified. The expression was originally coined by the American critic Howard Haycraft to single out Chesterton's unusual detective stories, but since Michael Holquist's founding article "Whodunit and Other Questions: Meta-physical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction," it has come to describe the postmodernist take on detective fiction, in the works of authors like Jorge Luis Borges, Vladimir Nabokov or Alain Robbe-Grillet. However, Holquist does not acknowledge Chesterton's defining role in the birth of the genre and falls short of a precise definition for its "metaphysical" quality. Such "dual" discomfort is equally palpable in most studies of the genre. Significantly, they have ignored Borges's role as a mediator between Chesterton and contemporary metaphysical detective fiction. Through a survey of the "Father-Brownian" intertextuality in some of Borges's *Fictions*, this paper aims to examine the "metaphysical" quality of *Father Brown* stories, in order to account for the recurring critical unease in defining both Chesterton's role as an innovator of the genre.

Cette étude se propose d'examiner la place de la série Father Brown *de G. K. Chesterton dans l'histoire du récit de détection métaphysique, un genre étroitement associé à la littérature expérimentale de la seconde moitié du XX*ème *siècle, dite postmoderne. L'expression « récit de détection métaphysique » naît en 1941 sous la plume du critique américain Howard Haycraft pour qualifier les singulières aventures policières du Père Brown. Trente ans plus tard, Michael Holquist la reprend et l'érige au rang de genre littéraire, pratiqué entre autres par Borges, Nabokov et Robbe-Grillet. Il l'associe donc à un traitement typiquement postmoderne du récit de détection, sans toutefois reconnaître à Chesterton la paternité du genre, ni donner de justification à l'emploi du terme « métaphysique ». Or ce double flottement se retrouve dans la plupart des études plus récentes du récit de détection métaphysique, qui ignorent précisément, entre les aventures de* Father Bown *et la fiction de détection métaphysique contemporaine, le rôle de passeur de Borges. On se propose donc de replacer Chesterton dans l'histoire du genre policier métaphysique, en examinant l'influence fondatrice de la série* Father Brown *sur la fiction de Jorge Luis Borges et en précisant la « métaphysique » à l'œuvre dans la série* Father Brown.

The expression "metaphysical detective fiction" was originally coined by Howard Haycraft in his seminal 1941 study of the detective novel *Murder for Pleasure*, to describe Chesterton's peculiar detective tales featuring a detective priest called Father Brown. It was then applied to the crime fiction of Borges, Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet by Michael Holquist in "Whodunit and Other Questions: Meta-physical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction," an influential article which presented metaphysical detective fiction as a distinctly postmodernist [1] genre. In his study, Holquist recorded the Chestertonian origin of the expression and Borges's enthusiastic criticism of Chesterton's detective fiction, but dismissed any literary kinship between the two authors, dubbing Borges's interest an extravaganza (Holquist 172). Other major critics of the genre such as Patricia Merivale and Susan Sweeney hold that Chesterton's metaphysical detective fiction was "secularised" by Borges (Merivale

[1] Holquist defines Postmodernism as a radical critique of Modernism, concerning itself with disestablishing the mythic and psychological tendencies of the modernist tradition, and with a focus on epistemological concerns.

and Sweeney 4). This term, which may tacitly relate back to the misconception that Father Brown is a mouthpiece for Chesterton's Catholicism, shows evidence of a certain unease that prevails in most studies when assessing Chesterton's position in the history of the genre, despite Borges's praises. But as Gene Bell-Villada writes, "G.K. Chesterton's dogmatic Catholicism always bored the agnostic, free-thinking Borges. Nevertheless, the arch-conservative Briton opened Borges's eyes to what could be done with detective fiction. This genre has a special appeal to Borges because of its minimal psychology and peculiar narrative mechanics" (Bell-Villada 35). This study therefore aims to examine Chesterton's detective fiction in relation with Borges's from a literary standpoint in order to fill a critical gap in the genealogy of metaphysical detective fiction.[2]

This paper hypothesises that the original choice of the word "metaphysical" by Haycraft to describe Chesterton's subversion of traditional detective fiction in the Father Brown series may have been unduly influenced by his assessment of Chesterton's later work as a Catholic apologist and by Chesterton's troublesome, larger-than-life public personality. This original uneasiness may have then reverberated in the vocabulary favoured by critics to describe the more contemporary concerns of postmodernists without accommodating a precise definition of the word metaphysical.[3] In defining the precise metaphysical quality of the Father Brown stories, this paper aims to examine Chesterton's pivotal role in the history of the genre.

First, Father Brown's occupation as a priest should not be too precisely identified with Chesterton's later Catholic proselytism. As Kracauer notes in *Der Detektiv-Roman*, most novelists provide their detective heroes with explainable (often psychological) grounds to account for their extraordinary reasoning abilities, i.e. to justify what cannot be justified (Kracauer 105). For instance, in *Le Parfum de la dame en noir*, Gaston Leroux justifies Rouletabille's rare skills by his being an isolated orphan (Leroux 51-68). Chesterton's take on this stereotype, and his ground for Father Brown's deductive skills, is the practice of confession. Indeed, in "The Blue Cross," Father Brown explains 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 2012, 18). In his *Autobiography*, Chesterton explains that it was the eccentric but perfectly logical nature of the explanation that appealed to him more than any theological agenda.[4] Moreover, this device also emphasises the repetitive, professional and mundane

[2] Merivale and Sweeney's authoritative work *Detecting Texts* makes room for an inspiring, though brief appreciation of Chesterton's contribution to the genre with Joel Black's article "(De)feats of Detection, The Spurious Key Text from Poe to Eco."

[3] In *Jouer au détective chez Kazuo Ishiguro et dans le « whodunit » métafictionnel britannique*, James Dalrymple points out the absence of any definition of the term "metaphysical" in the founding critical works on the genre, which leads him to substitute the word "metafictional" for "metaphysical" in his definition of contemporary British postmodernist detective fiction (Introduction, 6-7).

[4] In his *Autobiography*, Chesterton recounts the circumstances in which the idea came to him: while he was conversing with a priest about vice and crime, the priest showed him his ignorance by telling him "certain facts he knew about perverted practices" which left Chesterton astonished. Soon after however, he overheard a student talking about the same priest and saying "It's all very well to like religious music and so on, when you're all shut up in a sort of cloister and don't know anything about

aspects of confession rather than its mystical implications, while providing convenient starting points for Brown's many adventures (53 in total).

Therefore, the extra-literary implications of Father Brown's occupation should not preclude a reflection on the distinctly literary features of Chesterton's work, including his taste for metafiction. A gifted literary critic and a voracious reader of all genres of literature, Chesterton not only reflects on its ins and outs in various essays and critical studies (on Charles Dickens or Robert Louis Stevenson for example) but he also repeatedly stages, pastiches and parodies literary structures and themes, as Michael Shallcross aptly shows in *Rethinking G.K. Chesterton and Literary Modernism: Parody, Performance, and Popular Culture*. Metafiction also lends itself more accurately to Merivale and Sweeney's definition of metaphysical detective fiction as "a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective story conventions with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot" (Merivale and Sweeney 2).

But the phrase "metafictional detective fiction" does not cover the extent of the experiments, in particular the subversion and the critique of the underlying laws and philosophy of traditional detective fiction at stake in Chesterton's works. What, then, is Chesterton's literary role in the development of the genre of metaphysical detective fiction? To answer this question, this paper will first sketch a brief history of the genre, to go on and explore characteristics shared by Chesterton's *Father Brown* stories and Borges's *Fictions*, before reassessing the place of metaphysics in Chesterton's metaphysical detective fiction. In short, this paper will follow the golden rule of police investigations and ask the five Ws of detective fiction: who, what, when, where and why?

What, When and Who: the roots of metaphysical detective fiction

In *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, Martin Priestman delineates a "traditional history of detective fiction." Invented by Poe in 1841, the form then found its way into the novels of Emile Gaboriau in France and Wilkie Collins in England, before reaching its first apex of popularity with Arthur Conan Doyle's creation of Sherlock Holmes, followed by a second high point during the inter-war, a "Golden Age" dominated by Agatha Christie (2). According to this account, Chesterton's Father Brown (whose fictional existence spans a quarter of a century, from 1911 to 1936) appears as a bit of a regent between Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot.

Chesterton kept company time and again with writers of the "Golden Age" (most famously in the Detection Club, of which he became the first President in 1930), but his short stories do not belong to the category of "the slimmed-down, highly goal-oriented detective novels" (Priestman 4) characteristic of Agatha Christie. Chesterton is part of an older, Anglo-

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the real evil in the world," which sent Chesterton into fits of laughter given his previous conversation with the priest (Chesterton 1986, 327).

French, urban tradition, dating back to Poe's English-speaking French detective Auguste Dupin.

This "special relationship" between France and England is a recurring feature in nineteenth-century crime fiction.[5] Chesterton pays homage to this tradition by assigning a French former thief turned detective, called Flambeau (taken after Vidocq[6]), as an assistant to Father Brown. The former also serves as a pretext for regular forays into Paris. Urban settings are another key ingredient of early crime fiction (contrary to detective fiction of the Golden Age, which mostly takes place in enclosed spaces in the countryside) which Chesterton repeatedly honours in his stories and essays. For instance, in "A Defence of Detective Stories," detective fiction is hailed as "the earliest and only form of popular literature in which is expressed some sense of the poetry of modern life" (Chesterton 1901b, 119).

But the most defining quality of traditional detective fiction is indubitably the ideal of a radically rational world. In these fictions, the problem of truth is approached from a firm epistemological standpoint: truth has a fixed nature and can be accessed through reason, so that "there is no mystery, only incorrect reasoning" (Holquist 157). Rationality and the analytical method are given many shapes from Dupin's ratiocinative, abstract and logical process to Sherlock Holmes's clue-oriented method,[7] but they all point to one principle: the *adequatio rei et intellectus*, the belief that the mind can solve any mystery and understand anything. Therefore, all stories invariably end with what Kracauer calls "the victory of rationality" (Kracauer 201): order is brought back to the world by the detective who provides the reader's epistemological bearings within a reassuring, rational *Weltanschauung*. However, with the character of Father Brown, Chesterton works considerable changes from this norm of detective fiction.

Father Brown is an East Anglian Roman Catholic priest and an amateur detective whose distinct idiosyncrasy is that he has no idiosyncrasy. Despite the fact that they both have grey eyes, he is the anti-Sherlock Holmes.

> The little priest was so much the essence of those Eastern flats: he had a face as round and dull as a Norfolk dumpling; he had eyes as empty as the North Sea; he had several brown-paper parcels which he was quite incapable of collecting. (Chesterton 2012, 4)

> Holmes est un sur-personnage, courbé sous le poids de ses propres caractéristiques : le pouvoir de déduction en premier lieu, mais aussi les particularités physiques et vestimentaires, la

[5] Despite Sherlock Holmes's calling Poe's Chevalier Dupin "a very inferior fellow" and Gaboriau's Monsieur Lecoq "a miserable bungler" in *A Study in Scarlet* (Doyle 27), many of Conan Doyle's techniques can be traced directly to Emile Gaboriau, such as the device of long explanatory flashbacks to elucidate mysterious aspects of the plot and delay the revelation of the murderer used in *L'affaire Lerouge*, and which Conan Doyle reworked into *A Study in Scarlet*.

[6] Eugène-François Vidocq (1775-1857), a former criminal, was the first director of the crime-detection section of the Sûreté Nationale and a fruitful source of inspiration for writers such as Victor Hugo and Honoré de Balzac.

[7] This method consists in confronting the tenets of the ratiocinative method (mainly witness testimony) with material clues (which require extensive knowledge in pinpoint fields).

> misanthropie, la misogynie, le violon, la cocaïne, les tics de langage, les sautes d'humeur, etc. (…) Brown, à l'inverse, est moins qu'un personnage, un embryon, une silhouette. (Ohl 27)

In *Murder for Pleasure*, Howard Haycraft identifies significant variations on traditional detective fiction in Chesterton's *Father Brown* series, namely that philosophy replaces psychology in the treatment of characters, and intuition replaces deduction. However, the parody of traditional detective fiction at work in the stories is overlooked. Instead their metaphysical quality is attributed to their being fictionalised paradoxes of moral philosophy.

> Nearly all the problems in the Brown stories are problems of character. But Chesterton's approach was philosophical, where A.E.W. Mason's (for example) was psychological. (…) Father Brown is chiefly concerned with the moral and religious aspects of crime. In fact, it may well be Chesterton's chief contribution to the genre that he perfected the metaphysical detective story (…) Chesterton is at his best when he states a problem in apparently supernatural terms and then resolves it by philosophical paradox. (Haycraft 76)

Haycraft regards Brown's blend of ratiocination and intuition as running against traditional methods of deduction, "the root of all method of investigation" (Haycraft 75). But although Brown's intuitive method rests on a general and theoretical world view which gives him some certainties (including his faith), his purportedly anti-scientific intuition mainly parodies Sherlock Holmes's systematic method. As to deduction, what makes Brown's method a metaphysical one is that his sense of observation focuses not so much on searching for fingerprints and interpreting physical details, but rather on reading and understanding the testimonies of witnesses (following Dupin's ratiocinative method) and their behaviours. This, in turn, conveniently enables him to detect proof-tampering. Brown's method therefore demonstrates how deduction cannot rest on pure observation of material clues but must also consider their very nature as evidence, being in that sense literally meta-physical.

Finally, Haycraft singles out the total lack of realism of the stories, which fail to meet "the verisimilitude test of plausible fictive detection" (Haycraft 75). On the contrary, he mentions a fantastic atmosphere—which he dismisses as "fantasticism"—but nevertheless pays homage to the fertility of Chesterton's imagination, which "greatly enriched and revivified the stereotyped form into which the detective story was beginning to fall when he started writing" (76). He concludes that Chesterton gave the genre "a more literary turn that was to have far-reaching effect" (77), without going into further details. In his brief study of Chesterton's detective fiction, Haycraft therefore establishes the genre of metaphysical detective fiction and brings together a number of synonyms for "metaphysical," such as philosophical, supernatural and religious, but falls short of a clear literary definition of the term.

Michael Holquist's 1971 article "Whodunit and Other Questions: Meta-physical Detective Stories in Post-War Fiction" is a critical landmark in the definition of metaphysical detective fiction as *the* pervasive subtext in postmodernist literature. Holquist holds that traditional detective fiction provides patterns of reassurance to the reader with brilliant demonstrations of the ordering power of the mind on chaos and unexplained deaths. Drawing on the epistemological nature of the detective story, metaphysical detective fiction then stages, and questions, the very possibility of knowing "what happened" or "who did it."

Postmodernist writers, seeing in detective fiction a powerful vehicle for their epistemological concerns, jumble the familiar themes and structures of detective fiction and replace the narcotising effect thus created with a sense of strangeness, eerie meaningfulnesss and self-defeating, unsatisfying closure. In doing so, metaphysical detective fiction attempts to awaken "our flabby habits of perception" (Holquist 173).

For Holquist, the purest examples of metaphysical detective fiction are to be found in Borges's work (172), but what is of particular interest to us is that he hardly mentions Chesterton's paternity, except in a footnote: "Chesterton is of particular interest here. English and American audiences have long been baffled by the extravagant praise Borges bestows on such otherwise uncanonical authors as the author of *The Man Who Was Thursday*" (Holquist 172). Although Holquist acknowledges Chesterton's "unique contribution" to the genre (172), he does not elaborate on these converging links. But he is not the only critic to record the opinion that Borges's admiration for Chesterton is something of an outlandish enigma: the same unease prevails in Merivale and Sweeney's introduction. Borges's "secularisation" of Chesterton—however accurate the description—does not exhaust their literary connection, especially in view of Borges's studies of Chesterton's baroque, labyrinthine imagination and detective tales in magazines such as *Sur* and *Los Anales de Buenos Aires*, as well as in the series of lectures he gave on English Literature.

Along with Stevenson and Wells, Chesterton's detective stories belong to Borges's childhood readings and inform his later literary choices. Refusing realism and psychologism, they supply Borges with alternative literary devices. Borges enjoys the fact that Chesterton's detective stories explore the variable possibilities of change and their consequences, a process to which he gives literary form by refusing to restrict himself to only one genre. Thus, Borges especially commends the fantastic tinges in Chesterton's imagination (Borges 1981, 87-91). He also reworks Chesterton's immoderate use of masks and identity tricks in his early fictions. For instance, a person initially identified as a victim turns out to be the culprit in both Chesterton's "The Dagger with Wings" and Borges's "The Shape of the Sword" (Borges's story echoes "The Dagger with Wings" in the plot but the title is reminiscent of Chesterton's story "The Wrong Shape"). Both stories can also be read as variations on Stevenson's initial exploration of double identity (as both victim and villain) in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Bell-Villada ably defines the essence of Chesterton's art in Borges's view as a "mixture of the crime thriller with metaphysics and magic" (Bell-Villada 65).

A closer look at the Chestertonian intertextuality in some of Borges's *Fictions* may now help us understand the nature of Borges's avowed connection to Chesterton.

Where: the characteristics of metaphysical detective fiction in Chesterton's *Father Brown* series and Borges's *Fictions*

Joel Black is one of the first critics to have included Father Brown stories into the equation of postmodernist metaphysical detective fiction, through the narrative device of "the spurious keytext." In "(De)feats of Detection: The Spurious Key Text from Poe to Eco," he examines the conventional thematic role of written documents in detective fiction and the

post-modernist parodic treatment of such key texts. Black identifies Chesterton as the first writer to work a significant variation on this convention, initiated by Poe in "The Purloined Letter," in "The Wrong Shape"; and he sees in Borges's "Death and the Compass" a subtle homage to Chesterton's story. In both narratives indeed, the protagonist's main occupation is no longer detection (i.e seeking answers to the traditional questions "Who did it?" or "where is it?") but the reading and interpretation of clues, because they have been tampered with and are no longer straightforward.[8] There is no more *adequatio rei et intellectus*. In that regard, the materiality of texts plays a key role indicating, metaphorically, how unreliable a proof can be. Both scenarios lampoon the desire to "make sense" of things and emphasise, on the contrary, the mundane physicality of explanations, which leave the reader unsatisfied. Chesterton and Borges invite their readers to examine their own assumptions and expectations.

Through various conventions, traditional detective fiction provides "pattern[s] of reassurance" (Holquist 151) for the reader. The most important of these is of course the final revelation, when the detective deduces who the murderer is thanks to the indisputable power of his mind, thus providing narrative closure and bringing back order and structure to the world. But Chesterton repeatedly frustrates the reader's desire for familiar conventions and reassurance in *Father Brown* stories, especially the emblematic convention of narrative closure. For instance, the story "The Honour of Israel Gow" ends with the initial crime left unsolved. How did Lord Glengyle die? The reader will not find out because, as Father Brown ironically says, "this is not a story of crime" (Chesterton 2012, 88). The mystery of Lord Glengyle's death is supplanted by another enigma (why has Glengyle Castle been stripped of all its gold?) and a treasure hunt for Lord Glengyle's missing head. As it turns out, it has been buried in a kitchen garden by his servant who awaits the right moment to retrieve his golden teeth (which he thinks he is entitled to as the heir to "all the gold of Glengyle," 89) before replacing the head in the coffin. And although the servant is eventually proved innocent of the murder of his master, the grotesque image prevails while the reader is left to wonder what happened to Lord Glengyle. Father Brown gives no less than three different explanations for the mystery of Glengyle Castle's missing gold and when Flambeau confronts him, he answers: "I only suggested that because you said one could not plausibly connect snuff with clockwork or candles with bright stones. Ten false philosophies will fit the universe; ten false theories will fit Glengyle Castle. But we want the real explanation of the castle and the universe" (83).

[8] In "The Wrong Shape" a poet unwittingly contributes to his own murder by leaving behind a stray text that reads "I die by my own hand; yet I die murdered!" (Chesterton 2012, 99). His killer wrenches that text from its originally fictional context by snipping off the telltale set of quotation marks and constructs a false version of events (the writer killed himself) to deceive his pursuers. In "Death and the Compass," a puzzling crime leaves a rabbi murdered. In his typewriter, the police finds a sheet of paper upon which is written: "The first letter of the Name has been spoken." While the authorities look for clues, the private detective Lönnrot focuses on interpreting the note, mistakenly convinced that the solution lies in some deeply entrenched hermeneutic code of Jewish mysticism.

On the one hand, the reader is left with too many explanations on meaningless matters (in this case trinkets), while the solution that is supposed to provide narrative closure ("who has done it?") is left unexplained. Deduction is made relative, and although still effective, it is insufficient, as such, to relieve the tension created in the story.

A similar effect is created by Borges at the end of his detective story "The Garden of Forking Paths." The protagonist, a German spy named Tsun, while on a mission to deliver the name of a secret cache of British weapons, murders a man named Stephen Albert, whom he did not formerly know and who does not seem in any way connected to the mission. Before killing him, Tsun talks with Albert who reveals to him that Tsun's ancestor, Tsui Pen, made in his book *The Garden of Forking Paths* a disturbing philosophical proposition about a temporal, rather than a spatial labyrinth. But the reader only finds out at the very end that Tsun only came to see Albert in order to kill him, so that his name would enable Tsun to leak the location, also called Albert, of the British artillery park to the Germans (Tsun relied on the fact that the news of the murder would appear in British newspapers along with his victim's name). Instead, the reader's attention is subjugated by Albert's uncanny knowledge of Tsun's ancestor's proposal of a temporal labyrinth, which progressively ensconces the idea that Albert was in fact waiting for Tsun and not the other way around (whereas the two of them are not supposed to know each other). Therefore, when Tsun eventually kills Albert, the reader is left with a sense of uneasiness, unsatisfactorily resolved by the conclusion that Albert's knowledge about Tsun was, after all, only a remarkable concurrence of events (unless it was proof of Tsui Pen's temporal labyrinth). There are two narrative levels here: one is the disturbing, fantastic philosophical proposition, while the other is a frame detective story about a spy, a kind of purportedly disappointing narrative. "The neatness of the ending, its pat explanation, far from having the reassuring effect of demonstrating the mind's capacity to order the world in the Borges tale, looks shaky, hollow; its logic is unconvincing in the face of the complexity which has preceded it" (Holquist 173).

Chesterton's and Borges's taste for pitting eerie meaningfulness against utter meaninglessness frustrates the impulse to detect order and thus brings the genre of detective fiction to its limits. Because metaphysical detective fiction presents us with broken, truncated truths, with murders left unsolved, nightmarish bodies, or even with pathetic murder, thus frustrating our impulse to detect, William V. Spanos describes the postmodernist take on the genre as "anti-detective fiction."

The parody of detective stories at work in the Father Brown series and in Borges's *Fictions* functions as so many clues that call attention to the main suspect in all these scenarios: fiction itself. Instead of hiding all the ropes and tricks that contribute to create mimetic fiction, metaphysical detective fiction makes them visible and even inserts them into stories. In "The Resurrection of Father Brown," the priest becomes something of a celebrity because of his successes in solving several cases: "his adventures as a detective were even made the subject of short stories appearing in magazines" (Chesterton 2012, 363).

> Mr Paul Snaith set out vigorously to feature Father Brown (…). A series of stories about him, like the stories of Sherlock Holmes, were, by the instrumentality of Mr Snaith, planned out and put before the hero with requests for his assistance and encouragement. As the priest found they

> had started, he could offer no suggestion except that they should stop. And this in turn was taken by Mr Snaith as the text for a discussion on whether Father Brown should disappear temporarily over a cliff, in the manner of Dr Watson's hero. (Chesterton 2012, 366-7)

The whole story is remarkable for its striking, intended confusion between fact and fiction as evidenced by the shortcut "Dr Watson's hero" instead of the factually correct "Conan Doyle's hero." This genitive in particular may be seen as metalepsis, more particularly as a "métalepse de l'auteur," which Gérard Genette defines as a transgression of the boundaries between narrative levels, that is, logically distinct narrative worlds (for example the constant interruptions in Diderot's *Jacques Le Fataliste* are metalepses). In "The Resurrection of Father Brown," the metaleptic device consists in ignoring that Conan Doyle is the real inventor of Sherlock Holmes, and attributing instead the latter's (fictional) existence to Dr. Watson, who is only the (fictional) narrator of Sherlock's adventures. But then Father Brown is attacked and left for dead, and so is buried the next day. However, he wakes up in the middle of his funeral. Everybody believes in a miracle, but Brown does not and so decides to investigate his own death. He realises that he has been drugged by his fake murderers to discredit him (for political reasons) while his life never really was in danger. The plan was to fake the priest's death, let everyone and himself believe in a miracle resurrection, then debunk it in order to expose Brown as a sham miracle and a parody of a Sherlock Holmes, a would-be celebrity and not a "real," honest priest.

In the introduction to his short story "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero," Borges declares that he has drawn heavily on Chesterton's influence, without any more details: "Under the notable influence of Chesterton (contriver and embellisher of elegant mysteries) (…) I have imagined this story plot which I shall perhaps write someday and which already justifies me somehow" (Borges 1999a, 143). "Theme of the Traitor and the Hero" is a photographic negative of "The Resurrection of Father Brown." It is also a detective story but, instead of exposing a sham, the plot revolves around hiding a sham, namely that the great hero of the Irish Revolution, Kilpatrick, was in fact a British informer. To avoid any more damage to the cause, Kilpatrick's execution is disguised as a crime and not just any crime but a very theatrical, scripted crime. One of the conjurors, named Nolan, is charged with the task of devising a script for the crime but, for lack of time, he steals scenarios from classic literature and plagiarises Shakespeare. In both stories then, crimes are elaborated out of fictional scenarios and attest to an upside-down world in which history draws its inspiration from fiction and is conceived as literature. Paradoxically, pitting Father Brown's authenticity or actuality against Sherlock Holmes's fictitiousness does not reinforce the idea that Brown is real (the reader always knows that he has exactly the same fictional status as Sherlock Holmes), but exposes ways of manipulating fiction. By becoming a thematic instrument, a clue within the very plot of the stories, fiction is clearly unmasked as a prop in a game of make-believe.[9] Again, this aesthetic exemplarily anticipates postmodernist concerns with metafiction and with exposing the fallaciousness of the mimetic principle at work in realistic literature.

[9] For a definition of representational works of art as props in a game of make-believe, see Walton.

There are many more colliding themes and structures in Chesterton and Borges's works (including labyrinths and Babel towers), and an exhaustive account cannot be achieved in so few pages, but the examples given above attest to a fertile literary relationship between these authors, and thus between Chesterton and the postmodernist take on metaphysical detective fiction. To account for the prevailing embarrassment in linking Chesterton with other luminaries of the genre, it is surmised that Chesterton's cumbersome personality and polemical writings have hindered literary assessments of his work, but also that a certain ambiguity has prevailed in the literary definition of the metaphysical quality of the genre, precisely because of Chesterton's religious shadow.

Why Call it "Metaphysical" Detective Fiction?

In *Detecting Texts,* Merivale and Sweeney acknowledge that "metaphysical" is a loaded term, but they justify their choice (after dismissing other terminologies such as "anti-detective story," "postmodern mystery" or "analytic detective fiction") as follows:

> We have chosen the name "metaphysical detection," instead of these other designations, because it indicates explicitly how late modernist (sometimes proto-postmodernist) and postmodernist writers have altered the detective story (…). Metaphysical detective stories—composed in equal parts of parody, paradox, epistemological allegory (Nothing can be known with any certainty), and insoluble mystery—self-consciously question the very nature of reality, just as [17th century English metaphysical poets and 20th century Italian surrealist painters] do. (Merivale and Sweeney 4)

In choosing the term "metaphysical" then, they call attention to the combining form "meta-" which carries the notion of alteration, but they also single out a strong abstract quality of the word "metaphysical" by bringing to mind two conceptual movements: metaphysical poetry and Italian surrealist paintings. The notions of alteration and idealism allow them to embrace the broad spectrum and far-reaching illustrations of metaphysical detective fiction, understood as a parody of the bedrock of detective fiction: the fixed nature of truth. But despite identifying common features in metaphysical poetry and metaphysical detective fiction, no definition of metaphysics, in its relation to truth, is given in the study. In the following section, the religious, literary (fantastic) and philosophical meanings usually associated with metaphysics will be examined in connection with the Father Brown stories.

Chesterton's larger-than-life personality and his later work as a Christian apologist undeniably cast a long shadow on his characters at the expense of their independent literary existence. It was particularly true when Haycraft produced his essay in 1941 (at which point Chesterton had been dead for "only" five years). In Haycraft's description, Brown's intuitive method is subsumed under a theological programme, which is itself associated with Chesterton's own personal dogma. Haycraft even identifies in later Brown stories a proselytising tone (76). However true this may be (Chesterton only converted to Catholicism in 1922, eleven years after he invented Father Brown), the contemporary religious undertones no longer account for the enduring popularity of the *Father Brown* stories or Father Brown's paternity on later metaphysical detective fiction. Chesterton himself, in his *Autobiography,*

perhaps unknowingly, encourages the reader not to take Father Brown as a token figure or a mouthpiece.

> The notion that a character in a novel must be 'meant' for somebody or 'taken from' somebody is founded on a misunderstanding of the nature of the narrative fancy, and especially of such slight fancies as mine. (Chesterton 1986, 321)
>
> When a writer invents a character for the purposes of fiction, especially of light or fanciful fiction, he fits him out with all sorts of features meant to be effective in that setting and against that background. (Chesterton 1986,322)

The figure of the priest however allows two qualities associated with metaphysics to collide: the spiritual and the supernatural. In the *Father Brown* stories however, the use of the supernatural, or its literary correlative the fantastic, comes close to a narrative device. Supernatural explanations are suggested when Father Brown is in doubt; but the possibility of a "foreign" agency fills him, more often than not, with fear that he is becoming mad. For instance, in "The Honour of Israel Gow," after they dig up Lord Glengyle's body and discover that it is headless, Father Brown exclaims: "We have found the truth; and the truth makes no sense" (Chesterton 2012, 86). Borges considers this trick as a *tour de force*: "Chesterton always performs the *tour de force* of proposing a supernatural explanation and then replacing it, losing nothing, with another one from this world" (Borges 1981, 72-73). It is a trick because, as in the case of the spiritual, its first function is to distract both the detective and the reader from the more prosaic facts of the case. But the possibility of a supernatural, fantastic explanation also serves to expose the fake mystic who pretends to believe in this possibility or uses a vague religious or spiritual belief to deceive. In "The Arrow of Heaven," Father Brown remarks: "Real mystics don't hide mysteries, they reveal them. They set a thing up in broad daylight and when you've seen it, it's still a mystery" (Chesterton 2012, 392). This sheds light on a final possible use of the fantastic in detective stories, as a complementary counterpart destined to fill the ordinary with a sense of eerie meaningfulness. For instance in "The Man with Two Beards" a woman claims that she has seen a ghost, but Father Brown explains that it was, in fact, a corpse employed/operated as a dummy: "it was the reverse of a ghost; for it was not the antic of the soul freed from the body. It was the antic of the body freed from the soul" (Chesterton 2012, 554). The fantastic trope of the ghost serves here as a referent, a measure for the description of a macabre though mundane dummy. It serves as a distorting mirror.

Chesterton turns the fantastic genre on its head. Whereas it usually offers objects remote from reality, Chesterton on the contrary presents fantastic elements as an alternative, upside-down version of reality, thus reasserting the analogical validity of fantastic similes in dealing with matters of the visible world. The fantastic is therefore a stylistic technique intended to surprise readers into a reconsideration of their assumptions. In this regard, Father Brown's occupation as a priest acts as an alluring narrative device that triggers the epistemological temptation of reading metaphysical meanings into mundane things. The figure of the rabbi in Borges's "Death and the Compass" provides a telling echo of this. Lönnrot fantasises a mystical explanation to the death of the rabbi because of the latter's occupation as a rabbi specialised in Jewish mysticism, and this explanation proves fatal to him (Lönnrot fails to see

that the evidence is planted by his nemesis and double, Red Scharlach, in order to entrap him). Both apparatuses explore the promise of a mystical plot as a strong but dangerous object of desire.

Chesterton's approach to detective fiction has been called "philosophical" (Haycraft 76, Merivale and Sweeney 4) in so far as his fiction has to do with attitudes to, and ways of acquiring, knowledge. In this last section, Chesterton's metaphysical detective fiction will be examined in relation to epistemology. According to Brian McHale, detective fiction is "the epistemological genre par excellence" (McHale 9). If so, metaphysical detective fiction may be best understood as anti-epistemological fiction.

The first study of the correlation between philosophical thinking and the detective novel was written between 1922 and 1925 (though it was only published in 1971) by philosopher Siegfried Kracauer. In *Der Detektiv-Roman*, Kracauer tries to apprehend the relation between philosophy and the detective novel within the theoretical framework of Kantian metaphysics and "*KulturKritik*" (understood as the attempt to appreciate the transformations of modern civilisation through its surface manifestations, such as the detective novel). Heavily indebted to Lukacs's *Theory of the Novel*, Kracauer identifies the novel as a product of a new form of society, characterised by excessive rationalisation, and in which phenomena are immediately embraced within the grasp of reason, leaving no room whatsoever for the unknown. Drawing on his close reading of Kant, Kracauer criticises post-Kantian thought, which he sees as responsible for this "flattening" of Kantian metaphysics in popular culture. A most important representative of burgeoning mass culture, the detective novel embodies the mutation of modern society (and philosophical thinking) towards integral scientific and materialistic reasoning, which he calls by its Latin name, *ratio*, and describes as computing reason, strict classification of experience, invariantly subsumed within the structure of rationality (of *ratio*). Consequently, our understanding can no longer apprehend unknown phenomena, mysteries. It no longer asks questions of "why," i.e. metaphysical questions, but only questions of "how," i.e. epistemological questions. Concomitant with this is the flattening of the philosophical *spannung* (the existential tension at the heart of humanity, the metaphysical attitude towards mystery) into thrilling suspense, which is eventually resolved and eliminated by the victory of rationality (Kracauer 201). The process of deduction in detective fiction epitomises this reduction of metaphysics to epistemology in contemporary philosophical trends in so far as the detective only concerns himself with absorbing the chaotic diversity surrounding him into the power of his intellect. However, Kracauer finds one exception to this trend:

> Le roman de Chesterton *The Innocence of Father Brown* transforme effectivement le détective en prêtre et dévoile ainsi son rôle de vicaire dans la région inférieure. L'absurdité de l'analyse rationnelle y est démontrée, et on voit que la compréhension sacerdotale de la nature humaine va plus loin que la pure logique déshumanisée.[10] (Kracauer 98)

[10] Kracauer's *Der Detektiv-Roman: Ein philosophischer Traktat* was first published in its entirety only posthumously in 1971. While unavailable in English, it has been translated into French by Geneviève and Rainer Rochlitz as *Le Roman policier : un traité philosophique*.

What Kracauer notes in Father Brown's method and what could be identified as a metaphysical approach is a certain attitude to the unknown, the possible, the other. We shall call this attitude wisdom, for it is Aristotle's other name for metaphysics, as well as one of Father Brown's founding attributes (and the title of the second series of his adventures). In the very first pages of "The Blue Cross," the narrator also offers an enigmatic method for solving crimes: "wisdom should reckon on the unforeseen" (Chesterton 2012, 6). Metaphysical wisdom then consists in making oneself available to the unknown, rather than absorbing it, like evidence, into our *ratio*.

Father Brown expresses a similar view in the eponymous framing story of *The Secret of Father Brown.* An American traveller, Grandison Chace, invited to Flambeau's estate where Father Brown is also staying, congratulates the latter on his successes in resolving arduous cases (which will then be narrated in the book) but hints that Father Brown's different method (compared with Dupin's or Holmes's) "may perhaps involve rather the absence of method" (Chesterton 2012, 519):

> Edgar Poe throws off several little essays in a conversational form, explaining Dupin's method, with its fine links of logic. Dr. Watson had to listen to some pretty exact expositions of Holmes's method with its observation of material details. But nobody seems to have got on to any full account of your method, Father Brown, and I was informed you declined the offer to give a series of lectures in the States on the matter (…). I may say that some of our people are saying your science can't be expounded, because it's something more than just natural science. They say your secret's not to be divulged, as being occult in its character. (Chesterton 2012, 519-20)

Egged on by Chace's accusations, Father Brown reveals his secret: "You see, it was I who killed all those people" (Chesterton 2012, 520). Brown's ability to identify with another is reminiscent of Dupin's empathetic understanding of the Minister in *The Purloined Letter* which allows him to trace the letter, but Dupin is only capable of putting himself in the Minister's shoes because both are gifted with an analytical mind (the Minister being a mathematician and a poet), while Father Brown generalises this practice to all criminals.

> But what do these men mean, nine times out of ten, (…) when they say detection is a science? When they say criminology is a science? They mean getting outside a man and studying him as if he were a gigantic insect: in what they would call a dry impartial light, in what I should call a dead and dehumanised light. They mean getting a long way off him, as if he were a distant prehistoric monster; staring at the shape of his 'criminal skull' as if it were a sort of eerie growth, like the horn on a rhinoceros's nose (…). So far from being knowledge, it's actually suppression of what we know. It's treating a friend as a stranger, and pretending that something familiar is really remote and mysterious (…).
> Well, what you call 'the secret' is exactly the opposite. I don't try to get outside the man. I try to get inside the murderer… I am inside a man. I am always inside a man, moving his arms and legs; but I wait till I know I am inside a murderer, thinking his thoughts, wrestling with his passions; till I have bent myself into the posture of his hunched and peering hatred (…). Till I am really a murderer. (Chesterton 2012, 521-22)

In Kracauerian terms, then, Father Brown's attitude to mystery rests on the dialectical forces of imagination and understanding: against excessive computing reasoning, he seeks understanding in a radically imaginative method; instead of reducing the unknown to what fits a pre-interpretative frame of mind, Father Brown makes himself available to the mystery

through "suppression of knowledge" and empathetic imagination. These features certainly answer Kracauer's definition of a true metaphysical attitude, but they also epitomise a literary attitude. Father Brown's ability to become one of the criminals parallels the attitude of the writer becoming his characters. His featurelessness is a core element in this method for it allows him to take on the features of criminals, but it is also makes room for a cryptic writer figure.

"The Blue Cross," Father Brown's very first adventure, opens with a description of a character whom the reader assumes to be the hero of the story. It is in fact the head of the Paris police, Valentin (Father Brown's future foil). The reader makes the acquaintance of Father Brown a few pages later, through Valentin's point of view. Far from being the protagonist, Father Brown rather seems to be an eccentric guest in his stories, as suggested by the original title of the story, "Valentin Follows a Curious Trail," which identifies Valentin as the sleuth.[11] What the reader ignores is that when the story starts, Father Brown has in fact already solved the mystery, and sends the police on a wild-goose chase and arranges clues so as to lead them to the thief they want to capture. Father Brown's inconspicuousness serves to hide his real part as a conductor, present everywhere although he is—almost—nowhere to be seen. As to his method, it can be described as a reaction against omniscient knowledge and a radical exercise in fictionalising the self, in becoming someone else, in a game of infinite mirroring stories.

Chesterton repeatedly dismissed his fiction as the less valuable and interesting part of his work (Ker 283), and after him, many a critic may have sided with this observation a little too hastily, contributing to discarding most of his fiction as extra-literary objects. However, should the author's self-deprecation be taken at face-value? To say that Chesterton did not care for his fictional work is, in any case, a misconception. Father Brown stories have been called "potboilers" (Gardner 5), and although this may be true for a number of later stories, the last pages of Chesterton's *Autobiography* prove otherwise. Whereas Chesterton had followed a chronological order in most of the text, he concludes the last chapter by jumping back more than twenty-five years, and recounts the narrative of how he came up with Father Brown (in that regard, it is tempting to see it as the last Father Brown story). If anything, this "last bow" bears witness to his enduring fondness for his character.

In studying a few aspects of the close literary kinship between Chesterton and Borges, this paper aimed to define Chesterton's specific role as a literary innovator of the genre of postmodern metaphysical detective fiction. To work epistemological concerns into crime fiction is a hallmark of postmodernist literature, as evidenced in Borges, Robbe-Grillet or Nabokov's works. But before them, Chesterton paved the way by fictionalising attitudes to and ways of acquiring knowledge, through a variety of literary devices, including spurious

[11] The short story was originally published in the *Saturday Evening Post* (July 23 1910) under the title "The Innocence of Father Brown, Valentin Follows a Curious Trail," then in September 1910 in *The Story-Teller,* as "The Blue Cross."

key-texts, lack of narrative closure, insignificant deaths or fantastic elements, and to which Borges offered a posterity.

From a philosophical standpoint, his contribution to the genre of postmodern metaphysical detective fiction lies in a reassessment of the conceptual basis of the mind-game of detective fiction, through a structural parody of the "worship of the intellect which now makes the educated classes so foolish a spectacle" ("The Danger of Detective Stories"). However, the critique of the intellect, of sheer *ratio*, at stake in Chesterton's fiction does not amount to a dismissal of the very possibility of knowing anything, but makes room for a more dynamic, physical rapport to truth, which could then be defined as "this imminence of a revelation which does not happen" to quote Borges (1999b, 69), i.e. a metaphysical rapport to truth.

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