

Detective Novels as a Modernism

For Bohdan, in memory of a bus-stop

Abstract

In this paper, the detective novel, which is eminently art of the narrative, is interpreted in terms of the aesthetics of modernism. After an overview of the key points of a classical approach to the narrative in Aristotle's *Poetics*, the modernist detective novel (mainly on the example of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* by Poe) is discussed in the context of a theoretical approach to adventure novel developed by Jacques Rivière.

Abstrakt

Tematem artykułu jest interpretacja powieści detektywistycznej w kontekście estetyki modernistycznej. Po omówieniu kluczowych elementów klasycznego podejścia do narracji w *Poetyce* Arystotelesa autor omawia modernistyczną powieść detektywistyczną (głównie na przykładzie *Morderstwa przy Rue Morgue* Poego) z perspektywy teoretycznych ustaleń dotyczących powieści przygodowej formułowanych przez Jacquesa Rivière.

Słowa kluczowe: fabuła, *Poetyka* Arystotelesa, powieść przygodowa, estetyka powieści detektywistycznej

Keywords: plot, Aristotle's *Poetics*, adventure novel, aesthetics of detective novel

0. The Narrative as the Structure of Literary Work

The following essay tries to interpret the detective novel, which is eminently art of the narrative, in terms of the aesthetics of modernism. The narrative develops as a story or plot, and the detective novel is the artistic form purified to the plot.

The basic structure of the narrative as plot consists in the Aristotelian three phases form: “beginning – middle – end”¹. This does not apply to all forms of literature. There is a naïve story, which follows adventures of a character, without any precise ‘end’ to be assumed at the beginning. Naturally, the Aristotelian schema does not fit to very short poetry as *haiku*. The structure of Chinese poetry, “introduction – development – modulation – conclusion (起承轉結)”, stands in a different principle from the Aristotelian. Briefly speaking, while Aristotle emphasizes the logic of action, Chinese poetry is based on the physiology of breath of both the poet and his/her reader. In spite of such a limit, dramas and novels have been based on the Aristotelian narrative.

1. “Beginning – Middle – End”

After defining tragedy as “a representation (*mimēsis*) of an action that is heroic and complete and of a certain magnitude”, Aristotle enumerates its six components: “plot, character, diction, thought, spectacle, and song”. Evaluating the plot as the most important part among the six, he defines it as “the arrangement of the incidents”². It aims at representing “a complete action”. Because of this need of coherent wholeness, the plot must be constituted with a beginning, a middle and an end. About these, Aristotle explains that a beginning is that before which there is nothing and after which something else follows; then a middle is that which follows something and is followed by something else; and an end is that which follows something and is followed by nothing³. This is just a definition of the words beginning, middle and end. Though seemingly evident, this notion implies three problems.

1) Unbalance: The dry propositions of Aristotle give an impression as if this structure were like a stick divided into three equal parts. This, however, is far from being the case. First, the beginning and the end need not be temporally developed. A unique event can begin or close a narrative; in the total course of the narrative, its beginning and end are like points. By contrast, the middle is a temporal development relating that beginning to this end, so that it constitutes the substance of a drama. We can even say that a drama is a middle.

In addition, the Aristotelian explication of the development of plot like a stick divided into three is, at least misleading. Particularly problematic is that he does not mention the correlativity of the beginning and the end. The beginning of a plot is the emergence of an event that requires a solution, and the end must yield such a solution. Anything after which nothing follows cannot be the “end”. This entails the next problem.

2) Reality and Representation (*mimēsis*), or History and Poetry: By “reality” I mean here not only the historical world but also the mythical and fictional world. In reality, every event is related to one another in a complex way, so much so that there cannot exist a pure beginning or a pure end. It is the poet who cuts a beginning and its end out of the real continuity. *Œdipus Rex* by

1 Aristotle, *Poetics*, Chap. 7, translated into English by W. Hamilton Fyfe, The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1965 (the sixth revised print), p. 31.

2 Ibid., Chap. 6, p. 25.

3 Ibid., Chap. 7, p. 31.

Sophocles demonstrates most impressively this difference of reality and poetry. In its real world, the beginning of the story was found in the prophetic oracle Œdipus received when he was born: “this child shall kill his father and marry his mother”. After all his efforts to struggle against it, the prophecy was accomplished. The genius of Sophocles starts the narrative of his tragedy when all was finished and closes it with the revelation of the fact.

This difference between reality and drama explains the difference between poetry and history. A philosopher like A. Danto (*Analytical Philosophy of History*, 1965) interprets the historical discourse in terms of the narrative. “The Thirty Years’ War began at 1618” (my example) is, strictly speaking, a faulty utterance, for the skirmish that happened in Bohemia at that time was something of which people could not tell the future. It only became the beginning of the Thirty Years’ War, when the Peace Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 determined the series of events during this period as parts of one larger event. Indeed a historical big event is based on the structure of beginning – end. However, there is a fundamental difference between poetry and history. Whereas in a story, it is the beginning that determines the end, in history the end determines the beginning. After the meaning of a historical event established, a historical discourse describes it as a story, running from the beginning to the end.

How is the middle? The middle in history is the interpretation or explication of the logic that relates the beginning to the end, the historian does not need to describe the sequence of the events. Even though particular events are referred to, the “plot” is constituted by the scholar’s logic. When the logic is embodied in a rich description, a historical discourse becomes like a historical novel. Good examples are offered by Romantic historians such as Augustin Thierry and Jules Michelet.

3) Dimension of Poetics: In reality, events continue one after another and there are no breaks. It is a poet who defines or creates something as a beginning and a different thing as an end so to invent a wholeness that is a plot. Now we see that the Aristotelian “beginning – middle – end” was a thesis of poetics. The Philosopher not only notes that the plot is the most important among the six parts of tragedy, but also claims that it is “the end”, and even “the first principle, and as it were the soul of tragedy”⁴.

In poetics, that is a theory for the poet to write a tragedy, the importance of the plot is axiomatic. Without making a good plot, he/she cannot arrive at achieving a work. Even an original character needs to act along a due plot. The Aristotelian idea about the arrangement of the plot can be summarized as follows: “the component incidents must be so arranged that if one of them be transposed or removed, the unity of the whole is dislocated and destroyed”⁵. This requirement is applied first of all to the narrative itself and founds the necessity of the plot, and this logic guides the development of “beginning – middle – end”. Besides, this word is almost literally adopted by Alberti to architecture and has been accepted in every art genre as the most important

4 Ibid., Chap. 6, p. 27.

5 Ibid., Chap. 8, p. 35.

principle of artistic creation. Here, the ontological logic based on the dependent relationship is intensified to a logic of subtraction: what is only surplus should be erased from the work.

But, for an audience of theatre and a reader of a novel, is plot the most important interest as well? We consider this problem reflecting on two classical examples.

2. *Ædipus Rex* and *Hamlet*

These two works show clearly the structure of “beginning – middle – end”. The plot of *Ædipus Rex* is as follows: it begins with a petition of the citizens saying “there is an epidemic in the city of Thebes; please do manage to solve this problem”. King *Ædipus*, the good ruler, has already sent a mission to ask an oracle. The oracle given requires to purify the city from the pollution caused by the murder of the ex-King. So the drama develops as a quest for the culprit, to arrive at the “end” revealing *Ædipus* himself as the culprit. *Hamlet* is even simpler.

Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark, receives in Germany, where he studies, the news of the death of his father. He comes back home to find his uncle has married his mother and succeeded to the throne. Suspecting about the suddenness of the death of his father, he is visited by a ghost who presents himself as the very father of the Prince and explains how he was killed by his brother. Unable to take the ghost’s word for it, *Hamlet* tries to get corroborative evidence. The evidence is given along with his own death. Induced by a ruse to a duel and wounded, *Hamlet* kills his uncle before dying himself.

In both cases, the quest for culprit leads the plot and gives the drama a driving force. In this sense, they are like a detective story. But in both cases, the audience knows the culprit from the beginning. The Athenian public, being familiar with the myth, knows what *Ædipus* becomes. The audience of the Globe Theatre, who does not seem to have known the legend of *Hamlet*, believes immediately the word of the ghost. This means that the quest is not for the audience but only for the *dramatis personae*. Therefore, the audience of these pieces does not experience the suspense peculiar to the detective novels. Then what do they experience?

Ædipus Rex offers an exceptional case where the development of the plot constitutes its theme. The audience, as well as *Ædipus* himself, knows the end of the myth. But as to the fact that the end of the myth is to be revealed by the ongoing quest for the culprit, the audience knows it but *Ædipus* remains ignorant. While *Ædipus* belongs to the dramatic world, the audience stays outside. This difference of the viewpoint or the gap of knowledge yielded the romantic concept of tragic irony. Although the quest for the culprit produces no suspense, *Ædipus* himself who pursuits the quest because of the ignorance and the progress of his quest puts the audience in a psychic state of high tension. In addition, this affects their world view. Several testimonies about his own past are brought to *Ædipus*, and they seemingly suggest that he himself is the culprit. He wishes, however, to take these reported facts as simple accidental coincidences. He fears, not that he killed the ex-King who was his father, but

that the dreadful prophecy had been accomplished. Having spent his life to avoid the prophecy, and believing to have succeeded in that, he is being attacked. The power of destiny is the real culprit of this drama, for the original scenario was written by the gods. The theme of *Ædipus Rex* consists in the struggle between a transcendental force and human beings. So when *Ædipus* arrives finally at the acknowledgement that his self-deceit does not work, he cries that all was necessity⁶. The audience shares his shiver suffering the force of destiny. The plot itself represents destiny.

Comparing it with *Hamlet*, we perceive that it was an exceptional case. The narrative of *Hamlet*, which ends with the death of all main characters, has no particular meaning. If the development of the plot gives no interest, what is the focus of experience of the audience during five acts? What are considered as the good scenes of this play include: appearance of the ghost, philosophy of Hamlet talked against the starry sky (including the famous word "to be or not to be"), his modern skepticism that does not accept the ghost's word at its face value, vision of life and death at the scene of graveyard, Ophelia and Hamlet's word "Get thee to a nunnery!" Let us consider Ophelia. She plays a more or less important role in the drama. Not only being a girlfriend of Hamlet, but she also is a daughter of Polonius, the Lord Chamberlain of the Court, and deeply worries about the madness of Hamlet, and becomes insane herself so to be drowned in a brook with wild flowers, which incites her brother Laertes to revenge on Hamlet. We, however, don't consider this girl in terms of such a dramatic role. Her image we have is quite similar to the sweet figure depicted by John Everett Millais, independent from the plot of the drama. All other above-mentioned good scenes share this nature.

Now let us come back to Aristotle. He asserted the plot was the most important part of tragedy and noticed that "you could not have a tragedy without action, but you can have one without character-study"⁷. As above remarked, this is an ontological argument intensified to a logic of subtraction. Dependent on the action, and unable to subsist independently, character-study is accidental. This argument applies naturally to other parts. We have noticed about *Hamlet*, on the contrary, that the audience is not interested in the plot but in the other elements mounted on the plot. Indeed, they presuppose the plot. Looking at Millais's Ophelia, we take into account her circumstances related in the story. Otherwise, this picture does hardly produce such a pathetic effect. But we appreciate not the plot itself but Ophelia. As a result, the dependent relationship is reversed for the audience: instead of Ophelia being for the sake of the plot, the plot is for the sake of Ophelia. Aristotle is still right in saying that there cannot be any tragedy without a plot. But that is a principle of poetics, and in our theatrical experience, the plot becomes a pretext for different aesthetic points. Against this reversed relation, we have a literary form that takes the plot as all. That is the detective novel, which appeared only in the context of modernism.

6 Masaaki Kubo, "The Game of chance and necessity: Sophocles' dramaturgy and its religious character" (in Japanese), *Studies of Greek Tragedy*, vol. 1, 1958.

7 Aristotle, op. cit., Chap. 6, p. 27.

3. Modernism and Aristotle

Aristotelian ontological way of thinking has dominated the whole Western history of art to arrive at modernism. According to Greenberg, modernism consists in emphasizing the medium peculiar to the respective genre to pursue its purity that excludes other elements. According to this analytical way of thinking, painting is the visual art of flatness. If we stress this definition, any representation of the human figure, landscape, or historical scenery is not essential to the painting. In other words, they are dependent, accidental, so that we can eliminate them. "Point – line – plane" are the constituents, by contrast which cannot be excluded from a painting. Especially a coloured plane is the last element to be deleted, for any plane is necessarily coloured in a way or another. This logic of subtraction is the modernism⁸.

Now we read an Aristotelian remark on the relation between picture and colour presented in comparison with the dependent relationship of the character to the plot. Colour is compared to the character in tragedy, i.e. what can be deleted. What is equivalent in a picture to the plot of tragedy is the represented image. He claims that "if a man smeared a canvas with the loveliest colours at random, it would not give as much pleasure as an outline (*eikōn*) in black and white"⁹. It is interesting to compare this with the theory of modernism. Apparently, the position of colour is diametrically opposite in these two doctrines. But the difference is only surface and the core of the thought, especially its logical character is identical. The apparent difference is to be explained as follows. Aristotle is considering not the art in the modern sense but "the mimetic arts". Because of their act of imitation, picture and tragedy belong to the same group of activity. Therefore the representation is the part impossible to be deleted. At his time, there could not exist any non-figurative painting only made of colors. He dares to mention that only as a conceivable but ridiculous case. In contrast, modernism considers that representation should be excluded and that colours are impossible to be eliminated because they consider not the mimetic arts but "art". What then is that art? When it abandoned the representation, art became an open duty looking for its own possibilities or its essence. Modernism is the most important trial of this art, or art itself. In reference to the contrast between the Aristotelian view of colour in painting and the modernist aesthetics, we know that the change that happened in modern era transcends by far the stylistic evolution from the figurative to the abstract. Notwithstanding, it is remarkable that the Aristotelian ontological logic is firmly carried on. Modernism too pursues the essential element of the genre impossible to eliminate.

Then what has become the plot or the narrative in the modern arts of language? In *Hamlet*, we perceived the importance of plot retreating. But the fact remains that plot constitutes the temporal structure peculiar to literature. Then appears a new form of a novel that emphasizes this basic condition. If a plot forms the essential medium of the literary art, and therefore cannot be abandoned, the project of purifying literature to a plot represents the very spirit

⁸ C. Greenberg, *Modernist Painting* (1960) in: "Art & Literature", no. 4, Spring 1965, pp. 193-201.

⁹ Aristotle, *op. cit.*, Chap. 6, p. 27.

of modernism. It was not by chance that detective novel appeared at the mid-19th Century. We are now going to reflect on the independence of plot, on the example of the *Murders in the Rue Morgue* by E. A. Poe, which is considered as the first detective novel (1841).

4. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and purification to the plot

The story is simple. An old woman and her daughter, who lived on the fourth floor in an apartment on the Rue Morgue in Paris (fictive street), were killed in an unusual way. The corpse of the daughter was found from the chimney, head downward; that of her mother in the paved yard in the rear of the building, with her throat almost completely cut. The room was locked with the key inside. The neighbours and the policemen, who rushed there because of the victims' scream, believed to hear two people quarrelling one with another. One spoke French, but as to another's language, the testimonies were divers. Several foreigners being there, asserted that it was a different language from their mother tongue. Naturally, the investigation of the police was at a loss. The mystery was to be solved by "Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin". He is not called detective, probably because at that time the profession of detective was not established. As he reappeared in later works of Poe, he must be considered the ancestor of Sherlock Holmes. "I" who accompanies him, and is telling the story, is the archetype of Watson. All the interest of this novel consists in following the process how Dupin finds out in the testimonies and the situation full of contradictions the truth especially of the two mysteries, namely the trick of the window through which the suspect must have penetrated into the room, and the criminal with a strange voice.

We need not follow the process of the inference of Monsieur Dupin. We turn our attention to the introductory part, which is constituted with two steps. In the larger context, the teller of the story first develops a kind of philosophical thought about "the mental features discoursed as the analytical", and introduces the narrative of the murders in the Rue Morgue solved by Dupin. Then at the beginning of this narrative, he presents the exceptional faculty of Monsieur Dupin, who, strolling in Paris with "me", demonstrates the "proofs of his intimate knowledge of my bosom". The story of the murders, read in an evening paper, begins after that. In this introductory part, we can read the original concept of Poe. He was deeply interested in the analytical power of men, which is typically demonstrated in solving the mystery. As far as it is based on a narrative structure, every drama and novel contains that factor. A narrative has a beginning and develops pursuing a solution to the problem presented at the beginning. Its construction is logical. Before Poe, there had not existed any genre of novel of which the plot was concentrated to the solution of mystery. Therefore, this "somewhat peculiar narrative" needed such an introduction.

Then what is "peculiar" in this detective novel? The introduction starts with a remark that there are people who are gifted with a strong "analytical power" and obsessed with "enigmas, conundrums, hieroglyphics", etc. The original concept of Poe may have been a novel focusing on the "diseased intelligence" embodied in such persons. This concentration to the intellectual

activity anticipates the aesthetics of modernism. The avant-gardes in visual art, besides their political claims, came down to the conceptual art in a wide sense of the word. While however such intellectual arts monopolized the status of high art, the detective novel is generally regarded as typical popular literature. From where comes this paradox?

5. The Aesthetic Fate of the Detective Novel

I am not aware whether the detective novel was regarded as popular literature at the time of its birth. A typical popular novel, for example, the *Lady of the Camellias*, celebrates the loyalty in love, the respect of the social and ethical values in accordance with common sense, on the basic tone of the evanescence of life, in order to bring tears into the reader's eyes. If such is the standard of the popular novel, it does not apply to the *Murders in the Rue Morgue*. Here moral is so to speak discoloured and dry. We may think that the hard-boiled is natural to this genre. This moral neutrality is combined with the purification to the plot. In comparison with the *Lady of the Camellias*, it has nothing to do with popularity, and rather intellectually highbrow. If the detective novel was not counted among the high arts even in the time of modernism, there must be some different reasons. In order to elucidate such conditions, we are going to read the "Novel of adventure", critical essay of Jacques Rivière (1913). As the date of its publication suggests, it concerns the modernism in the novel, and the author shows an intensive interest in the detective novel and demonstrates his view about its weakness.

What Rivière called "novel of adventure" is not a so-called adventure story. It does not concern a novel talking about an adventure but a novel "the form of which" is adventure, i.e. it is not a character but the author who adventures. "Adventure is what happens as a surplus, which was not expected"¹⁰. Therefore the novelist whose adventures must avoid first of all the logic of the narrative in Aristotelian manner. "The work, as a whole" does not "develops like an idea going to its consequences"¹¹. Under this claim lies the conviction that the "truth" of life consists in somethings new coming continuously to exist and rewriting the meaning of the past. Readers share this adventure of the "intellect" that searches, discovers and explains. Making such remarks, Rivière must have the detective novel in mind. So he mentions expressly that "neither Mr Bourget nor Conan Doyle don't give us the varied pleasure that we expect from the new work." After rejecting the psychological novel of Bourget because of the lack of "the "feeling of anticipation, confidential ignorance, and fortuity"¹², he admits that the detective novel is the closest to the novel of adventure among all existing genres, and differentiates these two forms:

It would be more reasonable to expect it [such feeling] from a detective novel. But the detective novel is a substitution of the novel of adventure, and not the novel of an adventure itself. Indeed it has the merit of setting us in a state of curiosity. But our need is not such a curiosity. Its concept is based on the deductive type too so that it begins by posing a case. A crime is

10 J. Rivière, *Le Roman d'aventure III*, in: "La Nouvelle Revue Française", 1er Juillet 1913, p. 65.

11 Ibid., p. 66.

12 Ibid., p. 74.

committed. Let us look for the murderer. The arriving point is immediately fixed; we know immediately where we go; the only problem is to return there. [...] Nothing happens anymore; all is reduced to restore the traces¹³.

Is this differentiation of the novel of adventure from the detective novel satisfactory enough? In a detective novel, the incident has already happened, and in that sense, nothing arrives. But the point of interest for the reader is elsewhere. The solution of what appeared mystery at the beginning is their arriving point and in this respect, we cannot say that "nothing happens". Because something new and full of interest happens, the suspense peculiar to this genre is produced. Rivière may have wished to say what happens new is of different nature in these two forms of novel. In the detective novel, the new consists in the solution of the mystery, and the mystery was given at the first page of the narrative, so that the new does not transcend the given horizon. In what Rivière conceives as the novel of adventure, something new happens in the way of rewriting the horizon itself. He seems to claim that.

We have to pay attention to the fact that Rivière's text was a kind of manifesto: it does not explain new works already written, but try to depict a map of a new trial. His idea was realized by Gide, with *The Counterfeiters* in particular. Gide did not adopt the name of the novel of adventure but talked about the pure novel, which is the modernist form of novel, consisting in stripping "the novel of every element that does not specifically belong to the novel"¹⁴. What is the peculiarity of novel? Gide did not define it. Edouard, the main figure and a novelist in the novel who is writing a novel entitled *The Counterfeiters* in the novel, presents as his own way of writing novels to gather all that happens in life and to dissolve the plot and finds his ideal in the *Art of Fugue*. A formalist orientation is evident. There is no main plot any more, but there are several small plots that conduct the readers. That is possible because these small plots carry small mysteries that require the solutions. The intellectual interest, which constitutes the core element of the detective novel, subsists in a micro form. This is why Rivière referred to the detective novel's case.

As a purification to the plot, the detective novel belongs to the modernist trends. In order, however, to become a truly avant-garde work, it needed something such as dissolving or processing the narrative. The fact that some works of *nouveaux romans*, such as *Passing Time* by Michel Butor and *La Jalousie* by Alain Robbe-Grillet, are constructed on the motives of the detective novel, proves the aesthetic potential of the detective novel. It is remarkable that a new form created by E. A. Poe is surviving in the avant-garde novels even in a micro form.

Bibliography

Aristotle, *Poetics*, Chap. 7, translated into English by W. Hamilton Fyfe, The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1965.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 74-75.

¹⁴ A. Gide, *The Counterfeiters*, translated by Dorothy Bussy, Penguin Books 1931, p. 70.

Ken-ichi Sasaki

Greenberg C., *Modernist Painting* (1960) in: "Art & Literature", no. 4, Spring 1965, pp. 193-201.

Gide A., *The Counterfeiters*, translated by Dorothy Bussy, Penguin Books 1931.

Kubo M., *The Game of chance and necessity: Sophocles' dramaturgy and its religious character* (in Japanese: 久保正彰「偶然と必然の戯れ」[Play between the Accident and the Necessity]), "Studies of Greek Tragedy", vol. 1, 1958.

Rivière J., *Le Roman d'aventure III*, in: "La Nouvelle Revue Française", 1er Juillet 1913, p. 65.