

Review

Dark Places: Crime and Politics in the Personal Noir of James Ellroy,
Darrell A. Hamlin and
Joseph Romance eds.

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In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville observes that the political psychology of the tenth paper of *The Federalist*, of ambition counteracting ambition to preserve free government from tyranny, is present in the overlapping jurisdictions of American political institutions down to the organizational level of county and municipality. On Tocqueville's picture, magistrates, district attorneys, county prosecutors can check one another's transgressions of the law by taking one another to court, holding one another to law, and leaving free citizens to the business of their daily lives. James Ellroy's crime fiction, memoir and journalism, from 1981 to the present, inverts this picture of overlapping jurisdictions into one where competing law enforcement agencies from county sheriff's departments to municipal and state police forces to federal agents fight over control of cases, losing and destroying evidence in a manner which allows violent criminals to get away with murder. Moreover, Ellroy's crime novels display a world of thoroughgoing institutional corruption, systematic bribery and blackmail, in which organized criminality both entraps and bribes elected officials and police officers, with criminals and mafiosi escaping in the interstices of the overlapping jurisdictions, outside the law.

Given the institutional view that stands behind Ellroy's writing as well as the cultural prominence both of Ellroy's novels and of their cinematic adaptations, Ellroy's work would seem a potentially engaging object of analysis for historians of political thought and literature. For this reason, the appearance of *Dark Places: Crime and Politics in the Personal Noir of James Ellroy*, a book of nine essays coupled with an editorial introduction and conclusion, offers a welcome invitation for historians of literature and political thought to engage with Ellroy's work and the political thought of a major body of American crime writing and literary fiction. *Dark Places* opens with an introduction by the editors, Darrell A. Hamlin and Joseph Romance, laying out the stakes of the volume and concludes with a final chapter by Hamlin outlining Ellroy's relevance for reflection on American culture, politics, and civic life. This review outlines the ambit of the nine substantive chapters followed by some reflections on the volume as a whole, which lead into considerations of how texts may be read and studied in the history of American (and not solely American) literature and political thought.

American novelists writing in the aftermath of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county inherit the centrality of a singular location. For Roth, this was Newark; for Bellow, Chicago. For Ellroy, the pivotal locale is Los

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Angeles specifically, and perhaps southern California more generally. The first chapter in the volume, by Susan McWilliams Barndt, ably links Ellroy's social and political psychology to Ellroy's view of Los Angeles as a place. Los Angeles as a place is defined, on this reading, by many people moving there who long to be actors. Those who come to Southern California long to seen (they are running to the stage) and long to start over (they are running from something). For Ellroy, on McWilliams Barndt's reading, the psychology of the actor shares core features with the psychology of the criminal: the actor (like the criminal) is both self-aggrandizing and self-loathing. "For Ellroy," McWilliams Barndt writes, "acting and criminality are inseparable; the movie scene and the crime scene are in too many ways the same kind of place" (p. 18). Ellroy's LA as a place, on McWilliams Barndt's reading, is thus a place full with the in-gathering of potential sociopaths, and hauntingly so. "Ellroy's California," McWilliams Barndt writes, "is a place in which everyone is staring at each other, but nobody knows how to see each other; it is a psychologically and socially damaged and damaging place" (p. 21). McWilliams Barndt's chapter looks closely both at Ellroy's fiction and memoirs as well as Ellroy's journalism, not least Ellroy's GQ articles on the murder trials of O. J. Simpson and Robert Blake—in which the psychology of the actor is most emphatically linked to the psychology of the (accused) killer by Ellroy writing *in propria persona*. McWilliams Barndt's chapter is the only chapter in the volume to utilize Ellroy's journalism (collected in *Crime Wave* (1999) and *Destination: Morgue!* (2004)) as a source, the only chapter to relate Ellroy's reflections on America to Tocqueville (p. 25), and the chapter with the widest source base of Ellroy's work overall (pp. 26-28), with a genuine aim to understand Ellroy within the frame of his own work and writing, to understand Ellroy as the novelist understands himself. *Dark Places* is worth buying for this first chapter alone.

In his 2010 memoir, *The Hilliker Curse*, Ellroy describes his politics as a branch of "tory feminism" and himself as "The feminist with the right-wing chivalry code" (2010, pp. 71, 96). Deirdre M. Condit's second chapter of the volume draws upon the work of Sarah Hoagland (pp. 29, 34) and Judith Butler (p. 45) to offer a "reading of Ellroy's work through the eyes of a feminist political theorist" (p. 48). This second chapter doubles both as a feminist re-reading of Ellroy's literary work and as the chapter within the collection which most directly treats Ellroy's earlier novels, *Brown's Requiem* (1981), *Clandestine* (1982), and *Blood on the Moon* (1984, pp. 40-43, 49). The chapter argues that "Ellroy's personal struggle, and the commensurate struggles he writes into the men he invents, derives from a central feature of traditional masculinity that reproduces men as both women's protectors and predators, simultaneously, and which requires, through the system of heterosexualism, that women collude in their own subordination to make the system work" (p. 29).

Both Ellroy's 1987 novel, *The Black Dahlia*, and its immediate successor, *The Big Nowhere* (1988), end with images of departure from Los Angeles, with Ellroy's broken heroes seeking horizons beyond the city. The first word of Ellroy's *Black Dahlia* is "I" and the final word of the novel is "love" (1987, pp. 9, 383). Erik Anderson's third chapter in the volume, "Black Dahlia and Aesthetic Crime," aims to capture Ellroy's novel within the categories of aesthetic theory in contemporary Anglophone philosophy. For Anderson, Ellroy's *Dahlia* is both an "immoralist" work, the moral flaws of which "can be seen as aesthetic strengths and the negative moral value of the work of art can contribute to its aesthetic value" (p. 66) and, for Anderson, the novel also "instantiates" (p. 77) and portrays "aesthetic crimes", where an aesthetic crime, for Anderson, is something "profoundly ugly, poorly executed, and inappropriate to the extent of being cringe-worthy" (p. 61). For Anderson, "Ellroy's *Black Dahlia* both depicts and instantiates a variety of aesthetic crimes" (p. 77). Anderson is particularly keen to distinguish the "immoralism" that he associates with *The Black Dahlia* from distinct positions in contemporary aesthetics such as Noel Carroll's "moderate moralism" (p. 64) and Berys Gaut's "ethicism" (p. 65).

Deploying Judith Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* (1978, pp. 81, 83) and Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* (1978, p. 85), the fourth chapter of the volume, by Lexey A. Bartlett, is concerned to identify Ellroy's implied or implicit readership as well as to maintain that "the actual reader can and should resist being implicated in this way" (p. 84). In this connection, Bartlett stresses "Ellroy's conception of

his implied reader as male, and one concerned with a certain kind of male identity” (p. 89). Relatedly, Bartlett offers “the metaphor of a dark mirror, one that reflects but also enacts a dark transmutation of the reflected” (p. 86). Similar to the third chapter of the volume, this contribution is ultimately concerned with the ethics of writing crime fiction and the ethics of representation. “It seems to me,” Bartlett here writes, “that continually ruminating on the traces of crime, lingering over them, and using them for titillation without respect for the suffering they connote, falls on the wrong side of the ethical divide, and judging by the examples of the consumers of these images in *The Black Dahlia*, such ruminations dissolve ethical boundaries and push those consumers into dark versions of themselves” (p. 103). Bartlett accordingly ends this chapter with a call to resistance: “we need to resist our darker impulses and find better selves to be on this side of the mirror” (Ibid.).

In the fifth chapter in the collection, drawing upon Raymond Chandler’s essay, “The Simple Art of Murder,” Caitlin B. Coulter argues that Ellroy’s innovations within the genre of detective fiction amount to a corruption of the tenets of Chandler’s paradigm of the hard-boiled detective. Chandler’s detective, on Coulter’s telling, is a private investigator contractually bound to seek truth within his vocation whereas Ellroy’s detectives are public police officers seeking official and physical self-preservation at any (violent) cost within a system of harm (pp. 111, 116). Coulter delineates the violence of Ellroy’s violent detectives in relation to what these detectives fear. “The violent detective perpetually lives with the fear he so doggedly corrupts himself to avoid and inevitably dies by it” (p. 121). Coulter advances this argument on the basis of a reading of Ellroy’s 1990 novel, *L. A. Confidential*, the third volume of Ellroy’s *L. A. Quartet*. “The depraved or corrupt actions of the novel’s central detectives emphasize Ellroy’s maturation and deterioration of Chandler’s un-fragrant world into one that is difficult to separate from the world of true crime or the nightly news” (p. 115). Coulter concludes by juxtaposing the category of “violent” detective fiction (which Coulter applies to Ellroy) with “invested” detective fiction, the authors of which, Coulter claims, “are vocal in their intent to present a fictional reality that mirrors the one they live in as marginalized voices and look to the genre as an opportunity to show what systems of harm can do in hopes that it will be seen and understood by those less marginalized than themselves and changed” (p. 123).

Drawing on the work of Jane Jacobs (p. 140), Martha Nussbaum (p. 132), and Carey McWilliams (pp. 136, 143), Jeffrey Becker’s sixth chapter argues that Ellroy’s “LA Quartet reveals a Los Angeles that is a microcosm of American life: a city that, by its nature, generates an anxiety often expressed through violence and the desire to dominate and control the civic environment” (p. 129). Becker analyses these themes through a reading of policing in Ellroy’s middle novels, concluding that “Without a criminal justice system that citizens regard as fair or just, citizens will continue to regard policing as the imposition of arbitrary rules by the strong over the weak, by the well-connected over the disenfranchised, and by the wealthy over the destitute” (p. 143).

Within the first six minutes of the 1997 film version of *L. A. Confidential*, directed by Curtis Hanson and adapted for the screen by Hanson and Brian Koppelman, the character Sergeant Jack Vincennes describes his role consulting for the fictive *Badge of Honor* as “the television version. America isn’t ready for the real me.” There is no corresponding line in the source material of Ellroy’s novel. What Vincennes says of his relation to *Badge of Honor* within the movie (and its screenplay) doubles as a description of the relation between the film version of *L. A. Confidential* and the original novel. Chapter seven of the volume is devoted to a reading of the 1997 film version of *L. A. Confidential*, in which Paul Babbitt claims that the key themes of the movie are police violence and “the political use of illusion in maintaining authority” (p. 149). On Babbitt’s reading, the movie offers “an exploration of how violence is the foundation of power and authority” (p. 150), which offers Babbitt the occasion to claim that “the film is presenting an example of the ways Walter Benjamin argued police violence is connected to the state, law, and justice” (p. 160). Babbitt concludes the chapter with reflections on the relation of the genre of film noir to politics, writing of film noir that “the genre is cynical, and while characters might have a personal code that structures their attitudes and actions,

these codes are not really moral codes in that there is no attempt to universalize them. More than that, there is no politics that could emerge from these codes" (p. 164).

Ellroy opens his trilogy of *Underworld U. S. A.* novels with an italicized preface claiming that "*Our continuing narrative line is blurred past truth and hindsight. Only a reckless verisimilitude can set that line straight*" (Ellroy 1995, p. 5). In chapter eight of *Dark Places*, W. John Green argues that Ellroy's crime fiction in this later trilogy, not least Ellroy's portrayal of American assassins, professional killers or "wetworkers", in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s in *Blood's a Rover* (2009), should be read as historical fiction (pp. 168, 178) and that Ellroy's writing about these figures largely attains the "reckless verisimilitude" announced at the outset of the trilogy (pp. 168, 175). "Ellroy (and Fontanarrosa)," Green writes, "offer fiction that is well grounded in the real world; they get this right, to a large degree." On Green's telling, Ellroy captures both the sociopathic, the traumatic, and the tragic character of the novelistic assassins in *American Tabloid*, *The Cold Six Thousand*, and *Blood's a Rover*. In so doing, Green notes, "Ellroy becomes the bard and chronicler of wetworkers with PTSD" (p. 178).

The ninth chapter of the volume, by Joseph Romance, juxtaposes Ellroy's tale of the assassination of the 35th President of the United States in *American Tabloid* (1995) with Don DeLillo's story of the same events in the novel *Libra* (1988), a novel which Ellroy read and engaged with. On Romance's relation, Ellroy and DeLillo differ in the relative weight they accord to the events of the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in their stories of the Kennedy assassination, with DeLillo according the Bay of Pigs causal force in the assassination attempt whereas in "Ellroy's telling Kennedy's fate is controlled by the Mob and three law enforcement types driven by events that predate Cuba, Castro, and the Bay of Pigs" (p. 197). Ellroy, Romance argues, accordingly places greater centrality on organized crime in relating the Kennedy assassination within his fiction. Romance links Ellroy's account of the assassination to the persistent view of institutional and political corruption (primarily via systemic blackmail) that runs through Ellroy's novels as a *roter Faden*. Ellroy's institutional story, as Romance notes, inverts Madison's picture of ambitions checking one another in *Federalist* 10. "The moral rot of the men (and it is almost exclusively men) in control is so pervasive, the greed and naked ambition so all-encompassing, that though they and their institutions do clash the result is not a better, or at least safer, world that Madison envisioned" (p. 188). The clash of interests and the clash of institutional, jurisdictional, and personal ambitions allows organized crime, on Ellroy's portrayal, to dominate and get away with murder. This institutional picture is absent, Romance notes, from DeLillo's fictive account of the same historical events.

At the time this book went to press, James Ellroy was the sole author of more than twenty books (including novels, memoirs, and collections of short stories and journalism). The modal and median number of references to works by Ellroy in the bibliographies of the separate chapters of this book (including the introductory and concluding chapters) is one, and in the case of several contributions, the number is zero. Perhaps not unrelatedly, a number of the chapters are rife with errors of fact related to Ellroy's work. One contributor refers to "the *Black Dahlia*, the fourth novel in Ellroy's LA Quartet" (p. 165n14) when this work is the first book in Ellroy's tetralogy. At times, Sid Hudgens (the character played by Danny DeVito in the movie version of *L. A. Confidential*) is "Sam Hudgens" (p. 160).

These low numbers (and the errors related to them) point to a methodological or methodic problem: a number of the contributors (with chapters one and nine being notable exceptions) are not, in the first instance, aiming to understand Ellroy on his own terms nor to read the corpus of Ellroy's work in its entirety (or substantiality). The subtitle of the collection, *Crime and Politics in the Personal Noir of James Ellroy*, leads the reader to expect an engagement with Ellroy's own ideas, Ellroy's own political thought, which, as the better chapters here observe, is markedly present in Ellroy's work.

While not directly engaging with Ellroy's espousal of a "tory feminism" nor engaging with Ellroy's own genre categories of crime fiction, historical fiction, and historical romance, nor considering Ellroy's intriguing (or simply odd) claim that "History" (with a capital-H) ended in 1972 with the death of J. Edgar Hoover (a claim offered by the narrator in *Blood's a Rover* (2009) and reiterated *in propria persona* by the author in an essay from 2014), several contributors *do* bring other theoretical apparatuses to bear upon

Ellroy's fiction and life-writing. With the exception of the first and ninth chapters, Ellroy's work is considered not primarily in its own terms (with the aim to understand placed prior to the aim to critique, with the latter likely to misfire in the absence of the former), but rather through the light of other writers and thinkers projected on to it. Thus, some of the contributors read Ellroy through Butler (p. 45) and some through Arendt (p. 156), some through Shklar (p. 154) and some through Sarah Hoagland (p. 29).

This apparatus of "reading writer A through writer B" or "reading thinker A through thinker B" in political thought or political theory has become an all-too-common procedure such that at times it seems that the imposition of the theoretical lens comes to take precedence over the understanding (and reading) of the primary author to be understood. Ellroy, in this book, all too often becomes an instance of Sarah Hoagland's view of heterosexualism (p. 29) or Arendt's (p. 156) or Benjamin's (p. 160) view of violence—in this way, a tail has been pinned upon the donkey (and a Donkey has been pinned upon the tale): Ellroy is accused of aesthetic crimes (pp. 70, 77) and tagged with various nefarious -isms (pp. 71, 84, 89, 102, 124, 152, 153), without a corresponding attempt to understand how Ellroy's avowed feminism (and his avowed tory sympathies) differ from the views of the writers and thinkers which are being projected onto Ellroy's work.

One of the contributors to the volume defends the choice to close read *L. A. Confidential* to the exclusion of Ellroy's other books by writing, "I simply enjoy *L. A. Confidential* the most" (p. 125n2). Another of the contributors acknowledges that "Ellroy's writing presents insuperable barriers for me. I cannot enter into the mindsets of any of his characters" (p. 102). In lieu of historical reconstruction and understanding (as a necessary antecedent to critique), all that remains is the heaping of either approbation or opprobrium, a task taken up by a distressing number of the contributions included in the book to the detriment of close reading and scholarship.

The task of trying to understand (and historically reconstruct) Ellroy's political thought and novelistic vision of American life, Ellroy's genre categories, and Ellroy's view of "History", political institutions, and place (a task taken up admirably in the first and ninth chapters of the volume), is one that remains open for historians of American literature and political thought. Scholars and writers who take a genuine interest in Ellroy's body of work as historical (and literary) source material are unlikely to be wasting their time.¹

NOTES

- 1 An earlier and shorter version of this review appeared in *American Political Thought* (Summer 2025).

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