“Crime doesn’t pay” is a popular slogan – associated with the notion of law and order, with a certain view of the role of the police in the Western world, and with the idea that the social – and political – sphere should be governed in accordance with a certain set of pre-established and inalterable rules and principles. This means that the validity of the slogan “Crime doesn’t pay” depends on the existence of a constitutional state, a state governed by law – and here we must bear in mind that this is a fairly modern invention in the political world.¹

Crime fiction and/or the detective story as a genre also presupposes the previous establishment of such a type of political community, and the universal validity of the slogan “Crime doesn’t pay” as well as the unconditional belief in the legal maxims of the modern constitutional state are problematized (to a certain extent at least) in fairly early as well as relatively late examples of the genre. The classic detective novel or story (Poe, Conan Doyle, Dorothy Sayers, Agatha Christie) tends to exemplify an implicit faith in human reason – and by implication, in the project of enlightenment as well as the project of modernity – insofar as the detective is turned into “an emotionless reasoning machine” (Julian Symons),² a brilliant and super-intelligent discoverer of hidden causes and secret clues. Thus the detective’s ability to lay bare the rational kernel of any crime, whether it is a murder mystery or another type of illicit behaviour, authenticates the

¹ All references (given in parentheses in the text) to Bret Easton Ellis’ American Psycho are, as in the previous chapter, to the Picador edition, London: Pan Books 1991.
rational premises of the investigation itself and consequently the rationality of the social world *per se*.

Whereas the classic detective novel maintains the polarity between detective and criminal/murderer as a structural principle, the genre has undergone certain changes in the twentieth century, in particular after what came to be termed the “hard-boiled” school (Hammett, Chandler, Spillane) began to revise some of the basic concepts and representational strategies characteristic of detective or crime fiction. Thus the physical prowess of the detective, his ability to handle a gun, etc., was foregrounded to a much larger extent than it was in the classic detective novel, where the intellectual superiority of the detective (Dupin, Sherlock Holmes) was what mattered: in this context we find Patrick Bateman’s obsessive interest in fitness programmes, free weights, facials, and whatever has anything to do with his appearance, for this focus on the body and its would-be high-tuned physical aptitude has in the meantime become an important aspect of American middle-class culture as such in the 1980s and ’90s.

In certain recent crime novels and stories the emphasis tends to be much more on the criminal and his or her background, psychological hang-ups, and other parallel phenomena than on the detective and his or her investigation of the crimes. This displacement of interest can be found in Patricia Highsmith’s crime fiction, exemplified for instance by *Strangers on a Train* (1950), later turned into a movie by Hitchcock (1951). Here one of the main characters, Guy Haines, becomes a murderer against his will, simply because his fellow protagonist, the psychopath Charles Anthony Bruno – whom he chanced to meet on a train – came up with a monstrous proposal:

> Hey! Cheeses, what an idea! We murder for each other, see? I kill your wife and you kill my father! We meet on the train, see, and nobody knows we know each other! Perfect alibis! Catch?³

In this context René Girard’s theory of mimetic desire – and mimetic rivalry – could perhaps be mustered as a useful conceptual tool or a key to what is going on in the novel.⁴ According to Girard,

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