THE SEARCH FOR ORIGINS AS DETECTIVE STORY:
DETECTING DATEDINES AND THE MYSTERY OF ORIGINS

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Abstract: The essay compares two modes of investigating temporal origins: a scientific detection of dates of origin, associated with the chronometric revolution across a number of fields, and a speculative investigation into the mystery of origins in a more absolute sense, where the physical and metaphysical shade into one another. The former mode operates according to a linear, causal temporal model, while the latter initiates an iterative, recursive series of investigations from present through the origin and back again. A range of examples from science, theology, philosophy and literature are discussed.

Keywords: Origin, mystery, chronometric revolution, Cretaceous-Tertiary K-T Extinction, dendrochronology, palindrome, vortex, J.T. Fraser.

Introduction

The theme of the 2010 triennial conference was “Origins and Futures,” a phrase which immediately evokes some sort of open-ended arrow of time, anchored by a beginning point or points (“origins”), and pointing towards indeterminate pathways or trajectories (“futures”). The pregnant phrase “Origins and Futures” implicitly situates ‘us,’ the time-conscious subject, at a complex cusp articulated as the connective ‘and’—to be a noetic (hence temporal) human being is to find oneself between origins and futures, in the knotty space of mapping oneself into a time line extending from origin(s) into future(s). Scrutiny of such a linear arrow of time soon leads to complications, however—retrospective memory and anticipatory imagination project multiple lines of flight that only a multi-dimensional arrow could indicate. Fortunately, Rudy Hilt has provided precisely such an image with “The Arrow of Time,” which graced the cover of our conference booklet.

Convention decrees that the President’s Address cover the conference theme in some sort of comprehensive overview. Since “origins and futures” encompasses a rather wide swath of time, it seemed only fair, not to mention pragmatic, to truncate the topic by bifurcation. This essay thus addresses only one aspect of our theme, namely origins, and in turn
divides investigations of origins into two different kinds, which I'm calling “detecting datelines” and “the mystery of origins.”

Detecting datelines is a mode of looking into the past that seeks to pin down a point of origin, or ascribe a temporal co-ordinate to an event or object. This mode of investigation may be conceived as a form of detective story, in that its governing question is “what happened?” or “how and when did it get there?” and the goal is to reconstruct a past event and date it as precisely as possible. This reconstructive process essentially entails a form of detection: signs in the present are interpreted as traces of past events. The 'detective' undertakes an empirical investigation in which the object being scrutinized serves as the equivalent of a crime in detective fiction: it is the origin or cause of the narrative, and the narrative's plot depicts the process of reconstructing what happened. In a sense then, the detective plot involves the reconstruction of its own origin (see Brook).

The mystery of origins encapsulates a mode of looking into the past that contemplates and speculates about some origin of an absolute kind. This mode of investigation may be characterized as a form of mystery story, where the governing question is “what is an origin?” or “how did this origin itself originate?” These questions afford only solutions that themselves remain irreducibly mysterious, at least when framed in metaphysical terms. Consequently, the resolution of the mystery of origins involves moving around, in and through an origin without solving or resolving its mystery. Some literary critics point out that the mystery genre often touches on or broaches supernatural or transcendent domains because the investigation of a mystery organically expands into contemplating the mystery—namely, the mystery of whether or not there is anything beyond the material. Mystery denotes something secret, obscure, or puzzling; it poses as an unknowable truth or Gordian knot. The word's etymology conjures clouded eyes and lips; connotes a theological secret; connects to a desire to initiate or teach. In a mystery story, then, the investigation of the mystery returns to its origin, as in detective fiction. However, it becomes a mystery when the origin or truth proves undetectable. Thus no final solution can be reached; investigation must continue returning to the origin but without expectation of an endpoint (see Irwin).

Each of these investigative modes is governed by and constructs a different mode of temporality. Detecting datelines operates within a linear, causal model of time, in which solutions result in plotting the points and connective features of events. This is the narrative mode favored by science in particular. Mysteries of origins unfold or disclose a recursive, tangled,