

Clouds of Witness

D.Sayers

July 18-21, 2011

The detective story or the mystery story is a very successful genre. Why is that? It encompasses the high-brow as well as the low-brow, and is consequently read by a great variety of people. At the center of the story is a mystery, by convention almost always a murder, whose business it is to be resolved in such a way as to satisfy the curiosity of the reader. This means specifically that to as large an extent as possible the reader should in principle be able to put two and two together from the evidence presented, or at least get the impression in retrospect that this ought to have been the case. This forensic element in a detective story it shares with science, which also creates stories and theories through the scattered and fragmentary evidence unearthed. Theories and stories, no matter how convincing and pleasing, nevertheless have to be put to the test. To solve a mystery is, as the British historian and philosopher R.G.Collingwood¹ well understood, a matter of reconstructing the past, through the fragmentary traces it leaves in the presence, as well as; and this is a very crucial and important point, the actual thoughts of the actors. Crimes are by their very nature human affairs, a non-human cannot commit a crime, and the essence of a crime is to be found in the motivations and plans that have guided human intellects in the execution of actions. A crime, as well as a historical event, does not make sense without an elucidation of the underlying thought.

The plot of a detective novel, consisting of the clever set-up of a mystery and the skillful resolution of the same lies at the core of every such novel. This is by which such a novel should be judged, and this also constitute the key to the attraction it has to its leadership. True, there are novels in which murders figure prominently, such as the classical ones by Dostoevsky, but there the murders are no mysteries and their resolutions are of limited interest; thus they cannot by any stretch of imagination be classified as detective stories. It cannot be said too often, the actual murder in such a story is of limited interest, they are just excuses. That this almost exclusive focus on a murder came about is rather interesting, because the original detective stories, those which serve as an inspiration to all that followed, concerning Sherlock Holmes and his dimwitted companion, had no such exclusive focus.

Now integral to the resolution of a mystery is a single intellect, that of the detective. This is also an important feature, because a classical story needs a hero and a quest, and a detective and the mystery, provide an excellent example thereof. But a detective story also need to have other qualities, secondary maybe, but yet essential for its success, and that is the depiction of a milieu. In other words, there is not enough having the black and white outlines of a mystery, there has to be color as well. Most people would have little patience being exposed to lengthy and penetrating descriptions of peoples clothing and appearance, the weather and the landscape; but of course in a suitable context those things are not only

¹ Incidentally an avid reader also of detective stories, and most likely including the present one.

accepted but contributing to the charm. Indeed so addictive can this secondary aspect of the mystery novel be that after a while it becomes the main attraction. The phenomenon is well-known from soap-operas. It becomes particular manifest when one considers the extended output of a single author, whose oeuvre takes on an attraction apart from what should be the core. Namely the attraction of familiarity, be it with the settings or the main characters who will, as in a a soap, appear over and over again. The author has succeeded in creating a self-enclosed world, to which the hungry reader, desirous for comfort may find an escape.

This secondary aspect of a detective story has seduced many an author to see the story just as a convenient vehicle for conveying a message, a message far more important than the ephemeral one of whodunit. Typically such messages are in the form of societal criticism. This combination is of course potent, apart from giving the author the sense of doing something more than just serving entertainment for the moment. The reader too can take heart in being instructed as well as entertained,

How should one view the present story by Sayers? The story was written already in 1926 and is among her first attempts at mystery fiction. It is supposed to take place in 1923, but October 13 that year was no Wednesday, as is stated in the book, but a Saturday. This is of course a minor detail, but in murder mysteries, seemingly insignificant details more often than not prove to be of momentous importance. Thus reading the book almost ninety years after it was written, the reader is becoming privy to interesting historical circumstances, which of course were unwittingly served by the writer, who probably had no expectations let alone ambition that those novels would be still read almost a century later. But enough of a pre-ambule, let us come to the core, the mystery.

It is rather classical, with a dead body showing up and connected to a limited number of suspects, something which would serve as a standard model for Agatha Christie (who incidentally was Sayers almost exact contemporary born in the same year I believe). In fact the mystery is based on three independent events, which happen to happen at the same time and at the same place - a hunting lodge, and thus lead to confusion and false threads and a lot of herring colored red. There is the victim himself that being jilted by his mistress goes out to kill himself, botches it up in a sense, and crawls back to the lodge, only to eventually expire. There is his fiance about to elope with her old lover, who finds the body and takes fright and runs away. And finally the host himself, a beef-witted duke, who goes off in search of his mistress, but who from a sense of honor refuses to disclose his whereabouts and thus is deprived of an alibi.. We are given carefully selected evidence suggesting rather plausible scenarios only to be overthrown by subsequent developments. The author allows herself a cute meta-attitude when she likens the unfolding of the plot as too much like that of a detective story, the evidence coming in too neatly. This is of course the problem of a story, which at the same time conspires to be both entertaining and realistic. If too faithful to reality it becomes too tedious, just like a true transcription of an oral statement. Thus the challenge of a writer of detective stories is to provide the mere semblance of realism, something that incidentally is the challenge of almost all writing of fiction. So how does Sayers attempt this? A story needs to convey basic information, and by varying the way this is being done, the illusion of realism is heightened as well as relieving much of the tedium a more uniform presentation would involve. Thus we learn

about the beginnings of the story from reading over the shoulder a coroners inquest as reported in a paper. The point of view is steadily shifted, which adds to the illusion that we are viewing (from different angles) a phenomenon that is independent of all those points of views. Other ways of enhancing realism is to report peoples conversation as if they were taken verbatim from their actual speech. Actually to do so consistently, as Sayers tries to do, is rather tedious, and is thus overdone. I guess it was a bit modish at the time. More original is her presentation of her hero's speech while stuffing his pipe. Its flow being regularly interrupted by '(dig)'. Another idiosyncrasy is her habit of involving lengthy quotations from classical literature as well as having a lot of untranslated French². Sayers being a scholar must not only show off, but also to supply a large section of her readers with an alibi for letting themselves be entertained.

Now as to color. It helps to depict an upper-class setting with people having more leisure than they know what to do with. The lives of the rich and famous, although the latter is an added bonus which is not absolutely essential, exert an unending fascination. This fascination is rather enhanced than muted by the fact that almost all the fortunates are dimwits and good-for-nothings, not deserving of their good fortune. This tempers envy and gives to the reader a sense of moral superiority³. But of course mere milieu is not enough, the characters themselves must be fascinating as well, and this goes especially (maybe even exclusively?) for the main protagonist - the detective hero. In that respect Doyle was singularly successful. After all he was able to convey the right mixture of fascination and realism in order to make his Holmes the quintessential fictional figure who is wishfully mistaken for a real one. A series of detective fictions stand or falls by the character of the hero detective. Wimsey is not too different from Sherlock Holmes, he is less strange (and thus less fascinating) and thus easier for the reader to identify with. His allure is the mixture of high-society and sharpness of mind - a sleuth in the words of Sayers, along with his high-brow interests. In fact novels live and die by their characters, and in Peter Wimsey⁴, fittingly the brainy younger brother of a brawny bloke, she managed to create one (maybe a dream picture of the man she would fall for?), a feat which secured her an enduring readership.

As touched upon in the beginning, a novel also reveals many things, especially if it is written in the past, which were never part of the author's intention. One such example is the incidence with the Soviet Club. In the early twenties, as a natural effect of the recent Russian revolution, there was a lot of Socialism debated in British Society, both from an admiring and idealizing point of view as well as one from pure dread of the Cossacks. Sayers takes a rather disparaging view of the former, and in the character of Goyles, the man to bring about the elopement with the fiancee, Sayers makes fun of the discrepancy between high-flown Socialist rhetorics and actual down-to-earth action⁵ at least if we are to assume that her Wimsey is her mouthpiece. Britain is a class-society, and I guess even

² Although when a whole lengthy letter is presented in French, she author provides a translation. After all the letter is crucial to the whole plot.

³ How apposite is this not when it comes to the case of royalty.

⁴ The name makes you think of whimsy which can hardly be a coincidence.

⁵ In particular the idealization of the manual worker by people who have never done an honest piece of work themselves

more so back in the 20's than nowadays. The social privileges of the upper classes are taken, even if occasionally resented, as inescapable facts. The fact that a peer should be tried for murder is shocking and almost unprecedented, and needless to say being tried by his peers, is given a very literal interpretation in the book. In fact so literal and hilarious that it must be deliberate. Other things that shine through are fashionable prejudices. Crimes of passions are almost being forgiven, in fact cheating at cards, is considered by its pettiness to be a much greater affront to good form. The suicide is almost forgiven for his intention to keep an expensive mistress on the proceeds of a wealthy match⁶. It is not considered as low as it is tragic.

Now, of course, as a piece of fiction craft, there are obvious flaws in the book. Some of which have already been mentioned. For a writer of mystery here is a strong temptation to rely on coincidence. True, those also play a decisive role in real life as well. In fact the saying 'life is stranger than fiction' is not without foundation. But in real life coincidence is the exception to the rule, and as such there is no limit to its strangeness, while in fiction it tends to be the rule, and as such is often felt as being merely contrived. Stumbling into the pathologically jealous farmer, is one such incident, being shot at by Goyles another. Both being gratuitous as well. As to character build-up, much is to be desired. On the other hand, this is not really essential in a mystery story, especially when it comes to a murder victim, on which empathy would be misplaced and distracting.

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⁶ After all the fiancée is not emotionally deceived, thinking on her part the match as one of mutual convenience.