Agatha Christie & the metaphysics of murder

By Theodore Dalrymple

A publisher suggested to me some years ago that I write a study of Agatha Christie's social, political, and psychological ideas. The idea appealed to me because it would enable me—no, oblige me—to read her books while under the impression that I was working rather than merely indulging myself.

Francisco Goya, Fight with Cudgels, ca. *1820–23, Oil mural transferred to canvas, Prado Museum.*

But Agatha Christie wrote many books, and to conduct a study such as the publisher proposed would require not just a casual, but a very close reading of them all. Preferably, of course, I should read them in the order in which they were written, so that I would be able easily to detect (to coin a phrase) the development of her ideas, if development in them there was.

The life of man, however, is but threescore years and ten, as Macaulay reminds us in his scathing review of Dr. Nares's immensely long-winded two-volume biography of Lord Burleigh:

> *[W]e cannot but think it somewhat unfair in Dr. Nares to demand from us so large a portion of so short an existence.*
>
> *Compared with the labour of reading through these volumes, all other labour—the labour of thieves on the treadmill, of children in factories, of negroes in sugar plantations—is an agreeable recreation.*

And as I have already passed that threescore-and-ten span by some margin, I felt that to spend a quarter, say, of what little time remains to me reading, studying, and indexing more than eighty books by Agatha Christie, scouring them for fragments of ideas, would be frivolous. I can't justify this feeling from any first principles, of course. By comparison with death, what is not frivolous? Reading Kant or Schopenhauer? If I have an eternal soul, will spending my last years in this fashion count against it? Is there to be no Agatha Christie in Heaven? Still, the feeling persisted.

But so did the attractions of the project, despite the fact that her work has often been disparaged on a number of grounds. Her style is said to be flat and unoriginal, her plots absurd, her outlook bourgeois and small-minded. Raymond Chandler and Edmund Wilson took potshots at her. The latter, in an essay published in 1944, was particularly damning:

> *[H]er writing is of a mawkishness and banality which seem to me literally impossible to read. You cannot read such a book, you run through it to see the problem worked out; and you cannot become interested in the characters because they never can be allowed an existence of their own even in a flat two dimensions but have always to be contrived so that they can seem either reliable or sinister.*

Besides being ill-written, this passage is ill-conceived and exudes intellectual snobbery. The assertion that Mrs. Christie's books are impossible to read consorts ill with the

fact that they have been translated into every written language and sold in numbers unprecedented in history. It makes sense only on the assumption that Edmund Wilson is using terms such as “you” and “impossible to read” in a severely technical sense.

By “you,” he means “people like me,” which is to say persons of superior literary attainment and sensibility, a discerning elite; he is flattering his readers also, by assuming that they are part of that elite. It is an excellent rhetorical trick, for who disagrees with the contents of flattery?

As for “literally impossible to read,” he obviously means by the verb “to read” something rather more than its common acceptation. You cannot “run through a book” without reading it, however quickly and carelessly. What he means is that books such as hers do not repay close attention, such as it is the duty of serious literary critics to pay to books.

Even if this were so, that Agatha Christie’s books were mere trash of no intellectual substance whatever, the fact that they were (and are) of such worldwide appeal might be worth investigating. Why have they this appeal? How is it that books whose action takes place in a social milieu so completely alien to that of the vast majority of mankind were nevertheless able to capture their imaginations? Does this not suggest some skill on the part of the author? It could not be the universal interest in murder alone, albeit that such interest is in itself a subject worth investigating, for books about murder are legion, but there is only one Agatha Christie. At the very least, her work is an important social phenomenon, whose salience remains because her books continue to sell.

But surely it is not true that her writing, apart from being of a formula that has enchanted millions, is completely without merit or interest. (The Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha liked her books very much, presumably in French translation,

for Hoxha was fluent in French. He did not permit the Albanian people, however, to read them.) The author herself was under no illusions as to her own merits. She called herself middlebrow, just as Somerset Maugham put himself in the first division of the second rank of authors. But she had undoubted strengths, even if some of her books are frankly bad (and as Somerset Maugham also remarked, only a mediocre writer is always at his best). For one thing, she is often very funny: her books were comedies of manners, and to object to them on those grounds, that murder is no laughing matter, would be literary puritanism at its worst. For another, she was very far from an ignoramus. Her knowledge of toxicology, for example, was extensive. She was an excellent pianist and early in her life even considered a career as a concert pianist. She was closely acquainted with human suffering through her work as a nursing auxiliary in the First World War. Through her second husband, Sir Max Mallowan, an archaeologist of Mesopotamia, she became knowledgeable about archaeology. None of this means that she was a good writer, of course: all her other accomplishments were perfectly compatible with a complete absence of literary talent, but they entitle her to some respect for her intelligence.

More importantly, she was shrewd, in the way that someone who observes the world around her with amused detachment is often shrewd. She was psychologically very acute. I first realized this when I read The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, a book mostly famous because its narrator, Dr. Sheppard, turns out also to be the murderer, then an original twist in the genre of crime writing. (An analysis of Mrs. Christie's fictional doctors would be an interesting study in itself, and one which would hardly be flattering to the profession.) But in this book, Agatha Christie, through Dr. Sheppard's fictional pen, draws a memorable portrait of a busybody spinster, his sister with whom he lives, a type I have known only too well, who makes the business of others the whole focus of her life, always (and joyfully) believing the worst of them, the better to

assuage her own bitterness and disappointment with life. Dr. Sheppard's sister is
called Caroline:

> *Caroline can do any amount of finding out by sitting placidly at home. I don't know how she manages it, but there it is. I suspect that the servants and the tradesmen constitute her Intelligence Corps. When she goes out, it is not to gather information, but to spread it. At that, too, she is amazingly expert.*

This, surely, is fine portrait-painting in words. It is simple, euphonious, and effective. Certainly, I have known women like Caroline, whose whole being was like the long antennae of nervous insects, quivering and quavering in the search for possible information about whatever disreputable thing was going on around them, to be passed on with all the spice of malice.

When, in the first chapter of the book, Caroline says to her brother that Mrs. Ferrars, lately deceased, must have taken a suicidal dose of veronal, he says:

> *It is odd, when you have a secret belief of your own which you do not want to acknowledge, the voicing of it by someone else will rouse you to a fury of denial.*

This is a sharp psychological observation whose truth we recognize at once. In a sense, we have always known that it was true, but it is not until it is so clearly enunciated that we let it into the forefront of our minds. Moreover, it is an observation not without other significance. It suggests that vehemence is no guide to sincerity or honesty of belief, let alone of the truth of a vehemently propounded proposition. Since we live in an age of vehemence, in which so many people find meaning and purpose in vehemently expressed beliefs of at least questionable truth, Dr. Sheppard's observation is of

greater salience now than it was when first uttered, all but a century ago. Would one expect to be able to have a calm and rational discussion with people who throw soup at the Mona Lisa to save the planet?

There is yet more. When Dr. Sheppard makes his true observation, we do not yet suspect, let alone know, that it is he who has killed Mrs. Ferrars, and therefore that his true and acute observation is made in bad faith. But the fact that he is lying about what he believes does not make his observation any the less true, though it suggests that his own psychology is far from straightforward. Of course, if one just "runs through" rather than "reads" the book, as Edmund Wilson suggests one must, the subtleties of Agatha Christie's attention to the human capacity for simultaneously knowing and denying the truth, and even for suppressing knowledge of one's insincerity in doing so, will be missed. Mrs. Christie's characters are not as flat as they're painted—by Edmund Wilson.

Nevertheless, the prospect of reading scores of her books in succession was to me a daunting one. Few writers could or would repay such a concentrated exposure: a complete box of even the most delicious chocolates cannot be eaten at one sitting. Foregoing this approach, alas, meant that I would have to give up a favorite playful hypothesis of mine, that Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, far from being detectives, were actually prolific serial killers.

How else to explain that everywhere they go, murder is soon and sure to follow? Murder, after all, is a very rare event, yet a murder is committed almost as soon as Poirot, for example, sets foot on the Orient Express. This is not an unusual thing for this pair of so-called detectives. To take another example, no sooner does Miss Marple set foot in Stonygates, a Victorian country house now devoted to the rehabilitation of delinquents, than murder breaks out—not among the delinquents, and not just one murder. Surely Occam's

razor demands that Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple be arraigned?

I have never been quite sure about Occam's razor, that is to say its status. It is not a merely logical principle. The requirement that phenomena, in this case the extraordinary prevalence of murder everywhere Poirot and Miss Marple set foot, are to be explained in the simplest possible way that will explain them is no doubt a sound one—in certain circumstances. But the simplest explanation is not necessarily the best, especially of those complex phenomena that cannot be examined by controlled experiment. Conspiracy theories are usually simple and often explain a great deal, or at least would do so if they were true; and there are conspiracies (most of them unsuccessful), but not as many as are to be encountered in pubs and bars, or in other casual conversations.

If the aforesaid razor is not a logical principle, is it an empirical truth? One would have difficulty in proving it. One would have to refine the circumstances in which one might reasonably expect to apply it. In general, doctors apply it almost by instinct: once they have made a diagnosis that best explains a patient's condition, they do not look for another, or suggest that the patient has two diseases rather than one. But a doctor is sometimes obliged to change his diagnosis (of which, if rare, he may be inordinately proud), and not a few medical disasters have been caused by the doctor's refusal to do so. Pride goeth not only before a fall, but also before a mistake.

The best I can suggest with regard to Occam's razor, then, is akin to the injunction not to tell lies: generally a good principle, but far from the categorical imperative that Kant made of it.

Be that as it may, it would not be altogether easy to prove that Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple were serial killers, for

they would have been sure to cover their traces carefully, and to uncover them would require more effort than I was prepared to expend even on so important a hypothesis. The prospect of reading a single author to the exclusion of all others for two years, moreover, was daunting. Therefore, I decided on a different and much more manageable approach.

I would take at random a single book by Agatha Christie and examine it closely for its philosophical, social, and psychological content. I would, of course, have to be careful not to attribute the opinions of the fictional characters to the author, but she was often satirical, and an author's choice of object for satire is often revealing. Since she was primarily an entertainer, it was unlikely that she took excessive care to cover her own traces or disguise her own opinions.

The book I chose at random was They Do It With Mirrors, published in 1952 by William Collins, at which time the publisher ran a campaign with the title "A Christie at Christmas." I chose the book for no particular reason except that I happened to have a copy and had never read it. As far as I was aware, it held no particular place in what students of Mrs. Christie's work would no doubt call—by analogy with what enthusiasts of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories call them—the canon. I would therefore come to it with an open mind, without presuppositions. Whether it was a fortunate choice what follows will no doubt reveal.

My method would be to take every passage of possible social, psychological, or philosophical interest and deal with it in succession, and decide whether, taken at the end, they amounted to a Weltanschauung, a worldview. This method would not show any development in the author's ideas, of course: it would be a snapshot rather than a film. It is said, for example, that her mild anti-Semitism, more social snobbery common to her class than raging racism, declined after the Second World War, whether from moral conviction or

circumspection I do not know. By the time she wrote They Do It With Mirrors, however, she was sixty-two, an age at which one's ideas have usually matured, not to say hardened.

They Do It With Mirrors it was to be, then. It is fortunate that the book contains Christie's most beloved character, Miss Marple, for it allows an analysis of this figure who has managed to endure in, if not the literary imagination, at the very least the minds of the fiction-reading public.

In the first scene of the book, the contrast of the appearance of Mrs. Van Rydock—Miss Marple's old friend who has summoned her to investigate Stonygates—and of Miss Marple, who are of an age, is remarked.

> *It was practically impossible when looking at Mrs Van Rydock, to imagine what she would be like in a natural state. Everything that money could do had been done for her—reinforced by diet, massage and constant exercises.*

Miss Marple, by contrast, is dowdy, provincial, and unsophisticated in her appearance, which is not the same as untidy or disheveled:

> *She looked somehow an incongruous figure in the ornate bedroom of the expensive Hotel suite. She was dressed in rather dowdy black, carried a large shopping bag and looked every inch a lady.*

"Every inch a lady": there is much implicit in those four words.

By "lady" is meant a woman of a certain social, educational, cultural, and behavioral background, a member of an elite determined not solely by personal wealth. Miss Marple, we are supposed to infer, was gently born and taught accomplishments rather than school subjects, though enough of the latter not to be completely ignorant. Work, in the normal sense of

remunerated effort necessary for subsistence, especially in what was once called “trade,” was not to be demanded or expected of her. Her money, such as it was, would come from a source of which she knew nothing, and in which she took no interest. The war years had evidently straitened her circumstances, but that did not affect her social status. She was still of a social caste that might almost be called the gentry.

Her poverty was of the genteel kind. This is the poverty in which people, especially spinsters or widows, maintain the refined manners and tastes of the class into which they were born but have not the means to maintain a luxurious train or style of life. They struggle to keep up certain standards and would rather be seen in the worn-out expensive clothes of their caste than in the cheap finery of the lower orders. Miss Marple, we are told, is helped out a little in the post-war years of austerity by her nephew, Raymond, who is a successful novelist (an acceptably genteel way of making money, though an unreliable one). Such assistance is acceptable to her, as assistance by the state would not be, for the latter would signify sharp descent from the upper to the lower, or lowest, caste.

Genteel poverty is not destitution and instead entails sacrifices and sometimes subterfuges to maintain appearances. In a sense it is noble, for it strains to stay true to an ideal. Like bohemianism, however, it is a thing of the past. Bohemians had to be able to gather in the centers of metropolises to form, if not communities exactly, at least a population of people with an almost exclusive interest in art, music, poetry, and fiction that transcended the quotidian interests of most people, and which allowed them to live a distinct lifestyle that set them apart from the ordinary bourgeoisie, from whose ranks they were largely drawn. Their unconventionality was parasitic on the existence of convention. Like the genteel poor, they had low incomes, but

the rise in property prices and rents relative to other prices, as well as increasing regulations with regard to the rental of properties and the raising of compulsory standards of such property, meant that those who would once have aspired to bohemianism have been driven further and further from the centers of metropolises, and bohemianism does not survive suburbanization. The same goes for genteel poverty.

Nowadays there is merely poverty, even if it is only relative by contrast with historical standards. Shifts in prices have made the kind of sacrifices necessary to live in genteel poverty impossible, but there is another reason why such poverty should have become impossible, namely the obsolescence of the very idea of gentility as something desirable.

Is this a good thing? Clearly, there is a good aspect to it, insofar as the idea of gentility can be a reason for snobbery. As something that is largely, though perhaps not entirely, inherited rather than earned, gentility may seem unjust. But though inherited, it requires obedience to a code that includes admirable qualities worthy of emulation and that might be lost without it. In this sense, loss of gentility conduces to a coarsening of the general culture of a society, and the loss of an aspiration that is not entirely material.

Moreover, just because the idea of gentility is inherently inegalitarian does not mean that its loss results automatically in a more equal society. In all societies except the most primitive, and perhaps even in them, there is a hierarchy, one might say an iron law of hierarchy; there never has been or ever will be a society in which power and prestige are evenly distributed between all members. And if prestige does not attach to one way of life, it will attach to another.

What, then, has replaced gentility in social prestige? There is an obvious answer: money. The advantage of money as the conferrer of prestige is that it is easily measurable and ranked. The person with the most money has the most prestige,

all the way down to the person with the least. Moreover, it is not difficult (though it may sometimes be inadvisable) to make clear how much money you have. Of course, our assessments may be erroneous: many a fraud has spent magnificently, even munificently, before his exposure and bankruptcy, if not imprisonment, but in general appearances are not altogether deceptive. A man who drives a Rolls-Royce, or who is driven in a Rolls-Royce, is likely to be richer than a man queuing in the rain for a bus.

Where money is the measure of all things, manners and tastes are likely to be less refined than in a society in which social hierarchy unrelated to money persists.

The literary critic Fredric Jameson captures the difference between English and American crime fiction in his book about Agatha Christie's detractor Raymond Chandler:

> *the murder in the placid English village or in the fogbound London club is read as the scandalous sign of an interruption in a peaceful continuity; whereas the gangland violence of the American big city is felt as a secret destiny, a kind of nemesis lurking beneath the surfaces of hastily acquired fortunes, anarchic city growth, and impermanent personal lives.*

With the destruction of gentility as an ideal in England, it is not surprising that crime writing in England should come to resemble its American equivalent, exceptions being made for the backward-looking or nostalgic stories set in a world that no longer exists. Murder has been democratized, or at least made demotic.

For myself, I have had enough to do with real murder in modern England to prefer the gentrified type in Agatha Christie. Most murder is merely sordid, unmysterious, stupid, and not infrequently drunken, or alternatively engendered by passions of a crude culture, of which I do not wish to be reminded when

I read for pleasure.

If Miss Marple is ladylike, does it imply Agatha Christie's endorsement of gentility? It would be stretching credulity to suppose otherwise. Lower-class figures in her books are stereotypical, and while they may be amiable enough, they do not have complex mental lives. The parts they play are mainly walk-on, and even in a book such as They Do It With Mirrors, in which all the action takes place in an institution for juvenile delinquents of lower-class origin, not much interest is expended on them as individuals. They are mere background; mainly they are good-hearted, and the ill that they do is impulsive and not a manifestation of concerted evil—which they are not complex enough to have committed. They are even figures of fun, approached facetiously. Gina—the adopted granddaughter of the wife of the man who runs Stonygates—tells Miss Marple about a juvenile delinquent as she drives her from the station to the house:

> *The young criminals are rather pets, some of them. One showed me how to diddle locks with a bit of wire and one angelic faced boy gave me a lot of points about coshing people.*

There is not much pause for thought here about the coshed rather than the cosher because life in the lower orders is not very real for Gina. At most they are a distant and amusing spectacle, a backdrop to real life. Coshing—hitting someone with a club—can be the subject for Gina of light remarks because she is in absolutely no danger of being coshed by someone who is "rather a pet." The whole point of the murders in Agatha Christie is that they are committed in a milieu where they are least expected, a milieu in which people generally behave with refinement, carry no cosh, and do not stab each other to death in stupid drunken arguments.

Miss Marple is not straightforwardly a snob, however. She is aware that under any surface, however polished it may be,

human nature remains the same. She is always ready to draw an analogy between the events in her quiet, delightful, seemingly idyllic village of St Mary Mead, full of hollyhocks and climbing roses, and the criminality that she is investigating. When Mrs. Van Rydock first tells her that she (Mrs. Van Rydock) had a bad feeling about the atmosphere at Stonygates, Miss Marple at once recalls something that happened at St Mary Mead.

> *"I remember," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "one Sunday morning at church—it was the second Sunday in Advent—sitting behind Grace Lamble and feeling more and more worried about her. Quite sure, you know, that something was wrong—badly wrong—and yet being quite unable to say why. A most disturbing feeling and very very definite."*

The next day, Grace Lamble's father, an old admiral with whom she lived, attacked her with a coal hammer and nearly killed her, claiming that she wasn't his daughter at all, but the Antichrist posing as such.

Mrs. Van Rydock asks Miss Marple whether she had a premonition that something of the kind was about to happen, the implication being that there is, perhaps, a kind of mental faculty unrecognized by science. Miss Marple provides a rational explanation: "I wouldn't call it a premonition. It was founded on fact—these things usually are, though one doesn't always recognise it at the time."

Grace Lamble, it turned out, had been wearing her hat the wrong way round that Sunday, and she was normally a most precise and careful woman. She had rushed out of the house, putting on her hat carelessly, after her father, in a paranoid temper, had thrown a paperweight at her. Thus, the premonition was not the exercise of some psychic or prophetic power, unknown to the laws of physics, but a subconscious recognition that something was not right, even if Miss Marple was unable

to bring to mind exactly what it was.

Mrs. Van Rydock expresses surprise that such things go on in St Mary Mead, which she had imagined as a kind of paradise. Miss Marple replies: “Human nature, dear, is very much the same everywhere. It is more difficult to observe it clearly in a city, that is all.”

Perhaps that explains why so many writers write about situations in which their characters are part of a small society, isolated either socially or geographically.

Miss Marple, though she takes churchgoing for granted (as most people in English villages still did in 1952), is a materialist in practice, never resorting to the supernatural or the psychic in the explanation of strange events. Here is one small piece of evidence, among many, that Mrs. Christie was intelligent, clever (not quite the same thing), well-informed, and possessed of a sense of humor that she used to gentle satirical effect.

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