Fact and Tact

by Theodore Dalrymple (December 2014)

There are booksellers – quite a few, actually – who specialise in books about crime, both true and fictional. Among the categories they use is that of *classic* crime, a rather odd designation when you come to think of it: for when something is called *classic* it has a positive, even a laudatory, connotation, and crime, by definition, is something negative.

That a burglary, robbery, blackmail or murder should be good is against common sense and repellent to morality. Something can be good morally, aesthetically or functionally, but how could a crime be good in any of these respects? Yet we all know, more or less, what is meant by a classic crime: that is to say a crime with what Sherlock Holmes called points of interest, whether they be psychological, criminological, sociological, historical or forensic. Just as few books, or scientific papers, or works of art, rise to the status of the classic, so only a tiny minority of crimes achieve it. And we poor humans, most of us anyway, find the macabre fascinating, and fascination is an end in itself.

That, surely, was the point of De Quincey's essay – *classic* essay – on murder considered as one of the fine arts. Orwell more than a century later lamented the declining quality of murder, from the point of view of interest, in post-war Britain, and between these two great writers, Virginia Woolf's father – yes, Virginia Woolf's father – wrote an essay in 1869 titled *The Decay of Murder*, in which he too came to the conclusion that 'the style of the act is in a state of perceptible decline.' This was because 'Murders are [now] not only immoral – an objection to which they have long been liable – but they are becoming simply gross, stupid and brutal.' This was precisely Orwell's lament eighty years late.

'Murderers seem to me,' wrote Virginia Woolf's father Leslie Stephen, founder-editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, 'to be, for the most part, men of bad character and limited intelligence: and their patients are, as a rule, as stupid, if not as wicked, as the murderers themselves.' Stephen's judgment of murderers and the murdered is often, if by no means always, correct; and though Stephen was not notably a humorous man, the facetious use of the word *patients* (as well as the facetious style of the other passages I have quoted) suggests that murder as a subject brought out an elephantine irony in him, as it does in many writers (myself included). This is because, while murder is a dreadful act, and the closer one examines it the more dreadful it is both in itself and in its effects, it is difficult to find the precise tone in dealing with the phenomenon in general. If one adopts too solemn a tone,

one appears to be labouring the obvious: that murder is bad, that people shouldn't commit it and that one is against it. Even the most cynical or mentally exhausted of hacks feels the need to write something not quite as obvious as that. After all, what need not be said needs not to be said; but, as the history of literature amply demonstrates, murder is a subject no writer can resist. One might even go so far as to say, no murder, no literature. A writer who is tired of murder is tired of writing; for there is in murder all the subject matter that life can afford.

Stephen had some shrewd things to say about murder as a subject of human interest, for example 'It is, of course, impossible to define the precise point at which the interest ceases to be legitimate, and testifies to a morbid state of mind rather than an excusable degree of sympathy with our fellow-creatures.' He is not among those intellectual puritans – or perhaps prigs would be a better word – who thinks that our attention should be directed towards objects in strict proportion to their importance as measured by some absolute standard of measurement, not only because such a standard might not be easy to find or prove, but because human beings are simply not constituted like that, and it would be horrible if they were. 'A ferocious monster enters a shop,' writes Stephen, 'knocks down all the inhabitants with a mallet, and cuts their throats with a razor. A few days later he repeats the performance with minor variations.' [This incidentally, is a description of the murder that inspired De Quincey. Note also the slight facetiousness of the word 'performance,' which has a distancing effect from the horror of what was done.]

'If,' continues Stephen, 'I am living within half-a-mile of the spot it is absurd to tell me that I should be too nice to listen to the details of the story…' And this is so even if, at the very time the murders were committed, an infinitely greater disaster, as judged by the total of suffering it caused, was taking place somewhere on the other side of the globe.

Of course, prurience can go too far: anything can. As a doctor I am not altogether sure that I liked Stephen's comparison of the prurient newspaper reader with doctors who read the *Lancet*:

> The spectacle [of the prurient reader of the newspaper] reminds us unpleasantly of doctors studying the *Lancet*, and leads us to fancy that our friends are merely searching for the latest news in the way of their profession. We fancy their motto to be, "We are murderers: nothing murderous is alien to us."

Why, I wonder, are so many literati hostile to doctors, when all they – we – want is the good of humanity? Traditionally, I have ascribed this hostility to either to failure of the literati to be admitted to medical school (as Hitler was rejected by the Art Academy of

Vienna) or to resentment of the higher esteem in which doctors are held by the general public than that in which literati are held; but there is no record of Stephen ever having considered medicine as a career. But this is by the bye.

When it comes to murder, then, Stephen steers the middle course between prurience and priggery. I confess that the following words produced a stab of conscience in me when I read them, for reasons that I shall soon explain:

> Though we remember the extreme interest which all tourists display in seeing a place where some great man, of whom they never heard, performed some feat of which they are hearing for the first time, it must be admitted that local associations have a mysterious charm. When people take a step further, and deliberately go out for a picnic where a woman and her children were knocked on the head and buried in a ditch, I confess that they seem to me to show some moral obtuseness.

This discomfited me because, twenty years ago, I had myself been one of the morally obtuse tourists to whom Stephen referred. Shortly after one of the most notorious pair of serial killers in English history, Fred and Rosemary West, were arrested, I went to see their house as Number 25, Cromwell Street, Gloucester, next door to a Seventh Day Adventist church. In that small house they had sexually tortured, murdered and buried nine victims, including their own oldest daughter Heather. I wanted to see the house before it was pulled down. Later, before his trial, Fred West committed suicide in the prison in which I worked as a doctor.

What, really, did or could I have hoped to learn by looking at the house? Was it not prurience pure and simple? The house itself was in a terrace of slightly run-down but perfectly habitable and even potentially elegant early Victorian houses, mostly divided into small flats. One imagined the social milieu in which the crimes took place – a shifting and even drifting population – but, without detailed research into the facts, such imaginings would remain purely speculative. A newspaper at the time, for example, interviewed a man who had lived in the road for more than twenty years, who said that West had seemed a good, ordinary person. If you cannot even discern the evil on such a scale by talking to the man himself, what purpose could there be to looking at the exterior of his house?

Yet, says Stephen, ‘it must be admitted that local associations have a mysterious charm.’ Charm, perhaps, is not quite the word for such an association in this case; but we all know the thrill, no doubt irrational, of handling a book or other object that was once in the possession of a great man. And in fact Gloucester City Council acknowledged the power of such irrational associations when it decreed the demolition of Number 25, Cromwell Street. If there

were no power to such associations, why should it have done so? After all, the walls of a house are not responsible for what went on within them, nor is it very likely that, had the Wests lived elsewhere – at Number 19, for example – their conduct would have been much different. Yet no one protested that the demolition was absurd or even counter-productive (increasing, albeit imperceptibly, the housing shortage), and though I am not aware of any poll actually taken, I think it likely that the majority of the population of the city would have approved. Even if there is no spirit of a place, we continue to behave as if there were.

The houses of other notorious killers in England have also been demolished, for example 10 Rillington Place in London, where a man called Christie murdered eight women, and the whole street was reconfigured and renamed, the name indelibly sullied by association with Christie.

I happened to be in Gloucester nearly twenty years later for another purpose and, having half an hour on hand, I thought to revisit 25, Cromwell Street after its demolition. It is now a passageway to a parallel street, planted as a well- maintained garden, very much out of keeping with the rest of the area though no one who did not know the story would be able to guess why such an incongruous garden should be there. There is no memorial to the victims, nothing to indicate the appalling association of the place.

As I was looking at the garden, a man in what I should guess was a company car pulled up beside me. A man with a Manchester accent lowered the window and said, ‘Excuse me, is that Fred West’s house?’

He pointed to the Adventist Church, a miserable brick structure, and for a brief moment I considered telling him that it was, and that inside was a museum dedicated to the life and activities of Fred and Rosemary West which was free to the public. However, I thought better of it, and pointed instead to the garden.

‘They knocked his house down,’ I said. ‘It was there.’

The man had been passing near Gloucester on his way back to Manchester from Bath on business, and he thought he would visit Number 25, as he called it, only a ten mile diversion from his direct route. It occurred to me that if you conducted a word-association test of British people who lived through the Fred and Rosemary West era (which lasted a few weeks, as eras nowadays do), and asked them for an association with the words *Number 25*, the majority would say ‘Cromwell Street.’

My interlocutor, a salesman by trade, was an aficionado of murder, particularly of the serial variety. He first became interested in the subject after he was questioned by the police in

connection with the activities of a man known as the Yorkshire Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe, who murdered at least 13 women, mostly prostitutes – not that he had any connection with the murderer's activities, he was only one of 11,000 people questioned by the police in their desperate search for the culprit. But by such accidents are our destinies affected – though not, of course, decided, for I am sure that not every person of the 11,000 of those questioned became aficionados of murder.

The correct tone in which to speak and write of past murder is difficult to catch. Prurience, solemnity, levity, censoriousness, disgust, outrage, indifference, irony, almost any attitude you care to think of seems wrong in one way or another. Here is the opening of an introduction to the trial of Adelaide Bartlett for having allegedly murdered her husband with chloroform: *There is a peculiar fascination about a case of poisoning*. This is not right, morally, one feels: and yet it is true.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is