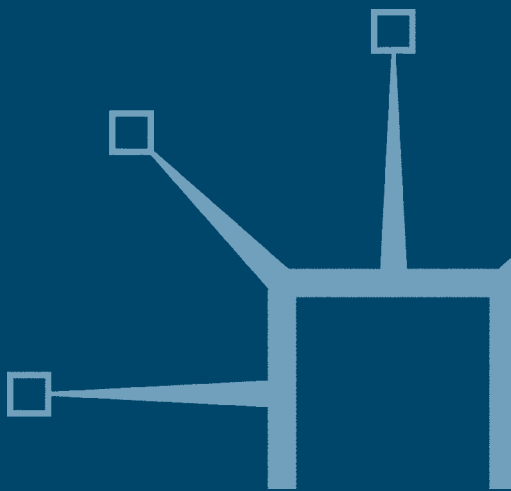
palgrave
macmillan

Agatha Christie

Power and Illusion

R.A. York



Crime Files Series

General Editor: **Clive Bloom**

Since its invention in the nineteenth century, detective fiction has never been more popular. In novels, short stories, films, radio, television and now in computer games, private detectives and psychopaths, prim poisoners and overworked cops, tommy gun gangsters and cocaine criminals are the very stuff of modern imagination, and their creators one mainstay of popular consciousness. Crime Files is a ground-breaking series offering scholars, students and discerning readers a comprehensive set of guides to the world of crime and detective fiction. Every aspect of crime writing, detective fiction, gangster movie, true-crime exposé, police procedural and post-colonial investigation is explored through clear and informative texts offering comprehensive coverage and theoretical sophistication.

Published titles include:

Maurizio Ascari
A COUNTER-HISTORY OF CRIME FICTION
Supernatural, Gothic, Sensational

Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen
CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CRIME FICTION

Anita Biressi
CRIME, FEAR AND THE LAW IN TRUE CRIME STORIES

Ed Christian (*editor*)
THE POST-COLONIAL DETECTIVE

Paul Cobley
THE AMERICAN THRILLER
Generic Innovation and Social Change in the 1970s

Christiana Gregoriou
DEVIANCE IN CONTEMPORARY CRIME FICTION

Lee Horsley
THE NOIR THRILLER

Merja Makinen
AGATHA CHRISTIE
Investigating Femininity

Fran Mason
AMERICAN GANGSTER CINEMA
From *Little Caesar* to *Pulp Fiction*

Linden Peach
MASQUERADE, CRIME AND FICTION
Criminal Deceptions

Susan Rowland
FROM AGATHA CHRISTIE TO RUTH RENDELL
British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction

Adrian Schober
POSSESSED CHILD NARRATIVES IN LITERATURE AND FILM
Contrary States

Heather Worthington
THE RISE OF THE DETECTIVE IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY POPULAR FICTION

R.A. York
AGATHA CHRISTIE
Power and Illusion

Crimes Files
Series Standing Order ISBN 0–333–71471–7 (Hardback)
0–333–93064–9 (Paperback)
(*outside North America only*)

You can receive future titles in this series as they are published by placing a standing order. Please contact your bookseller or, in case of difficulty, write to us at the address below with your name and address, the title of the series and the ISBN quoted above.

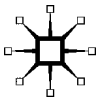
Customer Services Department, Macmillan Distribution Ltd, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS, England

Agatha Christie

Power and Illusion

R.A. York

palgrave
macmillan



First published 2007 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010
Companies and representatives throughout the world

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN is the global academic imprint of the Palgrave Macmillan division of St. Martin's Press, LLC and of Palgrave Macmillan Ltd. Macmillan® is a registered trademark in the United States, United Kingdom and other countries. Palgrave is a registered trademark in the European Union and other countries.

ISBN-13: 978–0–230–52501–6 hardback
ISBN-10: 0–230–52501–6 hardback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 07

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham and Eastbourne

For Rosemary

This page intentionally left blank

Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Humanities Research Institute of the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ulster for financial assistance in publication of this book, Rosemary York for help in picture research, and Stan Short for technical assistance.

1
Introduction

No one needs to *study* Agatha Christie, one might think. Christie is not a difficult writer. People do not have to be taught to enjoy her, to trace subtle and elusive patterns of imagery, erudite references or complex ideological stances. She is a popular writer, and she is popular because her writing is readily intelligible to the overwhelming majority of people, at least in the developed world. Anyone who sets out to write a book about her risks seeming either to say the obvious or to perversely invent aspects of the novels overlooked by immense numbers of previous readers.

This, of course, is an argument against systematic study of any kind of popular culture. The case for such study is actually taken for granted by many people now; in the case of detective fiction it is effectively stated by Porter (1981, 1–2). But it is worth keeping in mind those initial reservations, because they come very close to the reasons why it is, after all, important to study Christie: the very fact that she is easy to read and to enjoy suggests that her writing takes for granted a mass of assumptions about story telling and about the relationships and acts that appear in stories – in fiction and in real life, assumptions which her readers, to some extent and in some way, share. Christie has had enormous popular and commercial success. According to her publishers' website, her books have sold over a billion copies in the English language and another billion in 44 foreign languages. She is moreover widely regarded as typifying a literary genre which at one time was the staple leisure activity – the staple imaginative stimulus – of a great many people, and which retains a great deal of popularity, whether in its original literary form or in its transpositions to radio, television and film. It is characteristic that she earns 213 entries in the *Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing* (Herbert, 1994), well ahead of

Conan Doyle, with 151, Dorothy Sayers, 149 and Raymond Chandler, 137. (One may, however, get the impression that most of the 213 refer to the *Roger Ackroyd* trick.) "An Agatha Christie" is a detective story *par excellence*. Her work strikes a chord in very many readers; it appeals to inexplicit and perhaps uncritical assumptions about important things: crime and justice, reason and passion, the social and the private, the established and the outsider. These are no doubt the things regarded as "familiar universal themes" by a biographer (Morgan, 1985, 250); more precisely they are fundamental aspects of life in the developed world and most specifically in the middle-class England of the early twentieth century.

Christie's work, and more generally the genre of the detective story, has in fact attracted a considerable amount of critical comment. Light (1991, 64) was able to comment that "no self-respecting British critic" had yet written about her at length, and some of the published work is very slight criticism, such as Ramsey (1967), or gossipy and sometimes negligent biography such as Robyns (1978). There has, however, been a considerable improvement recently; a major addition to the critical literature, for instance, is Makinen (2006) which also contains a substantial survey of recent criticism, especially of a feminist orientation. Critical discussion has had, above all, to reconcile two aspects of mystery fiction, as well as to do justice to each. On the one hand, the mystery story is a mystery. It is a puzzle, which calls for solution, and it is often assumed that the enterprise of reading a detective story consists essentially of solving the puzzle. The puzzle theme is a favorite one of critics: a few instances are Cawelti (1976, 84), Knight (1980, 107), Morgan (1985, 257–9), Caillois (1983, 9) and Heissenbüttel (1983, 82). Just as people enjoy crossword puzzles or jigsaws (and the jigsaw is a favorite simile of Christie for the detective process) in order to get the satisfaction of getting a pattern out of chaos, or of getting a sense of completion out of a state of frustration, so – it is thought – they get satisfaction out of locating the guilty party out of a number of competing characters and identifying what happened at the crucial moment, which has been disguised up to the end. Puzzles are not novels: they do not depend on the things that make up normal novels – presentation of interesting and more or less sympathetic characters, relation of characters in a society, the sense of place or institution, the invitation to be concerned about the fate of individuals. The beauty of the image in a jigsaw is a secondary issue for the solver: the real experts do them with the blank side up. Some detective stories similarly are essentially concerned with train timetables and locked doors, and the people who catch trains and

open doors might sometimes just as well be automata. But the mystery novel is not just a mystery; it is a novel, as well. It does present the way people live. Reviewers and readers look, often, for "atmosphere" – and if the term may be vague, it does hint at that accumulation of detail and presupposition which conveys something of the quality of life in an Oxford college or in a Fenland village. Christie herself seems, in general, to accept the view of detective story as a puzzle; her few comments on her own fiction in the *Autobiography* are overwhelmingly concerned with the craftsmanlike creation of bafflement. Very revealingly, she comments that *The Hollow*, a novel with stronger psychological interest than much of her work, is not a typical instance of the mystery genre (*Autobiography*, 489); the two appear to be mutually incompatible. The view is shared, for instance, by Craig and Cadogan (1981, 166), who comment that Christie was "not so much a novelist as the inventor of a novelty, a peculiarly intricate and entertaining type of puzzle". Only late in her career – and in connection with a very inferior book – does Christie recognize the author's ability to depict and judge the society, to offer an image of the England of her time (*Frankfurt*, Preface). Her pre-eminence in the genre is undoubtedly due in large measure to her impressive ingenuity in misleading the reader, and much of the admiration of critics has been aroused by this. The title of Barnard's *A Talent to Deceive* (1980) indicates clearly enough the approach he takes, and Bisbee and Herbert's summary of her work in the *Oxford Companion* is very sound on this aspect: she is "a master of manipulating the rules of the game or conventions of the genre, generally laying clues before her readers' eyes while guiding their scrutiny in the wrong direction" (Herbert, 1994, 68).

Knight's recent impressive history of the crime novel hints at a more balanced view and gives a very fine and economical assessment of Christie's achievement: "Agatha Christie had the intellect and the technical skill to make of the clue-puzzle what [Carolyn] Wells conceived it could be: she isolated in her technically brilliant plots, her restrained characterization and subtle thematic nuances just what a dedicated reader could hope for as a fictional defence against feared crime" (2004, 89). The final phrase, of course, implies a view of the functions of crime-fiction which may be open to some qualification, at least. But the striking thing here is that Knight recognizes that Christie has not just the technical skills rightly admired by Barnard and the like, prominently as he stresses them, but also the gifts of the mainstream novelist. Knight, covering an enormous number of authors in a limited space, says fairly little about Christie's characterization and thematic structures, but he

says enough to justify a study like the present one, in which they will be primary.

Other critics and novelists, moreover, are inclined to reduce the gap between detective fiction and "literary fiction" (and some detective stories published today show a regrettable solemnity in their judgement of the modern world): Sayers (1983, 108) announced in 1928 that the detective novel should tend towards the "novel of manners", and more recent critics have remarked, very acutely, on the extent to which the classic detective story (unlike the "hard-boiled" story that originates with Hammett and Chandler) is a form of comedy of manners (Grella, 1976, 37–56), or more generally have confirmed Sayers's perception of it as a novel of manners (Chaney, 1981). This means that the detective story can be judged, like any other novel, for the convincingness, sensitivity and moral integrity implied in its presentation of social life. This, however, has led to some quite harsh criticism of the genre. The relation between an author seeking to entertain and his/her readers seeking what is often thought of as "undemanding" relaxation is inevitably one of the greater complicity than that of an author and a reader when the author is seeking to explore what is uncertain about the accepted values of their society and the reader is prepared to be disturbed by a portrayal of what is excessive in characters' behaviour or stimulated by an ironic pointing to the confusions of his/her assumptions. The detective author, that is, is likely, to a much greater extent, to take for granted the system of beliefs which he or she expects the reader to hold. Popular literature is essentially *consensual*, not conflictual. Pawling (1984, 10) criticizes Cawelti (1976, 18) for emphasizing too exclusively the consensual nature of the relation of the popular text with its culture and of making too simple a contrast between popular and high culture for this reason. But even if Cawelti misses some of the ways in which popular fiction departs from or modifies the beliefs of its readers, the basic contrast seems essentially valid: popular culture seeks not to disturb readers too fundamentally, since this would threaten the sense of relaxation which is part of the pleasure it offers. It is certainly valid to say that writing based on such an uncritical acceptance of the given norms is less important than writing which challenges them – though we should admit that in reality we are not ready to have our norms challenged every day, and that in any case there may not be all that much wrong with our norms and it does little harm to have them confirmed sometimes.

Critics have, though, insisted that there are three basic ways in which a detective story can be too complacent and can insidiously confirm norms which are ultimately objectionable. First, the classic detective

story tends to be politically conservative; Symons (1985, 96) has pointed out that virtually all the classic authors are right wing. (Again there is a clear contrast with the hard-boiled school, where the denunciation of social injustice, political corruption and corporate crime, as well as the depiction of the underprivileged areas of society, implies a distinctly left-wing perspective.) Most obviously, the classic story is generally set either in a society of high prosperity and glamour (as with Margery Allingham's *The Fashion in Shrouds*) or in a solidly established professional middle class (as with almost all of Christie), and rarely hints at any suggestion that the values of money-making are trivial or socially harmful, or that the success of the middle classes implies an unreasonable subordination of other people on grounds of class or ethnicity. Second, it is argued, for instance by Cawelti (1976, 105) and Knight (1980, 107, 128), that the detective story is essentially individualistic. It shows crime as the choice of wicked individuals, rather than the product of a society, and it stresses the danger of personal violence rather than the oppressions of a total society: so the murder of one woman at the country house of Styles relegates the deaths of thousands at the Somme to the background (Moretti, 1983, 135). Third, the detective story is reassuring. It reassures that values are certain, whatever the great writers of modernism may say (Holquist, 1983, 103–4). One villain of reassurance for Holquist, one may note, is Inspector Poirot. It reassures that evil is punished (Symons, 1985, 21) and that crime is traceable (Porter, 1981, 242). It reassures that people in power are well-meaning (Porter, 1981, 216, 220). It shows that crime happens, that life is precarious, that people are unreliable – and that a smart detective can put things right.

It is difficult to reject these views entirely. Both the views of the detective story, as puzzle and as reactionary parable, have an element of truth. But this book aims to qualify them somewhat. It will not be assumed that the reader is concerned actually to solve the puzzle. In fact, as Symons (1985, 15) points out, any novel which is a pure puzzle would be unreadable (he might have cited *Five Red Herrings*). Grella (1976, 38–9) and Routley (1988, 169–70) share his reservations, though Morgan (1985, 259) does assert that Christie's work is pure puzzle! In fact, the reader seems very often simply to hazard guesses which contribute to a sense of the manifold uncertainties of the world of the story, and then to enjoy the brilliant conjuring trick – the metaphor is sometimes applied to Poirot – by which the detective produces a hidden truth at the last moment. Murch (1958, 15) neatly says that the reaction of the reader, finally, should be "if only I had tried I could have fathomed that!" What needs to be recognized, then, is that the reader should be

fascinated by what is mysterious, what is inexplicable or at least unexplained. The unknown has an attraction, as well as offering a threat. Life is more exciting if our neighbours might be criminals – or if they might do anything unexpected, for that matter. The point is relevant to the reassurance argument. The detective novel does dissolve the tension of uncertainty. In doing so it provides an ending. The story is satisfying because it recounts a sharply defined period of time, with a question and an answer – and this is a lot neater than much of what we experience in real life. But the fact that the uncertainty is dissolved does not mean that it is denied. On the contrary, we exercise our sense of bewilderment for nine-tenths of the length of the book. And we may judge that the bewilderment is more real than the solution: the dazzling ingenuity and surprisingness of the solution – and the often stagy presentation of it – may lead us to feel that it is the solution, more than the mystery, which is fictive and arbitrary. Reading a detective story, in fact, is not a seamless activity; we sense that the novel has different relations to reality at different points: in the death of the victim, the tracing of the suspects' movements and motives, the frequent conversations about crime and punishment, virtue and vice and in the restoration of order and legality.

That the detective story tends to accept a conservative society is undeniable, with reference to Christie at least; Priestman is uncontroversial in speaking of her conservative social vision (1998, 21). Nothing in her writing suggests that she regards the structure or working of English society as essentially unjust. But the key word is "tends". The fact that the world is puzzling in itself implies that the world is not as well ordered as all that. Christie's world is a world of theatricality and secrecy, both of which extend well beyond the immediate circumstances of crime and are obstacles to any sense of full community. The fact that the genre tends towards ironic comedy implies that the values of an established elite are not necessary truths and that the act of reading can be an occasion for distancing oneself from the certainties which it may be necessary to live by every day. The distinction between a literature of acceptance and a literature of questioning is not as straightforward as was implied above. Christie, if deeply attached to the traditions of the Victorian–Edwardian world in which she was brought up, was also a person of great intelligence and aware that the world was changing. She knew that in some ways it was changing for the better – notably in the diminution of class and gender prejudice – and she knew that even when change was unwelcome it nevertheless imposed on the individual the need to adapt to it. Her novels, if they mark the persistence of an unchanging structure of crime and detection, also mark a constant

concern to live in the present, even if that means an alien present. More than that, she is aware of the evils of egoism. She seems to see these evils in the context of a traditional Christian distrust of human nature, but her emphasis on the fundamental role of relations of power in personal life hints at a distrust, more specifically, of authority – on the public or the intimate level, a distrust which might radically unsettle some sorts of traditional morality. These might, equally, and perhaps paradoxically, be unsettled by the positive values of the books. Christie believed in enterprise, courage and clarity of thought. Critics often insist on the rationality or intellectualism of the detective story, as incarnated above all in the figure of the detective. These things are certainly part of the workings of the Christie novels; they are displayed – and sometimes parodied – in the character of Hercule Poirot. But they are complemented by energy. The ideal Christie character would therefore have energy without egoism, and the difficulty of this combination is apparent in much of her writing. She reflects the feelings of her readers, no doubt; she reflects them in their confusion. We are aware of the pessimistic tradition of anxiety about the trustworthiness and goodwill of our fellows; we are also aware of many optimistic traditions which recognize the possibility of positive and cooperative action, whether it be based on the strength of the individual, the support of love or friendship or the guidance of a social or national group. Crime, because it calls into question the belief that people act in such a way as to ensure cooperation and mutual satisfaction, makes us sensitive to both kinds of tradition, which make extremity tolerable. A moderately thoughtful reading of Christie brings out the limits of each and the difficulty of reconciling them. To this extent, then, she is not a reassuring writer, but one who, discreetly, bears witness to the problems of living amongst people whom we do not quite understand and who are not exactly like us. The puzzle of the novels is not just the puzzle of who could have been in the billiard room at 9.45; it is also, ultimately, the puzzle of how we know what other people are like.

There is yet another ambiguity (or another way of putting the one we started from). Crime is a moral matter, a challenge for our understanding and judgement and a demonstration of what people are capable of in malice and cleverness. In the detective story, it is also a spectacle – a manifestly fictitious spectacle. Champigny's important book makes the point: the detective story is ludic, it is non-rational, it is an incitement to wonder (1977, 4–5, 35, 39). The crimes in Christie and her like are strange, devious and perverse; quite often the ingenuity they exploit

seems disproportionate to the effect they achieve, as if murderers killed in order to enjoy misleading people.

It is certainly true that the reader is encouraged to see the stories as being like real crimes. One symptom of this is the tendency of the detectives and their associates to list the motives for murder; more generally the game of the detective story depends on the premise that the only valid solution is one which includes a reasonable motive (or what can be passed off as one), and these reasonable motives are very pertinent to our daily concerns with love or money. The novels thus offer a sort of low-level didacticism. They teach readers about the things that can lead to crime. If many of us have little experience of major crime, we do experience conflict, and we can learn something from such novels about things that lead to conflict. A personal note: like many people, I discovered Agatha Christie in my mid-teens. She was the first undoubtedly adult author I read, and I had the impression of learning from her what adult life was going to be like. And if I have learnt more since then, I don't regret having learnt from her, at least, and not from Lord Acton or Foucault, that power is important and dangerous. But in another perspective, the stories don't teach us about the outside world. They demonstrate for us the author's delight in mystification and in exceptional people, in the superior planning and in the superior insight of perpetrator and detective. They impress us with a display of what life might be like if people were more quick-thinking, more perceptive and more open to new insights than they are.

There is then, a transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary, of the moral into the aesthetic, in the detective story, as there is – in more complex and elusive ways – in the literary novel. This, I suspect, is where the fascination of the genre arises. Readers are aware, perhaps dimly aware, that what they are reading is a picture of the varied passions of possible characters, self-seeking and inert or oriented to cooperation and openness to change. They are also aware that these normal passions have been transformed so as to merit curiosity and astonishment. It is difficult to side with justice against crime at the same time as one admires crime for inviting artistic contemplation and mental concentration. Difficulty lures the reader into the web of the text; in wanting to know what happens next we want to know what we are going to feel next about an event that is both an instance of moral degradation and a source of intellectual delight.

2
The Spectacle of Death

Death is strange in Agatha Christie. The deaths in detective stories are not the deaths of everyday life, the results of accidents, illness, and old age – and if they seem to be, there is something more to find out about them, something that makes them remarkable. They are not even the murders we are all too familiar with from our newspapers (and from a different sort of crime novel), deaths of simple violence or perverse pleasure, the results of uncontrolled anger, brutal desire, revenge or intimidation. They are spectacular, exceptional and fantastic: they engage our imagination not only as extreme acts, but as conspicuously extreme acts, as products of ingenuity and imagination, as challenges to our sense of the rational, the explicable and the normal. And so they bring home to us the limits of what we may take to be rational or normal and they demonstrate that the limits can be exceeded. The detective novel is a domesticated Gothic, Knight has acutely said (2000, 7); it may ultimately refer to common sense and common experience, but like the true Gothic, it has the strangeness and menace of the unknown. Knight elsewhere points out that it is only since the late nineteenth century that murder has become the characteristic crime of the detective genre, "the threat which the fiction would dissipate" (2004, 81). As often in Knight, this pregnant comment is not fully developed; it certainly seems that he is right to stress that in the period 1890–1920, the novelists ceased to be concerned chiefly with threats to property or to national security and began to present threats to life. No doubt, the process is the result of social changes opening crime-fiction to the unpropertied (although the characters continue to be overwhelmingly prosperous people); Knight offers some intriguing speculations (2004, 68). But does the fiction dissipate the fear of death? Or does it, Gothic-like, display a fascination with death?

The deaths, then, are excessive, abnormal deaths. What kind of excessiveness do they show? We may distinguish four varieties. One challenges our sense of decorum: death is treated as visual sensation, as artistic pattern, as game. It becomes frivolous, or it affronts our sense of rightness: people die too soon, before we know why they have deserved it or they die in the wrong place, a place alien to hostilities. A second variety challenges our sense of causality and practicality: murder, a deliberate human act, is carried out in a way that seems perversely designed to prevent its success – but doesn't. A third variety brings an excess of signification: it is accompanied either by signs of intense physicality or by signs of a quasi-supernatural malignity, by an excess of body or an excess of spirit. Finally, the death may intrigue us because it is remote in time; the investigators in the time of the narrative may be fascinated by an event to which they have no direct access because it took place some years ago; crime overrides the normal processes of forgetting.

We can make some preliminary comments on these kinds of conspicuousness. First, the fact that we find these things shocking (in different ways) implies that we have a conception of what an unremarkable, uninteresting murder would be like, a conception entailing, perhaps, a certain moral bluntness. It is not unreasonable, then, to speak with Mandel (1984, 41) of a reification of death in such fiction. Second, these aspects are very much aspects of fiction. Fiction, unlike real murders (as Christie's characters often paradoxically remind us), is a game. Literature is, predominantly if not universally, a production of enriched or excessive signification; novels do relate past events, events outside the reader's world and beyond the reader's intervention or even full responsiveness. Novels are about novelty, about what is strange or surprising; the investigators in a detective story make sense of the events, apparently disparate or incongruous, as the reader makes sense of the puzzles of any fictional text. But unlike many kinds of literature, detective stories provide a coherent and a rational sense. They do not, quite, assert that people are mysterious or inconsistent by nature, although they have to allow readers to feel during much of the novel that people might be like that. Finally, the strangeness must be seen to be a disguise for the consistent pursuance of what anyone can recognize as self-interest. The detective story, that is, offers a rationality of the bizarre.

The first type of fantastic crime, then, is the aestheticized crime. A fine example occurs in *Peril at End House* (vii). Nick, the youthful owner of End House, has apparently been the target of a number of murder attempts and has invited her cousin Maggie to stay with her as a kind of guard. She then organizes a dinner party, attended by Hercule Poirot

and a number of friends. There is much emphasis on Nick's red Chinese shawl, which Maggie offers to fetch to keep Nick warm as they watch a display of fireworks in the cold air. The description of the fireworks adds to the intense colour sense of the passage. At the end of the chapter, Poirot and Hastings are returning to the house when suddenly Hastings is startled by a disturbing sight: the body of a woman covered in a red Chinese shawl. The shock is very marked, and the movement of Hasting's perspective powerfully underlines the visual impact: the contrast of the redness with the darkness, the readiness for visual splendour instilled by the fireworks, the suggestions of beauty and elegance of the two young women, the obvious suggestion of blood and the reminder of the exotic. An audience forms, gathered in a semi-circle round the body, under the watchful eye of Poirot; the spectacle, thanks to the narrator's perspective, is becoming theatrical. All of this is reinforced by the title of the succeeding chapter (viii), "The Fatal Shawl", in which it proves that the dead person is not Nick but Maggie, and it is assumed that she has been shot because a murderer has been misled by the shawl into taking her for his real target. This assumption itself is part of the intricate plot of the novel; the calculation which in fact deliberately leads to Maggie's death also leads to her disguise and so to the moment of deathly beauty that forms the climax of the chapter, and one of the most memorable scenes in Christie's writing. The ritual gravity of the death is what furthers the criminal's self-seeking. Rowland suggestively speaks of the "theatricality and self-conscious artifice" of detective fiction and argues that it "constitutes one of the narrative functions of the golden age genre, which is to parody death.... Death is disposed of as unnatural, solvable, as a mendable tear in the social fabric" (2001, 26). There is much in this that is convincing; and yet here death becomes memorable as well as ingenious. The disruption of sociability and the destruction of youthful vitality are a real loss, made conspicuous by its public quality and its visual splendour.

Or the crime may be accompanied with incongruous and distasteful circumstances created by the perpetrator. An especially spectacular example arises in *And Then There Were None*: the judge, suspected of unjustly condemning an innocent man to death, is himself found (apparently) dead dressed in judge's robes (xiii). The robes are a scarlet curtain and the wig is made from wool stolen from a female knitter; there is a certain second-ratedness about the travesty of the law. It seems to highlight – in a way not apparent in the other deaths in this book – the offence which is being revenged; as the most conspicuous death in the book it marks an acceleration of tempo, so that the remaining deaths

take place very promptly, meriting little substantial description and leaving an apparently impenetrable mystery. It is impenetrable because the judge is not dead, but has rigged up an appearance of death, made the more convincing because of its strangeness; the baroque appearance of the body ensures that no one investigates it except for the doctor, who is in on the deceit. A less picturesque but nevertheless disturbing instance is the leaving of an ABC railway guide by the bodies of the victims in *The ABC Murders*. The point is specially notable because it is precisely this which lifts the first crime, in particular, from the level of everyday crime to that of the literary crime: an old woman in a poor shop in a run-down street is struck from behind while serving a customer. It is a crime without elegance, an unskilled crime. What makes it strange, and arouses Poirot's curiosity, is the ABC guide. And this links it with other crimes, also marked out by the ABC and by the alphabetical oddity of the victims' names and place of residence; the crime, insignificant in itself, becomes in context a celebration of literacy. This can, vacuously, be given psychiatric significance (as Dr Thompson feebly or pretentiously attempts to do, viii). More substantially it illustrates the "Purloined Letter" principle: where do you hide a murder – the really intended murder of Sir Clifford? Amongst other murders. The murderer, a keen reader of fiction, treats the other murders as mere décor and narrative sequence; the excess signified by the railway guide is an excess of clues, which is also an excess of heartlessness. In the same spirit one can recall the nursery rhyme plots, *And Then There Were None* and *A Pocket Ful of Rye*; death follows a trivial sequence. One may also recall the clocks that surround the body (for different reasons) in *The Seven Dials Mystery* and *The Clocks* (and one is aware that the second of these books is recapitulating the first, the author offering a virtuoso variation on her own work), as well as the fine grotesque or gothic effect of *The Clocks*: a typist sent from an agency (for reasons which I must admit I have not confidently grasped) to work in a private house finds there a dead body; panic-stricken, she wonders what to do, and is horrified by the return of the owner of the house who is blind and risks stepping on to the body. Whereas *End House* focuses on the body by making it extra visible, *The Clocks* presents it as unseen. Again the point is rationalized: the body has been deliberately moved out of place in order to obscure the motives for the crime; the horror of the threatened disrespect for the body displaces the non-narrated horror of the killing itself.

If in these ways we are disturbed by a turning away from the body, elsewhere we are disturbed by our sense of the gap between the living persons and the violence of which they are victims. Poirot insists that

in the character of the victim lies the reason for his or her death; victims die, in other words, the death that suits them. In fact, often the death either is really irrelevant to their character or appears to be so because of its suddenness, which obscures the things that link them to their murderer. The Reverend Stephen Babbington in *Three Act Tragedy* attends a cocktail party, drinks a cocktail and dies; all he does in the novel is to express gratitude to his host (who is about to murder him) and to say, humorously, that his wife will allow him to have a little drink (which kills him). One mouthful and he collapses, distracting the attention of Mr Satterthwaite, through whom this chapter is seen, from the more interesting and glamorous younger guests, and then he is conspicuously eclipsed, as the other guests gather round him impotently hiding him from view. The Reverend Babbington is a harmless, mild, gentlemanly old man. Investigation only confirms his innocence; even his marriage, so many years before, did not deprive any rival of a loved one. The suddenness of his death reinforces and dramatizes the arbitrariness of it. It genuinely is arbitrary, no more than a rehearsal for the murder the criminal really hopes to commit. (Cocktails are dangerous: Mrs Badcock in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* dies suddenly and publicly, drinking a cocktail at a party in the local big house.) In *Hickory Dickory Dock*, Celia Austin has confessed to a number of annoying and puzzling thefts; her confession restores her to happiness, since it endears her to the psychoanalytically inclined Colin McNabb, and they agree to marry. The story is a romance and it has reached a happy ending. But it hasn't; there can't be a happy ending, in Chapter 5; Celia is murdered overnight. All these things suggest unreality; readers find it difficult to accept the plausibility of such events; they read with a certain scepticism, unsure how credible or appropriate such happenings are (they may be conscious that the norm against which they are measuring them is in part the norm of certain sorts of fiction), and their scepticism is relieved in the last chapter. Celia dies because, without realizing it, she knew too much about a scheme for importing drugs and stolen jewels; this solution dissolves the sense of a malicious fate and restores the reality of dishonest profit.

What is spectacular in *The Clocks* is partly the displacement of the body; to realize how frequent this is in Christie, one has only to remember two very well-known titles (titles which hint at self-parody): *The Body in the Library* and *Murder at the Vicarage*. The author's foreword to *The Body in the Library* presents the book as a variation on a well-known theme and stresses the incongruity: the library is a classic image of a social order, so the body must suggest the scandalous

and disreputable. And the description of the body accordingly highlights the crude glamour the living woman must have had (i). Young, female, sexually attractive and conspicuously made up – the body is the polar opposite of the middle-aged and middle-class world into which it intrudes. Death is both alien and irresistible; the respectable householder is helpless to defend himself against it. One can add, I think, the frequently luxurious or exotic settings which critics have often noted. It is common to suggest that the settings – cruises on the Nile, holidays on the West Indies, private schools, the Blue Train, the Orient Express or at a less expensive level, the middle-class society of an English village – offer the reader a vicarious experience of luxury or ease, and so are in effect politically conservative. One may add that these are places which orient the reader's attention towards enjoyment, comfort and consumption, and towards a stable life free from the insecurities of poverty and employment; death is an interruption. The alienness of death, its incommensurability with the small concerns of the everyday and the small proprieties of a hierarchical society, is made conspicuous: the body in the library, reported by a timorous maid who comes, in perfect routine, to wake her employers in the early morning, is an evidence of a social difference, since it is that of a young woman in cheap fancy clothes, but it is also a reminder of the vulnerability of the human frame. When a murder is announced (in the novel of that title) at Little Paddocks, it is not one more social entertainment, of the kind indicated by the light ironic comedy of the scene in which Miss Blacklock's acquaintances arrive at the set time, not quite knowing whether they have been invited or not, or what they have been invited to: it is a moment of darkness and confusion, which leaves the ugly aftermath of the hostess covered in blood and the body of an intruder dead on the floor. Of course there is a cliché here; in the midst of life we are in death, and life means consumption, spending and elegant social intercourse while death means the disruption of a community and the imposition of a duty, the duty to detect and punish.

These are ways in which death seems incongruous, disorderly. There are also ways in which it seems inexplicable. The point may seem obvious, since this is precisely the starting point of any mystery, and so is essential to the genre. We want things to be explicable (and this is itself worth some emphasis; in how many areas of real life are we satisfied with things which have to be unexplained or which we don't think worth explaining?). But it may be useful to say something about what makes murder seem inexplicable. Very often the crucial factor is that the death is public. Real deaths are often private affairs, attended only by

immediate family and medical staff; characters in detective stories die in circumstances where their movements and those of their companions can be meticulously traced, and this means that they die in public: in aeroplanes, during bridge games, in fashionable restaurants, during cocktail parties, attending open day at a country house, sitting on a prominent ridge in a populous tourist site, bobbing for apples at a Hallowe'en party. If they die alone, they die in places which are sharply delimited and easily observed from outside: the study of Roger Ackroyd's house, bustling with family and guests; a sleeping compartment in a train; a room in an inn; and the study of Lewis Serrocold's school for delinquent youths. An especially startling example is *Sparkling Cyanide*, which powerfully contrasts the atmosphere of a luxurious restaurant with the intense physical reality of death from poisoning. On one hand there are the distorted features and desperate dying gesture evoked on the first page of the narrative and recalled, in almost the same words, later in the novel. On the other hand there is the luxurious restaurant, its efficiency a sign of wealth and social organization (I, v). The contrast of the vulnerability of the body and the efficiency of a prosperous society is clearly made. The strangeness increases when the victim's husband seeks not simply to repeat the scene, as a trap to oust the murderer, but does so, very tastelessly, using the pretext of her sister's birthday party. He both imagines the dramatic effect of this trap and recalls the sprawling dead body of his wife; intrigue and physicality are closely interwoven. More closely than he realizes, for he is murdered in the same way as his wife and his death is even more precisely visualized, the distortion of features and frustration of gesture being repeated and made more emphatic (II, vi). A few pages later, a police officer defends the now-abandoned view that the first death was suicide, even though it took place in a public restaurant, commenting that the dead person may have wished to make a public impression (III, i). The suicide is illusory, but the feeling for the spectacular is very real.

The effect of such cases is complex. There is the contrast of an animated society and the moment of destruction. But there is also a certain sense of the theatrical: society provides an audience for death. And there is the question of probability: why should a murderer choose to commit his or her crime not in some dark alley but in conditions which may seem to make detection highly likely? My feeling is that in *A Murder is Announced*, at least, this problem is not overcome: could Miss Blacklock find no more unobtrusive occasion for murder than a social gathering in her own home? When the problem is resolved, it is often a matter of opportunity: Ackroyd has to be murdered before he can communicate

the content of Mrs Ferrars's letter to anyone else. In *The Orient Express*, the opportunity is deliberately and elaborately contrived: this is when the 12 avengers can find themselves together with their victim. This goes wrong: Poirot is also in the carriage, unexpectedly, and a series of misdirections has to be mounted to confuse him: the false clues, the woman in the dressing gown. The effect is theatrical (II, xv) (and Birns and Birns (1990, 122) perceptively relate the scene to the general theatricality of Christie's writing). The theatrical takes different forms in Christie; here it means a conspicuous accumulation of false signs. This transformation of opportunity into bizarreness means that what is for the criminal a prompt and efficient action is for the reader a source of bewilderment: death seems to have struck with high visibility but without human agency. The surrounding public, waiters, passengers, guests and servants, whose interrogation will form the bulk of the novel, are witnesses both to the horror of the event and to its distinctness from normal causality: apparently unprepared and unmotivated, the death looks like a wicked miracle. The detective story, Hutter acutely comments, depends on the tension between the actually rational and the apparently irrational or supernatural (2000, 105); the challenge to explain the inexplicable, in Caillois's words (1983, 3), is an affront to reason and experience. The process of detection shows that the miraculous is really the product of will, courage and intelligence. In particular, also, many of the witnesses, in principle strangers to the victim, can give evidence of the movements and appearance of the victim and his or her associates, but not of the victim's thoughts or words; the detective has to find a causality within the victim's behaviour or the criminal's motives, which explains the inexplicable exterior spectacle.

Both hidden from view and subject to constant surveillance, the body of Ratchett in *The Orient Express*, once discovered, makes the malignity very conspicuous: it has been the object of 12 wounds. The number of blows at first suggests extraordinary frenzy or ferocity and is all the more disturbing because some of the blows are struck after death. There are many clues: clues which seem to point in different directions, to a physically weak murder and a strong one, to a left-handed person and a right-handed one; the one thing they all point to is the intensity of violence. There is a rationale: the 12 wounds result from the blows of the 12 conspirators, who share responsibility for what they consider to be the administration of a just punishment. So too in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*: the discovery of the body is truly spectacular, with its emphasis on the blood that is splashed everywhere in a room made comfortable by the seasonal blazing fire (iii). The scene is indeed a memorable one, for the

reader as well as for the characters, contrasting as it does the Christmas domesticity of the rug and the blazing fire with the blood and the violently disturbed furniture. In fact the blood is excessive, as Poirot soon points out. A frail old man should not have bled so much; there is an insistence on blood, suggestive of a blood ritual or sacrifice (iii). The blood is symbolic: Simeon dies because he has had too much animal spirits, because the desires of the body have been too strong. He has begotten and neglected too many illegitimate children, one of whom kills him in revenge. So too in the many novels in which there are several crimes. Poirot says more than once that murderers get used to their crime and cease to have scruples; this may or may not be true, but it allows the author to continue the tension, to accumulate further clues and (most importantly in our present context) to intensify the infamy of the criminal. Once again, there is excessiveness here: the crimes seem to be committed not simply to attain a specific end but to demonstrate their own wickedness. Once again this excessiveness is rational: Ratchett bears 12 wounds because he has been executed by 12 people (the number of an English jury, as Colonel Arbuthnot points out, although he does not comment that juries do not carry out the execution themselves); in the case of Simeon Lee, the blood is not his but animal blood, scattered deliberately to give the impression of a false time of death; the multiple murders arise usually out of the desire to suppress possible witnesses for the primary crime, and sometimes, still more horrifyingly, as random moves in a strategy: Mrs Ascher dies to start the alphabetical series, Babbington dies as a rehearsal, the numerous victims in *Murder is Easy* die so that the real murderer, whose only motive is to bring about the conviction and execution of an innocent man, can accumulate evidence against him. Murderers know the language of clues; they use it rhetorically, redundantly, to establish a false understanding of the crimes; and that rhetoric is what may impress and astonish the reader, because the reader derives from it a recognition of unrestrained malice.

What is here signified by an excess of the concrete can also be signified by an insistence on the metaphysical. The murder in Christie often does not take place at or before the beginning of the novel (as it frequently does in detective stories which emphasize above all the process of investigation, such as those of Dorothy L. Sayers). The delay allows the author to introduce the characters, their relationships and the setting, but it also allows for comments on the uncanny atmosphere, on premonitions of evil, on warnings of doom. There is a sense of infection in the air, there are discussions of the nature of evil: so Lydia Lee tells her too trusting husband that evil is an objective reality that can be sensed

(*Christmas*, i). *Death Comes as the End*, admittedly a novel set in ancient Egypt, a historic period which might be considered less rational than the twentieth century, strongly asserts a sense of evil. Renisenb, the central consciousness, reflects on a discussion of evil arising from within or without in the case of fruit; she has come to feel that her social world is suffering from evil too. She feels the evil comes from outside, in the form of her father's new wife, Nofret, a selfish and malicious woman. Nofret dies, and there are other deaths which are superstitiously attributed to Nofret's spirit. For the modern reader, the effect at this point is of a diffuse sense of evil; murder is in the air and guilt cannot be focussed on any one person. At the end of the novel, the sage Hori reminds her that evil is within individuals; it has not been brought by Nofret, who has only served as a catalyst for all the tensions and personal inadequacies that were already present but hidden. So evil is in fact the existence of a social grouping – the patriarchal family – that encourages conflict. But evil still looks like a distinct entity, not simply a way of describing bad actions or destructive relationships. Poirot has encouraged Jacqueline de Bellefort, in *Death on the Nile*, to resist the temptation to evil. Hori asserts that the murderer in *Death Comes as the End* has yielded to the temptation and that evil can thrive in a person who once gives in to it (xxiii). Even the rationalist Poirot (admittedly also a Catholic, as he more than once insists) feels an impression of evil on seeing Ratchett in *The Orient Express*; within the respectable American traveller, he senses the caged animal. But the violence of the book is not to be perpetrated by Ratchett; he is to be the victim of it. Violence becomes diffuse; the evil formerly committed by Ratchett contaminates all the passengers. The diffuse evil hints at the supernatural in *Endless Night*, where a displaced gypsy frequently appears to denounce the wealthy people who have occupied Gipsy's Acre and built a luxurious villa and to threaten them with the curse of the place. This is actually highly ironic: the gypsy is paid by the criminal-narrator to create an atmosphere of terror which will conduce to the impression that his wife's death is caused by shock at the gypsy's warning, and on at least one occasion the gypsy is speaking seriously, warning the wife not of the curse but of the husband's malice. But the curse gains a certain validity of its own; the narrator, in conversation with his architect, complains of the gypsy's presence and regrets that the house of which he is so proud has lost its beauty, and the architect replies that the beauty is lost because there is evil within the house (xv). But though he intuits the presence of evil in the house, he doesn't recognize that the evil person is the narrator himself; evil becomes an atmosphere, not a set of acts. By a neat inversion, the suburban setting

of *Hallowe'en Party* is regretted as an unsuitable place for a murder; it lacks a tragic dimension (vi). Against this is set the quarry garden which is one of the most memorable elements of this novel: apparently a *locus amoenus*, a site of beauty, magic, enchantment, it is also the site of an industrial history and of a murder, and Poirot senses its uncanny nature just as he recognizes its beauty (xix).

An uncanny atmosphere, that is, is normal in the context of murder; the world in which murder takes place is not the world of everyday life, and it is different in part because its inhabitants have an extraordinary sensitivity to atmosphere. They feel that there is something wrong somewhere, in a way that affects everybody. The feeling does not serve to identify one person as having performed evil acts; that is done by reason. For this world is *also* the everyday world, in which things happen because they are caused and people act with clear intentions. The detective, that is, replaces the intuition of atmosphere by the proof of guilt. But this replacement takes place at the end of the novel; up to that point the reader's fascination with the story derives to some extent from the double perspective of a possible world pervaded by a sense of gravity, anxiety and readiness for harmful change. The atmospheric may be subject to the murderer's analytic intelligence; the evil of the bodies exposed in sun-bathing, to which the clergyman of *Evil under the Sun* draws attention, is really the lack of distinctiveness of the body, and so the possibility of viewing persons as lacking in personality. But this lack of distinctiveness also means that bodies are difficult to identify and that is what helps the murderer in this instance to fake the time of death. The reader has responded to the quasi-supernatural but is led to see that response as itself a product of the criminal's exploitation of a deeply rooted cultural tradition. The ambiguity of reading and the ambiguity of our feelings about crime are acutely touched: do we regard literature as analysis of the real world or creation of a mystique? Do we regard crime as a product of people's wishes or a transcendent threat to humanity? We may feel both, and both are implied in the texts.

Finally, readers may feel the circumstances of the crime to be exceptional or spectacular not because there is anything obviously unusual in the killing itself, but because the investigation occurs long after the event; it is, to quote the American title of *Five Little Pigs*, a *Murder in Retrospect*. The phrase also appears in the text of *Sleeping Murder* (v). In this case, the exploration of the past is reinforced by hints of a paranormal travel in time (there is a reference to J.W. Dunne's *Experiment with Time* (iii), a work which deeply impressed Christie and which was also influential in J.B. Priestley's "time plays", still very popular in the 1950s).

In fact the novel does not suggest that we can visit other times; only that it is possible to remember with exceptional clarity events from remote childhood which have been previously forgotten. The sharpness and incompleteness of Gwenda's recall of a murder, however, do give a certain visionary character to the book, which needs to be complemented by patient detective work on her part and Miss Marple's. Here, and in *Five Little Pigs*, *Ordeal by Innocence* and *Elephants Can Remember*, the strangeness of the story comes from the sense of the continuing significance of events long past. Todorov, following Michel Butor's brilliant novel *L'Emploi du Temps* (which is both a detective story, or an anti-detective story, and an analysis of how detective stories are written), sees the essence of the classic detective story in its double narrative: the narrative of the detective's investigations produces the narrative of the committing of a crime. (A parenthesis: the author of this novel is not George Burton, as Robin Woods (1990, 19) seems to think, Burton being a character in the book. Not surprisingly Woods's criticism of Butor's point (20) is somewhat tangential.) In the cases we are considering, that distinction becomes emphatic. There is comparatively little direct narrative of the circumstances of the murder, because the society and the setting of the crime and the detection may be quite distinct and witnesses may be unavailable. The story that emerges is the product of the detective's mental processes. Moreover, whereas it is normally the crime that disrupts a more or less stable society, in these retrospective investigations it is the detection that disrupts a society that has come to accept an unsolved crime or a crime wrongly solved. One should let a *Sleeping Murder* lie, certain characters in that novel declare, and the family in *Ordeal by Innocence* is in fact very reluctant to see the crime reopened: if the convicted man (now safely dead) is not guilty, then one of them must be, and they would rather not know who. Death has secretly corrupted the course of life; the restoration of justice will restore a genuine normality.

Crime and punishment, then, are made hyperbolic in these novels. Murder is the crime *par excellence*, the one we recognize as surpassing all others in gravity. In factual narratives its outrageousness can be made apparent by meticulous description of the crime, which entails the murderer's lack of respect for life (a value so central to our feelings that we are hardly aware of it as a cultural quality) and by demonstration of the impact on survivors; a familiar literary example is Capote's *In Cold Blood*. The hard-boiled novel aims at a simulacrum of the same recognition of brutality and loss (though without Capote's cool elegance). In Christie, these real evils are distanced; the murderer's indifference to

normal feelings becomes ingenuity, and the survivors' loss becomes a sense of drama, strangeness, incomprehension and unreality. Violence is a subject of curiosity, its emotional effect subordinate to the processes of reasoning (Barnard, 1980, 126). We have, in a sense, élite crimes, manifesting intelligence and sensitivity. Hammett, as Chandler commented, gave crime back to the people who commit it for reasons, and not just to provide a corpse (Chandler, 1983, 234); in Christie it is given to the people who are capable of making it ornate. In everyday life, we assume that death is private and predictable. We are often wrong; but the assumption is strong enough to mark out the detective story as both different – because it makes death remarkable – and significant – because it makes us aware of the slightness of our assumption. What matters is the originality of the crime and its atmosphere and the extent to which it can touch on crucial factors of our culture such as our sense of the public and private, of the rational and the irrational, the accidental and the essential; and what matters also is the extent to which the two sides of the story, the malice of the killer and the spectacular disruption of normality, complement each other, the extent to which the killer exploits the community's – and the reader's – sense of propriety and comprehensibility where they are most vulnerable.

3
The Wrong Angle

The world of the classic detective story is a world of illusion. Real crimes may not involve illusion; the perpetrator may be immediately obvious, or there may simply be no immediate information as to who he or she is, requiring the police to search for clues and witnesses to lead them to a yet unknown person. In the detective story, there is plenty of information, but it needs to be interpreted; the detective has to sort out the relevant from the irrelevant and arrange the relevant information into a coherent pattern. Above all, the detective has to distinguish the true information from the false. Information may be false because the criminal has sought to confuse the trail, because other characters are concealing relevant facts in order to protect themselves, because the investigators expect to see a certain pattern in the circumstances of the crime and expect the wrong one. The story of the novel is the dissolution of illusion; the fascination of the novel is the indulgence of illusion, which produces a mystery and a delightful insecurity. The sense of the unreliability of the perceived world, of the elusiveness of truth and of the fascination of this elusiveness is nicely symbolized by the Zambesi Falls in *The Man in the Brown Suit* (the more strikingly because the novel as a whole is a thriller narrated in light-hearted tone with little by way of philosophical solemnity) Anne is fascinated by the Falls precisely because they are generally concealed by the spray they produce: they arouse emotional or aesthetic tension because they compel the desire for knowledge (*Suit*, xxiv).

Distrust is the key to the detective world: Miss Marple is the most explicit voice of distrust, refusing ever to accept people at face value (*Sleeping*, xxv) and asserting the unreliability of trust (*Rye*, xxiv). The implications are profound: we normally assume that at least a considerable measure of trust is the foundation of social intercourse and that

society without trust would dissolve into a war of each against each. We make allowances for vanity, bias, tact, and discretion. We do not believe that everyone tells the whole truth all the time. But we do assume that by and large people are what they seem to be and their acts have the aims they appear to have. A world in which this couldn't be assumed would be a nightmarish, Kafkaesque labyrinth. *Roger Ackroyd*, to mention briefly a well-known example, brings home to the reader how far the reading of literature normally resembles the largely trusting relationship of real conversation. The narrator of this work is not simply self-deluding as are the unreliable narrators of many novels, major and minor, from *Wuthering Heights* to *Bridget Jones*; he is deliberately concealing the most important fact in his story, namely that he is himself the murderer. If you can't trust a narrator who can you trust?

The sense of illusion is often emphatic. Renisenb in *Death Comes as the End* comes to doubt whether people are ever what they seem to be but learns that they sometimes are: the cases of truthfulness are moments of love; the seeming throughout the novel has been the product of power and self-esteem. Hori tells her that people who are weak or inefficient seek to compensate by imposing on others an image of themselves – which they may come to believe themselves (xxiii, x). Alex Restarick, the theatre director, has formed the habit of seeing things as a stage set and not as real; his comment provokes Inspector Curry's reflections on illusion, which may extend beyond the theatre to the whole world of *They do it with Mirrors*, a novel whose very title is taken from the art of conjuring and in which Miss Marple discourses on the nature of misdirection. Illusion is in the eye of the beholder, as the inspector says (xvi); it is the act of seeing that produces error, not the concrete world.

The possibility of illusion arises because things can be seen from different angles. Perception is partial and may be delusory. Christie certainly does not adopt the post-modern view that there is no ultimate truth and that all perspectives are necessarily relative because they are the product of an ethos, a way of life or an orientation to life. Her novels end with the revelation of a truth or a number of truths. But she does invite her readers to be fascinated by the many-sided character of situations or people, by their recalcitrance to any automatic recognition or assessment, and she is very aware of the seductive power of the perspectives we take for granted. The issue is nicely illustrated by the photograph which is the first clue in the "murder hunt" in *Dead Man's Folly*. It actually represents a tennis net, but is shot so much in close-up that Poirot mistakes it for a barred window (the suggestion of

imprisonment may not be accidental). Perception, in other words, is subjective; and in detective fictions subjectivity, as Chaney acutely says (1981, 73), often means suspicion.

The concept of angle is made explicit in *The Blue Train*. When the heroine Katherine confesses that she has not understood the case because of the angle from which she has seen it, Poirot replies by commenting that what we see in a mirror – while real – depends on the angle from which we see it (xxxii). There is such a thing as truth and it can be perceived; but there are many perspectives. These, to follow through the analogy, are not false but partial. Everything you see in a mirror is really there. But what is missing may be precisely what is crucial to identify the important fact, the identity of the murderer and the method used. The world of the novels is a world of varying and incomplete knowledge; only the solution provides the true angle and the end of the novel. The idea is especially important in *The Sittaford Mystery*, where the two detectives, Emily Trefusis and Charles Enderby, are constantly discussing their angle of approach. The term is important; the right angle of vision matters because it enables people to attack things, to change things, in this case to liberate the wrongly accused fiancé James Pearson. Emily associates the angle of attack with determination: it is a matter not just of perception but of will (xvii). As with Poirot, but perhaps more radically, she sees the angle as a part of the personality: a person's angle of vision is unique to them and no one can take someone else's angle (xvi). This looks like a serious threat to the idea of rationality, so far as reason is assumed to be impersonal or supra-personal. It is so because Emily is thinking of impressions, not of objective facts: perception, for her, is essentially subjective and so restricted to the individual.

Much of the action of many of the novels is constituted by people who take the wrong angle (or the false focus of attention, in Barnard's phrase, 1980, 74) or who follow red herrings, in the standard terminology; the novels, in other words, are largely studies in error. A few examples will suffice. In *Taken at the Flood* it is assumed that the three deaths are all murders committed by the same person; in fact one is a murder, one an accident and one a suicide. In *The Sittaford Mystery*, it is assumed that the motive for the murder is likely to be inheritance; in *Mrs McGinty's Dead*, it is assumed that the suspect, but unidentified, Evelyn is a woman. In *Appointment with Death*, it is assumed that the murderer is likely to be a member of the victim's family. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, it is assumed that there is only one murderer, and that some of the characters must be innocent. In *Three Act Tragedy* it is assumed that

there must be some sound reason for the deaths of the first victim, the Reverend Babbington, and the third victim, Mrs de Rushbridger, who has apparently claimed to have some special knowledge of the case. In fact, only the second murder is fully motivated: the first death is a rehearsal and the third a red herring. Poirot, in his concluding statement, admits that he at first viewed the crime from the wrong angle, in searching for a obvious kind of rationality in the clergyman's death; rehearsal is a kind of rationality (especially for an actor–murderer), if horrifyingly disproportionate for most readers. Poirot has seen the correct perspective in sudden enlightenment, when another character refers to going to see a dress rehearsal. The sense of discovery is convincing, and the element of chance is well conveyed. In *Murder is Easy*, it is assumed that the murderer must have some reason for hostility to the numerous victims. In *After the Funeral*, it is assumed that Richard Abernethie has been murdered for his inheritance; in fact, he has not been murdered at all, and the murders that do take place are motivated by an art theft. The aim of the detective story, Bayard comments (2000, 25), is to prevent an idea from taking shape: it is the prevention of thought. The point is a profound one, if provocatively put: in reading we yield our own knowledge to the continuing plausibility of the author's text; there is a pleasure in abandoning our real knowledge and our real habits of deduction or interpretation, and the detective story ultimately shocks us by highlighting the falsity of what we have accepted.

On these wrong angles, two comments may be made. Firstly, some of them arise from the expectations of the genre. Of course, there is a murderer in a detective story and not a series of disconnected deaths (and in fact any story can be presumed to depend on connections and exclude irrelevant accidents); of course, there is only one murderer or at most a small number in an organized plot, standing out against the background of a non-criminal society (not, as we shall be seeing, an innocent society); of course, butlers are innocent (they cannot even be victims, as indicated by the title of Georgette Heyer's *Why Shoot a Butler?*). The genre, in other words, is less haphazard than real life; it guides readers as to what they should expect. Christie's art, in this respect, is to create a coherence that embraces apparent haphazardness or indiscriminateness. All the characters in a railway coach may be guilty of the same crime if they all have the same relation to the victim (they are all members of the household which Ratchett outraged by kidnapping and murdering the young daughter of the family). Three deaths may be related, even if they are not all murders, if they are all responses to the same impersonation (suicide from shame by a false witness, accident in

fury at the apparent supplanting of the real heir, murder of a dangerous collaborator). Genre expectations are used and deflated also in deceptive romances. In *Death in the Clouds*, the murderer is Norman Gale, who is playing an active part in the investigation of the crime. The investigating team, as critics have pointed out, often includes the criminal, who is thus placed above suspicion; Norman is also above suspicion because of his burgeoning romance with the likeable, modest and clearly innocent Jane Grey. In *They Came to Baghdad*, Victoria leaves London on a momentary impulse to follow the charming, good-looking, adventurous devil-may-care Edward – who is attracting her very deliberately to use her in his conspiracy. In many of Christie's stories, as in many other detective stories, the experience of crime and investigation does lead to romance; but readers need to remember that young women may make mistakes, and that the detective story is, precisely, a narrative of mistakes.

Second, the author may discreetly endorse false readings. *Roger Ackroyd* and *Endless Night* are, of course, special cases, depending on unreliable narrators. Exactly how unreliable they are need to be emphasized. Dr Sheppard in *Roger Ackroyd* rather proudly draws attention to the passage in which he recounts the events immediately surrounding the murder, omitting only the murder itself. This, it has to be admitted, despite all the controversy at the time of the publication, is fair enough. But there are other details that call for some comment. In Chapter 1, he mentions that his sister unreasonably suspects Mrs Ferrars of poisoning her husband. Two pages later he admits that he accepts her view to some extent. In fact, he must agree with the most important point of it, namely that Mrs Ferrars did in fact, as he well knows, poison her husband. In the following chapter, he remembers feeling concerned when he saw Mrs Ferrars in close conversation with Ralph Paton, and at a later meeting is relieved at the frankness of Ralph's greeting; at the end of the book this obscure anxiety is clarified when he admits that he feared that she was telling Ralph that he himself was blackmailing her. The doctor is not merely suppressing the truth, but very strongly suggesting the false. This raises acutely the question of the kind of "contract" that binds the reader to the author. Of course, we should suspect everyone in a detective story. Of course, the narrator has good reasons for not telling the full truth on these occasions. He might, for that matter, have preferred not to mention them at all. But it would be barely possible to follow the story, still less to make any sensible guess at the solution, unless we could presume some level of accuracy. Unreliable narrators such as the Grossmiths' Mr Pooter or Dostoevsky's underground man can usually be recognized as such quite early in the

course of their narration; Christie, on the contrary, allows these small details to accumulate in such a way that their falsity becomes apparent only in the last chapter. To this extent she exploits the conventions, not only of the detective story, but of first-person fictional narration, and so allows error to persist. The deep misleadingness of *Roger Ackroyd* has more than once been commented on as a challenge to the whole sense of a secure communication as the basis of fiction in general, not only most emphatically by Bayard (2000) but also interestingly by Priestman (1998, 11) and Lovitt (1990), who very subtly shows how far the voice of the narrative is not simply that of the criminal Sheppard, but how far it is that of Sheppard as manipulated by the detective Poirot; the intense discussions on the fairness of the solution at the time of publication bear witness to the radical undermining of certainty the novel threatens.

There are also cases in which she misleads in third-person narrative, even if only by silence. No one in *Mrs McGinty* points out that Evelyn is often a man's name; the characters are misled by a newspaper article which arbitrarily assumes, on the basis of her mother's words before the birth of the child, and perhaps for reasons of pathos, that Evelyn Hope is the daughter of the suspected murderer Eva Kane; anyone who checks the Browning poem of the same name will find that Browning's Evelyn is female too. No one in *Sittaford* points out that a murder's being announced in the course of a spiritualist séance is nothing like proof that the murder took place at the same time: the author allows a faint suggestion of the supernatural to create at the least a readiness to accept false logic. Moreover, Christie (like Dr Sheppard) employs selective narrative to mislead the reader. She trivially and annoyingly suppresses bits of information to heighten tension, as when Poirot writes four words on paper, which disclose the true solution in *Hallowe'en Party*, but the author does not inform the reader of them, so postponing the truth, or when at the beginning of *Towards Zero* the author describes an anonymous person planning the series of murders. More crucially, she may give a false impression of the events to a reader who has not trained himself or herself to avoid any interpretation that goes beyond the literal sense of the text. Thus the false timing of *The Sittaford Mystery* is heightened by the method of narration. After the so-called message from beyond the grave, Major Burnaby sets out to walk through the snow from Sittaford to Hazelmoor, a distance of six miles in thick snow. He somewhat optimistically announces that this will take two hours. The next chapter (iii) begins with his arriving, two and a half hours later, at Trevelyan's door and finding the body. The author omits to tell us at this point that he has not walked at all, but travelled on skis, taking a quarter

of an hour, murdering the captain and then returning – as narrated – to find his body. Details of narrative enhance this wrong impression. So the reader is told that Burnaby's reason for going to Exhampton is to check on Trevelyans' well-being, and that having arrived at the door, he rings the bell twice since he gets no answer the first time. The first point is simply false: Burnaby had no such reason. Second, he knows well that no one is going to answer the bell, since Trevelyan is dead, and he repeats the ringing presumably to give the wrong impression to any passer-by (and to the reader). We read Christie in order to be misled; we are delighted, as Barnard says, to find that she has been fooling us throughout (1980, 55). The genre itself is an art of misleading (Porter, 1981, 33); it is a form of seduction, an art of framing lies (Sayers, 1988, 31). We read to submit to an author's creation of the unreal. We do that in all fiction; in the detective story the unreality of the crime is doubled by the unreality of the deception.

A special case of the manipulation of the point of view is a deadly one: if the story is suddenly narrated through some new character, the story is likely to be of that person's murder: in *Hickory Dickory Dock*, Mrs Nicoletis, the drunken proprietor of the dangerous hostel, enters a pub and encounters an acquaintance, who is not named. After some time she leaves and the narrative follows her consciousness as she swerves to avoid a pillar box and decides to rest against the wall for a moment. In the next paragraph she is found dead, poisoned as it later proves. In *The Clocks*, this happens twice: first Edna, who has realized some unspecified oddity in the circumstances of a murder, is accosted at the end of one chapter by a person whom she greets, with some surprise, and then is discovered dead in the next chapter; then Mrs Rival makes a blackmailing phone call to the murderer and is last seen cheerfully leaving a phone booth. A protracted and pathetic example of the exploitation of the point of view to suggest the false is the series of sections of *The ABC Murders* that are seen through the eyes of the eccentric and solitary A.B. Cust, who is always present in the towns where the murders take place, is vague as to his movements and at one point has blood on his clothing. In fact, Cust has been set up as a fall guy for the murders by the real criminal, but this narration avoids this preliminary material, keeping systematically to the present of the crimes and investigation until the background is revealed at the end. Cust's panic and secretiveness make a disturbingly ambiguous picture. If he is in fact the murderer, we have an image of a murderer incapable of grasping his own acts, a feeble and passive character, prey to some uncomprehended part of himself. But if that is the case, this is not a classic detective story, but a tale of crime

through insanity, of the type later developed by Ruth Rendell. If Cust is innocent, we have an image of a man helplessly manipulated by a stronger character. In either case, there is a forceful sense of the fragility of personality, of a person subject to something beyond his rational control and of a text which connives with that subjection.

Especially, conception of character is subject to variety and bias and this may affect the whole understanding of a crime. The star actress Arlena Stuart in *Evil under the Sun* is certainly a woman with lovers: but is she an active seducer or a victim of male domination and exploitation? The second view is the right one and gives the solution to the mystery; the first one is allowed to prevail through much of the novel, and the author's description does little to dispel the illusion. The strategy is repeated in *Sleeping Murder*: Helen Kennedy is not a victim of her own ravening sexuality, as many of the characters imply, but is the victim of a perversely jealous brother as she attempts a normal marriage.

Multiple visions are possible and inescapable. This fact informs the basic conception of *Five Little Pigs*, where Poirot, investigating a case sixteen years old, works from narratives provided by the five suspects. The narratives (and the interviews which parallel them) clearly relate the perception of events to the character of the observer. Philip Blake, the dynamic and insensitive businessman, is concerned to establish his own friendship with the victim, the artist Amyas Crale, and to confirm the court's verdict that he was murdered by his wife Caroline: so Amyas is seen, rather admiringly, as an egoistic and passionate man, his mistress Elsa is shown as triumphant at having wrested him from Caroline, and Caroline herself as unbalanced, neurotic, impulsive, though surprisingly enough also as calm and calculating, as a poisoner no doubt has to be. His brother Meredith, an ineffective dabbler in science and an admirer of Caroline, wishes to believe that Amyas committed suicide, and therefore claims to see in him some undercurrent of remorse at his excesses of sensuality and in Caroline a sense of total desolation at her betrayal by her husband; Elsa is also viewed generously as a sincerely misled young woman whose happiness is destroyed by the death of her lover. Elsa, who is in fact the murderer, is obliged to support the court verdict, and presents Amyas as an energetic and forceful man dedicated to his art and to herself and Caroline as an understandably resentful wife, dangerous because of her jealous and possessive nature. Miss Williams, the feminist governess, sees Amyas as vain, moody, lacking in self-control (as male, in short), and Elsa as trivial and self-indulgent, while she admires Caroline's dignity and self-respect, even though she thinks her guilty. Angela, the victim's daughter, a girl of fifteen at the time of the crime, has little

psychological perception; above all she is conscious of the need for parental care and affection and regards Elsa as an unwelcome intrusion. All these views are wrong in one respect; they share the assumption that Amyas was willing to sacrifice his marriage for Elsa's sake, and Poirot is able to demonstrate that in fact he is a weak man, who has capitulated to his wife's demand that he abandon Elsa, who remains present only so that he can complete his portrait of her – since he is an obsessive painter. Meanwhile the novel has systematically shown how people take sides, how their view of others is determined by what they conceive of to be their own needs.

Sometimes these misunderstandings are deliberately fomented by the murderer. We have already seen the murderer's strategy in *The ABC Murders*. In *The Moving Finger*, the murderer creates a campaign of anonymous letters to give the impression that they have led to a suicide; in fact this is a smoke screen to cover the fact that he murders his wife in order to remarry. In *Towards Zero*, the murderer creates an elaborate series of clues likely to incriminate the innocent Audrey; the generally reliable Superintendent Battle recites the evidence against her very thoroughly a few pages from the end of the book and has actually arrested her (though it later appears that this is a feint) when he is interrupted by a piece of new evidence from the true, amateur detective MacWhirter – evidence which is in fact false, but points in the right direction. A false suspicion, a false arrest, and a false proof of innocence: the climax of the novel is a dense accumulation of illusions.

Very common is the double bluff, the false self-incrimination (there are comments in Bayard (2000, 25), Priestman (1998, 20), Symons (1977, 28)). So in *Murder at the Vicarage*, the guilty couple Lawrence Redding and Anne Protheroe both confess. This, of course, seems to rule them out as suspects. For one thing, they confess very early in the novel, when the reader knows that there is still a hundred pages to go before the true revelation of the perpetrator. For another, they have an apparent motive for their confessions; each is seeking to shield the other. From this it seems to follow that they have a secondary guilt, that of adultery, that they nevertheless are decent characters motivated by real feeling for each other, that they are each living in isolation from each other at the crucial moment but know that they individually are not guilty; they are like the reader and the detectives seeking truth in a world of suspicion. An ingenious false self-incrimination appears in *The Hollow*: Gerda Christow shoots her husband. She then hides the gun and is found clutching another gun by the family and acquaintances who rush to the scene. There is doubt as to whether even Gerda (who has cultivated a

reputation for being more stupid than she really is) could be so stupid as not to throw away the weapon in time, and this is apparently confirmed when it is proved that the gun she was holding was not the one used in the murder. An ingenious exploitation of the appearance of guilt appears in *Death on the Nile*. The criminal couple Simon and Jacqueline create the false impression that they have parted, whereas their relationship has continued although Simon has married the victim Linnet (just as in *Evil under the Sun*, Patrick and Christine Redfern are not separated by Patrick's attraction to Arlena; on the contrary the attraction is a pretence, the result of a conspiracy between them. The similarities of the two novels are acutely noted by Merrill 1997, 88–90). Jacqueline, apparently inspired by a profound and almost insane malevolence, stalks Simon and Linnet in their honeymoon trip on a Nile steamer. This seems to break out into direct violence when, as it seems, she makes a hysterical scene while drunk and shoots Simon. But this is precisely what seems to prove her innocence; she is ushered to her cabin and given a morphine injection by a kindly nurse. It is at this point that Linnet is murdered, so that Jackie has a perfect alibi; a false act of violence masks a real one.

So people can misunderstand each other; the fact is all too familiar from real experience, and what is striking in Christie is the crucial role it plays in certain novels. Still more fundamental is the radical uncertainty people may have as to each other's identity, since this may extend to an uncertainty about the very possibility of personal identity. Personal identity, it would seem, depends on two things: continuity and distinctness. I am an individual because I am still, *grosso modo*, the person I can remember being – and the person my acquaintances can remember knowing – over the period of my life, and because I differ, as a whole, from any other person. As a whole: I share much with other people, especially those of my own age, class and gender, but no one has exactly the same memories, the same range of information and acquaintanceship, and the same combination of opinions. Traditional humanism (like the Christianity from which it is ultimately derived) stresses the uniqueness of the individual and with it the moral responsibility of the individual for his or her acts. Much contemporary thinking, Marxist or post-modern, challenges this conception of humanity, stressing the common, the derivative, what is determined or constructed by history, class, culture, rather than what is distinct, and denounces humanistic individualism as bourgeois and ultimately exclusive of many groups of people. The novel as a genre has been plausibly claimed to derive from such an individualistic humanism, and criticized as such; Christie too has been criticized for her excessive concern with the personal and

indifference to historical and class forces. We shall be concerned later with these views, which are not unfounded; at this point we shall be noting that her novels, while undoubtedly rooted in a conception of the free individual, may also be seen as inviting some scepticism about it.

On a playful level, we may note Christie's enjoyment of Dickens's Mrs Harris, who is much referred to by Sary Gamp but proves not to exist. Hastings, sceptical as to the existence of his future wife Dulcie's sister, accuses her of having a sister called Harris (*Links*, viii). When an actress provides an alibi by pretending to be someone else, Poirot – at this stage still relatively unfamiliar with British culture – comments that "There's no sech person", but attributes the quotation to Shakespeare (*Investigates*, iv). Mr Harris has booked a berth on the Orient Express, and his booking has to be cancelled to allow Poirot a place; M. Bouc, a director of the train company, hastily instructs the porter to move him to make way for Poirot. Poirot, better informed about English culture, recalls Dickens and decides that the name is a good omen, and that Mr Harris will not arrive. The detail is fascinating: from Poirot's initial viewpoint, Dickensian fiction coincides magically with reality. From his final viewpoint, the conspirators have humorously displayed their inventiveness (they could have chosen any other name for the non-existent character) and crime becomes an act of literary fancy. Finally, a brother to Mrs Harris appears in *They Came to Baghdad* (xxii). Playfulness does not exclude seriousness; Christie is obviously fascinated by the idea of someone who can act like a person, by for instance booking a ticket, but isn't one.

Criminals and bodies alike can be disguised. In *Murder in Mesopotamia*, Lavigny is not in fact a highly qualified French archaeologist but a swindler; his whole personality is a disguise (xxvii). In *Appointment with Death*, Lady Westholme disguises herself as an Arab servant in order to approach the victim, sitting in wide public view (a Father Brown story points out that no one notices a postman; no one notices an Arab servant either); in *Third Girl* the central character's (false) step-mother Mary Restarick is disguised as her flatmate Frances Cary. In the case of Lady Westholme, a good deal of attention is given to making the disguise plausible; she is a tall woman, capable of passing for a man, and attention is drawn to the checked cloth with which she cleans her shoes and which she uses as a headdress in her disguise. In *Third Girl*, the impersonation is quite absurd; the late novels of Christie contain much that is interesting chiefly because it shows the author's preoccupations reduced to their crudest level. Here the outrageousness of the disguise intensifies the betrayal of friendship, or more precisely of the tenuous

co-existence of young women who share a flat for reasons of convenience, which Christie perhaps regards as a typically modern substitute for the real community of family. These physical disguises are, moreover, only part of the total imposture. Lady Westholme, apparently a distinguished politician, is also an ex-criminal; the murder is committed in order to disguise her real – that is original – identity. In *Third Girl*, Frances Cary genuinely has the artistic interests which define this personality; but she is also a colonial criminal who can adopt the comparatively colourless personality of Mary Restarick. Her husband, moreover, is not the real Andrew Restarick but another colonial crook who profits from Restarick's death and succeeds in imposing himself even upon Restarick's daughter. The imposture is neatly reinforced by a portrait of the imposter which is displayed in his office with the implication that it is an old portrait of the true Restarick; physical identity is created by artifice.

The dead body is subject to the indignity of disguise: the body in *One Two Buckle my Shoe*, desecrated by blows to the face after death to make it unrecognizable, is thought to be that of the expected victim, Miss Sainsbury Seale; the identification is reversed on false dental evidence and the body is assumed to be that of the missing Mrs Albert Chapman, until in the eventual solution of the crime Poirot reveals that it was the real Miss Sainsbury Seale, after all, and not Mrs Albert Chapman, who has been impersonating her and who is in fact Mrs Alistair Blunt and still alive. What seems to be the body of the dancer in *The Body in the Library* is in fact that of a schoolgirl, murdered simply to permit the substitution. This substitution twice leads Peach (2006, 73, 102) to reflect in post-modern style on the instability of identity; more generally it demonstrates, what is asserted by the clergyman in *Evil under the Sun*, that the body can be impersonal – in other words it insists on character as identity. The body in *The Clocks* is first identified by a calling card in its pocket. This proves to be false, and an alternative identity is established by the evidence of a woman who claims to be the widow. This evidence is false as well, and the true identity of the victim proves to be almost tangential: he is simply someone who might have been able to identify the murderer – who is also of course hidden under a false identity. It hardly needs to be said that disguise is one of the staples of crime-fiction (Sherlock Holmes provides many examples); but it is worth emphasizing that in the cases of deliberate disguise in Christie there is a very strong suggestion of a denial of social rootedness (Lady Westholme becomes a foreigner, Mrs Restarick becomes a younger and unmarried woman), while the cases of disguise of the dead highlight the

impersonality of humanity's physical form, just as does the replacement of Arlena by Christine in *Evil under the Sun*.

Miss Marple is right, then: you should trust no one. The world we perceive is a complex of deceptions, extending from the moment of crime to a whole lifetime's identity. We live in a haze of appearances. We can overcome them, or at least the kind of people who become fictional detectives can: mentally alert, energetic, self-confident, enterprising people. The novels create a small elite of intelligence and will power, which the reader can admire. The spectacle of the books is the dissipation by perceptiveness, suspiciousness and determination of the delusions we have appreciated in the story – delusions like those in which we may really be living without appreciating them.

4
Actors and Imposters

Christie is fascinated by the elusiveness of personality. Poirot declares to the assembled suspects at the end of *Cat among the Pigeons* (xxiii) that they are in fact the people they purport to be (as they no doubt know). It is difficult to imagine any situation in real life where this comment would need to be made; it is essential in Agatha Christie, where almost anyone might prove to be somebody else. Even here Poirot's comment is somewhat inaccurate: Miss Shapland is really Miss Shapland, but she is not only a schoolmistress but also an international spy (and sometimes passes as the exotic Angelica de Toredo). Christie's novels are a sustained experiment in how people can not be who they say they are. People are disguised, they are reduplicated, they adopt other selves, they change so much as to renounce their own past, they fail to understand themselves, and they perceive their own identity as restriction. Most confusingly, perhaps, they pretend to be themselves.

One way in which personality is dissipated is reduplication. Thus in *At Bertram's Hotel* the criminals, in somewhat surrealistic mode, commit their crimes while disguised as specific bishops, judges, admirals; a powerful moment is the one in which the absent-minded clergyman returns to his hotel unexpectedly and finds himself – or a criminal disguised as him – sitting in his room. In *They Came to Baghdad*, Victoria is prized by the conspirators not because of her charm and vitality, but because she closely resembles the financial expert Anna Scheele and can be passed off as her (Miss Scheele, moreover, appears at the end of the novel disguised as the wife of the archaeologist for whom Victoria has been working). Captain Hastings's romance with the acrobat Dulcie Duveen in *Murder on the Links* is somewhat complicated by his tendency to confuse her with her twin sister Bella, with whom she performs a sister act under the name of Dulcibella, and who is suspected of having

committed the murder in the course of a frustrated love affair with another man (in a later novel *EndH* (iv), when Hastings has married Dulcie, he deplorably forgets her name and calls her Bella). *Elephants Can Remember* depends on the murder of a woman and her replacement by her twin. People are interchangeable; they are masks and not faces, as Chesterton put it (cited in Champigny (1977, 61)). The uniqueness crucial to humanist anthropology is unreal. Our value lies not in ourselves, in what we have chosen to do or be, but in the social role we are made to play, whether by fraud, brute force or persuasion; we are pieces in a game and follow the rules of the game.

Duplication allows substitution. But people can also choose to substitute a new role for their original one, and this distorts social contact. A nice example of an innocent substitution, which has essentially a comic effect, occurs in *4.50 from Paddington*. During much of the investigation, the crime is seen from the wrong angle: it is assumed that the body mysteriously found in a sarcophagus in the Crackenthorpes' family estate, which can be identified as French by its clothing, is that of Martine, the woman Edmund Crackenthorpe is assumed to have married in the course of activity with the French Resistance, and a good deal of attention is paid to tracing a French woman who may be Martine. Amongst those who are interested in the investigation are the son of the house, Alexander, and his friend, James Stoddart-West, both of whom find it exciting to partake in a real detective story. The two boys then leave to stay with James's mother, who (the negligent reader may not fully register) is French. Towards the end of the novel Lady Stoddart-West appears at Rutherford Hall; and Lady Stoddart-West is Martine and has nothing to do with the murder. A neat trick on the part of the novelist; a rather strained coincidence; but also a demonstration of a kaleidoscopic world in which people change nationality and status, and in which the change may not be precisely perceived by those who come across them later.

Less innocent transformations abound. When a stranger arrives in *Taken at the Flood* calling himself Enoch Arden, the name suggests that he is really a husband returning from the dead, as in the Tennyson poem of the same name, to find his wife remarried; or possibly that he is someone who wishes to give the impression that he is such a husband with the intention of making trouble for the unfortunate wife. He is (on the latter hypothesis) pretending to be someone pretending to be the husband pretending to be Enoch Arden. Each of these layers of pretence has its own level of malice, and when the imposter takes action by threatening a relative of the wife, his manner is extremely sinister. As a

further complication, it proves that the wife is not really the wife, but an independent imposter. Letty in *A Murder is Announced* is really her sister Lotty, who has dishonestly claimed the money left to her sister, now dead, by her employer. Of the five other people in her household, Julia is not Letty's distant cousin but a relative of the dead millionaire Randall Goesler, and Philippa is not a war widow but the wife of a deserter and the twin sister of Julia. Nick in *Peril at End House* is really Nick, but her given name is actually Magdala, as is that of her cousin Maggie, and she has used the fact to dishonestly claim the money left to Maggie by her fiancé. Her cognomen itself is a sign of an odd indistinctness of identity: she shares her name with her grandfather, Sir Nicholas. He was a man of bad character and alleged to have sold his soul to the devil, and was therefore known as Old Nick; his devoted granddaughter is accordingly known as Young Nick. This has the simple plot advantage of giving her a name unrelated to her baptismal name; symbolically it hints that she is the creation of the grandfather and may have sold her soul like him. Three prominent characters in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* are really someone else: Stephen Farr purports to be the son of an old friend of the victim, but he is really the victim's own son; Pilar purports to be the victim's granddaughter, but she is in fact an acquaintance of the real girl, now dead; Sugden, the policeman who investigates the crime, is really another son of the victim and is his murderer. The physical similarity of Stephen and Sugden to each other and to Harry, a legitimate son, leads to frequent faint confusion. Hattie in *Dead Man's Folly* has been murdered by her husband, and the person who purports to be her is really his first wife (and the substitution of this sharply intelligent person for the intellectually limited Hattie gives rise to a series of ambiguous remarks which Poirot acutely recognizes: Hattie appears to be a double figure, simpleton and sophisticate). The false Hattie further complicates things by disguising herself as a tourist visiting the family home, where, to add still more to the falsity of the situation, her husband is purporting to be a prosperous business man who has bought the house of which he is in fact the heir. As often, a late work reduces the pattern to absurdity: in *By the Pricking of my Thumbs*, Mrs Lancaster, a mentally confused resident in an old people's home, is really Mrs Yorke, a resident in another old people's home, who is really the deadly gangster Killer Kate, who moreover was in her youth the actress Julia Warrender (sometimes identified with her favorite role as Waterlily) and who has married the local landowner and saint, and so also been Lady Starke.

This lavish profusion of identities is at once a sign of energy and a source of anxiety, of Christie's "disquiet about the self" (Knight, 2000, 139). In a world in which social mobility was sharply increasing, as a result of economic developments, increased educational opportunities and a developing sense of social democracy, Christie both recognizes and fears the freedom of will and ease of movement that allows people to deny their past. What do we mean by asking who someone is? If we mean what they can do and what they have made of themselves – if we think of identity as choice and action – then the adoption of a new self is admirable, a sign of vigour and competence. If we mean what their family origins are and what responsibilities they may have contracted – if we think of identity as continuity and openness – the change of the self is a result of inauthenticity. One may easily say that since most of these transformations have criminal or improper motivations, Christie must have been inclined to disapprove of them. But we should perhaps not assume too confidently that she was hostile to criminality and impropriety; these are the things that make life – and fiction – colourful, dynamic, surprising.

A crucial issue is that of inheritance. Inheritance of money is likely to be determined by biological links, as when in *Sad Cypress* Mary Gerrard is persuaded by Nurse Hopkins to leave her money to her long-lost aunt in New Zealand. It only emerges at the end of the novel that Nurse Hopkins is the long-lost aunt, and therefore guilty of Mary's murder. The reader may be annoyed by this transformation of an apparently minor character (this is an unusual instance of what Christie and some of her critics are reluctant to admit in her writing, the least likely character as murderer). The implications, however, are serious: the social relationship between the helpless young woman and the kindly, experienced, competent, older person is a mask for the social and legal convention that privileges family connections, however vacuous or malign.

The instability of the self is particularly acute when it affects the individual's own sense of who he or she is. There is much in the novels that asserts explicitly that we do not know our own identities. The conception may arise from a (perhaps rather vague) awareness of the psychoanalytic view that people are in some ways controlled by aspects of their own self of which they are not fully conscious. It may arise from a sense that is in the air in the early twentieth century, and expressed in much major literature of the modernist period, that the self is elusive (one recalls Virginia Woolf's claim that the sense of identity disappeared in about the year 1910 and her exploration of a "world without a self"). It may arise from some knowledge of the denial of any firm substance

of individuality by existentialist writers such as Sartre. Hence Birns and Birns's very perceptive and forcefully argued – almost too forcefully argued – perception of Christie as a modernist pre-occupied with the unreality and destructiveness not only of deliberate deception but also of social roles as such: in her characterization, she "is less probing the souls of her characters than seeing how their enactment of social roles implicates them in carceral circumstances that are sometimes apprehended as 'criminal', sometimes not" (1990, 122).

Whatever its origins, the feeling that one is not quite one's self is emphatically manifested on several occasions. Poirot, with unusual modesty, tells Hastings that he is no fortune-teller, able to read character at sight, because of the hidden and inconsistent emotions within each person (*Edgeware*, i). The model is obviously Freudian; what is most important in affecting our character and conduct is not our conscious self, but what is within us, the necessarily unknown unconscious, which is all the more inaccessible to other people. The point is not actually very relevant to the story of *Lord Edgeware Dies*: Carlotta Adams's behaviour is based on lucid and rational motives, and puzzling only in so far as it is kept secret for reasons of deliberate deceptiveness. Such, in fact, is the norm of the classic detective story; the deduction in the novel must be rational, so the characters must be rational. Poirot shows his awareness of currently fashionable theory, impresses his readers by his recognition of the possible extremes of feeling, and inculcates in them a readiness to be awed at the unforeseeable violence these may produce.

These abstract formulations may seem banal to sophisticated readers. But there are points where the sense of the elusiveness of personality is given genuine fictional life: Addie in *The Body in the Library* (xii) asserts that she wanted to be just an independent person, not the devoted widow and daughter-in-law she is expected to be. David Hunter in *Taken at the Flood*, similarly, speaks of the idealized self-images we create. The argument is interestingly complex. He is challenging Lynn Marchmont to decide whether she is really the woman who is engaged to another man; in other words he is inviting her to consider himself as a better match than her fiancé. She is seriously tempted, but eventually decides that her attraction to David is unreal and that she really does want her fiancé. This is just as well, since David is actually a murderer, whereas the fiancé has merely attempted to murder her, thus proving himself to be less plodding than she had thought. *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, in its title as well as in the portrait of the frustrated and self-willed film star Marina Gregg, implies the terror of a painful mirroring of the self: Marina commits a murder because she is suddenly confronted

at a crucial moment with a painting of the Madonna and child; this brings home to her in specially acute form her childlessness, which has been for her a chronic deprivation, thus acting as a sort of negative mirror.

Especially characters can be aware of themselves as theatrical signs: Mary Dove, the inconspicuous, efficient, lucid but discreet housekeeper in *A Pocket Ful of Rye*, who seems too intelligent for her humble position in a family she finds odious, sees her identity as Mary Dove as being a mere role (iv). The idea of identity as a role coincides with the conception of much recent sociology and notably is fundamental to the writings of Erving Goffmann. Peach (2006, 2) argues that much real crime is a matter of "performance, trickery and masquerade". There is much to show that Christie shares or reproduces these tendencies. One may, however, wish that Peach had been more explicit about the qualities that Christie does not share with Jack the Ripper; and one may feel, when for instance he comments that she shows English social life to be largely "a socio-cultural masquerade" (106), that his definition of "masquerade" is so broad as to include most of society and most of culture; in fact his argument recognizes that Christie had the same insight as Goffmann. The sense is especially acute when a character sees herself as acted by another person: Jane Wilkinson, the star actress, is profoundly excited by the sight of Carlotta Adams, a fictionalized Ruth Draper, imitating herself. The narrator Hastings expects her to be annoyed; in fact she is delighted and thrilled. We eventually learn that the delight is not simply aesthetic. This is the moment when Jane realizes she can commit a murder while using an alibi furnished by substituting Carlotta for herself. But, at least until this becomes apparent, there is for the reader the sense of a narcissistic satisfaction in seeing oneself reduplicated. Most acutely of all, perhaps, in *Murder in Mesopotamia*, Louise Leidner's husband, who is thought to be dead, remarries her without disclosing his identity, which she never guesses, and then murders her out of jealousy at her relationship with another man. There is an obvious strain on the reader's credulity, which Christie does something to allay; but the deepest point is that Louise's husband is purporting to be Louise's husband; he has both maintained his passionate commitment to her and denied the personality within which that commitment has arisen. A strange episode in Christie's *Autobiography* relates her childhood game of "the elder sister", in which she was terrified by her sister Madge's pretending to be someone pretending to be Madge. There is an uncanny duplicity in the self: in the novels this becomes an image of a delusory society.

The effect of these falsifications of the self is double. On the one hand, there is a serious questioning of concepts of identity, of uniqueness and integrity: the self is not unambiguously the product of a lifetime's experience and choices, but can be put on, perhaps provisionally. So in *Evil under the Sun* (ii), Poirot remembers the game from keepsake books, "*If not yourself, who would you be?*". His interlocutor, admittedly, decides against becoming Mussolini or Princess Elizabeth, but the whole conversation is about whether one could have changed one's life and become a different person, and the nostalgia for otherness is not quite denied. "*Notre personnalité sociale est la création des autres*", Proust says; Christie implies that we can determine that creation by an act of deception. We can determine it, at least, for a long time, since the point of the detective story (and some novels of other sorts, such as *Middlemarch* and *Our Mutual Friend*) is that the true identity is revealed eventually. But it is revealed in extreme circumstances, of murder and detection; in the ordinary course of events we can take people in and we can be taken in by those around us. Life is a presentation of personae. On the other hand the sense of self as role adds to the spectacular quality of the texts. Jane Wilkinson is a striking personality; her personality is reinforced by the reader's view of her viewing herself, and learning how to exploit what she sees. The dramatized personality is enriched in self-knowledge and will-power, and the relationships of the characters become the more intense for it.

Theatricality is in fact one of the basic concerns and one of the basic mechanisms of the Christie novels. Christie was of course interested in the theatre and wrote a number of successful plays, either as adaptations of her novels or as original productions, and critics such as Light (1991, 216) and Morgan (1985, 291) have noted the theatricality – in different senses – of her fiction. Many of the central characters in her novels are professional actors: Sir Charles Cartwright in *Three Act Tragedy*, Magda in *Crooked House*, Jane Wilkinson, Bryan Martin and Carlotta Adams in *Lord Edgeware Dies*, Linda Arden, the Shakespearian actress who entertains herself in *The Orient Express* by her imitation of a vague and self-indulgent matron, Miss Sainsbury Seale in *One Two, Buckle My Shoe* (though only in small parts), Michael and Rosamund Shane in *After the Funeral*, Marina Gregg in *The Mirror Crack'd*. Robin Upward in *Mrs McGinty* is a dramatist, and his actor friends appear briefly. Some characters have been amateur actors, as, for instance, members of that extremely suspicious organization the Oxford University Drama Society: Ronald in *Lord Edgeware Dies*, Stephen in *Sparkling Cyanide*, George Crossfield in *After the Funeral*, and David Ardingly in *Pale Horse*. These people

are actually innocent: the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art is a more conclusively evil background for Frances Cary in *Third Girl*. The wife in *One Two, Buckle My Shoe* has worked in drama, and in fact first met the victim there; the skill acquired allows her to masquerade as the victim when the time comes. Actors are employed as tools of investigation: in *Sparkling Cyanide*, George Barton reconstructs the events of a year ago, when his wife Rosemary died during a restaurant meal, and surreptitiously hires an actress to represent the dead woman. The preoccupation with illusion and unreality in *They Do it with Mirrors* culminates in Miss Marple's realization that the whole setup of the handsome building and the study within which its head is closeted is a stage set and that the people apparently quarrelling behind locked doors are actors (xvii). In *Cat among the Pigeons*, the apparent Arab schoolgirl princess is in fact a French actress of more mature years (her knees give her away to the keen eye of Poirot, a connoisseur of the female form).

Scenes may be staged, even without professional actors: Nick Buckley announces, early in the novel, that she would like to produce a play at End House, which she feels to be a dramatic location (*EndH*, vi); she even sees the alleged attempts on her life as actually being a drama, in which she is the person who dies in the first act (this is obviously an Agatha Christie sort of drama, of the kind that was to be so popular in the West End). Her view of the atmosphere of the house is amended later: the servant Ellen feels some evil in the house, as does Poirot (xii), and the victim's mother feels uneasy in the house (xvi). The dramatic atmosphere is uncanny, diabolical, in keeping with its former owner Old Nick (and, though we don't yet know it, its new owner Young Nick). Poirot is to exploit the ambiguity of drama. He does stage a play there, as Nick has wished, and moreover a play with a ghost; but this play is to elicit the truth of the crime (xviii). Drama is both disturbing and a source of knowledge. Having pretended that Nick is dead, he stages a little drama in which she suddenly appears, apparently returning from the dead. The immediate effect is to put to shame the neighbours who have forged her will in their own favour, believing themselves safe from detection; the play brings to light the drug-crazed husband of one of her friends, who has so far been only a sinister glimpse at the windows; the final step is to prove Nick's own guilt of the murder itself, as a police inspector, instructed by Poirot, recounts how he has seen Nick planting a gun on the friend. Much of this, it seems, might have been done without theatricals: the truth depends on Poirot's deductions, more than on Nick's last minute opportunism with the gun. The drama gives Poirot the chance to make the revelation of

guilt as public and sudden as possible. He maintains the consistency of the novel; he diagnoses Nick's pretence of shock at the death of Maggie as showing that the house itself, with its theatrical character, has inspired Nick to a magnificent dramatic performance (xxii).

In *Three Act Tragedy*, Poirot arranges an extremely tasteless performance making full use of the actor Sir Charles. A number of characters are drinking sherry on a somewhat constrained social occasion, only Poirot himself seeming cheerfully unconcerned by the recent murder. Suddenly Sir Charles utters a strangled cry, drops his glass and collapses. The scene repeats the original crime, of poisoning in a cocktail: one character, understandably enough, exclaims at the repetition. Sir Charles is in fact shamming; Poirot congratulates him on his acting. By reenacting the crime, Poirot demonstrates that it is possible to conceal the poisoned glass; but he does so with maximum publicity and intense emotional effect. The publicity allows him to warn someone whom he perceives to be a potential victim; the spectacle, as so often, is rationalized. But the immediate impact is of his brutal display of fake criminality, as he claims to have magically killed and revived Sir Charles. Theatre is magic or myth, and so greater than real crime (III, xi). His final explanation in the same novel is very much a performance. He sits alone in the light and the listeners sit in darkness as if in a theatre. One of them, of course, is the murderer, Sir Charles, who becomes more actorly as his guilt is declared. At first he maintains his innocence, looking disgusted (III, xv); he turns proudly to the young woman he loves; as she accepts Poirot's explanation, he curses the detective and does so in a tone of fine theatrical grandeur. The performance shifts from a one-man show to a drama, and it is the murderer who finally stands centre stage.

In Sir Charles's career up to this point the acting has been very complex. He is always acting – a major figure in the theatre, but still an actor off the stage (*3Act*, I, i), and is first seen playing the part of the Retired Naval Man, in a style that doesn't quite convince. But he is driven to murder by his sincere passion for a young woman. His opportunity for the murder arises when he is invited by his intended victim to play a practical joke on the members of a house party by pretending to be the butler. This is a protracted and a challenging role (since Sir Charles, of course, has little knowledge of what butlers do behind the scenes, so to speak), but he carries it off well, the pretence being undermined only by a slight oddness in his fulfilment of his supervisory duties and by a frivolous remark by the victim. The disappearance of the butler after the murder thus arouses suspicion of this non-existent character and enables Sir Charles to participate in the investigation of the mystery he

has himself fabricated (he plays the part of a detective). The implication is of a virtuoso performance; the ability to suppress so effectively one's true self is seen as radically sinister. The imposter according to Grella (1976, 51), is a comic figure, an *alazon*. The comedy is certainly there in Sir Charles, but so is a sense of inhuman arrogance.

A particularly fascinating example of the exploitation of the theatrical occurs in *Death in the Clouds*, where Poirot requires Norman Gale to act the part of a blackmailer. In order to conceal the fact that he is really an accomplished deceiver, Norman has to act at acting badly, appearing in an absurd disguise of false beard and eyebrows – the opposite of the minimal but effective disguise in which he has carried out the murder. There is a second level of artifice, an artifice which displays itself as such; the sense of another, unrecognized artifice is all the more sinister.

The murderer may play a part in order to carry out his or her crime unsuspected. In *Endless Night*, for instance, the murderer-narrator boasts of his acting talent, and in this he is typical of many Christie villains. The theatrical appearance of Alfred Inglethorpe with his huge black beard, gold pince-nez and opaque expression, which strikes Hastings as stagy and unnatural (*Styles*, i), is what allows Evie to disguise herself as him; his theatricality is actually a lack of real identifiable character. Poirot arriving just in time to witness the murder in *The Hollow*, thinks it a charade, and frequently recurs to this sense that it was a theatrical illusion (xii). This is what it proves to be; the woman he sees standing by her husband's body with a revolver has not actually shot him – with that revolver.

Other people may play a part too; acting is not only confined to misleading but also means personal magnetism. The glamorous and charismatic Linnet Doyle in *Death on the Nile* is perceived as a theatrical star (ii), and her rival Jackie has such theatrical quality that even when she is absent people wait for her entrance (iii). Some characters are theatrical by their nature: the famous traveller Sir Rupert in *They Came to Baghdad* with his long hair and moustaches, hooded cloak and a general air of conspicuousness, is viewed by the heroine as a poseur (vii).

Even without such deliberate playacting, there is a frequent intuition of theatricality. In *They Came to Baghdad* Victoria feels everything in her own recent experience to be unreal (xv); Bertram's Hotel seems to be a *mise en scène* (i), the location of a theatrical performance – and indeed so it is, the old style hotel having become a front for a gang of robbers. Artificiality contaminates: Miss Marple herself feels herself to be playing a part (xiii). Theatrical falsity here, very significantly, lies in the preservation of the past; Bertram's Hotel has become a stage set because

the way of life it implies, that of a genteel upper class, is no longer secure, threatened by youth and permissiveness; the country house of *Dead Man's Folly* is false because the original family members have been forced, by their own guilt, to act as themselves. Ariadne Oliver, a novelist and a determined, energetic, dominating character, admits to being a poor actress: she is too aware of the real to be taken in by illusion.

Theatre is both falsity and spectacle; the real person or the real act is concealed and the display of the person or act is made conspicuous. The unreality itself may provoke a recognition of the real: it is significant that the most famous of Christie's plays is *The Mousetrap*; like the play within a play in *Hamlet*, the acting of the investigators reveals a hidden truth. The conscious theatricality of the events of the novel, moreover, has an ambiguous relation to the real world; does it contrast with reality or does it hint that all life is unreal? Logically, of course, it can't be; pretence is inconceivable if there is no such thing as reality. But there can be a detachment from life, a readiness to view it as an uninvolved spectator, that serves to extend the attitude of make-believe to life in general. So Mr Satterthwaite, who first appears in *The Mysterious Mr Quin* and recurs in *Three Act Tragedy* and elsewhere, is an audience for those who are committed to the changing activities of social life, within which he is inactive. His part parallels that of a reader: he is eased into active detection by the supernatural soliciting of Harley Quin and later becomes an assistant to Poirot; as the reader seeks the solution to the puzzle of the novel, so Satterthwaite gradually moves from observing to explaining.

There is a counterpart to theatricality: it is secrecy. The theatrical life is illusory and public; within the characters there is hidden a life which is truthful and private. Reserve, the author often insists, is the great British characteristic; and there is regret that in the modern world secrecy is destroyed by the mass media. For Christie, Englishness largely means decorum (Taylor, 1990, 135) and decorum means reticence. Her view of the English, as Light (1991, 11) well puts it, is as "a nice, decent, essentially private people". Decency is somewhat limited by their propensity to murder, but privacy isn't. In *Death on the Nile* the Franco-American Jacqueline accuses the English of the vice of reticence (xv) in the course of a violent outburst which may seem to imply that reticence has its merits. In *Dumb Witness*, reticence is part of an admired Victorian self-respect: two elderly women equally know of problems in each other's families, but do not mention them: family calls for tact and decorum (i) – which is why one of them suppresses the information that some member of her family has attempted to murder her (xxi). Throughout

the novels there is a concern with avoiding the communication of information. Inspector Narracott in *The Sittaford Mystery* declares his preference for keeping information to himself (rather echoing the young Agatha of the *Autobiography*, who was known for her reticence). Fictional detectives are of course given to retaining their knowledge till the last chapter. But Inspector Narracott is not the detective of this book, in the formal sense: it is Emily Trefusis who brings about the solution, and she is mildly handicapped by this secretiveness on the Inspector's part. What he is concealing is the identity of a person whom Emily finds suspicious, but who is actually an extremely worthy former police officer, who has concealed his origins apparently because they would be considered socially lightweight in the rather snobbish society of Sittaford; Narracott very rightly respects his choice of discretion. He has in fact, under the influence of Emily's charm, been a lot less discreet on matters relating to the actual crime. Secretiveness is a positive value, which may be overcome by female persuasiveness in the cause of proving innocence.

Secrecy is a sort of possession: Poirot says admiringly that Satterthwaite keeps his opinions about people secret, as personal property (*3Act*, III, v). Of course, this secrecy is likely, in other characters, to be guilty: Poirot asserts in *Roger Ackroyd* (vii) that everyone hides something, and in *Death in the Clouds* that no one reveals the full truth (x) – because everyone has something they wish to conceal. This need not be an improper wish. In *Death in the Clouds* the victim's maid has concealed her mistress's dubious business transactions; the concealment is an act of loyalty and in itself creditable but an impediment to the processes of law. Everyone has his secret, the novels often imply. The concept justifies the form of *The Clocks*, for instance, and of many other detective novels; all or most of the characters remain suspect because they have something to hide, although in most cases what is hidden is not the murder which forms the theme of the novel, but some lesser fault: in *The Clocks* drink for one character and spying in several. It also implies a wide-spread shamefulness. The theatrical characters seek to impose a vision of themselves, to make themselves admired; the secretive characters seek to conceal what they know to be disreputable within themselves.

These things constitute the major options for Christie characters: sincere self-revelation is an ideal rarely manifest. *The Clocks*, moreover, also asserts that, in the context of spying, there are no permanent secrets; the desire for privacy is ultimately frustrated, just as the theatrical is ultimately unmasked. The plots of the novels are made up of illusion

and disillusion; and the characters also are defined largely in terms of these qualities, manifest as either self-display or self-concealment, as a relation to other people, in either case, which is fundamentally uneasy and vulnerable; the conception of selfhood and of relationship is bleak and challenging.

5
Human Nature

Miss Marple tells her vicar that her hobby is Human Nature (*Vicarage*, xxvi). Poirot tells Dr Sheppard that his profession is Human Nature – from which the doctor deduces that he is a hairdresser (*Ackroyd*, iii). Being foreign and therefore more abstractly intellectual, he more often claims to be an expert on psychology. It would be reckless to attribute to the author any sophisticated knowledge of academic psychology or any systematic study of psychoanalysis. But there is certainly in Christie's novels a persistent wish to account for what people are like and the way they behave. As with many aspects of her work, this can easily be explained in structural terms. Plausibility is a requirement of the classic detective story; if readers can't see the likelihood of certain characters behaving in certain ways and having certain motives, the solution of the crimes is unmotivated and the puzzle element of the stories is invalid. But this is not the whole explanation. Clearly, Christie did wish to create the impression that the author of her novels possesses a certain wisdom, a wide and dispassionate view of behaviour. This serves to maintain a sense that the endings of the novels represent a possible establishment of a morally significant state of affairs; it is also a kind of rhetoric, assuring the reader that reading the novel is not just a self-indulgence, but that it also offers a kind of learning experience. A character in Conrad speaks of the moral discovery which is the true purpose of any novel; if Christie's discoveries are less radical, they exist nonetheless and give a certain dignity to the stories. Watson speaks of her "simplistic commentary upon human nature" (1977, 101): if not subtle, her commentary is at least thoughtful, serious and often acute.

Her insights are less radical than those of more demanding novelists because they form a kind of popular psychology, based not on scientific investigation but on "common sense" – on the kind of unsystematized

and possibly inconsistent expectations that allow us to cope with the everyday life, and that we sometimes formulate in conversation, either as a curious generalization or as a guide to action or support for advice. These views, one should stress, cannot be strictly confined to description or explanation of behaviour or attitudes. They also involve assessment of them; popular psychology overlaps with popular morality. Christie's challenge is to realign this commonplace understanding so as to give the sense that extreme acts – specifically murder – are intelligible. A major novelist such as Conrad or Dostoevsky may be aware of the strangeness of murder and may for this reason leave the reader conscious of how far from full intelligibility it is. Christie has to display the real ordinariness that is part of its apparent extraordinariness. In doing so, she implies a critique of the society within which it is, in certain ways, normal; and she extends this critique to a quite wide-ranging assessment of psychological or moral types and of the social patterns within which these types operate.

The first manifestation of human nature may lie in physical description. At one point, this does seem to lay claim to some scientific impersonality: when it is reported that the shape of a person's head implies his criminal tendencies (*Zero*, iii), it looks very much as if the author has actually been reading Lombroso and so has some knowledge of the criminology that her characters often appeal to, and that often proves to be no more than a familiarity with well-known criminal cases of the past. This physiognomic diagnosis is a dated kind of criminology, and one that seems highly likely to resolve itself into ethnic or class prejudice; it appeals to our wish that character should be instantly recognizable. Moreover, it plays another part in *Towards Zero*, where there is concern over someone who has committed murder as a child and is identifiable (in principle) by some unspecified physical peculiarity. This might be the oddly shaped head, whether it indicates criminal inclinations in general or not; the theory is a gloss on the routine business of identification. The wish for instant recognition of the types of character is actually met quite satisfactorily by the kind of psychologically significant description that is common in popular fiction. So in *And Then There Were None* we have, *inter alia*, Philip Lombard, seen by Vera in the train as they approach their doom – his close-set eyes and the line of his mouth reveal his vices (i), Anthony Marston who is a handsome and well-built man (i), likely to be attractive to the opposite sex, and the judge who has not only the physical signs of age, but also eyes that betoken shrewdness (ii). Some of these descriptions explicitly indicate a psychological dimension: arrogance is visible, and so is shrewdness. Some suggest a

normal and recognizable type: Marston's healthy good looks identify the active, outside, adventurous man; Wargrave's physically unimpressive form signifies age and so experience and distance from the passions of youth. Some are symbolic: Marston's god-like appearance reinforces the sense of bold self-reliance, and is to be ironically perceived as part of his egoistic indifference to the deaths he has caused. Appearance, that is, produces a sense of potential of the person: Lombard is likely to be dangerous and skilled in adventure, and Marston is likely to enjoy untrammeled self-assertion; both have the potential for attracting the opposite sex. The reader is prepared for developments which may or may not take place: Marston is got rid of quite soon, but Lombard remains till the end and shows the initiative and resourcefulness that might be expected, though his relationship with Vera never does more than tease the reader with the dubious possibility of a happy ending.

The implications of this approach are nicely entailed by an elegant (though not necessarily deliberate) paradox: the appearance of the (putative) insane murderer, in *The ABC Murders*, is thought to signify his insignificance (xv). Normally people show their character through the force of their personality; their energy and their desire to impress others are so strong as to form their outer appearance. Although this account of the murderer is in fact unsound, the true criminal not being a maniac, it fits remarkably well the fall guy Cust, who is remarkable – and is chosen as a scapegoat – because self-neglect, poverty, solitude and age have robbed him of any distinct personality. Hence the signs of insignificance. The obvious contrast is with Poirot, whose exuberant self-confidence is signified by the moustache of which he is so vain.

To a large extent, the conception of human nature is dominated by two ideas: that human nature is the same everywhere and that it is pretty bad. Miss Marple is given to asserting that her experience, largely confined to village life, is not a disqualification but an advantage in the study of human nature. Human life is much the same everywhere, she insists: birth, growing up, marriage, and parenthood. Her intellectual nephew completes the T.S. Eliot triad (*Vicarage*, xxi). Birth, copulation and death: things are a bit less basic in St Mary Mead than in Sweeney's London but not much more appealing. Of course, there are plenty of deaths in detective stories; but it is remarkable how much death in life there is in Christie as well. Miss Marple is an expert on crime because the village is an observation centre for wickedness (*Library*, xiii); she is an expert in the varieties of evil (*Finger*, xiv). She boasts that her cynicism about other people's moral character is usually justified (*Bertram*, xii). Notoriously, Christie insists that everyone is a potential criminal (*Nile*,

vii, amongst many other passages), that no one is incapable of murder (*Hickory*, viii). *And Then There Were None* creates a society comprising only people who are guilty of causing death, maliciously or indifferently, but cannot be brought to justice. The judge, eager to kill but determined to kill only the guilty, has brought together servants who have killed their mistress by refusing her the necessary medicine, a reckless driver, a child-carer who has encouraged her charge to swim in dangerous water and the like (he allows himself to be accused of condemning to death an innocent man, a charge which he himself rejects but which may appear to be not unfounded). The effect is ambiguous. On the one hand, there is a powerful picture of a lot of people who have caused death easily and are in most cases unrepentant or oblivious; the sense is of a universal guilt, of a world without moral control. On the other, the reader is aware that these people are not a microcosm but have been carefully selected by the judge so as to protect the innocent from his own sadism. The reader may perceive the picture of the guilty torturing each other by their suspicions and anxieties as an image of a special hell – or as an image of a world in which suspicion and anxiety are rife, a world in which other people are hell.

The view that everyone is a potential murderer is impossible to prove, since most people do not commit crimes (or at least major crimes) and a very small minority commit murder. Might more people do so, in other circumstances? It is convenient for a detective novelist to believe so, since it multiplies the number of suspects; more generally, the belief creates a climate of solemnity and anxiety which allows the crimes to be perceived not as extraneous to a peaceful world but as a product of the total environment. The diagnoses of this sinfulness are various, though not mutually exclusive. There is the view that cruelty is childish and can be outgrown by intelligence: Christie repeats the example of the child which kills its kitten out of anger and only later realizes the import of what it has done (*Crooked*, xii, *Curtain* Epilogue); that goodness is maturity is convincingly implied when Poirot accuses the selfish and unhappy Elsa of immaturity in her inability to feel for other people (*Pigs*, III, v). A related conception is the view that people are primitive beings behind the mask of society (*Cypress*, I, iii). Another perspective is the contrast between rationality and violence. *The Hollow* offers a subtle view of the contrast. Poirot reflects that Gerda Christow appears to have murdered her husband and allowed herself to be found holding the gun. Had she lost her sense of self-preservation? Acted in a moment of unreasoning passion? (xv). Reason here is not morality, the decorum that prevents people from committing crimes, as it is in some classical

philosophers. Unreason is blindness to one's own interests. Reason is the ability to calculate, and it is to prove that Gerda, though guilty, has not lost this ability. A chilling note appears in the recognition of madness, which seems to have concerned Christie much in her later years: she offers four times the story of the old woman who kills her closest friend because she sees the devil looking out of her eyes; also strangely recurrent in the late work, as Morgan (1985, 230) notes, is the image of the old woman who asks a younger one if it is her dead child that is hidden behind the fireplace. If evil is a loss of rationality, then madness is the ultimate form of evil. The conception of human life implied here is not fully explicit. It may derive from a Christian sense of original sin or it may be related to the Freudian myth of the conflict of ego and id; the two models are not easy to distinguish. What is clear is the feeling that wickedness is normal and goodness is acquired, artificial, and cultural; it is society that makes for decent behaviour. The view is of course a conservative one: people need the discipline of law if they are to live together cooperatively.

The natural evil takes especially the form of egoism. The point is frequently emphasized. Nick in *End House* is an egoist, obsessed with her desire for possession of the ancestral house, which comes to define her own personality, and prepared to sacrifice anyone else to it. *Lord Edgeware Dies* provides one of the outstanding models of egoism in Christie's work; the murderer Jane Wilkinson is formed by egoism, vanity, self-delusion; she is totally indifferent to the interests of anyone but herself, and on meeting Poirot immediately sweeps him off and virtually orders him to act for her in the divorce she hopes to arrange; it never – apparently – occurs to her that this is not Poirot's profession and that he might not choose to get involved in her relationships. She cheerfully welcomes the death of her husband as a solution to her own problems (xi). In the final words of the novel, with impressive vanity, she hopes for an image of herself in Madame Tussaud's waxwork museum. All this is both very plausible and sufficiently generalized to impress the reader as displaying a sense of the depths of life. In the act of reading, the reader joins the author in recognizing the dangers of the self and in (temporarily) rising above his or her own egoism. We should note that there are examples of selflessness in the novels: Carlotta Adams, in *Edgeware*, for instance, works especially in order to provide comfort for her disabled sister. But we should note how few there are; Christie's vision is of a world of self-seeking.

For vitality is what interests Christie. Time after time, characters are assessed in terms of their vitality, energy, boldness, enjoyment of life

and magnetic attraction. Crucial is an acceptance of life, a yes-saying: Dr Lord memorably offers the example of the Little Ease, a cage in which the prisoner is in exquisite discomfort, being unable to stand, sit or lie, but in which people nevertheless cling to life: their feeling is instinctive, not rational, and he praises his patient Mrs Welman precisely because she has this fundamental and perhaps unconscious love of life at any price (*Cypress*, I, ii).

There is an obvious point to be made: vitality is not a moral quality. The novels insist frequently on the evil of egoism; but they display just as frequently the attractions of energy. Dr Quimper is egoistic, but his egoism is not petty: Miss Marple regrets that he will not be executed, but his audacity is not beyond admiration (*4.50*, xxvii). Simeon Lee, Harry, Pilar are marked by boldness and amorality (*Christmas*). Bess Sedgwick is an outrageous character, with her multiple marriages and love affairs, sporting adventures, criminality, love of danger and general exuberance of personality: she is admired for her exceptional character (*Bertram*, xxvii). Michael Rogers and Greta are impelled to crime by their passionate love of life (*Endless*, xxiii). Amyas Crale in *Five Little Pigs*, the artist of genius and passionate amorist, is impelled by egoism (I, iv), an egoism that goes with talent, pride and self-assurance (I, ii). His egoism leads to conflict and unhappiness for those around him and eventually to his own death; but the sheer force of the man's appetite for life clearly inspires admiration. Meredith in the same novel is a warning against meekness; in a community dominated by the intense and freely expressed feelings of Amyas for his art and for his numerous love affairs, of Elsa for the position she hopes to gain as Amyas's future wife, of Caroline for the husband who threatens to leave her, the gentle and incompetent Meredith, with his years of unfulfilled devotion to Caroline and his attempt to deceive himself about the theft of poison from his laboratory, appears a figure of inadequate feeling, a mere encumbrance on the life of his peers. The connection of all this with one aspect of the theatricality we noted above is obvious; the people Christie most clearly admires are the ones who are "larger than life", who strive to assert themselves, to gain what they desire, to make a difference to other people – even if these things are gained by crime. It is not accidental if we feel impelled to refer to those who say yes to life: the ultimate force of these views is at least analogous to the philosophical purpose of Nietzsche. It would be difficult to claim any first-hand knowledge of Nietzsche for Christie, and I know of only one critic who has (parenthetically) made the connection, Hanna Chaney (1981, 23). Only late in her career does Christie produce what looks like a fairly close citation

of Nietzsche, when in *Destination Unknown* characters denounce Christianity and the slave race and praise the superman. In this book, to be sure, Nietzscheanism is forcefully rejected; it is associated with the Nazism which at the time was seen as the offspring of Nietzsche, and the Nietzschean characters are shown not as supermen but as mere puppets of a cynical money-mad master-criminal (rather of the type that James Bond repeatedly defeated). But the need to engage in dialogue with Nietzsche, even to refute him, must surely arise from an awareness of how far Christie found within herself that amoral or anti-moral love of life at any cost.

The love of life and selfhood emerges most explicitly in the cult of the will. Characters who show will-power are admired. The Duchess of Merton, however drab in appearance, impresses Hastings by the sheer force of her will-power and ability to dominate (*Edgeware*, xix). The issue is faced with some ironic complexity in the treatment of Stephen Farraday in *Sparkling Cyanide*, who is said to have cultivated his Will. This assertion of the Will has been sufficient to raise him to political success, from humble and somewhat difficult origins. But his success is partly the result of his choosing a wife from an elevated area of society, who is eager to further his ambitions. His success, therefore, is not simply individualistic, but involves a certain level of dependency. More crucially, his will crumbles in the face of sexual attraction. He becomes involved with the seductive Rosemary, at the risk of his political career, through the despotic power of love (I, iv). Will has its limits, and crucial ones; they make him a suspect in her death, since he might have murdered her to escape from the captivity she exercises on him. So too, when the optimistic American Jefferson Cope in *Appointment with Death* announces that anyone can determine his own destiny (I, v), the remark appears to be totally incongruous, since he is dealing with a family apparently entirely paralyzed by the domination of a tyrant. The tyranny is so intense that when the wife of one member tells him to choose freedom (I, viii), he simply shrinks back: he hasn't the will. Cope's companion, the European Dr Gerard, with the author's apparent approval, reflects that there is no unlimited freedom, only different types of subservience (I, v). The helpless Cust is told by his ambitious mother, a believer in will-power, to control his own fate (*ABC*, xxxiii). The point is bitterly ironic; overstrained by his mother's vision of him he retreats into passivity and becomes the tool of the murderer, who is in fact the master of Cust's fate. Cust is pitiable, whereas there is something just a little admirable in the murderer's confident control of him; lack of will makes one a victim for life. But elsewhere the assertions of

the power of will, or at least of wanting, are manifold, and not quite straightforward.

You can get what you want, says the narrator near the beginning of *The Man in the Brown Suit* (i). She wants adventure, and she gets it; that is the rest of the novel. But in *The Blue Train* Poirot tells Katherine Grey that you may get more than you want (*Blue*, x). Katherine wants adventure, too, or at least an escape from St Mary Mead. She gets it, and a fortune, and a real lover, and the chance to play along a false lover who proves to be the criminal. All these things, admittedly, come as a gift of circumstances rather than through her efforts. There is a counter-tendency, as so often in Christie: the belief that getting what you want may prove disillusioning. Poirot warns Satterthwaite of the danger of disillusion, dissatisfaction, finding that retirement and comfort have palled – though the story he is about to investigate is that of a man who resorts to crime when his dreams cannot be fulfilled (*3Act*, II, i); John Christow is an example, as he regrets that his wife has been exactly as uninspiring as he had wished (*Hollow*, iii).

The contradiction is enough to prevent us from attributing to the author any single view, and most of all from seeing here any simple didactic purpose. It formulates an ambivalence, an intense attraction to will and a restraining sense of decorum and resignation. The ambivalence is acutely formulated in what Christie claims to be a Spanish proverb, which she frequently cites (with minor variations): "Take what you want and pay for it, says God" (*Christmas*, ii). (I am grateful to Ms Guadalupe Soriano and Dr Stanley Black for informing me that this proverb is unknown to Spanish people, and to Rosemary York for pointing out that it appears – as a Spanish proverb – in Winifred Holtby's *South Riding*, with attribution to Lady Rhondda. It appears to have become an English proverb, perhaps thanks to Agatha Christie.) This saying is surely not a warning against taking what we want; it is an encouragement to act, to desire, to enjoy, while knowing that there is a price to life. In its first appearance it forms a bond between the wicked old man Simeon Lee and the wicked young woman Pilar, as they appreciate each other's unconventionality, outside the pallid English respectability that surrounds them. A bond and a challenge too: Pilar wants to know if Simeon has paid, and he hesitates to answer; she intrigues him by her implication of independent judgement and her unrestrained acceptance of the processes of life. In *Five Little Pigs*, a modified form of the saying appears at first in reference to the go-getting Elsa, who at first has no idea of paying (I, iv). This is cited as the code of modernity, and as an expression of an unrestrained life. But Elsa herself

supplies the corrective: "Take what you want and pay for it, says God" (I, viii). She has paid the price: she has survived her lover's death and her own youth, and lives a prosperous but solitary and unloving life.

Will, in true Nietzschean style, means a will to power. If there is a single dominating force in Christie's view of human nature, it is the prominence of the love of power. Throughout the novels, the satisfaction of wielding power and the obligation to resist the power of others are central in the web of relationships; characters are distinguished, very often, as those who, through age, wealth, social standing, gender, possess power, control others and enjoy their obeisance, and those who are victims of power. Power may be seen as a form of energy or vitality – though it often is based in an inert social structure. It entails a will to make one's world fit one's own desires, to see others as instruments rather than obstacles, to know one's own rightness. And so it is, in the Christiean scheme of things, profoundly ambiguous: an assertion of the self against a pervading dullness, a demonstration of strength, and a destructive force suppressing the freedom of one's familiars, a demonstration of selfishness. And the ambiguity is explored with much variety and much uncertainty throughout the novel. The powerful may be what the French call "*monstres sacrés*" – monstrous but awe-inspiring; or they may simply be detestable. Either way, power leads to crime: the powerful may murder to maintain their power or they may provoke murder by the excess of their repression of the other.

Power is certainly not simply condemned; Alistair Blunt, the banker (*Buckle*, i), openly declares his love of ruling, controlling (ix). But he exercises power within a democratic state, and he uses it benevolently, protecting Britain from the evils of 1930s politics, Communism and Fascism. He has, admittedly, been led into murder by his love of power, combined with a complicated private life, and Poirot insists that he be punished for his crime; but the belief that a great man could use power wisely is certainly not denied.

More crucially power is shown especially in the family; Christie's fascination with the family tyrant, exercising gleefully a power often based on money and the prospect of inheritance, but also channeled through sheer force of personality, is remarkably akin to that of her near contemporary Ivy Compton-Burnett. Light treats Christie along with Compton-Burnett in her fascinating study of the English temperament of the inter-war years and nicely describes them as "literary sisters under the skin" (1991, 61). There is the family tyrant Simeon Lee in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, asserting his mastery of his house, insulting those of his sons who lack his own extrovert dynamism, hinting at impropriety

by their wives, deciding without consultation to invite additional people to live in his house, one of them a black sheep much resented by his brothers, teasing the family by blatantly purporting to change his will and enjoying the conflict he provokes amongst them. Very memorably there is the dominating mother in *Appointment with Death*, with her habit of power and her acute understanding of power (I, iv). There is the eccentric father in *4.50 from Paddington*, a virtually caricatured tyrant and miser. There is the dictatorial father in *Death Comes as the End*, who selfishly imposes a young second wife on an apparently settled family, deprives his elder sons of responsibility and arbitrarily spoils his youngest son. There is the pig-headed father (now dead) of the two sisters in *A Murder is Announced*, who has prevented Lotty from seeking medical treatment for her goitre and so gravely reduced the scope of her life.

There are more subtle forms of control: it is noted that old Mr Jefferson's personality is so strong that those who live with him can have no personality of their own. Mr Jefferson is admired for his force of character, even if he is criticized for his headstrong decisions and his blindness to the needs of others; the man's sheer energy proves to be a stumbling block for others (*Library*, xii). Linnet in *Death on the Nile* is a benevolent tyrant, with her combination of money and charm (i), and she is reluctant to marry someone who could claim any authority over her, by rank or property; she marries a dependant – and pays the price as a victim of murder. Knowledge is power (as Mrs Upward firmly tells Poirot, refusing to share her knowledge with him, *McGinty*, xiv): it is obviously a source of power in the case of blackmail, a little less obviously in the assumed motivation of the anonymous letters (*Finger*), implicitly in the case of the knowledge of guilt which offers the unrealized potential of blackmail of some kind, or even simply of confronting someone with their own guilt: in *Cards on the Table*, Mr Shaitana gloats over his knowledge – not wholly accurate, as it proves – of unpunished murderers and invites Poirot and other detectives to meet four of them for dinner and bridge, teasing them with indirect hints of his knowledge; crucially, he reduces his suspects to objects in a collection (i). In *Crooked House*, Josephine loves knowledge of secrets; she puts her knowledge to use only once, in framing Brenda for the murder of her husband, but there is also a clear sense that the possession of knowledge about the weaknesses or faults of others is in itself a source of superiority.

In most of these ways, though attractive, power is evil. The point is implicit in the cases we have considered; it is fully argued out in the political context of *Destination Unknown* and *Passenger to Frankfurt*, where

the arguments may quite strongly recall the confrontation of Winston Smith and O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, published six years before *Destination Unknown*, and it is made simply explicit in *N or M*, which refers to the Nazi lust for power as one of the justifications of the British war against Hitler. But it can also be identified with the charisma which is at least neutral; power radiates from Superintendent Battle in *The Seven Dials* (xxxi), while Mrs Leidner, in *Mesopotamia*, more than once referred to as a *Belle Dame sans Merci*, exercises power through charm alone. The treatment of Mrs Leidner offers a subtle complex of attitudes. She is a woman of great beauty who is able to attract men easily. But she is not a sensualist, as she might seem. She is essentially an egoist, in Poirot's judgement, who enjoys above all the sense of power (xxvii). But there is a further dimension. As a young woman, during the First World War, she has denounced her husband, whom she finds to be a German spy. She deludes herself that her motives are patriotic; in fact she dislikes the domination of marriage, the feeling of belonging to someone else. The taste for power is allied to self-deception (which allows for a certain sense of guilt) and to the sense of independence. The result is unhappy; she creates much tension in the enclosed world of an archaeological dig and is finally the victim of murder. The view of her, through Poirot and through the narrator Nurse Leatheran, is one of the most complex characterizations in Christie's work. The Nurse ends by reflecting that she perhaps deserves more pity than blame. However that may be, she is clearly a source of fascination for the author as for the characters, in her mixture of selfishness with delicacy, intelligence, generosity and sensitivity; she is a character without restraint and without vulgarity.

There are some complex issues in this fascination with power. An obsession with power obviously entails conflict, since the people over whom power is exercised at least desire their own freedom and may well wish to possess power themselves. Dr Reilly notes that power and conflict are inherent in life; if Louise Leidner has caused upset by her flirting with the men around her, that is her nature; it is the way she enjoys power, and the men should accept that people vary and that pursuit of power is one part of the relation between the sexes. The implication is important: we accept people as they are; moral judgement (whether in terms of sexuality or power) is not pertinent (*Mesopotamia*, xix). A world in which the will to power is so widespread is bound to be a world of multiple hostilities, a world which produces murder because murder is the ultimate act of power and the ultimate defense against power. But power is one aspect of the vitality, charm, dynamism which the author so clearly admires. The novels present then a powerful

ambiguity; moral and amoral at the same time, they both assert the need for order, moderation, cooperativeness, respect for the other – the modest virtues of English middle class life – and express fascination with the uncompromising egoism that conduces to murder and that may or may not also conduce to the greater good of humanity.

6
The Self and the Other

Christie's characterization, as has often been noted (for instance by Morgan, 1985, 250; Cawelti, 1976, 118), is largely based on types rather than unique individuals. The comment is rather too general: this study aims to show that many of her characters are quite precisely conceived. But it is obviously not unfounded, as far as quite a lot of other characters are concerned, and even the more original conceptions are often close to standard models. The comment is intended as a criticism: Christie fails to produce characters as complex and therefore as unusual as Dorothea Brooke or David Copperfield. The criticism is reasonable enough; it differentiates this genre fiction from major literary fiction. But it may also be useful to consider that the types are essentially conceived in terms of two factors: creativity and adaptation. Prominent amongst Christie's characters are the artist, the professional, the adventurer: people who choose a way of life and follow it boldly and confidently, and who produce outstanding paintings, dramatic performances, contributions to medicine or politics. Prominent also are those who have the competence, social skills and perceptiveness to adapt to the world in which they live, to make it serve their own ends: the users of money and social status, the charmers, the ingénues (not so ingenuous as they may at first seem), the practical and efficient servants, people who seek a comfortable and peaceful life and are effective in attaining it. Against these two groups are, on the one hand, those who do not adapt but accept, the inert products of society, often bourgeois, lacking the imagination to redefine their role and status, and, on the other those who do not create but fixate, the maniac, the obsessive, the psychopath. Any of these types may prove to be criminal or may prove to be so objectionable as to provoke their own murder: the novels work not just on a distinction of guilt and innocence but also on a distinction of self-reliance or passivity.

The Hollow gives a particularly interesting analysis of the relationships between talent and egoism. It is a book about people with different degrees of creativity; John Christow, the medical researcher, Henrietta Savernake, the sculptor, and Veronica Cray, the film star. These three are linked erotically: Henrietta is John's current mistress and Veronica a former mistress; the three are emphatically opposed to the dullness and domesticity of John's wife Gerda. John, the murder victim and the most prominent character in the first part of the novel, is devoted above all to his work, and for this reason Gerda persistently sees him as unselfish. But he is also aggressive and dynamic (xiv) and is seen, by his very lucid secretary, as a very selfish man who expects the world to revolve around his wishes. Henrietta is characterized by her intelligence, discretion, clear-sightedness and devotion to John and to her art. The egoistic Veronica, presumably a lesser real talent, spectacularly turns up at John's home 15 years after they have parted and in effect incites him, before his wife and family, to follow her home. Gerda is spineless, until driven to revolt by her husband's presumed infidelity, which even she cannot mistake for unselfishness. Veronica is a full match for John, whom she can enslave by the force of her attraction and of nostalgia, and whom she treats as subordinate to her own love of power and excitement. Henrietta has the intelligence and the self-reliance that come from her own artistic achievement, and so has the ability to stand up to her domineering lover without abandoning her admiration for him. In her, in other words, artistic energy produces self-respect without the wish to control others; if there is any egoism in her, it is the egoism that gives her a sense of her own rightness.

Our picture of the moral landscape of the novels indicate a strong presumption of individualism. There are of course factors that delimit this individualism: love and romance, marriage, the family; and there are factors which inhibit contact or understanding, especially the factors of class and ethnicity. The institutions of sexuality and family form the basic framework within which the desires of the characters operate; and they are often treated without indulgence. If there are presentations of true love, satisfying romance and fulfilling marriage, the sense that these positives are a convention of the genre rather than a reflection of the real world is rarely totally absent, and they are counterpoised by many images of the falsity and inertia that can, in reality, distort such relationships.

More broadly, there is in Christie a profound ambiguity, which may be related to a crucial contradiction of bourgeois society in the twentieth century. On the one hand, there is a firm assertion of the strength and

self-sufficiency of the individual. On the other, people are perceived as justified by membership of an established class, as being "like us", as being what we expect and think normal, and those outside the given frame, by reason of nationality, class, race, gender role or sexual preference, are considered with a concern sometimes amounting to a puzzled distrust. This concern, the need to come to terms with otherness, may seem to constitute a nervous and insecure defence of the structures of an unchanging hierarchical society, structures which are both protective and restrictive. It might be more accurate to say that Christie seeks to overcome the contradictions which exist between a conservatism which one may perhaps feel to be most natural to her, the liberal humanist principle of tolerance for variety, and her respect for those who transcend, by energy and talent, the limits of an established order, in other words the capitalist principle of enterprise (which may extend to criminal enterprise). She admires both order and adventure, both self-assertion and self-discipline. The paradox is awkward and stimulating.

One work which is centrally concerned with the unsatisfactoriness of romance is *A Pocket Ful of Rye*: Elaine escapes from the tensions of her family and the overwelming power of her father by falling for the self-seeking left-wing schoolteacher Gerald, Adele escapes from a boring marriage to an old but rich man with the evasive Vivian Dubois (whose name alone indicates his unreliability). Passion is deceptive. Love – or sexuality – allows for exploitation. The extreme case is the parlour maid Gladys: she allows herself to be exploited by a man who disguises his identity – and is finally murdered by him. *Murder is Easy* offers a more varied view of love. The feeling of Luke for Bridget is somewhat arbitrarily conveyed (when she comments that he doesn't seem to like her much he replies that he doesn't like her at all, xii); most convincingly he has to wrest her from her willingness to marry Lord Whitfield who is old, vain, of dubious intelligence, lacking in real willpower, but rich (in fact the reader may wonder how such an insipid character came to be a self-made press magnate). The truth, Bridget remarks, is seldom romantic (iv); she is bitter but frank and realistic about her impoverishment and her dependency. The novel ends romantically, of course, with the discovery of love and renewed life. But however simple the end, the novel recognizes firmly the difficulties of love for a woman without wealth. In *Sad Cypress*, similarly, the wise old Mrs Welman warns the young Elinor against love as a source of suffering (I, ii), and the book ends with Elinor recovering from her desperate passion for one man and ready to settle with another, to whom she is not much more than grateful but with whom she can be

happy. Consistently with all this scepticism about romance, *4.50 from Paddington* leaves us with a neat irony: there is some assumption that the independent-minded Lucy Eyelesbarrow will marry at the end of the book either the rascally artist Cedric or the helpless RAF veteran Bryan. We do not learn which. The implication may be that it hardly matters.

These things said, it must be recognized that *Murder on the Links* offers a real parallel of false and true love: on the one hand there are the lasting devotion of Mme Renauld for her ex-criminal husband and the simple but heroic love of Hastings and Cinderella, on the other there are the treachery of Jack Renauld in abandoning Cinderella's sister Bella when he meets the more seductive Marthe Daubreuil and the cynicism of Marthe herself, who seeks to attract Jack simply because he is the heir to a fortune. It is also true that many of the novels on marriage provide quite a complex account of the different forms it may take. There is no lack of happy marriages, notably in *Sleeping Murder*, and of course the partnership of Tommy and Tuppence (in both instances marriage is a shared activity of detection). A touching instance is the love of Renisenb for her dead husband Khay in *Death Comes as the End*, which is, however, ultimately transcended; the pleasures of youthful romantic love fade from memory and are replaced by a marriage based on sharing a new and challenging life. But against these satisfactory marriages, there are a great many which are problematic. Cross-class marriages are especially so (*Bertam, Caribbean*, *Crack'd*); foreign marriages may equally be fragile, though in fact retrieved, as with the marriage of the Anglo-Italian Gina to the American Wally Hudd, who feels out of place in her palatial English home and successfully removes her to the States at the end of the novel (*Mirrors*). There are conflicts of personality, as with Kenneth Marshall (*Sun*), who finds it difficult to cope with his wife Arlena's attraction to other men and the tension between Arlena and his daughter by a previous marriage, while in the same novel there is the marriage of Patrick and Christine Redfern, apparently strained by Patrick's relationship with Arlena; the fact that this strain is a deceit does not wholly undermine the convincingness of the roles they adopt and so the novel's portrayal of the fragility of marriage. Marriage in Christie is subject to discord and divorce (at a time when divorce was rare in England) (*Zero*); false or concealed marriages are not unusual (*Mesopotamia*, *4.50*, *Clocks*, *Bertram*). Marriage, in short, is often profoundly affected by the illusoriness and egoism of life: it all too often provides a stimulus or potential stimulus to violence rather than a lasting fulfillment.

Murder at the Vicarage, on the other hand, offers a subtle account of a marriage made difficult by differences of character and age; the narrator,

a middle-aged clergyman, is married to a woman 20 years younger than himself, of lively and even frivolous disposition, negligent about housekeeping, ironic about members of his congregation and having previously experienced some close relationship with a young artist who proves to be the murderer, a relationship she hushes up for much of the story. They have married in haste, despite the vicar's conviction that marriage should be a matter of lengthy deliberation, and Griselda admits that she accepted his proposal because it flattered her vanity. Things look bad; the vicar is frequently irritated by his wife, speaks sharply to her on several occasions and even confesses, hesitantly, that he thought her capable of murder. But these frictions prove to be superficial; they are held together by a genuine affection, in which the vicar's modesty about his own unglamorous personality and his recognition of the generation gap between them play some part. The affection is shown in their cooperativeness and mutual understanding, their recognition that there are limits to the way in which two quite different people can share a life. The novel ends happily with Griselda's first pregnancy, and the pair are mentioned in several later novels. There is, furthermore, an interesting account in *The Hollow* of the marriage of the great doctor John Christow with the plodding and modest Gerda. During much of the novel the inequalities of the couple, and John's bad temper and impatience with his wife, make them seem a very ill-matched couple. Late in the book, however, there is a strange recognition by Henrietta, John's lover; he has asked her, with his dying breath, to protect Gerda, because he genuinely loved her, more than he loved Henrietta herself: Gerda was his own property (xxix). The balance of criticism and acceptance is impressive.

In general, we have already suggested, the family is a forum of power; for this reason in *Appointment with Death*, it is taken for granted during most of the novel that the murderer must be a member of the family, and it is a considerable surprise at the end when they are all found to be innocent. The family can normally be expected to be guilty. If there seems to be some disapproval of the schoolteacher who is reported to believe that family life is all wrong, and children should be brought up by the state, the disapproval is at least mild, and the novel as a whole can certainly be read as entailing the wrongness of family life (*Cypress*, I, vi). Morgan notes the importance and the problematic nature of family in Christie (1985, 31), while Cawelti argues that escape from the restrictions of family life is one of the fundamental characteristics of the detective genre (1976, 105). The emphasis is very frequently on the tensions within the family. It may be a collection of egoisms, creating an odious set of people, as Mary Dove comments of the Fortescues in *A Pocket Ful of*

Rye (iv). At best the family forms a kind of conspiracy, seeking to protect its own against the law or the processes of an open society: in *Ordeal by Innocence* the family's hostility to Calgary's investigations is a means of protecting itself as a unit, while in *Crooked House* the family's aim is to pin the guilt on "the right person" – that is, on some outsider, such as the victim's young second wife, who is constantly regarded as an intruder, and the detective can succeed in making inquiries at all only because he has some status within the family as fiancé of the daughter. The end of the novel is striking: the crime is traced (shockingly) to the psychopathic child Josephine; her aunt (who knows herself to be fatally ill) then arranges a car crash in which they are both killed. Justice is done, after a fashion; after the fashion of the family, which aims above all to preserve itself. This is part of a revival of the family, in fact; it is purged of its worst element and enriched by the narrator's marriage to Sophia, who, moreover, is to continue her grandfather's tradition of financial acumen. In *A Murder is Announced* we have a very thorough account of a family which has dissolved and been replaced by the heterogeneous group of people who have come to live with Miss Blacklock, in a kind of post-family unit (which is not much happier than a traditional family): the author acutely recognizes the vulnerability of the family in her own day. Most crucially, these patterns constitute an important denial of any complacent conservatism. The intimate institutions that might be hoped to control our conflicting selves and provide a sense of belonging and self-worth are undermined by selfishness and social change; they constitute a threat to the peace of the individual rather than a support for it.

It is in dealing with women that the ambiguity of Christie's feelings become clearest. There are many heartfelt complaints about the restrictions of a woman's life in early twentieth-century Britain (or in ancient Egypt, which is much the same). Being a woman is only part of the sensibility of Renisenb in *Death Comes as the End*, who thus rejects the view that the women of a household must all stand together; later she asks if marriage is all of life, if women can expect no more than to do housework and look after children (x, xvii). Miss Williams in *Five Little Pigs* (I, ix) comments lucidly on the advantages of the male sex and hopes for a more just future. Miss Williams' feminism is maliciously viewed by Poirot in the light of suffragette militancy, but her words are striking enough – and she has trained the outstanding female academic Angela Warren. Pilar in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (vi), no intellectual, is as firm as Miss Williams on the inferior status of women. She is being accused, rightly, of being a gold-digger. She has ingratiated herself with

Simeon in the hope of benefiting from his will, at the cost of his family. Women must use what gifts they have, she asserts; and she has the gifts of charm, vitality and beauty. Eventually she is to marry, out of real attraction, and to continue her adventurous life by moving to South Africa. The author therefore does not need to give long-term approval to gold-digging; but she has shown some short-term sympathy for it. Pilar is echoed by Gina in *Mirrors*; she is no gold-digger but a flirt, who comments that women should have all the excitement they can derive from their charms, because they deserve compensation for the limitations of their lives (xvi). Similarly the author appears to show respect for Josie, the strong-willed professional dancer in *The Body in the Library*. Having injured her ankle, she has herself replaced by a relative, to avoid the risk of her job being taken over by a stranger: her sense of the need for self-defence is strong (iii). There is cynicism in the procedure, and it proves that Josie is not so good-natured, after all, since she is the murderer of her substitute (eager to avoid her substituting herself also as heir to a rich man). Fighting to protect her position is a form of egoism, and ultimately a motive for murder; but one that is at least intelligible and perhaps meriting some sympathy.

Certainly there is respect for the dynamic young woman. An attractive instance is Emily Trefusis. The police inspector at first meeting admires her intelligence and self-reliance (*Sittaford*, x); Miss Percehouse views her as a female with a capacity for effective action (xvii), and the Chief Constable respects her skill in organizing people (xxiv). She does manage people: she teases the journalist Enderby into acting as her assistant, although she presents their relationship as a partnership, she gets lodgings in Sittaford, talks to suspects and witnesses, extracts excessive information from the Inspector, grasps the key to the murderer's method. She is self-confident and bows to no-one else's judgement (xvi). Determination, control, confidence: she has the virtues of action, often thought of at the time as male qualities; her fiancé is weak, passive and dependent. Gill comments that in general Christie's women tend to be "dynamically conservative" while her men are "passively conservative" (1991, 60). The comment is a thoughtful one and applies aptly to many characters in the novels: it is perhaps a little too positive or at least too general. More generally, Christie's attraction to the "modern girl" or "new woman" is at the heart of Makinen's study; she comments that "Christie's novels, in documenting cultural change, also depicted, 'consciously' as well as 'unconsciously', the shifting changes in what culture constructs as acceptable femininities and champion a range of differing modern formations being made available during the time in

which she writes" (2006, 6). The depiction of such change is complex and ambivalent.

The issue of careers for women is often considered. Gill perceptively notes that in wartime Styles, women work and men are idle (1991, 61). Megan, in *The Moving Finger*, is offered the possibility of typing or bookkeeping as a way of escaping from her unsympathetic family. Rosamund in *Evil under the Sun* runs a successful dress shop, but is relieved of it by marriage. Midge, in *The Hollow*, more humbly works in a dress shop, which she hates, and is proud to earn her own living (vi). Her admirer Edward, similarly, at first believes that women work because they have a sense of independence and need an interest in life (xxiv). But then he reflects that work prevents such normal pleasures of the leisured class as going to picture galleries or lunching luxuriously during an afternoon drive and so he marries her and takes her away from the ordeal of the shop. In fact, most women in the novels do not have careers. The one woman who attains major success in what had traditionally been a male domain is the financial expert Anna Scheele in *They Came to Baghdad* (though even she, despite her major responsibility, is officially just the confidential secretary to a banker). One should also mention Sophia in *Crooked House*, who is chosen by her dynamic and perceptive grandfather as the only person in the family worthy of inheriting his millions and who does start to use them with the same firmness as he did himself. There is also, as we have seen, the academic Angela Warren. Apart from these there are nurses (the very sensible Nurse Leatheran in *Murder in Mesopotamia*, the wicked Nurse Hopkins in *Sad Cypress*), a doctor (Miss King in *Appointment with Death*), an artist (Henrietta in *The Hollow*), secretaries and various types of servants. There are two notable cases of women of high ability who choose domestic employment: Mary Dove in *A Pocket Full of Rye* chooses to become a housekeeper, which she cynically regards as ideal employment because it pays well (though she supplements her income by blackmail and robbery). Similarly, Lucy Eyelesbarrow in *4.50 from Paddington*, who has a first-class degree in Mathematics from Oxford, becomes a kind of peripatetic housekeeper, because it pays and because she enjoys it. She is, a little surprisingly, regarded by Kyzlinková (1997) as a model for the Czech socialist woman; her choice of domestic work is, on the contrary, regarded as a deplorable lack of ambition by Taylor (1990, 144) who points out furthermore that working outside the home is likely to make the women characters into murder victims. A blatant example of the limited opportunities for women is the case of Mary Gerrard (*Cypress*) who receives a sophisticated education, involving French, German and

piano playing, which is thought to be unfit for her working-class origins, and then undertakes a career as a masseuse. Many readers may also be sickened by the cheerful commitment to housework of the vicar's wife in *A Murder is Announced*; when her husband regrets the lack of labour-saving devices and points out that it means a lot of work for her, she cheerfully reassures him that she can complete her day's housework by eight in the morning (i).

Overall, then, Rowland sums up this aspect of Christie's work soundly in saying that "her works promote female self-expression, but finally do not trouble conventional social structures" (2001, 158). The roles that remain for women, in fact, are the housemaker, the *femme fatale*, the adventuress. The point, however, is not, surely, that Christie wishes to accept the secondary status of women (though it is true that she satirized the militant feminists in "The Incredible Theft" (*Mews*) and in *Appointment With Death*, more perhaps from scepticism about politics than from scepticism about the rights of women). On the contrary, the limits of opportunity for women are part of the inhibiting futility of the society depicted in the whole oeuvre. The key instance is Miss Waynflete in *Murder is Easy*; she wished to study at Girton, at a time when education for women was hard to come by, but under parental pressure was not allowed to do so (xxi). She is obliged to stagnate, unemployed, in a village while she sees her former lover, the mediocre Lord Whitfield, attain wealth and power. Her frustrated energy makes her a particularly vicious murderer.

If Christie is sympathetically aware of the extent to which the individuality of women is shaped by expectations about gender, she is less sympathetic to other socially constructed groups. She undoubtedly shared the prejudices of the middle class of her own generation (especially since these, or the middle class of a younger generation, might be assumed to form the bulk of her readership when she was establishing her reputation and her manner of writing). She often appears to be suspicious or hostile towards groups outside the orbit of that traditional-minded middle class, and to this extent her work may look like an attempt to protect her class from everything alien to it. There is a certain tendency to anti-Semitism, which has been fairly assessed by Barnard (1980, 14) and by Morgan (1985, 264). She appears to find entertainment in the character in *Chimneys* who frequently makes jokes about the name of the Jew Isaacstein, which he distorts as Noseystein and the like. The speaker is presented as person of little intelligence or sensitivity; but even so it is difficult to believe that the author is merely satirizing his attitude. Gill very properly says that this is hard

to forgive, but reasonably comments that Christie's anti-Semitism is "stupidly unthinking" rather than fanatical (Gill, 1991, 89). One should add though, that even during and after the Second World War, when the full horror of anti-Semitism might have been expected to be known, the author herself makes numerous remarks implying that Jewish people are likely to be selfish, tasteless, bullying: it will suffice to quote the stout Jewess of *The Moving Finger* and the vitriolic and lisping Whitechapel Jewess of *The Hollow*. While she shows a certain sympathy for (presumed) Lesbians such as Hinchliffe and Murgatroyd in *A Murder is Announced*, she shows simple distaste for male homosexuals such as Ellsworthy in *Murder is Easy*, with his exquisite clothing, his womanish mouth, his mincing walk and his failure to play golf (xi), while, as Wallace notes (in Herbert, 1994, 176), in the very late and somewhat overheated *Nemesis* the murderer is a Lesbian provoked by her beloved's preference for a natural – heterosexual – romance.

Her interest in other races or nationalities, to say the least, lacks subtlety: the comments that Arabs are distinguished by simplicity and a sense of humour (*Mesopotamia*, ii) or by Eastern fatalism (*Baghdad*) might easily find a place in Said's *Orientalism*; and it is shocking for modern readers to find that one thing a young couple have in common is their dislike of black people (*Clouds*, xiii). The recurrent picture of the funny foreigner, also, is not wholly relieved either by its obvious frivolity or by the irony with which the image is also treated. Mitzi, the refugee in *A Murder is Announced*, proves to be genuinely courageous in confronting the murderer in the final chapter, but her complaints of persecution are treated with heartless mockery. Poirot himself is shown to exploit his foreignness, counting on the fact that English people will say things more readily to a foreigner they do not wholly respect than to an English policeman; even so there is a fairly forced humour in some of his mangled English.

Christie pays no attention at all to the considerable influx of immigrant workers into the United Kingdom from the West Indies and the Indian sub-continent after 1948, except for a brief welcome to black nurses in *Hickory Dickory Dock* (i); the only black characters who are prominent in her work are the students in the same novel. Here, it must certainly be noted, there is a sincere facing up to the issue of race. If Elizabeth Johnston is demeaned by the nickname Black Bess, freely used in the hostel and apparently accepted by herself, she is nevertheless presented as a person of high intelligence, self-reliance and firmness of character. She is also a member of the Communist Party, an allegiance which Christie, perhaps surprisingly, does not criticize; on the contrary

she takes it as an occasion for criticizing American McCarthyite anti-Communism. She denounces witch-hunts and anti-Soviet feeling more than once; in *They Came to Baghdad*, for instance, she refuses to see the Soviet Union as a threat to the West, regarding it only as the centre of an alternative ideology, and has her secret agent speak eloquently of the need for peace and understanding that is threatened by the hysterical panic of anti-Communism arising in America; and while it is true that public opinion in Britain was largely hostile to the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, as well as to the racism which was, in the early 1950s, more readily perceived by British people in the United States than at home, it is nevertheless worth stressing the liberalism this implies in an author who might in general seem to be hostile to any threat to the established order.

This liberalism is sufficient to qualify the points just made. Christie's humanistic values are at least sufficient for her to recognize sometimes the injustice of the prejudices she elsewhere appears to accept. There is respect for Jewish people: there is respect for Isaacstein's financial skills, Papopolous in *The Blue Train*, to whose race Poirot refers with conspicuous discretion, is shown as a person of great dignity (though a dealer in stolen goods). Bauerstein, the German spy – whose occupation, one should stress, is not condemned – is identified by Poirot as a Jew, which is a sign of his intelligence (*Styles*, x). These points, if not actually hostile, may still seem regrettable as emphasizing the separateness of Jews, the alleged racial characteristics of intelligence and financial acumen being all too close to the qualities that anti-Semites use as a pretext for their prejudice; one may perhaps find more comfort in the references to Poirot's friend and assistant, the theatrical agent Aarons, whose race is never mentioned. Moreover, one only has to point out that Christie's most famous creation is a Belgian to see that she feels no systematic xenophobia. In fact she mocks xenophobia in *Baghdad* (xi), and in *Sad Cypress* where a conservative-minded middle-aged woman tells Poirot himself of her dislike of foreigners (II, iv).

Christie herself is more clearly conservative on the issue of class. She simply recognizes that class is a fundamental dimension of English society; so the characters in *The Body in the Library* have no hesitation in perceiving that the victim is not a "girl of our class" (xiii). She shows some awareness of differences in expectation between the classes, notably showing Poirot's recognition that Mrs McGinty had specially to buy ink to write a letter, since writing was not (in the early 1950s) an everyday activity for some members of the working class; in general the working class remains subordinate, appearing in order to display a comic

volubility, from which gems of clues can be extracted; if they can provide victims, such as Mrs McGinty and Marlene in *Dead Man's Folly*, they rarely have the energy to provide villains. Kyzlinková, in an attractive article (1997), writing from a strongly socialist viewpoint, comments on the absence of working-class criminals and on the recurrent fear of inter-class marriage, though she surely simplifies in finding in Christie any criticism of the characters' "preoccupation with class and money". Class, for Christie, does not mean money. The obvious exception to her overlooking of the working class is the socially mobile narrator of *Endless Night*, a chauffeur who becomes rich and cultured through a cynical marriage. *Endless Night*, in fact, is a remarkable achievement for Christie, who convincingly creates in it the voice of a character very much out of her usual range: of working-class origins and contemptuous of some of the people he drives for, but able to mix with the squirearchy, egoistic but frank, open and curious about new experiences, fascinated not just by luxury but by what he intuits of artistic grace, unscrupulous but still to some extent loving the wife he plans to murder. If social mobility here is assimilated to crime, at least it also possesses a freshness and sensitivity to the richness of life that may – at least temporarily – attract the reader's respect.

If contact with other people brings frustration and anxiety, and if viewing oneself – or being forced to view oneself – as constituted by social pressure is personally alienating, there is an alternative: the suppression of life and change. There is in the characters a longing for peace, which transcends the struggle for life, perhaps most acutely summarized in Mrs Foliatt's quotation from Spenser: "Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas, ease after war, death after life, doth greatly please" (*Folly*, iv): Henrietta Savernake is asked if she wants to be peaceful, and she replies that sometimes peace is what she wants more than anything else (*Hollow*, vi). But the psychology is complex here and actually implies a rejection of the longing for peace. Henrietta has just said that what robs her of peace is her art, which is her deepest commitment. She has not explicitly said that she is also robbed of peace by her love for the forceful John Christow. But the question about peace is asked by Edward Angkatell, who wants her to marry him and live in the peace of the countryside, and she rejects this kind of peace. Peace is a velleity; she really wants the intensity of feeling and action. A recurrent theme in *Death Comes as the End* is the sense of a broad and empty landscape which can be seen from the family tomb, remote from the activity and conflict of the house. Renisenb finds peace in the solitude and calm here, as she looks out at the multiple hazy colours of the Nile and the

cultivated land near it. Most strangely perhaps, at one moment when she is in the house she imagines the still panorama of green fields and river and then imagines Hori turning to her, followed by her sleeping; and the sleep is perceived as a sleep of death (vi, xvii). When Hori does finally declare his love, it is as an overcoming of death. As long as the crimes continue, love is not attained and Renisenb is subject to the temptation of denying life as she refuses the antagonisms of her daily experience.

Peace is found especially in nature and contemplation: in isolation therefore. Very striking is the sense of emptiness and peace in the desert landscape of *Murder in Mesopotamia* and *Appointment with Death*; in the former book Nurse Leatheran, in general a busy, sociable, unimaginative person, agrees with her patient about the beauty of the landscape, appreciating its isolation from the business of practical life. This leads to hints of danger and so contributes to the plot; but the sense of remoteness is already apparent, and it is reinforced later when she stands with Poirot admiring the sunrise, with its multiple colors, the remote and alien sound of the waterwheel and the distant view of a town. The plot intervenes again, as Poirot suddenly sees in the panorama an undisclosed clue. But the moment of stillness has been recorded, at least (vii, xxiv). In *Appointment with Death* there is a fine sense of Sarah King's response to the emptiness of the wide open landscape near Petra, far from personal problems: again the vast solitude of the desert means peace and escape. A contrast quickly arrives. The journey becomes dreamlike and infernal, as the characters descend a gorge to the city, which proves to be dominated, visually as well as psychologically, by the form of the monstrous tyrant Mrs Boynton. The city, as opposed to the desert, is an enclosure, as is the contact with domestic power (I, x).

The ultimate form of this peace is an acceptance of death: General Macarthur doesn't want to leave the deadly island of *And Then There were None*, though clearly recognizing that staying there means his own death; it is a peaceful place and a final one: he perceives the separate state of the island – its isolation, precisely, as a sign of finality, completion, conclusiveness. The novels clearly recognize the force of Eros, of an attachment to life and desire; they also pay tribute to Thanatos, the attraction to death and inaction. As so often, the point is contested. In *Sparkling Cyanide*, George Barton tries to persuade himself that his dead wife is at peace (though he remains eager to revenge her murder). The truth, as is apparent from the next sentence, is that he himself is at peace, because he is no longer disturbed by her adulteries (vi). A later section of the book, however, begins with an epigraph which by

implication reproves him: "For I thought that the dead had peace/But it is not so . . ." All this suggests a gravity rather alien to the detective story genre, in which death is not a temptation but a stimulus for curiosity. What it implies is a resigned desperation in the face of a complex world. Romance, marriage, family, the need to adjust to persons of alien character or origin: these things are a challenge, they impose an anxious obligation to respond to the life beyond ourselves. Solitude and space offer an alternative to anxiety; and they hint at an alternative to rationality and justice.

7
Change and Decay

"Take what you want and pay for it", Christie often says. Still more often she comments that "Old sins have long shadows." In a sense the two sayings convey the same vision; that life is continuous, and that we cannot escape responsibility. There is however a major difference of emphasis; if the first is a Nietzschean affirmation of the future, the second is a Freudian resignation to the rule of the past. Between them, the two views formulate a major preoccupation of the novels, which is the nature of change. How deep does change go, historically or personally? What aspects of our social life or of our personal being resist change? Is change always change for the worse?

The restriction on change is marked most especially in the concept of inheritance. Characters are very aware that they may stand to inherit money. They manoeuvre and commit crimes to ensure that they are the person who does inherit. But they also inherit traits of character and physique from their parents. One character remarks that heredity is as important for people as for dogs. There is some irony here, no doubt, but only some: there is a certain conviction when another speaker asks if environment is not more significant, and she replies that the effect of environment is superficial, and that breeding is crucial (*McGinty*, xiii). We are social beings, and live in a changing society; but we are also biological beings, and live in the image of our parents. The point is made most explicitly in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*. Simeon Lee is the father of a number – an unknown number – of illegitimate children (he expresses admiration for the Arab Sheikh who has a bodyguard of 40 sons, all of the same age). Amongst these is his murderer, Superintendent Sugden, who regards his begetting him and his abandoning Sugden's mother as grounds for retribution; biological continuity then, is seen to this extent as an evil (it is a sort of power). But it is also the

source of Sugden's strength. He has inherited the physical appearance of his father, the long jaw, and also his mannerisms, such as stroking his chin. These things are clues, which should alert the attentive reader to his parentage – provided that the reader believes that gestures can be inherited, that the biological extends to conduct. He has also inherited his force and determination; the Oedipal conflict is a conflict of equals. Simeon's sons are a mixed lot: the over-sensitive musician who takes after his mother, and is emotionally dominated by the memory of her subjection to his father, the pompous politician who retreats from Simeon's crude directness into officialdom and insincerity, the placid loyalist who blinds himself to his father's brutality. The most attractive are the two adventurers who take after their father's sense of enterprise, and whose resemblance to him is most stressed: the black sheep Harry and the bold intruder, the illegitimate Stephen.

The idea that birth might determine character permits what we should now regard as blatant snobbery, but what in the context of the time may be seen as a rather anxious questioning of how far inherited distinctions of social status are justified. So in *Sparkling Cyanide* there is hostility towards a daughter's marriage with a man of unknown origin (III, iv); there is the conception that birth determines whether one is a lady (*Announced*, vii); Mary Gerrard seems to be a lady – but only seems, because she is thought to be of working-class birth (*Cypress*, I, vi). Against this there is the democratic assertion that character matters more than birth – though the source here is the criminal and fake progressive Serrocold, so the view should perhaps not be taken too seriously; on the other hand the view that heredity is inescapable has just been expressed by another character and proves to be quite mistaken (*Mirrors*, v). There may be more apparent scientific pretension in the view that one's genetic make-up makes one what one is (*Nemesis*, xviii), and so in the concern that one might have inherited criminal characteristics from one's parents: a concern expressed in the simple term of "bad blood", and one that makes adoption perilous (as with Pippa in *Mirrors*, xv); the fear of hereditary viciousness (*Hickory*, xvi) which proves, however, to be illusory – the character claims that his father is a murderer, but it is he himself who has committed the murder in question as well as others; the fear that the mother might be a poisoner, which makes it likely that the daughter might also be a murderer (*Witness*); even the wish to know about one's parents that contributes to setting into motion the plot of *Elephants Can Remember*, together with the suspicion of a prospective mother-in-law about the heredity of the daughter of a possible murderer – these suggest a sort of

doom that inhibits the moral freedom of the characters. The view is one that might plausibly have led to embracing the idea of eugenics, which is defended by Alec Legge in *Folly*, who claims that only the intelligent should be allowed to breed; one is pleased to see that Poirot rejects the idea, acutely ironizing the view that the apparently imbecile Lady Stubbs might be a candidate for the lethal chamber (*Folly*, iii). There is in fact some recognition of the limits of heredity: the novels are careful to define the things, such as mental instability, that are not hereditary (*Caribbean*, xiii). It is possible for the daughter of criminals to be herself innocent (as with Pippa and Gina in *Mirrors*). There is then uncertainty in the author's mind, and it may be significant that these denials of hereditary vice come from the later books: she may have learnt to be sceptical of the concern for ancestry that was so strong in her earlier years. But even the fact that the concern needs to be denied is an indication that it is a presumption held by at least some of the characters, one which casts its shadow over the expectations in the book.

The relationship of parenthood, if often one of conflict and domination, can also be one of tenderness and commitment. A notable insight appears when Christie shows a child whose attachment to its natural mother is such that he longs to rejoin her despite the recognition of her cruel and selfish behaviour (*Ordeal*, viii). Bella in *Dumb Witness* and Kait in *Death Comes as the End* are women whose love for their children is the dominating force in their life, and the sense of a warm, positive emotion is striking in books dominated by materialistic self-seeking and ambition for power. The picture is however far from sympathetic. At the least these women are depicted as narrow and asocial. Worse, any intense feeling in Christie's work is quite likely to turn to crime: so Bella in *Dumb Witness* is a drab middle-aged woman, of no great intelligence, whose only concern is with her husband and, especially, her children, and she is the murderer, having killed her aunt to ensure that her children inherit her wealth. In *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, Marina's feeling for motherhood is so intense that she murders the woman whose naïve star-worship has led her to make contact with her even though she is herself suffering from German measles, and so has caused her to bear a mentally defective baby. Against these is set the more difficult and more mature experience of Renisenb, who has to learn that her daughter is not just a product of herself and her husband, but a distinct person, rejecting the mother's sense of the child as part of her own body and so belonging to her (*Comes End*, xvii).

Adoption comes to play a significant part in some of the later books (as Morgan notes, 1985, 31); it is an obfuscation of "true" biological

parentage, a disguise of biological origins. We have seen the case of Pippa in *They Do it with Mirrors*; in *Mrs McGinty* Robin Upward murders to conceal the fact that he is the son of a murderer, since his adoptive mother would reject him if she knew of this sinister background; in the same book Maureen Summerhayes regrets being adopted because she considers this to be proof of a rejection by her natural mother. Marina's adoptions in *Crack'd* do not satisfy her, and she abandons the adopted children, to their great – and justified – resentment. In *Ordeal by Innocence*, also, the inability to have children has overshadowed the married life of Mrs Argyle, who has adopted a number of children, as well as founding a home for orphans, and it is the disparate characters and interests of these children, as well as Mrs Argyle's overwhelming control, that have created a strained family situation and specifically allowed the suspicions that arise in the course of this delayed investigation. In *Elephants Can Remember*, the adoptive mother is suspicious of the son, and eager to keep for herself any money he might inherit. In *Sad Cypress*, Mary Gerrard is in fact the illegitimate daughter of the rich Mrs Welman, but is brought up by her maid, to conceal the guilt of her conception. She is lavishly educated by her true mother, and this alienates her from her foster-family, and especially from her nominal father, who realizes of course that she is not his own child. There is perhaps a hint that Mary, with her delicate beauty, could not accept working class life because of her aristocratic heredity, and there is a sense also of the unpredictability and alienness of the adopted child.

The preoccupations here are very typical of Christie's way of thinking. On the one hand there is an ideal of continuity, the assumption that a natural relationship is one in which a person's character and appearance can be explained in terms of their parentage, and that someone whose parentage is unknown is suspect, mysterious, an affront to the pattern of society. There is, in short, the view that social order corresponds to biological orderliness. On the other hand, there is radical scepticism about this idea, which clashes both with the modernizing democratic ideology with which the author was learning to cope, and with the individualism and sense of personal determination which was always deeply implanted in her. There is therefore the sense that the individual is alone, responsible for himself or herself, not created by a past. A firm choice appears to be made in the late *Endless Night*. The narrator Michael tells his fiancée Ellie that he is not specially fond of his mother; but it becomes clear that at least part of his hostility or indifference arises from guilt and the fear that his mother knows the evil side of his character (vii). The beginning of this may sound like healthy unsentimental

frankness. It expresses, moreover, the view of an individualistic society in which personal dynamism counts for more than family and in which people can abandon the social class of their parents. Ellie, herself an orphan, is obviously not quite convinced, since she still asks Michael to take her to meet his mother, and goes to meet her secretly when he fails to do so. And in fact it is the second part of Michael's remarks that is really crucial: she is the one person in the novel who already grasps his evil character; she strongly suspects that he has already caused one death out of greed, and she refuses to accept money from him. Here rejection of the parent is rejection of responsibility; Christie returns to an affirmation of continuity in her old age.

The individual may or may not be constituted by a genetic past. His or her present self, similarly, may or may not be constituted by a personal past. We have seen the huge potential for deliberate disguise or personation, the capacity to deny one's "true self". This falsification of the self is only one conspicuous aspect of the issue of how far people change in the course of their lives. The ambivalence is again strong. It is more than once asserted that people do not change (for instance by the Archdeacon in *Nemesis* (xviii) and Miss Marple in *Rye* (xxii)). Character is fate, so to speak: Poirot, after referring to silk purses and sows' ears, quotes the Islamic conception of a fatality determining individual character (*Halloween*, iv) (though he meets the rejoinder that we should not be too respectful of the Middle East).

Hercule Poirot's Christmas is a particularly acute display of attitudes not only to heredity but also more generally to the past. The crime is a revenge, a forced payment for an amoral past; and the central family is also past-dominated in various ways: the wimpish David broods on the past, in his devotion to his dead mother. His wife tells him that preserving the past in fact amounts to distorting it (i). Only at the end of the novel does he turn his back on the past (vii). Also the appearance of several of Simeon's sons has a hallucinatory effect of suppressing time. The aged butler, recalling a play being performed in London, perhaps J.B. Priestley's *Time and the Conways*, 1937, comments that the past seems to be again present (iii). Poirot, for different reasons, comments in *After the Funeral* (xix) that the past demands to be remembered and acted on. Mrs Foliatt, the voice of the old aristocracy in *Dead Man's Folly*, recognizes the temptation of the photograph that brings the past excessively before one and resolves to reject the past (*Folly*, xvi). Characters may be haunted by past guilt: Poirot congratulates Mrs Lorrimer on her memory for cards while playing bridge, and goes on to hint that she

remembers more important and more sinister things, and so possesses a living sense of what is over (*Cards*, xi).

The Hollow has a specially thoughtful account of the nostalgia for the past. The family assembled at The Hollow has a constant preoccupation with childhood at another, presumably more splendid country house, Ainswick; *The Hollow* in fact is no more than an echo of Ainswick (xviii). Ainswick is both a survival of an aristocratic past, threatened in post-war Britain, and a reminder of youthful happiness (is it fanciful to see here an analogy with Bourton in *Mrs Dalloway*?), and many of the characters are eager to maintain its significance. Strikingly, Lady Angkatell is prepared to kill for it (though she actually does not); she believes that by murdering John Christow she will precipitate a marriage of Henrietta and Edward, the present owner of Ainswick, and so preserve the dynasty. But others reject the past. Henrietta tells Edward, specifically, that thinking of Ainswick means living in the past. He accepts the comment, and defends his nostalgia, but she tells him that the past is inescapably lost (vi). Later she tells Midge that she can not bear to think of Ainswick because it brings back too acutely a lost happiness. Midge assures the survival of Ainswick by marrying Edward herself, while Henrietta, left alone, continues her artistic career. She is told by one of John's patients, in the last pages of the book, that there is no way of retrieving what is lost, a comment all the more positive for the patient's earthy Cockney speech (xxx).

In fact the books often insist on the irreversible loss of the past, or declare that the nature of life is to accept inevitable change (*Bertram*, xx). There can be a strong moral aspect to this concern, as when Poirot tells Linnet Doyle to accept the reality of her present situation – and to accept responsibility for her past acts (*Nile*, iv); in his next conversation he encourages Jacqueline to accept that her past acts are truly past (v). The issues here are quite complex. Linnet's past deed is to steal Simon from Jackie; the consequence of it is her murder. And Simon's love is not past for Jackie; the murder is a conspiracy between them. Poirot's resignation is false, though essential to the novel; he is allowing a murder.

Taken at the Flood offers a carefully balanced consideration of personal change, in the context of the general impact of war. Lynn Marchmont, the native returning from the Women's Royal Naval Service, believes she has changed. Very near the end of the novel she tells Rowley that she has changed and no longer loves him; Rowley declares that, plodding away on his farm, he has not changed – and still loves her. Poirot insists (*Flood*, II, xii) that Lynn has not changed because the discontent she is now feeling at country life is precisely what led her to leave home and join

the Wrens. The final chapter of the novel gives a sort of resolution: Lynn returns to Rowley, and to her country origins, because she discovers that he is not the safe, dull person she knew but really quite dangerous. He has changed, or at least revealed his potential; she has changed, but she has preserved her true allegiance. Poirot seems to be wrong; both have changed, and there is no tragedy for them.

Life changes, Renisenb learns in *Death Comes as the End*. Returning to her father's family after the death of her husband, she seems to find everything the same as before (i). But her mentor (and future lover) Hori insists that there *should* be change. He tells her that she is growing constantly, becoming a different person (i). Renisenb is still nostalgic for an unchanging world. She contemplates marrying Kameni, because he so much resembles her first husband Khay that life with him would seem to be a recapturing of the past. But on the last page of the novel, she chooses Hori, who offers her, in almost existentialist style, a new life in which she can freely determine her own future (xxiii).

If the passage of time is problematic for the personal life, it is all the more so for the process of historical change. Christie was very aware of change, as critics such as Barnard (1980, 34) or Bisbee and Herbert (Herbert, 1994, 69) have noted. Even Grossvogel, though perceiving her above all as a "cozy" writer, catering to a "hankering for Edwardian gentility", recognizes her sensitivity to the social insecurity brought about by historic change (1983, 2). Born in 1891, she lived through a period of major cultural change, which saw two world wars, the recession of the United Kingdom as a world power, the rise of the United States and the USSR, the decolonization of the former Empire, a decreased acceptance within Britain of hierarchy and authority and a liberalization of morality, not least in the area of sexual conduct. She notes the physical manifestations of these things in her books, from the appearance of news on the front page of The Times (*Nemesis*) to the building of lower cost housing in St Mary Mead (*Crack'd*) by way of the 1960s fashion for espresso bars and black stockings (*Pudding*). The novels recognize the virtues of tradition – seen positively in Market Basing, the old-style English market town, with its settled appearance, and possibly negatively in Miss Arundell's condemnation of women who lack breeding (*Witness*, vi, iii). Miss Marple, it is true, sees change as secondary to a permanent human nature; despite the new housing in her village, fundamentals do not change (*Crack'd*, ii). But Christie did recognize how profound were the moral and social changes of her age. She did not find it easy to cope with these things. Nor did she simply refuse to countenance them. Her work can thus to a considerable extent be seen

as an attempt to come to terms with modernity. By the 1960s, it seems fair to say, she had little grasp of the perspectives and norms of young people, but had a rather bewildered curiosity about them, manifest for instance in her repeated impression that young women of the time were physically dirty and in her astonishment at men's wearing brightly coloured clothes. (The latter, one must add, is not condemned but rather indulged; the "Peacock" in *Third Girl* is compared to Vandyke's portraits and viewed by Poirot as exotic and rather beautiful (iv).) In other respects, however, there is an intriguing and honest attempt to preserve the values of a settled conservative morality while showing full awareness of how serious the erosion of that morality has been. It is no chance that her favourite detectives are old people when they first appear (and therefore, as the author notes in the *Autobiography*, should be over a hundred at their final appearances). Poirot, for instance, has retired from the Belgian police before he arrives in England during the First World War. At his second appearance, in *Murder on the Links*, he is frequently referred to by the 30-year-old Giraud, the French police officer in charge of the case, as an outdated survival of the older generation. Of course Poirot solves the mystery and Giraud doesn't; there are advantages in age. In later books there is much amusement at the affront to Poirot's vanity from young people who admit they have never heard of him. The point of all this, and of the old-maidish severity of Miss Marple, is that they judge the modern world from a position which is almost outside it; like their author they are forced into a certain complexity of judgment by their recognition of the reality and the validity of change.

In many respects Christie's view of the modern world is a harsh one. What she sees in it is a loss of decorum, which means a loss of sexual restraint, self-discipline and moral seriousness. Divorce does not mean as much as it used to, even for a politician (*Cyanide*, III, i) and adultery is accepted, so that children grow up familiar with the idea of it (*Pigs, Bertram*). A charming and mature young woman can be glad that her admirer has had previous love affairs, because it proves that he is not queer (*3Act*, I, iv). Young people show an aggressive disrespect to their seniors, to the Church which has been the central voice of an English morality, to loyalty to school or Empire (*Library*, i). Oliver Mandel's attack on Christianity is characteristic of the style of some 1930s progressivism, and his bitterness is plausibly rooted in the disapproval his parents have met for not being married. It is gently but firmly rejected by the saintly clergyman, Babbington, but Christie at least shows that the Christian hegemony is no longer in force (one may regret however that Mandel is Jewish, and so might well have been

more moderate in attacking a religion to which he has presumably not belonged) (*3Act*, III, ii). (One should note, moreover, the realism and tolerance with which Christie notes that the admirable Sarah King and Dr Gerard in *Appointment with Death*, in the course of what Rowland misguidedly calls their "theological debates" (2001, 145), both make it clear that they are not Christians, though not without some sympathy for Christianity.)

Young people use drugs – and the fact is already noted in *End House* (1932), *Lord Edgeware* (1933) and *Death in the Clouds* (1935), long before the swinging 1960s of *Third Girl*. Crucially for the crime novel, according to a respected schoolteacher in 1969, murder itself is no longer seen as unacceptable (*Halloween*, x). It is not quite clear what is being referred to here; probably it is what Christie elsewhere sees as an excessive respect for extenuating circumstances. A reminder of a real case suggests, perhaps fallaciously, contemporary decadence: Jacko Argyle is said to be the kind of youth who would go robbing with an accomplice and when the police arrived would say "Let him have it" (*Ordeal*, vii). The reader should recognize Derek Bentley, executed for calling these words to another youth, who then shot a policeman; the teenage criminal becomes an emblem of the modern world. There are some simple denunciations of the condition of England, all too reminiscent of the Conservative popular press of the mid-century, with its nostalgia for authority and Empire. The generally rather hysterical *Passenger to Frankfurt* (1970) is particularly eloquent on the hostility of youth to traditional authority and on the new permissiveness of the 1960s (ix). All this is inspired by such prophets of social dissolution as Marcuse, Guevara, Levi-Strauss and Fanon (xiv); the heterogeneity of the list shows the limits of the author's understanding.

A clear symptom of Christie's concern with change lies in the idea of the lady. The problems with the concept are very apparent to modern readers: it presumes that a certain social status is likely to go with a certain moral propriety, and that kind of propriety is one that, at least in some respects, may seem to consist essentially of a rather superficial and potentially self-inhibiting restraint. Does the idea still matter? As early as *Roger Ackroyd* (1926) it is commented that you cannot tell who is a lady nowadays (xiv) (and in fact the middle class but impoverished Ursula is able to disguise her identity by acting as maid in Ackroyd's house, conduct perhaps all the less ladylike because it results in a clandestine marriage; Christie herself, astonishingly, once contemplated becoming a maid). A few years later, the vicar of St Mary Mead refuses to believe that someone can be a blackmailer, because she's a lady. He has to

apologize for this archaic term. And he totally fails to convince the police inspector, admittedly a person of little sensibility, who appears to have come across unladylike behaviour (*Vicarage*, xvii). In *Sad Cypress* (1940) Mary, the near-lady, meets agreement when she suspects that the concept no longer counts much (I, ii). By the time of *Crooked House* (1949), Josephine is able to inform the narrator that the Brains Trust (a radio discussion program of some intellectual status) had declared that ladies no longer existed (xxii); the narrator seems not to be quite convinced. Characters, typically, may be shamefaced about believing in the concept: in *The Moving Finger* (1943), which sets the fast fashionable world of the visitors against an apparently unchanging village, Gerry uses the term *lady* reluctantly, recalling his grandmother's arrogant tones as he does so. The ultimate decadence comes with *After the Funeral* (1953), where Miss Gilchrist commits the murder in order to be able to purchase a tea-room, which she regards as a proof of gentility; she is therefore a ladylike murderer (ix, xxv). The point is not a trivial one; the disappearance of ladies means the end both of a form of snobbery and of a way of expressing moral refinement. Christie's anxiety is obviously that the modern world is one in which morality and social stability have been undermined by egoism and hedonism. The concern with social stability is based on the assumption that an ordered society is comprehensible and therefore helps people to manage life because it defines possible types of conduct and the reactions to them that are to be expected.

We should not see Christie too simply as fearful of the threats of the modern world. A simple instance of her rejection of mere conservatism is the old woman in *Taken at the Flood* who tells Poirot that all foreigners should go home, and who denounces modern women for wearing trousers and make-up, especially red toe-nails, and for taking too much interest in airmen (including Americans, niggers and Polish riff-raff) (II, vii). There is also explicit condemnation of some aspects of the lost world of the past. Miss Waynflete has been driven into madness by the failure of her attachment to Lord Whitfield, as he now is. She was a daughter of the aristocracy while his father kept a boot-shop. Her parents have separated them for reasons of class-consciousness; and now she can condemn them for doing so (*Easy*, xiii). Much later, the elderly Carrie Louise in *They do it with Mirrors* notes with some satisfaction the decline or disappearance of such class-consciousness (iii).

Elsewhere there is seriously felt tension between conservatism and the recognition that the world, like the individual, cannot go back. The tension is nicely shown in the opening paragraphs of *The Pale Horse*,

a book which shows a very strenuous effort of the part of the elderly author to grasp the changing world of the 1960s. The narrator complains of the threatening noises of the modern world: espresso machines, jet planes, underground trains and heavy traffic. There is already something a little absurd in this fear of the espresso machine; and the narrator goes on to explain that he is an architectural historian who is ignorant of the contemporary world. In the course of the story he will find adventure and love by coming to terms with coffee bars and danger; personal maturing means seeing the world as it is.

In general, we should recognize that there are aspects of Christie's view of modernity that are based on a genuine sense of the quality of life and a regret for what can reasonably be viewed as a widespread anomie, an uncertainty as to values and allegiances. *End House* is especially in many ways an attempt to come to terms with modernity. It asserts that the hedonistic young of the interwar years were leading a life of superficiality; the concern is a serious one, and one which the book makes convincing (*EndH*, xxii). The contrast between the expectations of "grandpapa" Poirot and of Hastings, on one hand, and of Nick and her friends on the other is frequently defined as a conflict of the conservative and the modern. Nick is blasé about divorce and the corruption of faked evidence that was common in divorce trials, she has no feeling for family (except for her attachment to the memory of her wicked grandfather), preferring her independence (iii); she and her friend Freddie take cocaine. Freddie, while still legally married, admittedly to a madman, is carrying on an affair with another man, one of whose attractions, she candidly admits, is his money. She is willing to discuss her sex life with Poirot, rejecting his apology on the grounds that no question nowadays can be impertinent; privacy has been abandoned. This is a life of egoistic pleasure, but limited pleasure: Nick can purport to enjoy the thrill of being the victim of attempts on her life (iii). It is also a life without real human contact; Nick's insincerity is apparent because Freddie recognizes that she cannot be sure that Nick likes her – and in fact Nick is trying to frame her for the crime. All this is a harsh view of the young. But the moderns are not quite beyond redemption. After the elimination of the murderer Nick, Freddie's would-be murderous husband and the drug-dealer Challenger, Freddie cuts her drug consumption and marries her lover, who ends the book with some good-humoured chat with Poirot about his own sharp practice as an art-dealer. Nick, moreover, as Ackershoek points out (1997, 126), is not quite a modern: she is motivated to crime by love of an old house and loyalty to the memory of her grandfather.

Moreover, the condemnation of modernity is far from systematic. If Christie seems often to respect most naturally the old-fashioned dignity, conscientiousness and clear-sightedness that are incarnated, for instance, in Miss Arundell of *Dumb Witness*, she undoubtedly shows a certain respect for the young as well. They are in fact victims, exploited by an older generation, in *The Pale Horse* and in *Third Girl*; youth can still be the time of a sort of innocence. It is moreover the free and adventurous spirit of youth that often provides the vitality of the books. Northrop Frye acutely comments that comedy is a struggle not of good and evil but of youth and age; there is a certain comic spirit in at least some of the novels which ensures that – to a certain extent – the detective story superimposes the struggle of youth and age, of vitality and propriety, on the legal struggle of crime and punishment. So Hastings, on first meeting Dulcie–Cinderella, is shocked to hear her saying "Hell" and comments that, old-fashioned as he is, he thinks a woman should be "womanly"; he has no patience with what he thinks of as modern girls who dance, smoke and swear (*Links*, i). In fact Cinderella is not much like this, unless "Hell" counts as serious swearing, and Hastings soon yields to her charm, liveliness, impertinence and worldliness; later she is to show an impressive courage and readiness for self-sacrifice. The novel neatly ends with his saying "Hell" – and kissing her. The marriage of the staid Hastings and the youthful Cinderella is an image of a reconciliation of generations, in which the old changes more than the new. This acceptance of modernity leads to a certain display of tolerance. The gentlemanly Hastings objects to Poirot's searching of Nick's underwear drawer. In fact she has invited him to search her house, and has hidden under her underclothes some letters which she intends him to find. Poirot dismisses Hastings's prudishness: you see things like this everyday on the beach, he comments (*EndH*, xiii). (Later, Patricia Lane in *Hickory Dickory Dock* objects to Nigel's searching her underwear drawer, though she has agreed to his searching her room and he can plausibly point out that the hidden poison is quite likely to be in that drawer. Nigel is in fact the criminal, and the search a display of control; the overall point is that the restraints of corporeal discretion are considerably eased, so that he may well be right in calling her prudish.) More seriously in *Murder in Mesopotamia*, there is a recognition of generational changes in morality; Dr Reilly differs from his daughter, whom he regards as a prig because she welcomes uninhibited love affairs but condemns the victim's teasing of her male acquaintances. The novel seems to side with Dr Reilly, but it does not clearly condemn Sheila Reilly (unlike the narrator, consistently biased against her).

The desire for change is seen at its worst in politics. Edward Goring, who declares that we should look only to the future and that the past is always boring, is a member of a conspiracy to sweep away civilization as we know it (and especially no doubt the science of archeology) (*Baghdad*, xvii); the conspiracy is denounced by the sage secret agent Dakin who denounces, in a sentence that sums up Christie's deepest political feelings, the delusion of a Millennium imposed by force (xiv). The Millenarian doctrine is often epitomized in the wish for a new Heaven and a new Earth: Edward uses the phrase in this novel (xxii), repeating the views of Jane in *One Two, Buckle my Shoe*; she too desires a new heaven and a new earth, she calls for the sweeping away of the old order; she rejects history and looks *forward* all the time (vi, iii, iii). The idea is repeated in the quasi-paranoiac *Passenger to Frankfurt*. If Christie is not uncritical of the old order, she at least sees in continuity an essential of the truly English democracy of sanity and honest dealing that *One Two, Buckle my Shoe* recommends; the rejection of continuity is a gesture of hubris, both delusory and sadistic. But the rejection of change can be hubristic as well: Miss Marple, a few pages after she insists, in *The Mirror Crack'd*, that the new is like the old, admits that one cannot refuse change (vi). And this, it seems, reflects the author's own reluctant acceptance of the world she lived in. Light's important study centers on a "conservative embracing of modernity" (1991, 11); the phrase acutely summarizes a central aspect of Christie's sensibility, and one that merits considerable respect. Ackershoek, in perhaps the most important article that has been devoted to Christie, stresses that "the danger inherent in believing in things and people that are not what they seem and of clinging to an illusory reality that does not adapt to change is central to Christie's work" (1997, 127). Birns and Birns, in another outstanding article, comment that "Beginning with her mysteries after World War I, her stories reflect a nostalgia for an earlier arcadian time as well as a realization that this society is now, at best, a form of play-acting or pretense, at worst a tragic deception" (1990, 126). The point is briefly and wittily put by Bisbee and Herbert: "Coziness, like so much else in Christie's work, is often a case of deceptive appearances" (Herbert, 1994, 69). We have seen how deeply Christie was tempted by the nostalgia for an unchanging past; her recognition of its falsity is a serious achievement.

8
The War of Good and Evil

Why do people detect? The answer may help us to think a bit about why people read about detection. The answers are various. Poirot detects out of professionalism, boredom, a liking for sport, the wish to clear the innocent, curiosity and the love of truth. Though a professional detective, he hardly ever accepts a commission. This seems to be a matter of a sort of pride, which places him almost – but not quite – amongst the amateur detectives. He is an *amateur*, at least in the French sense of the word: he loves crime and he acts from personal interest: he seeks interesting cases, not profitable ones: he looks for the elite cases, worth solving for their own sake (*Edgeware*, xvii). He does, actually, agree to act for Mr Van Aldin, who sends him a cheque at the end of the story, but it is not absolutely clear what he has been commissioned to do and he is independent enough to threaten to drop the case as soon as he suspects Van Aldin of concealing information (*Blue*, xvi). He refuses to work for the kidnapper Ratchett, even to protect his life and despite (or because of) the offer of big money; he gives the explanation that he does not like Ratchett's face (*Orient*, I, iii). In *Dumb Witness* he insists that he has been commissioned by Miss Arundell, though in fact due to postal delays he does not get her letter till after her death, which surely eliminates any question of a contract between them: Poirot seems to act out of loyalty to someone who has intrigued him. The contrast with his great predecessor Sherlock Holmes is clear, Holmes's life being largely a series of encounters with clients; Poirot has no real clients, only protagonists. He detects because he likes to: like Holmes, he gets bored when not occupied in crime, and does not have Holmes's recourse to cocaine and the violin. Although he refuses to protect Ratchett from his enemies, he welcomes the chance to solve his murder, since this will save him from the boredom of hours stuck in a train in a snowdrift.

A nice example, amongst many, of Poirot's encounter with boredom, occurs in *Three Act Tragedy*. Holidaying in the South of France, he notes an English child who is bored and fractious because he has nothing to do. By chance, he meets Mr Satterthwaite and tells him (in a rare piece of autobiography) of his early poverty, his successes in the police and as a private detective, of the challenging problems he has solved – and now of the difficulty he finds, like the child, in amusing himself. He needs challenge, and Satterthwaite provides it with news of the death of Sir Bartholomew Strange; if Poirot has too much self-respect to take this bait immediately, it takes him only 10 minutes after Satterthwaite leaves to book his ticket for England. Boredom is curiously associated in this novel with his love of finding the truth, curiously because we may tend to think of a love for truth as one of the most dignified characteristics a person may have and boredom as a trivial one. Christie realizes that the two are not so distinct.

Professional in his sense of honour (*Edgeware*, xviii) and in his promptness to meet the call to act (*Mesopotamia*, xiii), proud to be a specialist, like a surgeon, who is able to announce that murder is his work (*Witness*, xv), plausibly accused of being a specialist who finds his specialism everywhere and enjoys a Roman holiday in murder (*Appointment*, II, iv) or of a perverse attraction to blood (*Hallowe'en*, xi), he is amateur in his enjoyment of the game. So he memorably says to Hastings in the last words of *Styles* that they may hunt together again. The last words of *ABC* return to the theme, as he congratulates himself on their having renewed their hunt. He acts from curiosity and from a firm respect for truth, telling a petitioner that he will not be biased towards any client, but seeks only truth (*Buckle*, vii). Who doesn't esteem truth? Well, Poirot doesn't always, since he lies with effrontery in many of his investigations, pragmatically concerned with results and not with meticulous integrity. Getting at the truth brings a sense of attainment. Thus he can reflect with justified pride at the end of a case that nothing remains unknown (*EndH*). Curiosity is the feeling that the world is opposing us, and that we can defeat it. The Christie world is a world of illusion; it is therefore a world of mental enterprise.

Poirot is the games-player *par excellence*, and a discriminating one. He regards the ABC murders as a sport, the cream of crime. The murderer, intelligently enough, grasps that it is possible to involve Poirot in his plot by writing to him in advance to invite him to intervene; and Poirot takes up the challenge. There is here a rationalized oddity: it seems arbitrary of the criminal to draw attention to his crimes, and especially to draw the attention of a private detective and not of the police. (Jack the

Ripper did in reality write letters to taunt the police, and ABC's letters are somewhat reminiscent of them.). In fact this is a subtle calculation: he has to draw attention to the crimes precisely in order to conceal something about them, namely the real financial motivation; and he has to contact a private individual and not the police since it is vital to his plan that one of the letters should be misaddressed, and you cannot misaddress a letter to Scotland Yard. This makes the relationship of murderer and detective very much a duel, and that is what Poirot enjoys: in a similar spirit he congratulates Henrietta in *The Hollow* as an outstanding opponent (xxix). The duel, the contest of more or less evenly matched opponents is a major form of entertainment in our culture, from boxing matches to elections; it relates to the sense of the *agon* that is one characteristic of the *homo ludens* according to Huizinga, of mankind as capable of play.

Play is amoral; it is a matter of skill and success, not of rightness. Poirot's frequent assertions that he disapproves of murder are a strangely faint attempt to revert to morality. Thus he sets himself up in opposition to the decadent Mr Shaitana, who believes that murder is an art and can be justified as such, asserting – or confessing – that he has no such aesthetic view of murder – which, he later explains, means that he disapproves of it (i, viii). The reader may well reflect that the supreme ingenuity of a crime is a justification – for a detective story. Poirot's more frequent and explicit assertions of the need to protect the innocent are a stronger moral factor. In *Death in the Clouds*, Norman Gale (who admittedly is guilty) finds his practice as a dentist falling off as people suspect that he might be a murderer. He claims to suffer though innocent (v). He happens to be hypocritical, but the point is a valid one and endorsed by Poirot, who insists that his ultimate purpose is not to find the guilty but to protect the innocent (xv). *Sad Cypress*, starting with the anguish of a woman in the Old Bailey unjustly accused of murder, focuses strongly on the dilemma of the injured innocent and presents Poirot as a saviour from the hazards of the law, who can boast of his achievements in proving innocence (II, xi). In such cases there is a fascinating complexity of feeling. The reader has to agree with Poirot. He or she wants the innocent to be exculpated. But the essence of the detective story is precisely suspicion. It is the sense that almost any of the characters could be guilty, the sense of a diffuse potential guilt. The conclusion of the novel, in which the innocent are identified and often rewarded, destroys the reader's curiosity which has constituted the pleasure of reading, and the reader is able to rejoice in the wrongness of the suspicions he or she has enjoyed.

A saviour, Poirot is also a force for control. The control is benevolently operated. He redeems the lost Norma in *Third Girl*, deviously concealing her from other investigators, and matching her romantically with the young doctor who undertakes to rescue her from malicious administration of drugs. He likes mystery, too, as is shown by this concealment and that of Ralph in *Ackroyd* and Nick in *End House*. He produces happy endings, in genre terms; he also mitigates unhappy endings by allowing some murderers to commit suicide rather than face the rigours and shame of the law. Of Sir Charles Cartwright he comments that he will make his own exit (*3Act*, III, xv). Sir Charles is a particularly unscrupulous killer, but he is a great man of the theatre, and he is loved by the charming Egg Lytton-Gore, already deeply shaken by the discovery of his guilt and potentially embarrassed by the fact that his murders are committed in order to allow him to marry her; decorum as well as theatricality call for a discreet ending. Nick Buckley, recognizing that Poirot can prove her guilt, borrows Freddie's watch, which she knows to contain enough cocaine to constitute an overdose. Freddie and Poirot clearly both realize the implication and accept it. Nick is likeable; she is pretty, charming, lively, entertaining, and Poirot is indulgent to the enterprising young. Jackie in *Death on the Nile* is allowed to shoot both her feeble accomplice Simon and herself. The deaths make a fine dramatic ending to the novel, with Jackie showing continued and desperate self-assurance as she smiles briefly at Poirot before turning the gun on herself; Poirot views her sympathetically, as the heroine of a tragic love story. In *The Hollow* he virtually murders Gerda Christow. She has offered Henrietta a cup of tea which he suspects to be poisoned and he ensures that Gerda drinks it herself, commenting as her lips turn blue that she has got off lightly (xxix). Miss Marple, similarly, though her morals are usually particularly correct, turns a blind eye to the killing of the murderer Marina Gregg by her husband. The detectives shape the novels by offering satisfying closure (and it is satisfying in these cases because it allows characters to continue to act in character, to refuse the passivity of the prisoner, to continue to assert their willfulness). Knight comments that in the classic detective story criminals are not punished: "the knowledge that explains the puzzle seems a sufficient ending to a classic mystery" (2004, 88). Here, it seems, Knight overstates the intellectualist aspect of the classic mystery. We do see some criminals in Christie about to be punished (such as Jane in *Lord Edgeware*); and the fact that some are explicitly and specifically spared punishment is a sign that the final satisfaction of the text arises not wholly from curiosity but also from a sense

of justice – which is, however, more flexible than the justice of the law courts.

Miss Marple first becomes involved in crime out of curiosity. She is a local gossip (in her, Craig and Cadogan point out (1981, 165), the female vice of gossip becomes useful). She is distinguished from the other middle-class churchgoers chiefly by the accuracy of her insights, and she pursues her hobby of observing human nature to the extent of taking an acute and active interest in the Vicarage murder. Crime is a challenge for her: she confesses to being conceited about her gift for understanding her neighbors' weaknesses and has hoped for the opportunity of solving a crime (*Vicarage*, xxvi). The vicar replies that we would all like to be Sherlock Holmes. He summarizes, no doubt, the attitude of the detective story reader and perhaps gives an idea of the attractions of the detective story to many people: intellectual activity and a sense of rightness are things we aspire to, and things some of us only imperfectly attain outside fiction. She later detects out of concern that right should be done; in her next full-length investigation she is concerned above all for the reputation of her friend Colonel Bantry, who may suffer from unfounded rumours after the discovery of the body of a glamorous young woman in his library. In *The Moving Finger*, she is called in as an expert on wickedness by her friend Mrs Dane Calthrop; in *A Murder is Announced*, she is invited to intervene by her friend Sir Henry Clithering, who is confident that she will find the case a source of enjoyment. In *A Pocket Full of Rye*, on the contrary, she is severely moral in her motives: she regards the murder of the servant Gladys, whom she has known herself, and especially the fixing of a clothes pin on her nose to approximate to the nursery rhyme, as an affront to human dignity; she becomes a figure of relentless punishment (xiii, xxviii).

These are Christie's best known detectives, and the ones that appear most frequently. There is also the worthy Inspector Battle, and an important and quite different group. These are people who are young, or youthful, and adventurous. The obvious case is of the Beresfords, Tommy and Tuppence, who remain youthful into advanced old age and who appear to be rather excessively unpopular with critics. A very sympathetic example are the young couple in *Sittaford*. Emily Trefusis is motivated by the wish to prove the innocence of her fiancé James, and Charles Enderby is a newspaper reporter, who is delighted by the chance to prove his mettle by solving a much publicized mystery and (mistakenly) hopeful of earning some romantic interest from Emily. The two have a strong sense of enjoyment, despite the anxiety that Emily ought to feel about James (a character too wimpish, moreover, to excite

much sympathy from the reader). Detection here is not a matter simply of thought, but of excitement, enjoyment, intrigue and persuasiveness. There are many examples in the less ratiocinative novels, such as Anne in *The Man in the Brown Suit* and Victoria in *They Came to Baghdad*. These are people who seek excitement, novelty, change, movement, the unpredictable. Although they differ from the detectives proper in their physical participation in the criminal scene and their vulnerability to unseen figures striking them from behind (whereas it is not unknown for Poirot and Marple to be absent from the location of the crime for a large part of the narrative) they resemble the true detectives in their enjoyment of competition with an opponent.

What gifts does the expert detective need? One conception, not entirely absurd, is that of the rank amateur, Ariadne Oliver. Mrs Oliver speaks for intuition, but works by imagination: she produces a comic plethora of possible solutions. This at least hints to the reader that there may be something a little regrettable about the one true solution proffered by her friend Poirot: the rules of the game call for a single perspective, but the multiple perspectives are fun. Intuition is the ability to perceive something amiss. Christie, like other detective novelists, is well aware that not all perception is conscious; there is a familiar scene in which a character racks his or her brains to identify some significant detail that has been passed over rapidly a few pages earlier. This is a way of taunting the reader: "You too have missed something!" But it is also a recognition of the complexity and imprecision of actual perception, which needs to be focused on vital elements even though it may not be possible to identify those elements at a given moment. In fact this intuition is very strong in the Marple novels, giving some readers the sense that the solutions are produced haphazardly or by divine inspiration. Miss Marple declares that one of the characters resembles a person she has known, an errand-boy or grocer's assistant. The perpetrator's motive and his or her mode of deceptiveness thus identified, a convincing narrative of the crime can be developed. The details – the clues essential to Sherlock Holmes's positivistic science – are fitted in later.

Poirot in fact insists that his method is not positivistic or empirical; it is deductive. It depends on the "little grey cells". It is, incidentally, fair to the author to point out that this famous phrase is not as common as jokers often imply: it appears primarily in the earlier works. A more revealing phrase, more insistently used, is his concern for methodical order, whether used by the detective as means of solving the crime or admired in the criminal who has elaborated the crime. It is the murderer Dr Sheppard who speaks of the "clear and distinct" ordering of his

narrative (*Ackroyd*, xiv), but the Cartesian echo is apparent and applicable to his adversary Poirot. (Poirot is a Cartesian, vain of his personal appearance and his intellectual status, an admirer of female beauty: can he really complain if people think he is French?) For Poirot mind is distinct from and superior to the physical, to the clues such as cigarette ends and footprints. In fact he does use these things; the rational abstraction is partly a pose of intellectuality, chiefly a label for the moment in which the variety of events and signs falls into a perceptible pattern. (Knight, moreover, very neatly points out how often his success is the result of precise observation with the predominantly feminine world of domestic life, 2004, 91.) Critics have often stressed the intellectuality of the detective story, its apparent assumption that evils of practical life can be solved by the efficient use of the mind. So Hühn can speak of an "intellectualist ideology" (1997, 42), and Mandel views the conflict of criminal and detective as "competition between abstract intelligences" (1984, 41). Poirot would appear to agree with this priority of the mental; but it is not quite so clear that his behaviour corresponds to his ideas. Certainly the mind gives great aesthetic pleasure. His insight that the Orient Express murder is the work of a jury of 12 assassins is enlightening; it reveals the meticulous planning of the whole plot (III, ix). His comment reveals what is one of the greatest satisfactions for readers of the classic detective story, the attainment of order, and it names it as an aesthetic experience. There is beauty in the emergence of pattern and clarity from confusion, as there is in the emergence of concord from discord; the fascination of author and readers with illusion is part of a process of revelation.

Two analogies are frequently offered for the detective's work. One, cited by Poirot, is the jigsaw; the detective's job is to fit all the disparate information into a perceptible whole. Everything falls into place as do the odd pieces in a puzzle (*Christmas*, vi, cf. *Folly*, xvi). There is a literal jigsaw in *Evil under the Sun* (x) and it becomes the occasion for a commentary on the confusingness of the senses; the mind has to discriminate by discovering *Gestalt*, total shape: in fitting in the pieces one learns to distinguish the fur rug from the cat's tail. The art of the detective story writer is to create queer-shaped pieces, to give an impression of oddness and incoherence – and to demonstrate the natural order that underlies this impression. The tension of queerness and naturalness is perhaps the essence of the genre; queerness is what arises when facts are seen from outside without the plan that unites them, and naturalness is recognition of the plan, of the combination of motive and ingenuity. The second analogy is archaeology: the heroic

quality of the subject is apparent in the references to Schliemann, the discoverer of the remains of Troy, and its charm is ironically implied in the comment in *Death in the Clouds* that an archaeologist is a poor kind of fish (xxi); it's the archaeologist who gets the girl, in this book and others. Archaeology is both analytic and synthetic or creative: it involves distinguishing the essential from the extraneous and then building up the identified fragments into a whole, as a specialist can reconstruct an animal from a single bone (*Nile*, xxviii; *Rye*, xxviii). This is why Poirot can claim to be an archaeologist; he makes the dead past of the crime live again as justice. (Ascari (2000, 54) intriguingly traces the analogy of reconstruction of an animal from a bone to the nineteenth-century Parisian criminal and policeman Vidocq, who cites Cuvier: the analogy is an old one.)

A trivial game, a science without immediate use: the analogies bypass the emotional dimension of crime, the manipulation of trust and provocation in the investigation, the attainment of control. They stress detection as rationality, where rationality means primarily a sense of a possible strategy. Game theory might have afforded Christie another image for the process of detection. The detective's strategy depends on a recognition of the opponent's strategy. The detective's work is to retrace the thinking of the criminal. The implication is again one that might be embarrassing, since it means that the detective thinks like a criminal. Miss Marple, it is said, seems to understand the crime so well that she might herself be the criminal (*Vicarage*, xxvii). In *4.50 from Paddington*, she explains that she understands the crime by imagining what she would do if she were a cruel and cold-blooded murderer (x); the imagination is obviously not difficult for her. Murderer and detective alike are superior beings, transcending the intellect of the other characters and of the many readers who do not solve the crime. The novels, then, are demonstrations of how reason can identify itself with malice. The detective resembles the murderer: the point has been noted by Moretti (1983, 142). The detective also resembles the reader, in his deciphering of the text of the crime (Most, 1983, 348; Champigny, 1977, 41). The combination is disturbing: the reader enters, just a bit, into the mentality of the criminal. The detective novelist Nicholas Blake (C. Day Lewis) recognizes that the reader identifies with both detective and criminal, "representing the light and dark side of his own nature" (1983, 400). The idea of "identification" seems to me a dangerous one, and so does Blake's idea that good and evil are somehow a settled part of the reader; but the awareness that we can fictively hope for justice and admire crime is an important one.

The association of crime and investigation is especially acute in two novels. In *The ABC Murders*, the murderer's plan is precisely to set up an ongoing program of investigation which will impose a wrong angle on the way the crucial crime is seen. In *End House* Poirot complains indignantly that Nick made use of him: he is somewhat consoled to realize that this implies that, although the young Nick pretended not to have heard of the old Poirot, the trickery proves that she must have done so after all. Far from infallible, he has allowed himself to be enrolled to defend her against a series of attempted murders which she has orchestrated herself, and to be made a hoodwinked audience for the death of Maggie. The detective is a tool of the criminal. The existence of law enforcement is what makes the crime possible. The situation is a scandalous one, both in moral terms, since this is a degradation of the force of law, and in genre terms, since this confuses detective with culprit and so distorts the whole narrative structure. Critics have pointed out Christie's liking for making the criminal a member of the investigating team; we may suggest that this scandal is not only a technique for blinding the reader to the solution to a puzzle, but also a reflection on the extent to which entertaining the idea of intelligent crime is itself a sort of participation in crime, a fascination with the idea of asserting superiority over others by imposing an illusion.

The form of the novel masks this identification. The explanation is formulated by the detective; if, like Dr Sheppard, the perpetrator gets the chance to explain his ingenuity, he is essentially filling in the details of the detective's basic insight. So the detective speaks from reason and the criminal acts from passion. The reader's strongest sense of the criminal, at the end of the book, is likely to be that of a person driven by desire, since a major component of the solution is the revelation of the hidden motive, and often of a complex of secret feelings and relationships, and these are often the subject of explicit and emphatic comment. The criminal represents for us the passions for power, self-esteem, property, money, to be obtained through inheritance or dishonest gain, illicit sexual desire, self-protection in the face of blackmail or the threat of discovery. Possible motives for murder are listed in more than one book: revenge, mania, gain, fear, *crime passionnel* in *Three Act Tragedy* (II, vi); gain, passion, jealousy, fear in *End House* (ix), money, or gain in general, revenge, love, hate, fear, beneficence in *Death on the Nile* (vii), money, sex, queerness in *Murder at the Vicarage* (xxvi). The detective desires rationally attained truth, the criminal desires comfort, freedom, emotional enrichment. The habit of listing shows a fascination on the part of the characters (notably the two major detectives) with analysis;

they like to talk about crime and to generalize and classify. Criminals, on the contrary, are a prey to impulses.

So reason is the path of righteousness and passion the path of sin. But that is not quite the pattern in the detective novel. Not all philosophers have thought reason superior to passion, and it is not clear that Christie thought so without qualification. Detectives, that is, are not quite as "intellectualist" as has been claimed. Poirot's vanity and love of control, Marple's class loyalty, the love of adventure of the younger detectives: these things suggest that reason is a sort of passion, at least a sort of pleasure in life, though one that is moderate in its effects and consistent with a stable society. And it needs to be said that the passions themselves are not wholly alien to society. Society does rely on money, inheritance, power and sexuality (if in controlled forms). The point appears most clearly when the murderer is apparently a model of respectability. The solicitor in *The Moving Finger* murders and causes much misery through his anonymous letters, in order to be free to marry. Rejecting sex outside marriage, he wishes precisely to maintain the decorum due in the professional middle classes; to reconcile his social status with an illicit love (xiv). Charles and Walker comment that the "golden age" novels tend to "elevate respectability to a stature usually reserved for morality" (in Herbert, 1994, 485); but Christie shows she is well aware of the difference. Most powerful of all is the instance of *And Then There were None*. The murderer is a detective; there is no effective detective of the kind normally demanded by the detective story structure, and the perpetrator of nine murders (plus one offstage) is a judge who has identified the crimes of his victims and who himself provides a posthumous explanation of the particularly impenetrable puzzle he has created. It is precisely his passion for justice, combined with the less orthodox traits of a feeling that justice should extend beyond the strict rule of law, overweening arrogance and a love of detective stories, that leads to crime. Social order, here, destroys itself. The point has been stressed by critics. Peach (2006, 72) speaks of Christie's fascination with "the blurred boundaries between the respectable and the non-respectable", while the sensitively class-conscious Kyzlinková (1997) notes perceptively that her characters fear the outsider but fall victim to their own kind.

The result of this ambivalence about the nature of crime is a great deal of frank admiration for it. The murderer can be said to display bravery, according to Miss Marple (*Mirrors*, xi). The Princess in *The Orient Express* expresses admiration of murder, and Poirot does not dissent (*Orient*, II, vi). Similarly he admires the intelligence and efficiency of the murder on the Nile (*Nile*, xxvii). Murder can be the work of creativity and ingenuity

(*Hollow*, xxv), a work of genius (*Sun*, xiii), a work of art (*Edgeware*, xv), a creative art (*Hickory*, iv, where admittedly the speaker himself is the murderer). The judge in *And Then There were None* sees himself as an artist in crime, and his motive as artistic self-expression (Epilogue). There is a whole tradition of fascination with the greatness of evil, with the heroism of unrepentant crime, which goes back many centuries. "Il y a des héros en mal comme en bien", said the seventeenth-century moralist, La Rochefoucauld. Milton's Satan, from the same period, is a figure that comes to mind, and is recalled by the "children of Lucifer" in Christie, such as Elvira in *At Bertram's Hotel*, who are not simply condemned but also merit a demonic admiration (xxvii) (the idea recurs in *Hallowe'en*, xvi and xxvii). Bess in *Bertram's* is considered by a police officer to be a great criminal (xxvii). Can the criminal be a great man? The issue is seriously discussed in *The Pale Horse*, though the plot of the novel actually refutes the idea of criminal greatness. The novel also points out, on a slighter level but not insignificantly, that in pantomime the evil Demon King is always seen as more dynamic than the good fairy: evil is instability and stability will outclass it – dull as stability may seem. When Sugden announces (in *Christmas*) that he is unrepentant, the reader may well be invited to feel a certain respect for him and to see the death of his father as the outcome of a conflict of intense wills beyond good and evil. Jacqueline de Bellefort shows a balance of pride and stoicism that the reader may easily admire. If she had succeeded in her crime, she tells Poirot, she would have had no regrets; now that her guilt has been shown, she accepts the reality of the situation – though she still controls it, shooting herself and her accomplice (*Nile*, xxx).

There is another view of crime, which also falls short of full condemnation. People in Christie do not just assume that crime is wrong. They seek to explain and assess it. If Miss Marple takes the Conservative view that murder is simply the result of wickedness and deserves hanging, her opinions are far from universal; the case against hanging (in practice abolished in the United Kingdom in 1966 and much debated for many years before) is also strongly put. Doctor Haydock in *Murder at the Vicarage* formulates the "scientific" view forcefully: crime, he tells the vicar, is the result of physiological disorder, and so the province of the scientist – such as himself – and not for the moralist – such as the vicar (xiv). Haydock's case is somewhat undermined when, at the end of the novel, he is morally indignant at an attempt to frame an innocent man and asserts that the actual criminal does not deserve to live. But it is only somewhat undermined; the reader can contrast the rational view of crime as curable illness with the emotional indignation and see them

both as worthy and decent attitudes, and at least the case for moral scepticism has been made, at some length. The liberal view is again treated in *Hickory*, where it is formulated by the youthful psychoanalyst Colin, who denounces explanations in terms of original sin or willful disregard of law and declares that the thefts which Poirot is investigating – notably that of a single shoe – are the result of a Cinderella complex, a female desire to be noticed and punished (v). The tone verges on parody, at least, but Colin is partly right; Celia, who is responsible for some of the thefts, is seeking to be noticed – by him. More importantly, the other thefts are part of a plot that leads to murder and surely is the result of original sin or deliberate lawlessness.

Even Miss Marple feels sympathy for Lotty Blacklock in *A Murder is Announced*; a kind, considerate, generous woman, Lotty has embarked on a career of deception out of a sense of injustice, and to maintain the deception has to kill three people, one of them her closest friend. In certain circumstances, such as those of *The Orient Express* or *Cards on the Table*, murder can be justified. The gentlemanly Colonel Race in *Cards* suggests that Major Despard, also being a gentleman, might kill for good and sufficient reasons – though Poirot disagrees (xix). Later, when it is thought that Mrs Lorrimer is guilty of the specific crime in this book, the stolidly respectable Superintendent Battle, noting that she is a lady, thinks she may have had some justification (xxviii), and this time Poirot makes no comment.

There is then an ambiguity in the way the conflict of murderer and detective is conceived. On one level, the detective is an agent of society and of morality, restoring an order infringed by crime; on another, the conflict is a contest of wits and perseverance. The paradox is at the heart of the classic detective story. Unlike the majority of real crimes, no doubt, and unlike many of the crimes in hard-boiled fiction, the murders in the classic genre are ingenious; they call for reflection and analysis. This is why they interest the reader. As far as the pleasure of the detective story is concerned, the fact that the subject of the novel is a terrible act is secondary, though not wholly immaterial. The reader is concerned that anyone should be as unscrupulous as the Christie criminals are, but this is partly because their cynicism makes their actions surprising and difficult to comprehend. Moral degradation is counterbalanced by intellectual force and energy; the criminal becomes a model of egoistic intelligence matched only by the detective. Detectives are outsiders (as Ackershoek notes, 1997, 121; Rushing, 2005, 97, aptly comments that they are outsiders because they "defend the domestic without properly belonging to it"): very obviously in the case of the

eccentric foreigner Poirot, a little less so in the case of Miss Marple, whose love of gossip may seem to be typical of a certain type of elderly unmarried woman (at least in the world of middle-brow fiction), but whose familiarity with murder becomes so habitual as to place her beyond chatter about adultery and financial derelictions. Criminal and detective alike stand outside the world of a Hastings, who according to Poirot is normality personified, and so only a little more dim than the reader is assumed to be, because he assumes, like most of us in our daily affairs, that other people are mostly honest and moderately cooperative. We live in a world of fair dealing, or we usually think we do. A world of strenuous deceptiveness and strenuous scepticism is more demanding, more unsettling than what we are accustomed to; entering on that world gives us a vicarious sense of uninterrupted isolation, in which we can rely on other people only if we can check on the reliability of their words by meticulous tests of consistency, completeness and conformity with other evidence, and in which the sequence of motives and acts we fabricate to explain the mystery is more valid than any of the narratives the suspects offer us. This might seem to give us a sense of solitary power and achievement. In fact we usually fail. We do not usually arrive at the one all-embracing solution which the detective is to produce in the last scene. If we do note some clue that puts the solution beyond doubt, the novel is a failure (and this has very rarely been my experience with Christie, and not very often with other detective authors). We want to be held in tension, waiting for a solution. We want to believe that such a penetrating vision is possible, but that it is admirable because it is beyond our scope. We want simultaneously to accept and disbelieve in the mastery of the detective heroes; and perhaps that ambiguity is of the essence of fiction.

9
Clues

In *Taken at the Flood*, a gold cigarette lighter with the initials of the dangerous intruder David Hunter is found beside the body of the so-called Enoch Arden. The experienced reader of detective stories recognizes this as almost certainly a proof of his innocence, but Hercule Poirot, Superintendent Spence and the jury at the inquest are bound to take it seriously. Lost property, footprints, the 140 varieties of tobacco ash that Sherlock Holmes has catalogued – these are clues. They are the matter of a positivistic deduction and of a positivistic detective fiction that culminates in the pathologist's novel of Patricia Cornwell; precise observation of material facts, however small, may conclusively lead to identification of a criminal. But Agatha Christie is not, at least in her mature work, very positivistic; deduction matters less than plausibility, and plausibility is a matter of story telling. In this case, the reader may remember something about a gold cigarette lighter appearing previously: it is produced by Rosaleen, Hunter's sister (apparently), and Rowley Cloade has used it to light her cigarette in the course of conversation; we are not told that he hands it back to her. Rowley seems unlikely to be the murderer of Arden, having no motive, but he does have a reason for resentment against Hunter, who is obviously bent on attracting Rowley's fiancée and seems likely to succeed. Those who make the connection will get the true explanation: Rowley has accidentally kept the lighter, still has it when visiting Arden and, on finding him dead, seeks to pin the crime on Hunter. The "scientific" clue, the clue of the police court which will give clear and definite evidence is a plant. It is not a true sign, not, in Peirce's terms (1955), an index, an inevitable result of a distinct cause, of a physical process, as it would be if it had been dropped in the course of a violent struggle and then forgotten about in the heat of fear and anger; it is a sign created artificially by the will of a malicious

character. To continue with Peirce's specialized terms, it is more like a symbol. It is a conventional indication of an intended meaning, namely Hunter's guilt. If the device is not a convention for the characters, one should add, it is very obviously conventional for the reader, who can recognize this sort of clue instantly, and can at once read the meaning attached to it, but may – and should – remain just a bit sceptical as to the genuineness of that meaning.

This is not the only fake clue in the novel. Arden has in fact died accidentally by hitting his head on a marble fender during a fight with Rowley. Rowley has not only provided a clue specifically against Hunter; but he has also created an appearance of murder by striking the head with the round top of a pair of tongs, so as to create wounds incompatible with accident and blood stains on the pseudo-weapon. Here, it must be recognized, science, rather timidly, comes into its own. Dr Lionel Cloade suggests mildly to Poirot that the wound is suggestive of a sharply edged instrument rather than a round one, and Poirot discovers the fender. No comment is made on it at the time, the fender being simply part of a general survey of the room, though the emphasis is perhaps a little too strong to be mere scene setting. Poirot is to reveal its significance in his final peroration. There are, then, causes and effects, and the effects leave traces which can be objectively observed. Christie is not rejecting evidence altogether. What we need to observe here is that the evidence actually disproves murder, that it does not identify any culpable individual (in fact Rowley is eventually recognized to be guilty of manslaughter, but not punished), that it emerges late in the novel and that the level of medical science involved is low and is complemented by the detective's common sense glance: overall it seems fair to say that this sort of proof by impersonal evidence is relegated to a secondary status in the novel. But there is proof of a different kind in the novel. We can identify three crucial elements (and the fact that there are only three is itself very characteristic).

One crucial issue in the book is the identity of Enoch Arden. There is a strong suggestion that he is in fact Robert Underhay, Rosaleen's first husband, and that his being still alive proves that her marriage to Gordon Cloade, and so her inheritance from him, are invalid. He is actually the wicked cousin of Frances Cloade, the wife of Jeremy Cloade, a crooked solicitor. The introduction of Frances near the opening of the novel stresses how different she is in character from the Cloade family into which she has married. She comes from the aristocracy, and from a racy, adventurous, unrespectable branch of it. This point is illustrated by reference to her father, Lord Edward Trenton, an unreliable horse

trainer, and briefly to her cousin Charles, who has committed some offence which has been hushed up and has been sent to the Colonies – an apt destiny, obviously, for black sheep (I, ii). The first-time reader can process this easily: the listing of Frances's relatives illustrates the character of the family and suggests that she may share some of their adventurousness and unscrupulousness. He or she can reasonably expect that Charles has fulfilled his function in the novel and can be forgotten about during the remaining hours of reading. But this is not all. Frances keeps in her home a photograph of her father, and it is commented that there is an exceptionally strong family resemblance amongst the Trentons. On the fatal evening of Arden's death, Rowley visits Frances and Jeremy; he has to wait in their drawing room until they finish dinner, and suddenly leaves the house before seeing them. Poirot, in the course of his investigations, visits the pair, observes the photograph and starts dropping hints to Frances that he knows more than he wishes to say. She visits him later and confesses that Enoch Arden was her cousin Charles, whom she has got to pretend to be either Underhay himself or at least a witness that Underhay is alive. Poirot has recognized the family likeness; he also recognizes that the reported charitable and generous character of Underhay does not match the threatening conduct of Arden. Here, then, there is real evidence; the family resemblance is an index, it is part of nature, beyond artifice and so beyond scepticism.

The evidence might not be such as to convince a jury, beyond reasonable doubt. It provides a good level of probability – and so it can be woven into Poirot's final narrative. For the structure of the novel is this: a lengthy narrative based on partial knowledge and therefore containing puzzles and incongruities is succeeded by a very brief one, attributed to the wisdom of the detective, in which the strange or unsatisfactory details are made consistent and plausible. This revised story – because it is a story and has to follow the logic of storytelling – has to be clearly motivated in the purposes of the various characters; the wisdom of the detective is in part a knowledge of normal desires and of the strategies that can be employed to attain them. And it has to force the reader to reconsider, to reread, to realize that what seemed to be background information on families and décor was really a genuine clue allowing the constitution of the true, hidden story. Rereading is a crucial concept in Champigny's important book (1977), and it is vital in defining the distinctive features of the detective genre. One can reread any novel. With a major novel one finds out more with later readings. One can adjust one's reading in mid-text with many novels, and so one gains a sense of the multivalence of life and language. In the detective story one

not only can do this; but one has to do it. One can "reread" metaphorically, by recalling the crucial details, if one's concentration in reading has been strong enough and one's memory is good enough. Or one can leaf through the pages already read, in the hope of tracing the details one has overlooked or forgotten. Or one can, sooner or later, reread the whole book and identify with satisfaction the details which one can now read properly. All of which points to a curious feature of the detective story. It is easy to regard the genre as one for rapid consumption, to be read hastily and in a mood of relaxation, like the reader Poirot mocks in *Lord Edgeware Dies*, who reads thoughtlessly and guesses at random (xiv) (and how many readers must have recognized themselves when they reached this remark!) To understand the workings of the detective novel and to be able to confirm (or sometimes to doubt) the validity of its ending, it has to be read with exceptional concentration. One probably misses little in *Middlemarch* or *The Idiot* if one forgets the full list of non-appearing relatives of one of the less central characters; in *Taken at the Flood* one misses the essence. In reality, then, the reading of this sort of novel tends to be a demonstration of how one ought to have read, and produce admiration of the author who can construct a plot that requires care and of the detectives who can read it so acutely.

The point can be further demonstrated by the two remaining real clues. How does Poirot know that Rowley is part of the conspiracy to bring Enoch Arden to the village? Rowley goes to him to ask for help in contacting anyone who might have some knowledge of Underhay. Poirot is delighted at the prospect of an easy and apparently miraculous triumph, and the same day is able to take him to Major Porter, whom he happens to know through his club and who has told him the story of Underhay, his marriage and his presumed death. He proudly introduces Rowley to Porter, who greets them with modest politeness and offers them drinks and cigarettes. Poirot accepts a cigarette, but Porter says to Rowley "You don't, I know", and after all these rather laborious preliminaries the discussion of Underhay's fate gets underway. Poirot does not realize till near the end of the book what Porter's careless remark implies: he has already met Rowley. Rowley is putting one over on Poirot, not Poirot on Rowley; Rowley knows that Poirot will produce Porter, and that Porter, having been bribed, will declare that Enoch Arden actually is Underhay. The evidence this time is conclusive; it is masked from the inattentive reader because it seems to be a trivial bit of preliminary scene-setting. These are the trivial procedures of sociability, so automatic as to require virtually no attention; and focussing attention where it is not obviously required produces the vital information. Poirot is to regret

his inattention; but it is no more than a manifestation of our normal screening of information to distinguish the new and unpredictable from the predictable, the redundant and normal. Poirot attains truth when he recognizes Porter's error; it is what is unintended that reveals what is taken for granted and should be concealed.

Thirdly, David Hunter, recognizing the danger of being taken for Arden's killer, develops an ingenious plan for appearing to be away from the village at the time of his death. In order to achieve this, he persuades Lynn Marchmont, whom he meets near the railway station, that he is going to catch a certain train to London. But just before she meets him, she has been wandering around the country lanes pondering on her uncertain feelings for her fiancé Rowley and for the tempting David. In poetic mood, she looks round the landscape and sees the smoke from a train seeming to form a great question mark in the sky. Only later does she realize that this is the smoke from the train that David purports to catch. He has already missed it. There are differences between this case and the ones we have been thinking about: the reader cannot perceive this clue unless he or she knows – what the text does not state – that there are no other trains passing through the station at about the same time as the one in question. When the truth is revealed, then, we see not a rewriting of the author's text, but a moment of realization on Lynn's part, a rewriting of the way she perceives her vision; the smoke stops being a symbol (in the literary sense of the word), and becomes an index, an indication of the physical fact of the train's movement – and the result, of course, is to eliminate David's powerful attractions as a rival for Rowley. The clue, a conclusive one, is objective, impersonal; it is a self-preoccupied fancy that has obscured it, and when she recounts her experience to Poirot he immediately sees through to the brute fact.

Family, courtesy, train-times: these are everyday realities. They need attention, precisely because they are so ordinary that their appearance can be manipulated. Of course there are trains around, if you are near a railway line; the interesting thing is that they may seem to have some message about your love life; but the important thing is that trains can be caught or missed. Of course there are family photographs, but who looks at them? Of course you need to offer cigarettes to acquaintances (or did in 1947), but the interesting thing is the conversation that comes next. The good detective is the person who notices what should be ordinary but isn't quite.

Clues, that is, depend on noticing: Noticing is what is typical of Miss Marple (*Vicarage*, xxx). This obviously is an essential quality in detectives. There is a sense in which clues are created by the detective: it is the act of

noticing that makes them into clues. Which means that readers have to be noticing too; the point is most apparent in *Endless Night*, where there is no detective and the reader has to see through the deceptiveness of the narrative; it is a little less obvious in such works as *They Came to Baghdad*, where the central character does not know she is a detective. Otherwise, no doubt, many of us delegate our noticing to the professionals, Poirot or Marple; ideally we should be alert enough to notice for ourselves, and much of the entertainment of the novel is the author's skill in discouraging us from noticing. Clues are much deprecated by Poirot: more than once – and especially in the face of a plethora of false clues – he comments that he seeks psychological evidence not material facts (*Orient Express*, I, vii); or that the character of the victim herself is the primary clue (*Sun*, vii). There is too some mockery of the kind of detective story that has the word *Clue* conspicuously in the title, obviously suggesting the most hackneyed of routine genre fiction, and Poirot entertains himself as he inspects the crime scene in *Lord Edgeware Dies* (vii) by commenting that there are no clues of the romantic and evocative kind so familiar in detective stories. But this is a sort of sleight of hand on the part of the author; in fact there are clues, if not, usually, of the kind that requires scientific analysis or the use of magnifying glasses; there are things which are out of place, actions ill-timed, small gaps in the everyday. Knight refers to the classic "cosy" detective story, and specifically to Christie's work, as the "clue-puzzle" (e.g. 2004, 89), and Cawelti points out the paradox: the detective novel must appear insoluble but must have clues (1976, 85).

Of course they are justified; but one may add that Christie is obviously preoccupied throughout her career (at least after *Styles*) with a tension between a deductive structure based on clues – which she often reduces to a minimum or indeed to zero – and a structure based on social observation and psychological predictability, and the tension accounts for much of the reader's pleasure.

The detectives, one might add, sometimes at least notice things that correspond to their own character: Poirot, in his first appearance, notices – belatedly – the movement of the vase on the mantelpiece because of his fanatical love of symmetry which has led him to move it the previous day (just as with equal officiousness he straightens Hastings's tie); Miss Marple, a lover of the domestic, notices the unwatered plants in *Murder at the Vicarage* and in *A Murder is Announced* (as does the suspect Anne Meredith in *Cards on the Table*: she has been a paid companion and it has been her job to ensure that flowers are watered). A detective has to be attentive to trifles; he or she needs a sense of domestic

order; so Knight can aptly remark that the real value in Christie's stories is "close attention to material detail, listening to what people say . . .", and he can reasonably enough see this as "the world of the stereotypical housewife and home maker" (1990, 177) – housewives and homemakers who were no doubt numerous among Christie's original readers, and for whom the domestic was not a separate sphere of activity but their everyday experience. Clues, in fact, are anything that is strange – what in *The Murder at the Vicarage* is playfully called a Peculiar Thing, but not the conspicuous peculiarity that appears there, the matter of gossip – a secretary carrying a heavy suitcase into the woods, a lacerated painting; rather they are often things barely worth mentioning, things that are odd only if you stop to think about them. Why does Mrs Inglethorp in *Styles* have a fire lit on a hot day in June? Why should anyone throw a cosmetics bottle out of a hotel window, in *Evil under the Sun*, instead of dropping it into the waste-paper basket? Why, in the same novel, should someone have a bath in mid-morning? The maid Gladys is led by Poirot to reflect on these things and to see them as funny; they are things that impinge on her routine, and on her curiosity. What makes a clue is oddity which is explicable but unexplained; the clue is a suppression of the truth which can be made to reveal the truth.

The result is often of a marked disproportion: an elaborate scheme comes to nothing because of a bottle of tanning lotion thrown from a window, or because of a nail-varnish bottle that smells of vinegar (*Nile*). These are genuine imperfections in the murderers' schemes: in *Death on the Nile* the criminal has faked a bleeding wound with red ink (vinegar flavoured, apparently) and has to get rid of the evidence, in circumstances which allow little opportunity to do so. Or the scheme may meet with bad luck: Poirot remarks that the conspirators in the Orient Express have had two strokes of bad luck. One is that the train is caught in a snowdrift. The other is still more crucial and perhaps suggests neglect rather than luck: they have burnt a letter to the victim which contains the name of the kidnapped and murdered child whom they are avenging – and this name remains legible. Without this trace, there would have been no pointer to their motives and they would have succeeded with impunity. People are fallible; the detective story is in part a study in oversights.

Why are such trifles important? Because everything is important, as Poirot points out to Hastings, who has commented that a detail is curious but unimportant and need not be taken into account: the theory should fit the facts, not the facts fit the theory (*Styles*, v). The task of the detective (and the reader, and in the first instance the task of the author) is to

construct a true narrative which gives a place to all the clues. The test of the solution then is completeness and consistency: the test of a theory, Miss Marple tells the vicar, is that it should fit all the facts (*Vicarage*, xxvi). This hardly meets the standards of strict science: there might, in principle, be more than one story that fits all the facts – though the more complicated the facts, the less likely it is that a solution will match them by mere coincidence. The tendency in many of the novels for a strong case to be built up against the wrong suspect shortly before the end (before the true revelation, that is) – most neatly, perhaps, when Poirot in *Lord Edgeware* maliciously makes out a convincing case against Bryan Martin to punish him for disrespect – is a demonstration of the problems of a consistency theory of proof; near-consistency creates illusion and makes what is presented as the genuine proof of total consistency all the more impressive.

This explanation by the construction of narrative depends on matching perceived objects or events to possible episodes in a sequence of intended or accidental events. Why is there a dark stain on the carpet in *Styles*? Because there is a shaky table in the same room and it has given way and spilt a cup of coffee; the victim has therefore not drunk the coffee and so not been poisoned by it. Why is there mud on the carpet in the same novel? Because there are freshly planted begonias outside, and the victim has had her will witnessed by the gardeners who were planting them. This makes rather redundant the commonly accepted distinction of logic and intuition, implied for instance when Craig and Cadogan comment that Miss Marple succeeds not by intuition but by accuracy of thought (1981, 166); the recognition of a total pattern of possible results and intentions is a matter of a holistic perception, of grasping a *Gestalt*. Poirot, as Knight notes (1980, 118), views intuition as a disguised deduction – despite the common belief that intuition is feminine. It is in fact Miss Marple who phrases the point most lucidly, nicely justifying her habit of interpreting events in the light of episodes she has previously heard of: intuition is simply the ability to instantaneously see a set of facts as a structured whole (*Vicarage*, xi). Klein (1998) makes much of Miss Marple as a female detective and draws special attention to *The Body in the Library*, where detective, murderer and both victims are all women. Undoubtedly, she is right to suggest that this novel can be seen as a study of the position of women and one that attributes to them a level of initiative and responsibility (for good or ill) that was not common at the time; but it seems much more questionable to suggest that Marple's style of thinking is distinctively female – although her style of speech undoubtedly is.

This sort of interpretation of the clues is certainly not legally valid. Clues do not add up to evidence, at least not to evidence which places guilt beyond reasonable doubt. Poirot even glories in a case where there is, as yet, no proof: towards the end of *Death on the Nile* he remarks that he grasps the whole pattern – and he is obviously proud of his perception – but is intellectually frustrated because he cannot prove it (xxviii). One way of dealing with this lack of legally valid evidence is the test or trap. So the evidence against Christine Redfern in *Evil under the Sun* is very slight; Poirot tests her by requiring her to cross a narrow bridge, which she does confidently, thus disproving her claim to be giddy at heights and so proving that she was capable of climbing a dangerous ladder in the course of the crime; suspicion becomes proof when it is supplemented by lying. In *The Hollow*, there are no genuine clues at all. All the clues are fakes, planted by her friends to defend the guilty party, Gerda. Poirot perceives these fake clues as inverted real clues (in other words, he brilliantly reverses the norms of the detective story): the pointing of the finger in all directions except that of Gerda is a sign that someone knows her to be the murderer. Can he prove it? Not to the satisfaction of any jury. He can only force her to drink the poisoned tea she has prepared for Henrietta and so provide the ultimate proof of her criminal intention. It is only after her death that a real clue appears: Poirot finds in her work-bag some pieces of leather which he recognizes as being the holster of the gun used in the killing.

So too in *Cards on the Table* the author in effect boasts in her foreword that there are no clues of her usual kind, since she has carefully arranged for all the suspects to have the same opportunity and motive. This means that the novel comes close to the adventure story, rather than the classic tale of deduction, as truth arises almost by accident. Only at the last moment does Poirot identify a real clue to the first murder: it has taken place during a bridge game, and he realizes that the one character who in fact has a better opportunity than all the others is one who is dummy during the playing of a grand slam. Four points can be made: first, this is not likely to be very clear to people who are not bridge players, though admittedly many of Christie's original readers probably were familiar with the game; second, the clue is made apparent through the direct reproduction of handwritten score-cards, and the reader does not need to be very acute to know that anything reproduced in handwriting is a clue; third, this suggests that bridge players are a nasty and vicious lot of people; fourth, the clue provides a very faint probability of opportunity and is very far from conclusive proof. Poirot again has to entrap the criminal, this time by hiring an actor who pretends to have seen him

committing the second murder. In *Styles*, on the other hand, there are a vast number of clues (the sign perhaps of an apprentice novelist); Poirot lists six of them on his first visit to the scene of the crime. But he realizes that they do not add up to evidence and so allows a trial of a man he knows to be innocent; it is only when this trial breaks down that true guilt is made clear by the discovery of an incriminating letter.

Why are the clues so often not conclusive? Sometimes, admittedly, they are so. In *The Body in the Library*, for instance, Mark Gaskell remarks that the dead Ruby was not specially attractive, with her teeth running down her throat (ix). But Miss Marple has mentioned that the victim has protuberant teeth. The hasty reader may just recall that this is a woman whose clothing shows that she aims to be glamorous but who does not have the physical perfection to carry it off; if one remembers with sufficient clarity one can deduce that this is not the same woman. In fact, it proves that this body is of a girl gratuitously murdered as a substitute to allow a confusion of the time of death, while the really intended victim is burnt to make her unrecognizable. But the body has been identified by Ruby's cousin Josie. So, inescapably, Josie must be guilty, since otherwise she would have had no motive for lying, and the really alert reader would work this out immediately.

But being able to work out the solution immediately would ruin the story. Gladys Mitchell's *The Twenty-Third Man* contains a clue about halfway through which is both obvious and absolutely conclusive. The second half of the novel is of very little interest. The detective story has to be elusive. It has to fascinate by withholding understanding. The clue, one might say, is like Wallace Stevens's poetry: though for very different reasons, it should "resist the intelligence/Almost successfully." So when there are conclusive clues in Christie's work, they have to be masked – as, for instance, patronizing male evaluation of the female physique. Much more often, the clues merely are consistent with the hidden story that is being built up. So with the nail-parings which appear frequently in *The Body in the Library*. The linen basket in Ruby's hotel room contains soiled underwear, nail-parings, used tissues and cotton wool (vii). Why shouldn't there be nail-parings there? What else could you do with nail-parings in a hotel room? This is the height of normality, introduced apparently by a dogged love of listing. An explanation is offered: Ruby has broken a nail and cut all the rest to match. But Miss Marple, used to the bad habits of teenage girls (presumably from experience with Guides), realizes that the corpse's nails are bitten, not cut. So the body is not Ruby. The facts are not as plain to read as all that. The parings are not there through youthful haste and vanity; they are there as a result

of criminal deviousness. The facts have to be reread and they make the ordinary onto something sinister.

Similarly in *Death on the Nile*, Poirot is suddenly struck by the thought that he drinks wine in the evenings while Tim Allerton drinks whisky and his mother drinks water. Why is he so excited by the discovery? Of course a continental drinks wine. That is what continentals do (and Poirot obviously is not Belgian enough to drink beer). He is excited because he realizes that he has been drugged with a narcotic in his wine – which therefore has spared the others. And if we reread, we find that Poirot on the evening of the crime has been uncharacteristically sleepy and so was not able to witness the events leading up to the murder. And all because of the wine. In the same book Tim owns some objects of Anglo-Catholic devotion – a tryptich and a rosary (xxii). One may or may not like this sort of high ritualism, but it seems quite compatible with the character of this slightly camp young man. But he also owns a tube of Seccotine. Why should anyone own a tube of Seccotine? Why should anyone wonder? He owns it because he is a jewel thief who has concealed his swag in the large beads of the rosary, which he then glues together imperceptibly. This more than verges on the absurd and suggests a somewhat disproportionate fascination on the author's part with widespread guilt and ingenuity. There is a quadruple effect on the reader at the moment of revelation: a certain relief at finding that the generally likeable Tim, being guilty of the minor crime of theft, is innocent of the major one of murder; amusement at the boldness of disguising the paraphernalia of crime as accoutrements of religion; marvelling at the disproportion of justice being wrought by a tube of glue; and, most seriously, a sense of the unreliability of one's own reading. What had seemed to be a sign of a fashionable religiosity was actually a sign of crime. We have gone on reading and interpreting what we read through the grid of a normal social sign system; we suddenly learn that another, clandestine system is the valid one.

The gap between the surface text with its series of apparent signs of normality and the crypto-text in which they are signs of villainy is perhaps most systematically exploited in *Endless Night*. This is a variant on the *Roger Ackroyd* format; in fact narrated by the murderer, it appears to recount the whole of an amorous relationship and of a life of cultural discovery, rather than the investigation of a crime, and therefore suggests to the experienced Christie reader that she is doing something different from her normal work, and that the act of reading is not crucially that of tracing clues. So the one apparent manifest physical clue in the novel, a dropped cigarette lighter – a clue very much of

the Sherlockian cigarette-ash variety – is neither genuine evidence nor a deliberate fake, but the result of mere chance. In other words it is not a clue at all.

Against this there are many features which in an ideal reader would lead to a gradual accumulation of suspicion. The narrator and murderer Mike abandons his job in Hamburg because of some unspecified crisis, one aspect – but only one aspect – of which is disagreement with the people for whom he is acting as chauffeur, and he attends the auction of The Towers for reasons not made quite explicit (iv). He knows, when he meets Ellie, that she has not given a false name, apparently on the naïve grounds that he himself has given his real name (v). When his mother, whose knowledge of his faults he acknowledges (viii), complains of his failure to hold permanent employment, he tells her, in mocking and secretive tones, that he has a plan for his life, but cannot meet her eyes when she asks about his love life (vii); later the mother is to react with silent suspicion to his secret lover Greta (xvi). The architect Santonix, a model of moral insight, questions the wisdom of Ellie's marrying Mike (viii) and dies asking Mike why he has lived as he does (xxii). Mike makes a clumsy and conspicuous gesture on hearing the mention of a drowned boy, and refers to a school friend who drowned after skating on thin ice (xiv). He relates that a visit from Greta, as Ellie's friend and factotum, is a strain on him (xiv) and recounts a quarrel with her, in which they shout at each other in Ellie's hearing (xv). He changes radically in his tone towards her, however, after Ellie's death, writing to a neighbour to explain that he has come to depend on her as Ellie did – but admits that he has to draft his letter three times to find the right expression (xxiii). And now his tone is triumphant: recalling the events of the story since his first meeting with Ellie, he exclaims with delight and satisfaction that all his ambitions are achieved (xxiii). But this contentment is the first sign of madness; driven by his passion, he murders Greta, with whom he has conspired to kill Ellie, and then confesses the true story.

There are three major axes of rereading: First, the crucial event in Hamburg was not the quarrel with his customers but his meeting with Greta, and the decision to attend the auction is a result of a plot she has devised. His feeling of strain at her presence is thus the result of the effort of concealment he has to make to prevent Ellie from finding out that the two of them already know each other and the quarrel with Greta is a fake for Ellie's benefit. Second, Mike has deliberately allowed the boy to drown in order to steal his watch from his wrist. Third, his mother has suspected his guilt in this matter and in his marriage, and she, Santonix and even the apparently hostile gypsy are the voices of

wisdom who have been giving warnings against him, Santonix's final words being to point out that Mike could have chosen the path of virtue.

Can the first-time reader anticipate these things? He or she might be alerted by the vagueness of the "things" that affect Mike during or soon after his Hamburg experience; but Mike is an informal and apparently unsophisticated narrator and can hardly be expected to follow principles of scholarly completeness. The reader should recognize the illogicality of deducing Ellie's frankness over names from Mike's own frankness, and note with some suspicion that he thinks it worth commenting on that he has given his real name; but there may be nothing sinister about illogicality on the part of a young man who has just met an attractive woman. Most of the remaining details seem unremarkable: mothers do complain, sons do feel embarrassed with them, new husbands may well feel resentment of their wives' friends, an innocent Mike would have good reason to feel that his happiest days were the ones shared with Ellie. Two points stand out. First, the drowned boy. In terms of the verisimilitude of the narrated events, the reader may feel that the suddenness and awkwardness of Mike's reaction are excessive, given that it is supposed to relate to an accident of 20 years ago, dreadful but not exceptional in nature. There may be more to it than this, one may think. One should certainly think this on narratological grounds. Trivia do not get narrated. If the author includes this detail of everyday conversation, it must have some function in plot or characterization – and we find out ten chapters later what its function is. Second, the decision to marry Greta, if Mike is innocent, is certainly straining verisimilitude (though not I think wholly defying it) and his difficulty in composing the letter may point to a guilty relationship. Here the illusion is becoming very precarious; it disappears a few pages later with the murder of Greta.

In most cases, then, the clues in *Endless Night* are compatible with the true story rather than revelatory of it; they become clues – for most readers, one may assume – only on careful rereading. And they prove to be clues to something important: Mike is not just a psychopath. The story is genuinely a confession, in which there is repentance. The repentance is not based on morality. He remains egoistic. It is based on a sense of self-chosen loss, on a recognition that his happiness really depended on the loveable Ellie and not on the demonic Greta. The novel calls for rereading, and the rereading is a radical revision of the voice of the narrator and the vision of the author. Ina Rae Hark aptly comments that clue-puzzles are "not about crime-solving but about reading. Moreover, they posit the detective's ability to come up with determinate readings as an exception, a product of fantasy, precisely because the texts of guilt

and innocence in the real world are so resolutely unreadable" (1997, 111). Fantasy, perhaps, but a fantasy not totally alien to the real world, a fantasy dependent on the conception of a total reading, a meticulous, noticing and suspicious reading; and the reader's pleasure is the greatest as his or her reading approaches to this total perception and as the text most nearly resists it.

10
The Myth of Crime

Crime novels say something, imaginatively, about the way crime affects society. Readers may wonder how seriously they say this, and it is easy to think that the hard-boiled novel of Hammett and Chandler has a greater claim to genuine social observation than the classic detective tale, which may appear to be a frivolous game, without much more claim to represent the real than has Cluedo or Monopoly. We shouldn't accept the view too readily. Hammett and Chandler and now Paretsky have their myth, the myth of the detective as the person of integrity in a corrupt society. The myth is obviously one that appeals to many readers, though it might be hasty to assume that it appeals because it is true. Christie has her own myth, in which the detective is the person of insight in an inert society. If the formulation of the myth, in terms of one or two families in an English village, is no longer fashionable, and especially does not capture the multiple and rapid social and technological change that has affected the United Kingdom and other advanced countries since she reached maturity, that does not mean that it is fundamentally false or that it is simply sentimental or self-indulgent. On the contrary, we shall see that the image of crime in society is one that combines a sharp critique with a sense of possible resolution.

The initial situation in a Christie novel is, necessarily, far from idyllic. People do not commit murder if everyone is content. In fact, it would not be a vast exaggeration to say that everyone is discontented. A fundamental concern of the novels, in fact, is, as Light puts it (1991, 97) "the difficulty of social belonging". This is an alienated world, and there is in the novels a strong sense of frustration for those who are not in a position to determine their own fate. Life may seem futile, as it appears to be for the etiolated Frederica in *End House* (ii), there may be a sense of bitterness, as with Ted Latimer in *Zero*, rejected in his love

for Kay Strange and feeling excluded by her family circle, or May in the same novel, bitter at the emptiness of her life, or Jacqueline de Bellefort deprived of her lover (*Nile*, ii). The author, through Hilary Craven, notes the confusions and frustrations that seem to her to be inherent in life (*Destination*, vi). Suicide is not uncommon (even apart from the several murderers who choose suicide in preference to trial): *Roger Ackroyd* starts from the death of Mrs Ferrars, who commits suicide to escape from the blackmailing of Dr Sheppard. The apparently hard and egoistic Theresa in *Dumb Witness* has contemplated suicide, out of general frustration. A central figure in *Towards Zero* is Angus MacWhirter, who has attempted suicide in despair at the failure of his marriage and who feels his life to be wasted and later recalls his sense of longing for an end to the tribulations of his life. In his recovered state he rescues Audrey Strange not only from a false murder charge, but from her own desperate suicide attempt (ii, iv). In *The Hollow*, the marriage of Midge and Edward arises from her saving him from suicide, as she recognizes the despair of coldness and loneliness into which he falls when rejected by Henrietta and then by Midge herself. At the end of the novel, Henrietta, the most sympathetic character in the book, is saved from murder by Poirot; bereft of her lover, she briefly regrets that she did not die at the hands of the murderer.

This is a society dominated by two antithetic tendencies which are perceived by the characters as equally intolerable: inertia and change. On the one hand, this is a society of inertia, boredom and solitude, in which there is no true community: this is the lifeless world of the lonely wife (*Rye*, xvi). In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Mary Cavendish has married John only in order to escape the tedium of life as a penniless orphan, and finds Styles no improvement and feels herself to be imprisoned there (x). In fact there is little love lost anywhere in Styles. Hastings notes the general apathy to the death of Mrs Cavendish and comments on the lack of feeling that characterizes the place (iv). It is a world in which despair is not far from the surface. In *Death Comes as the End*, for instance, the new concubine Nofret is most frequently seen as a source of evil and conflict. But there is also sympathy for her situation as an outsider in an unwelcoming household: so when she speaks harshly to the family, Renisenb recognizes her misery and speculates that it may be the result of a frustrated love; she feels real pity for Nofret when, near the end of the novel, she realizes the object of that love (vii, x, xix). Brenda in *Crooked House* is deeply embittered at being treated like an intruder in a self-contained family, which moreover has its own weaknesses in plenty: the grandfather, loving and understanding as he is, has simply been too strong a character for the rest of the family, most of whom

have been incapable of developing any individuality. Even Sophia, who is in fact the most self-reliant and competent member of the family, can feel the inhibition of freedom and maturity brought about by their subservient state (xv).

This is a world of quiet desperation, in which people seek privacy but are denied it by the prevalence of a trivial and malicious gossip and of overhearing and eavesdropping. It is a world dominated by a dead past. The motive for crime in *Peril at End House* is Nick's passionate attachment to the house, which is constantly described as decrepit and dreary-looking, and to her grandfather whom the house seems to symbolize. The grandfather is no model of virtue. Nick has preserved his unscrupulousness, at the cost of the life of Maggie, who stands for the present, engaged as she is to the air-ace Captain Seton, the acceptable face of modernity. The point is most fully displayed in *At Bertram's Hotel*, where there is a strong sense of old English genteel luxury, but where it proves that the appearance of tradition is a mask for crime. The past remains as a source of evil; as a wound may fester beneath an apparently healed surface, hatred and venom may persist beneath an appearance of calm (*Comes End*, xxi).

Moreover, this is a world of threatening change: the people who detest the tyrannical sameness of the given world remain prisoners to it and suspicious of any intrusion that might change it. So families protect their own crimes: they regard poisoning as an intimate family matter (*Mirrors*) and fear the exposure of their inner tensions by the glare of exterior publicity. The family in *4.50 from Paddington* is brought to public attention by a murder in a train, witnessed by a stranger and leading to the abandonment of a body on their own property: the private world of the family estate, with all the jealousies and secrecies, is invaded by the public transport system. The intrusion of the misplaced body in *The Body in the Library* and the apparently arbitrary choice of crime scene in *Murder at the Vicarage* make the same point: murder disrupts a privacy that is far from a cozy one. So the apparently settled world of the village and family is disturbed by the arrival of strangers. Enoch Arden may be undermining the pattern of innocence and inheritance in the Cloade family in *Taken at the Flood*, the green faced pansy in *Murder is Easy* may have corrupted village maidens, the artist in *Murder at the Vicarage* has asked Lettice to pose in a bathing suit, has previously been on close terms with the vicar's wife and now is having an affair with the colonel's wife (and proves to be a murderer), the archaeologist in the same book gets up to strange things in remote parts of the landscape and has a seductive female secretary (and proves to be a burglar). These outsiders are not

always seen from the settled point of view. *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* and *Murder is Easy* both open with a vision of England through the eyes of the outsider, a drab, decorous England. Specially interesting is the outsider–narrator of *Endless Night*: a chauffeur by origin, he marries an heiress and moves to a richly built house in the countryside, where he frequents the local gentry and acquires culture. But his deepest relationship is not with the people from whom he learns elegant living, but with Greta, the heiress's companion, who sacrifices her charge by encouraging Michael to marry and murder her. A still more radical distortion of the life of tradition appears in *Dead Man's Folly*, where the folly is not a true eighteenth-century relic but a novelty, wrongly placed and designed to cover up a body. The folly, moreover is collapsing, having been too hastily concreted into place. The rotten foundations, one may feel, are all too clear a symbol of the rot within the family (ii).

The characteristic restriction of the Christie's world is enhanced by specific forms of separation. The snow in *Sittaford*, which makes the big house inaccessible (except on skis) for some days, parallels a society of solitaries: the inhabitants of Sittaford are the murderer and victim, who are elderly bachelors and whose only serious human contact is their friendship with each other, the secretive retired detective Duke, the sinister Rycroft, interested in crime and birds, the retired Anglo–Indian officer Captain Wyatt, alone with his Indian servant, the witty, disillusioned and perceptive invalid Miss Percehouse, whose main entertainment is bullying her spineless nephew, and, temporarily, the Australian intruders Mrs and Miss Willett, who are waiting for their husband and father to escape from the neighboring high-security prison. There are no happy households: social life consists of the rather strained hospitality of the prosperous Willetts, which the other characters think rather excessive. There are the island setting of *And Then There Were None* and *Evil under the Sun*, the boat in *Death on the Nile*, the party of tourists in *Appointment with Death*: images of luxurious exclusion that prove to be images of confinement with death.

These are situations, like others in Christie, which produce heterogeneous societies that are the product (more or less) of chance and are far from being communities: the characters are brought together by a single interest: travel, archaeological exploration, the chance of a cheap holiday. But they may have little else in common: so *Appointment with Death* brings together one large family, two doctors, one middle-aged and eminent, the other recently qualified, one prominent female politician and one harmless old lady. Or they may bring together people whose associations are hidden or conflictual. The Nile steamer

assembles one spy, one secret service officer, one drunken novelist and her daughter, one disguised Marxist aristocrat, a rich American woman with a nurse and a dependent niece, a not so rich English woman with a charming but unreliable son, a German doctor, Linnet Doyle, one of the richest girls in England, her husband and the husband's (apparently abandoned) former lover, American businessmen (whose clandestine purpose is to get some unmerited signatures from Linnet), a British solicitor (whose clandestine purpose is to prevent any unmerited signature) and Hercule Poirot. People have to talk to each other in hotels, boats, archaeological digs and coach trips. But it is difficult to talk when you know little about your companions, when you suspect that what you know may be illusory or when you know all too much about them. These are modern-type societies, as Light comments, societies of strangers (1991, 89), and perhaps a little less truly social than Light believes. Christie likes to choose occasions that maximize social discomfort and she likes to show discomfort as the origin of murder.

The sense of continuity is especially prominent in the range of motives for murder. This works in two ways. Some people kill to ensure inheritance of money: they assert a continuity on the level of material advantage alone and do so in ways that deprive some more legitimate heir. Others kill to disguise the past, to reject responsibilities, to allow a new start in untrammeled freedom.

The first type of motive may be seen in *Death on the Nile*. The plot hints at *The Wings of a Dove*: the intense and dominating Jacqueline has encouraged her lover Simon Doyle to marry the rich heiress Linnet; they then work out an ingenious plan to murder her so that they can be reunited and rich, as Simon inherits from her in turn. It is Simon who is preoccupied with money and who exploits the laws of inheritance; Jacqueline desires above all else to retain the man she loves, to restore the status quo.

The second type of motive may be seen in *Mrs McGinty*, where the scandal of being the son of a murderess is what has to be hidden. Poirot, with bitter wit, comments that niceness – which all the population of Broadhinny, of course, possess – can be a motive for murder: niceness is in the eye of the beholder and needs to be preserved, by any means necessary (viii). More simply, as in *Appointment with Death*, people kill to conceal evidence of former guilt, to disguise the selves they have become. The two types come together in *At Bertram's Hotel*: Elvira kills Michael Gorman to obscure the facts that he was her mother's husband, that her later marriages were therefore invalid because bigamous and that she herself is therefore not legally entitled to inherit from her

mother. That first marriage is a threat both to social status and to financial security; respectability and cash go hand in hand, and they exclude the teenage romance which Bess has long outgrown. Elvira is genuinely the daughter of her mother (she displays a biological continuity): she may be more discreet, but she is bold, reckless, uncompromisingly egoistic. And Bess accepts the relationship, to the point of sacrifice: she falsely confesses to the murder and drives to her death, in order to shield her daughter from suspicion.

There are other motives for murder. They are not alien to the motives that impel people about their everyday lives. Money, status, sexual desire, the wish for personal freedom: these are the springs of normal action and could be rejected only by the most rigorous ascetic. They become a source of crime when they are allied with overweening egoism, and when this happens the society is made aware of the potential for evil within it. So it is that in *A Murder Is Announced*, as Priestman points out (1998, 22), the criminal is the "apparent linchpin" of the whole society. Crime is not alien to society, but a manifestation of it. In *Lord Edgeware Dies*, Jane Wilkinson murders her first husband in order to marry a Duke and conform to the rules of her new husband's Anglo-Catholicism, which require her not to be a married woman at the time of the wedding, but allow her to be a widow. Jane has no faith in religious dogma, but she has acute respect for the rules of high society (within which Anglo-Catholic faith was at least fashionable) and unlimited faith in her own abilities.

Particularly disturbing is the story of *Elephants Can Remember*, where the death seems to be a kind of ritual of justice that usurps the justice of the state. Dolly, having murdered her twin sister, is forced to take her place until she can be executed by the victim's husband, who commits suicide at the same time. The murderers indulge a sense of power, of will, of delight in their own effectiveness. They differ from other characters chiefly because they have the confidence and the capacity for risk-taking that others lack. If anyone could be a murderer, what really makes one a murderer is the belief in one's own success. In a society of inhibition and constraint, it is the readiness to reject the rules and the skill to manipulate them that makes the murderer; the criminal is an inverted image of the decent citizen. In some cases this vision of the murderer's arrogance reaches a very disturbing level. There is here a sheer delight in death in the Judge in *And Then There were None*, while in *Hallowe'en Party* the garden designer Michael Garfield persuades his own (unadmitted) daughter to take poison in a ritual that she is led to see as sacrificial but is in fact essentially a technique for his own

self-protection from further prosecution. We seem in these cases to have, briefly, an inverted society; the solemnity that is accorded to violent death in the law and certain religious traditions becomes a tribute to the self-deifying individual.

Crime often involves collaboration. Evie Howard and Alfred Inglethorpe in *Styles* have hatched a plot for Alfred to marry the rich and elderly Mrs Cavendish and then for Evie, her companion, to poison her. This partnership gives rise to an intriguing series of deceptions. Evie persistently, even before the actual crime, accuses Alfred of being a potential or actual murderer, thus collaborating with his plot to incriminate himself and then to allay any risk of conviction by producing an alibi. She even has to disguise herself in a false beard as Alfred, in order to create a suspicion that he has bought poison; the image is of an oddly disturbing identification of the guilty pair. This conspiracy seems a model of efficiency and loyalty. The criminal project entails planning, determination and mutual trust. In *Murder at the Vicarage*, likewise, the adulterous relationship of Anne Protheroe and Lawrence Redding soon becomes known, and they themselves are unapologetic, despite the inevitable disapproval of the vicar and most of his parishioners, since Anne's husband is an irascible and tyrannical character who obviously deserves to lose his wife. The reader does not see them together, since the story is narrated by the vicar, and the emphasis at the end of the novel is on the guilt of the scoundrelly artist rather than the passionate and possibly persecuted wife who actually fired the fatal shot. Anne's last appearance, in fact, is some two-thirds of the way through the book (xxii), and the image she gives is a highly creditable one. She unapologetically tells the vicar that she intends to marry her lover, thanks him for discouraging them from eloping previously and defines acutely her feelings about her rather difficult step-daughter. The vicar is left respecting her frankness. The frankness is real; she is open and self-aware, as few people are in the village. Christie's analysis of the criminal partnership in *Death on the Nile* also shows a considerable psychological acuity. If it is Simon who gets the idea of murder, and if Jacqueline consents out of passionate love for him, she is also influenced by a certain sense of superiority: she feels just a little aloof about Simon's love of money and she knows that he is too stupid to work out an effective plan of action, so that it is her ingenuity that creates the mystery of the book. Their relationship during the period of masquerading is occluded from the reader, though Jackie asserts that they could have been happy together if they had been successful; in fact she shoots Simon in what is both an admission of failure and a *Liebestod*.

There is the unique case of *The Orient Express*: the crime is committed as an act of justice by 12 people. They seem, when Poirot enters the train, to be utterly disparate: in nationality, age, personality, social standing. So we have the comic exuberant Italian, sharing a compartment with the comic reserved Englishman. We have the tender loving aristocratic married couple, the Andrenyis, and we have the restrained tense unmarried couple, Colonel Arbuthnot and Miss Debenham. At most Poirot recognizes, from a conversation he overhears, that the latter two have some common purpose. Men and women may, however, have common purposes that are not criminal. Gradually the clues accumulate: the passengers do know each other. Their being together is not chance. In fact the only chance is that Poirot is amongst them. They have been members of the Armstrong household, members of the family or servants of various levels, and they have agreed to use the train journey to execute justice on the kidnapper Ratchett. The Italian is a chauffeur, the Englishman a valet, Miss Debenham a governess. Countess Andrenyi is the aunt of the Armstrong victim. Colonel Arbuthnot is a friend of Colonel Armstrong. For once, Christie imagines a small society united by a solemn contract. It operates outside the law or against the law. It acts in what amounts to no single country; in fact the train is in Yugoslavia, and the key point is that the Yugoslav police do not enter the train, which is therefore outside civil society. Harmony of purpose appears most obviously in the operation of that anomaly, the justified crime. Hence the paradox formulated by Rushing (2005, 100): this is a novel in which every-one is guilty – or in which no one is guilty. It is, he argues, a novel of ambiguous exculpation. We shall see in *Curtain* a novel in which everyone is (morally) guilty, a novel in which there is no exculpation.

It appears, less conspicuously and on a smaller scale, in *The Hollow*. The real criminal is Gerda. But she by herself lacks the intelligence and dynamism to disguise her guilt. And so she comes under the aegis of the artist Henrietta and of Lady Angkatell. The crime is not approved; but it is understood. Henrietta feels pity for Gerda, who has lived only for John and is crushed by the discovery of his infidelity. The fact that Gerda eventually attempts to murder Henrietta herself may suggest the dangers of such sympathy; but at the least the book sets up pity as an imaginative alternative to justice.

The impact of crime in general to strengthen or undermine relationships has the effect of discriminating the ultimately sound and mature characters from those who are selfish, weak, irresponsible. The issue is examined in a particular systematic way in *Cards on the Table*. In this

novel, as the author points out in her foreword, there is no real issue of motive, opportunity or method, as all four suspects have these in equal measure. The interest of the novel is on the psychological level. Readers may well be skeptical about Christie's claim that the solution to the mystery is reasonably based on the psychological distinctions of the characters and may suspect that any other solution could have been made equally plausible. But they may nevertheless be intrigued by the characters' varying relationships as the investigation develops. The ultimate villain appears fairly little. He demonstrates, in a conversation with Poirot, the recklessness which has brought him to the crime and he is denounced at the end. The other characters, however, develop interestingly. Mrs Lorrimer shows kindness to the young Anne Meredith, herself guilty of a previous murder and addicted to theft, and finally confesses falsely to the crime in order to protect Anne, whom she believes to be guilty but excusable. The upright Major Despard, who is in fact innocent of any crime, seeks to help Anne, but in doing so comes to know her close friend Rhoda, and finally is tested when Anne and Rhoda apparently fall into the Thames, leaving the spectator Poirot to wonder, in sporting spirit, which of them he will save. He saves Rhoda, which proves to be quite right since Anne has deliberately pushed her into the river. Anne is a convincing portrait of a person who commits crimes out of weakness and who is dependant and at the same time suspicious of those who seek to help her: Rhoda, Despard, Mrs Lorrimer, Ariadne Oliver. And the novel plausibly shows the motives of these people for helping her: curiosity, personal attraction, bossiness, pity, the sense of a shared guilt.

Murder both creates and destroys human contact. We should not overlook the most obvious instance: the friendship of Poirot and Hastings is a product of crime and Poirot is a lonely man, his enjoyment restricted to eating, when he loses contact with his follower. It is a friendship based on admiration: Poirot's regret that he can no longer enjoy Hastings's hero-worship is both absurd and rather contemptible and also a touchingly frank recognition of his own vice of vanity (*McGinty*, i).

Partnerships are set up in the course of investigation, groups are bonded by death, as Heissenbüttel says (1983, 88); murder creates a circle, "a shared intimacy like that of home" (Light, 1991, 91). Poirot shares the excitement of the chase and the fascination of intellectual debate with M. Bouc and Dr Constantine in *The Orient Express*. Specifically, the shared experience of death and suspicion often leads to romance: Rowland says well that "Murder becomes, paradoxically, a form of social restitution as the social group is purged and reconstituted

at the end. This is often substantiated in the figure of the romantic couple whose courtship occurs via the detection" (2001, 27). Journey's end, the author often comments, leads to lovers' meetings. So do the ends of the detective process. Hastings meets his wife Dulcie in the course of *Murder on the Links*, and his courtship is inseparable from his involvement in Poirot's investigation. This relationship is decidedly odd, though it settles into a harmonious and affectionate marriage in later volumes. Notably Dulcie refuses to give Hastings her name, gives him a false address, prevails on him to show her the body of the victim. In fact she is acting in the interests of her sister Bella, tangentially involved in the crime, as well as from her real attraction to the gallant captain. Hastings traces her to a theatre where she is appearing with Bella; he still thinks she *is* Bella and that she is guilty of the crime and in love with another man, but he is ready to perjure himself to protect her. Dulcie does not disillusion him, and their meeting is interrupted by Poirot, who later brings them together, announcing that he has arranged their marriage, a marriage based on the slightest of contacts and a great deal of fundamental misunderstanding. Hastings is then able to declare, in the foreword to *The ABC Murders*, that Poirot has shown him the link between romance and crime. In *The Moving Finger*, Gerry meets Megan and converts her into the ideal partner, combining rural innocence with urban glamour, and his even more sophisticated and modern sister Joanna meets Dr Griffith and converts herself into the partner of his hard work and exposure to suffering. Sarah King (*Appointment with Death*) meets Raymond Boynton, whom she is to marry, as well as Carol Boynton, whom she encourages to become independent of her mother; love, together with murder, releases them from the traumatic effects of family tyranny. By the end, in fact, Sarah's medical colleague Gerard has married the neurotic but gifted Ginevra, Carol has married Jefferson Cope (previously mistakenly attached to the married Nadine) and the strained marriage of Nadine and Lennox has been restored. In the final scene of the novel, only Poirot remains single.

There are two points here. On the one hand, it seems psychologically very plausible that shared adventure and especially shared danger do bring people together, as each learns the other's character, exercises responsibility towards the other and enjoys the common thrill. On the other hand, love and marriage form a harmony which contributes to a genuine social order and constitutes the happy ending. This kind of order is obviously very much conventional and genre-determined. Christie gives it some new life by contrasting this relationship based

on mutual attraction and mutual respect with the relationships at the beginning of the novel, based largely on inertia, property and power.

She adds also two notes of caution. First, as we have seen in *Links*, these pairings-off are sometimes Poirot's work: he allows John Cavendish to be tried for murder, in order to bring home to Mary her true feelings for her husband (*Styles*). In *The ABC Murders* he ties the knot for Donald and Megan by making explicit what Donald had not consciously realized, that his misplaced attraction for the dead Betty has been rightly replaced by a well-founded love for her sister Megan. The author thus hints at the malleability of the characters, dependent, even for their most intimate satisfactions, on the greater wisdom of the star detective. Also she hints at the curious fictional status of Poirot, who arranges the fate of the other characters as if he were the author rather than one more character. The books become conspicuously fictional as they lay bare the extent to which they are fabrications of a central controlling intelligence. Second, the novels sometimes offer an abrasively unromantic note. A nice irony arises in *Sittaford*, where Emily and Enderby join forces and provoke a good deal of gossip. The reader is likely to think they ought to have a romantic relationship: they are alike, in both being personable, dynamic, efficient, ambitious, ready to control other people, unpretentious and realistic. Enderby certainly thinks so. Emily disappoints him: she prefers her fiancé, who has got himself arrested through sheer incompetence, verging on the criminal and leading to panic and unconvincing lying. She is properly proud of having saved him from himself in proving his innocence; and she is very aware that she is going to have a husband who is dependent on her. Marriage will have at least a tincture of power.

In any case, murder is not always so beneficial. In *Death in the Clouds*, the romance which springs up between Jane Grey and Norman Gale as they enjoy questioning suspects, acting the rôle of participants, collaborating with Poirot, is based on true feeling on Norman's part and a genuine attraction on Jane's, but this attraction depends on Norman's concealment. He is guilty, and in fact his passion for Jane leads him to add to his guilt by murdering his wife. The couple's enjoyment of the adventure of detection is uncomfortable in retrospect, a fool's paradise, and Jane is deeply disillusioned – until she enters onto the romance with another man that Poirot has arranged, a good archaeologist. In *Baghdad* the romance of Victoria and Edward is a fake, Victoria's romanticism being abused by his cynical plotting (she is finally rewarded by the love of another good archaeologist). Partnerships can also be fakes: Franklin shows initiative and public spirit in *The ABC Murders* by establishing a group of people, each affected by the murders so far, who will watch for

further murders and aid Poirot and the police. The atmosphere amongst this group is positive, friendly, relaxed. It transcends differences of class, bringing together the aristocratic Franklin, the intelligent and dynamic typist Megan and the unsophisticated housemaid Mary. But Franklin is the murderer; the veneer of cooperation is simply one more strand in his plot. Similarly Sir Charles Cartwright forms a partnership with Poirot, Satterthwaite and Egg Lytton-Gore, the woman he loves, to investigate the *Three Act Tragedy* murder; but he is himself the murderer, and the investigation serves to further his love (which is the ultimate motive of the crimes) as well as to avert suspicion. More than this, the interest aroused by murder may provide a social link which is not constructive, as these instances appear to be: in *Crooked House*, the child Josephine is eager to share her expertise on the murder with the narrator (and quasi-detective). This is disturbingly morbid, even before it is revealed that Josephine is herself the murderer, acting precisely because she enjoys the excitement of murder.

Crime and detection, then, often form a process of liberation. Freed from what Sartre would have called a serialized society, one in which every person's hand is turned against their neighbor because everyone's interests are in conflict with those of everyone else, the characters tend to attain new integrity and fulfilling relationships. The essential myth of the majority of the novels is that an act of violence (or a series of such acts) concentrates within itself a pervasive accumulation of guilt and conflict, that the act necessitates investigation and that the investigation precipitates not only the guilt of the murder but also the generalized guilt of the society, leaving a healthy alliance of the detective and the characters who are innocent or whose guilt has been purged by exposure to extremity, to suspicion and self-recognition. Detection effects an exorcism of evil, according to Symons (1985, 19), while Grella (1976, 47) neatly observes that murder and detection together get rid of two undesirables, the criminal and the victim. Christie is often very systematic in the working of the pattern, and the contrast of the wasteland world of the opening and the harmonious world of the end is often very systematic.

One major force in this resolution of alienation is the integrity and skill of the detective. But there are also mechanisms in the novels which suggest a world that is on the side of happiness. They include coincidence; it is a coincidence that Gwenda should return to the house in which she spent a brief part of her childhood and so precipitate the memory which leads to the identification of the murderer; it is coincidence that Mrs Badcock should live in the village that Marina Gregg moves to and even more of a coincidence that her husband should be

the star's first husband. The chance brings an excessive punishment to Mrs Badcock, who is murdered for an act of thoughtlessness whose consequences were themselves disproportionate, and the investigation brings about the death of Marina, who has meanwhile acquired extra guilt in two more murders. The two deaths form an equilibrium which eliminates from the society of the village two intrusive and disruptive elements. The identity of Arthur Badcock as Marina's first husband is much more problematic: it is concealed only by the fact that he has changed his name since their marriage – for no stated reason – and it contributes nothing to the plot. It seems, in fact, to bear witness simply to a fascination with the way that old relationships can recur, that the past is never finished with.

A particularly thoughtful example is *Towards Zero*, where chance brings the suicidal MacWhirter together with Audrey, who is being framed by Nigel, redeeming him from his depression and saving Audrey from persecution. The rhythm of the novel eloquently follows the convergence of their lives, and the writing is strong enough to convey their despair convincingly; the story gives a real sense of force for good operating outside the control of the characters. The point is symbolized when Audrey tells a friend about MacWhirter's suicide bid and reflects, speculatively, that he is perhaps glad to have been saved (iii). The comment appears about half-way through the book; its full significance is apparent only at the end, when she attempts to throw herself off the same headland and is saved by MacWhirter. It is tempting to see these coincidences or convergences as examples of a kind of fate or providence. Certainly this view is supported by the Catholic nurse in *Towards Zero* who says that suicide is wrong because it defies the will of God, and actually has a vision of MacWhirter saving someone (i). We should at least say that the ordering of the novel affords a model of a benevolent world – and indeed one that might have given Rowland much better support than the essentially secular *Appointment with Death* for her claim that the crime and detection genres are "inherently metaphysical" or that "a religious dimension is a persistent feature of the form" (2001, 135).

The genre of the detective novel is one that may be ultimately reassuring; it presents what is normally considered the gravest crime possible, one that depends on people having absolutely no regard for the life of others, and it shows that this crime can be integrated into a world which tends towards mutual acceptance and goodwill. And yet the reader has reservations. He or she accepts that consoling message – as a rule of the genre. He or she feels satisfied at the end of the novel, and

puts it down contented that the solution of a puzzle has entailed the dissolution of unhappiness, that the order of intellect has supported the order of personal wellbeing. But the forming power of the author is too apparent. The novel could only end that way. Permanent bitterness, of the kind that persists in Chandler, is excluded in Christie. There is no providence; there is only a genre which is a model of kindliness.

11
The Real and the Unreal

It is easy to think that the Christie world is cut off from the real world of the readers. She lends herself to this view all too readily: in her first novel, Hastings comments more than once on the remoteness of the war from which he has returned and its apparent irrelevance to the crime with which he finds himself involved. The implication seems plain that the crime with which the novel is concerned is something very different from the war which was the overwhelming factor in British life in 1916 (*Styles*, i, ix). By the same token, one can be astonished at how little World War II appears in the novels which appeared while it was in progress. The obvious exception is the spy thriller *N or M*, which might reasonably be regarded as a frivolous fantasy rather than a genuine response to history. Gerry appears in the village of *The Moving Finger* because he is recuperating from injuries he has suffered as an aeroplane pilot. What could have caused a pilot to crash in 1943? We are not told, though there is perhaps a hint in the comment of an old lady on the courage of young men, and later in Gerry's dream of war and Chamberlain's "scrap of paper". The stress in the book is on the difference between the urban Gerry and his fashionable sister and the apparently staid inhabitants of Lymstock. His presumable heroism is behind him, and outside the story. And why are there so many young men about in the villages of England in the wartime novels? Shouldn't they all be in the army? Or are the novels published at this time actually set pre-war? The question is systematically avoided in the novels.

But this is not the whole truth. Even in *Styles*, the impact of war is actually very clear: Hastings is at Styles because he, too, is recuperating from injury, and he later gets a post in the War Office, which enable him to keep in touch with the Styles group. Poirot is there because he is a refugee from gallant little Belgium. Cynthia is working as a dispenser

with the VAD and Mary on the land. The suspicious Bauerstein proves to be not a murderer, nor an adulterer, but a German spy. The story is in fact clearly related to the real events which must have been fresh in the minds of most readers in 1920, and these events are treated as the motor of the social change which permits a particular crime (though here the social change itself is still comparatively minor). In *The ABC Murders*, published 18 years after the war, Cust still suffers the psychological consequences of it (no doubt the one respect in which he resembles Lord Peter Wimsey) and has been handicapped in his employment as a result of the slump of the 1930s. Christie, in other words, not only uses her novels to comment on changing moral standards and norms, but also gives them plausibility and pertinence by reference to actual facts. These vary in their scale: there is a good deal of reference to real criminal cases, but there are also references to wars, to decolonization, to political events, and some of the novels convey a measure of familiarity with other countries. The effect in the novels is sufficiently important to merit comment. The novels can certainly not be regarded as in any sense documentary (the closest approach to this lies in the travel novels), but they do imply something of the way that private lives, the lives of the families or groups affected by crime, are affected by the broader life of the outside world.

Michael Seton in *End House* dies while attempting to fly round the world. The enterprise is paralleled with Amy Johnson's solo flight from Britain to Australia, which is mentioned with admiration, though she is not named. The reader is obviously expected to grasp the reference and with it the sense of the insistent modernity of the book; published in 1932, it responds to Miss Johnson's flight of May 1930 (*EndH*, vii). The kidnapping and murder of a small child from an American family in *The Orient Express* (as Lathen notes, 1977, 92) recalls the Lindbergh case, which occurred the year before the book was published and where no criminal had been identified at the time of publication. This is a matter of the novel's rhetoric. The character or event is possible, because there has been such a character or event. And it deserves a certain attitude, because that is the attitude we have to the real person or happening. The Lindbergh case was an outrage which merited punishment. The imagined illegal punishment in the novel gives the reader the sense of a private justice. His or her astonishment at the strangeness of the solution is reinforced by a sense of wonder at a moral legitimacy which is at least defensible – and which Poirot accepts, as he agrees to publish a version of the crime he knows to be false – but which bypasses the legal authority of the state.

A similar rhetoric is implicit in some of the explicit analogies. When the Tichborne case is mentioned in *Third Girl* (xxv), the reader is reminded of a real *cause célèbre* in which an imposter was welcomed by members of the family to which he claimed to belong and lengthy litigation was needed to establish his falsity. The wide publicity and lasting fascination aroused by the case suggest not only that people are curious about shady activities amongst the aristocracy, but also that they recognize the importance of the distortion of inheritance and of family status that such a masquerade entails and the desperation of feeling of a mother who can obtain a false son by suppressing her rational assessment of identity. Borges' treatment of the case, in his *Historia Universal de la Infamia*, wittily emphasizes the strain it showed in logic and emotion, and the fallibility of human attachments; what inspires elegant wit in Borges inspires a recognition of the ingenuity of evil in Christie. *Third Girl* is a novel in which the falsification of identity is extreme and the historic reference goes some way to diminishing its implausibility (though not far enough, no doubt).

A warning lies in the character of Edith Thompson (whose fate had received fictional treatment from F. Tennyson Jesse in 1934). Executed along with her lover Frederick Bywaters, although it was far from clear that she had in fact incited him to murder her husband or was aware that he was going to do so, she shows that passion means guilt and that whether or not this guilt actually is murderous it can provoke such intense disrepute that it leads to a condemnation in court for murder. So in *A Pocket Full of Rye*, the cowardly adulterer Vivian attempts to steal back the letters he has written to the victim's wife, fearing that they might be regarded, as Edith Thompson's were, as incitements to murder (xi); the reference attunes the reader to thinking of adultery as a probable motive for the crime – which is quite misleading. In *Crooked House*, Magda is planning to act in a play about Edith Thompson (cynically cashing in on the publicity brought about by a murder in her own family) (vi). The case has no direct relevance to her own situation, but it is very close to that of the victim's wife Brenda, who has written to the children's tutor (who may or may not be her lover in the full sense) letters which, like Thompson's, at least appear to hint at the wish to be released by murder from an unwelcome marriage. The narrator comments on the resemblance, noting how the sheer terror on Brenda's face as she is arrested resembles the sheer terror portrayed by Magda as she tries out the role. The whole conception is subtle. The analogy between Brenda and Edith Thompson is incomplete, since it is not her lover who has killed the husband (and this may suggest that the real

Edith Thompson's letters were as free from real commitment to crime as are Brenda's). The similarity is a red herring, an illusion which may appear to be based on a solid reality, that of a well-known scandal. But its illusory nature is made more complex by the theatrical dimension; Brenda is living in the sort of fantasy which is depicted on stage, a fantasy of desire and vulnerability.

More commonly mentioned amongst real cases are those of Lizzie Borden, Charlotte Kent, Charles Bravo, Madeleine Smith, William Wallace, Armstrong. (The first three are named together in *The Clocks* (xiv), where Poirot speculates on how much more successfully he might have handled them than was the case in actuality; the Bravo case is discussed in some detail in *Ordeal by Innocence*, which emphasizes the hardship to innocent people who remain suspect in an unsolved murder; Lizzie Borden is the most frequently mentioned throughout the author's works, being also named in *The Moving Finger, After the Funeral, Ordeal by Innocence, Elephants Can Remember* and *Sleeping Murder*, as well as being referred to anonymously in *And Then There were None*.) What these cases have in common is that they are, in various ways, unsolved. It is generally assumed that Lizzie Borden was the person who gave her mother 40 whacks, there being no other suspect, but this was never proved in court. The cases show that life really is mysterious; that law does not in fact control violence and inexplicable passions. And they imply that this situation is intolerable. Justice must be done: punishment must match guilt. The novels, because their very *raison d'être* is the difficulty of establishing the truth, allow the reader to fear that the fictional world, like the real world, will be one in which loose ends remain, in which people remain suspect. One can add the simple annoyance that many people may feel at the block to their natural curiosity offered by a crime which has no solution and in which no further investigation seems possible. The apprehension of endless uncertainty adds seriousness to the novels; the gap in comprehensibility in the novel is akin to that which disfigures the real world.

Finally, we may note the references in the works to real cases that are notorious because of the special infamy of the criminal: Jack the Ripper (*ABC*), The Brides in the Bath (*Caribbean*), Crippen (*3Act*, III, ii). In the case of the serial murders, the point is to justify the principle established by Poirot and essential to novels in which there is frequently more than one murder, that murder becomes a habit, and that this actually helps the detective by the repeated *modus operandi*. In the case of Crippen, there is more specifically the claim that he was motivated by a sense of inferiority. The point is not obviously relevant to *Three Act Tragedy*,

where the motive is quite different (though the speakers do not yet know this). In fact it suggests a false solution and keeps open the mystery. What it also does is to enhance the sense of intellectual connoisseurship typical of Mr Satterthwaite; he likes to understand people, and perhaps the odder the people the better. More generally, there is a sense that excessiveness is real, that what we might be tempted to call the inhumanity of people who can kill more than once without compunction is not a product of the perverse imagination of the novelist but on the contrary an indication that her work is actually rather restrained: the real world is a dangerous place and we should be aware that the respect for human life that we may take for granted is not universal. The novelist has a knowledge of the depths of human existence. As we all do: most readers will recognize these names. The frightening is familiar to us, at second hand, at least, and it may be disturbing for us to realize that reading detective stories is an exercise in the macabre. It is far less so in Christie than in many other authors, especially of recent years, less even than her near contemporary John Dickson Carr. But it *is* macabre, nevertheless: we should feel a little uneasy at viewing either the imagined events of classic novels or the real events of classic crimes as spectacle; we are enjoying other people's death and suffering. Our culture, we are reminded, is one in which curiosity about death, fascination with the people who transcend the normal, is widespread, and the novels both fit into that somewhat sinister culture and alleviate it by presenting the excesses as regular, recognizable, reducible to intellectual challenge, open to the elimination of horror. Our admiration of the author may be a little queasy. She shows herself an authority on murder: is that a quality we can respect without qualification or is there a little too much morbid complicity with evil?

The references to real crimes, then, bring plausibility and a sense of emotional appropriateness, this latter perhaps not quite straightforward. The references to historical events can have a similar import. On the one hand, historical circumstances provide the occasion for the crimes or for the presence of the characters in the context of the crime; on the other they allow for the formulation of an ethos, an assessment of the world within which crimes occur and a sense that the crimes in some way parallel the nature of that outside world. So a reference in *Death in the Clouds* (1935) to Stavisky, the swindler whose large-scale corruption of the French political system led to major disturbances in 1934, shows the author to be moderately well informed about a foreign country and allows readers to congratulate themselves, since by recognizing the reference they prove that they too are moderately well informed. It also

provides an analogy. The victim of the murder is a moneylender who has used her dubious financial transactions to gain power over prominent people. She resembles Stavisky then, who may have died because he knew too much; certainly she resembles him as a symptom of the cynical and money-dominated high society of France.

The novel which perhaps makes the most emphatic use of a political conflict is *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, published in 1938. Pilar, claiming to be Simeon Lee's granddaughter, has arrived from Spain to join him, making her way through the ubiquitous violence of the civil war (which had been in progress since 1936, and was to continue to 1939). She makes light of the violence, though she also describes it in ways which can bring a shudder to the peaceable members of the family and to readers in their armchairs: she was annoyed to have to walk when her chauffeur was killed by a bomb, his head missing and his body covered in blood (iii). Spanishness, as must have been apparent to those who were accustomed to accounts of atrocities in their newspapers, is a sign of savagery. And Pilar is a person of very partial civilization, by conservative standards: she accepts violence, she is intensely sensual and vital, she is selfish. She stands for amorality and is clearly admired by the author for this reason. She contrasts emphatically, then, with the refinement and timidity of the more docile members of the family. But this is not quite a contrast between Mediterranean directness and British reserve. For she finds her match in the grandfather, a man with an unscrupulous past of sexual and monetary adventurousness (the adventures, it must be admitted, having largely but not entirely taken place outside Britain), and she gets on well with him – all too well for the others who will fear that she is seeking to attract his inheritance to herself and deprive the more legitimate relatives of it. Spanish violence and sexuality then comes to parallel the violence of crime, as Simeon is murdered by a son of his philandering. Victim, criminal and international background alike are distinguished from the respectability of ordinary Britain. There is a further twist to the story. Pilar is not Pilar at all. She is really called Conchita and has usurped the character of the real Pilar, who has been killed by bombing on the way out of the country. The disruption of order by war is what permits this particular imposture and so illustrates the insecurity of identity and of legitimate relationships. It further allows the pseudo-Pilar to enter on a romance with Stephen, another illegitimate son who is therefore no relation of hers and not affected by any question of incest; she is thus linked finally with the passionate side of the family, which she has approached in her intimacy with Simeon.

In these ways, the real world becomes a support for ideas of the precariousness of civilization. Elsewhere the same points are made in a context closer to home. So, for instance, *One Two, Buckle my Shoe* is set against a background of 1930s political uncertainty and extremism, evoked by the names of Hitler and Mussolini. The politically important central character Alistair Blunt is respected because he can offer the country moderation and honesty (ix); he is the victim of an assassination attempt by a Hindu student and he fakes an assassination attempt which he blames on a young man who is a bully, a liar, a swindler and a member of the Imperial Shirts (presumably Moseley's Fascist Blackshirts). The social disruption of World War II plays a vital part in the construction of *A Murder is Announced* (1950), where Philippa, an attractive but distant character, apparently a widow, distinguished by her discretion, her modesty and her devotion to her son, seems to have some guilty secret. She is accused by the refugee Mitzi of having assignations with the victim, a foreign waiter of disreputable character. She denies this; only at the end is her full innocence established, as it emerges that her husband is a deserter from the war and that she has both been seeing him secretly and trying to persuade her son that his father is a war-hero, a person to be proud of. Fortunately he dies in the last pages of the book, saving a child from a road accident and so becomes a hero belatedly. War is a test of character, and a failure of courage can contaminate marital and parental love. Mitzi (while treated with regrettable levity) contributes to the sense of change in the village, more crucially manifest in Miss Blacklock herself; her sister's links with the financier Goesler have been obscured by war and so enabled Lotty to usurp her sister's identity. Miss Marple reflects on the way war has destroyed geographical stability: people have come into the once unchanging English village from the colonies, from the continent; the big houses are sold and the cottages converted, and the inhabitants are strangers (x). Nobody knows who anyone has been or what their family is; change means an obscuring of identity, thus conceived. In sociological terms, *Gemeinschaft* gives way to *Gesellschaft*, community to society, and the modernized society means a sort of alienation. An observant detail: the respectable middle-class villagers indulge in various ways of bypassing the post-war rationing laws, a minor form of lawlessness which is symptomatic of the risk of a more profound anomie.

Taken at the Flood also devotes much reflection to the war and its aftermath. The starting point of the plot is the death of a rich man in the bombing of London, and the bombing is seen both as an ordeal through which the characters have survived and as a state of confusion

in which a maid can replace a lady. The war in general is a disruption of established society. The most sympathetic character, Lynn Marchmont, has been away from her home and her fiancé for 6 years in the Wrens, and having seen the world finds it difficult to stay down on the farm – while at the same time she has no skills that would equip her for a career. The book is pervaded too by the memory of deaths in the war, the sense of the missing young men: Lynn's fiancé Rowley, who has stayed at home – quite properly – as a farmer rather than serving in the forces, is haunted by guilt at having survived. The post-war world, too, is viewed bleakly, as a time of high taxes, rationing, difficulty in finding servants and general ill feeling: "Oh! brave new world", Lynn thinks grimly (I, i). The bias is clear enough; this is a conservative and middle-class view of a Socialist Britain, in what other people might have regarded as a time of increased opportunity, wider educational opportunities, massive rebuilding and generous welfare provision. But partial as the view may be, one at least has to recognize the firmness with which the novel reflects social change and the explicitness with which it is assessed. There is, too, perhaps something to be said for Poirot's judgement that only the strong can live easily in the post-war world (II, x).

Special attention should be paid to those books which accord considerable importance to travel. We need not consider at length *The Blue Train* or *The Orient Express* in this context, since they provide little evidence of interest in the places through which the characters pass; essentially these are books about luxury. There is much more interest in Christie's treatment of what we now call the Third World. She visited South Africa as a young woman, and sets most of *The Man in the Brown Suit* there, and includes in the novel the political violence of Johannesburg at the time, which in fact produces much of the motivation of the journey, the villain being an arms supplier who is fomenting political discontent for mercenary reasons. The narrator, a lively but unintellectual young woman, announces that there will be no local colour in the book (xviii) since she can't tell a paw-paw from a hula-hula. In fact, local color doesn't go much beyond the appearance of "Kafirs". But she has already given her impression of Table Mountain, which is one of intense admiration and excitement (xviii). This confirms her love of adventure, her discontent with the ordinary life of England, and it anticipates her marriage to a man she meets in Rhodesia and their choosing to stay there. Such local color as there is, then, is largely a matter of escape from her restricted childhood, as the daughter of a professor, fascinated by the adventures of the cinema. The description is inarticulate, perhaps; it is the inarticulateness of youth and enthusiasm.

Most prominent as travel-writing is Christie's presentation of the Middle East: Egypt, Jordan, Iraq. She obviously knew some of the Middle Eastern countries as a result of her early travels, her interest in archaeology and her marriage (in 1930) to the archaeologist Max Mallowan. This means that the area is seen (except in the historical novel *Death Comes as the End*) from the view of the European outsider, the luxurious holiday maker in *Death on the Nile* and *Appointment with Death*, the archaeologist in *Murder in Mesopotamia*, the archaeologist, the tourist, the businessman and the spy in *They Came to Baghdad*, the diplomat, briefly, in *Cat among the Pigeons*. *Murder in Mesopotamia* is typical: the only local people are employees except the sinister outsider who proves to be an accomplice of the European thief Lavigny. The political situation had changed over the 20 years between the first and last of these works: an acceptable tourist destination in the 1930s, the Middle East had become a place of violent revolution and civil disorder by the 1950s. Even so, as early as *Death on the Nile* there is a sense of the instability of the area: the mysterious Ricchetti is not a murderer but a revolutionary, involved in the sending of coded telegrams remarkably like those sent in *The Man in the Brown Suit* in a different country 13 years earlier; the South African connection is made explicit by the secret service man Colonel Race (xxviii). The main concern of *Death on the Nile* is with the romances and vices of the Western characters. The relationships, the vices, the attempted frauds are founded outside Egypt, in the Anglo-Saxon world of wealth and leisure, and the sense of the historical events of the slump and the frenzy of Wall Street is not forgotten (xxvi). There is certainly an element of touristic exoticism in the depiction of Egypt. The country is a holiday arena, and the holiday serves to intensify the tensions of existing contacts and to allow the possibility of new relationships (as with the abortive relationship of Ferguson and Cornelia and the successful relationship of Cornelia and Dr Bessner). People come to see their situation more clearly when they are away from the multifarious activity of home. But that is not quite all Egypt is; it is not just a negation of home but a place with its own distinct identity, and here is some sense of the alienness of Egyptians. There is some irony at Mrs Otterbourne, the novelist, who claims to be taking the Nile cruise for local colour for her new work *Snow on the Desert's Face* (presumably something of the Valentino school): the claim is obviously that *Death on the Nile* does something more than local colour. (There is, incidentally, a private joke here: *Snow on the Desert* is the title of an unpublished juvenile work by Christie, written before she had seen any deserts.) There is nevertheless a lot of what might well be considered local colour,

as with the fairly precise geographical indications of Wadi Halfa and the second cataract (ii) and the use of odd phrases of Arabic such as the local word *dahabiyeh* (vii). A high point of tension is a guided visit to Abu Simbel, where Linnet is endangered by a falling rock (x). At one point the setting attains a symbolic force as Poirot warns Jacqueline that her passion may lead to disaster as irresistibly as the river sweeps on to its destination (viii); there is a hint of travel not just as self-discovery but as discovery of a dangerous self, faintly echoing Conrad's savage Congo River in *Heart of Darkness*. There may seem to be a major disproportion in this reminiscence, and in fact the self-discovery does seem to be much less radical than Marlowe's. The interesting thing for the reader is precisely in the gap here; the novel expresses a concern to find out what is different from the European life of comfort and success – either in terms of the actual other society or in terms of the passionate and precarious inner self. Placing these Western conflicts in an eastern setting gives us a sense of their own strangeness: the characters' way of life, which gives such priority to wealth and romance, is not the only possible one; there is potentially an external vision of people who may seem to be, in the full sense of the word, spoiled children of Western prosperity.

For in essence what we have been looking at here is the recognition of otherness. Old crimes, political events, foreign societies show us the world beyond the puzzle: they give contexts and parallels for the doings and feelings of the characters, but they also show the characters how their own concerns may be seen by people who do not share them. They impose a sort of objectivity, an impersonal justice, a sense of proportion. A woman's adulterous desire may make her an Edith Thompson; a crime inspired by the state of a family or a love affair may be overshadowed by the fate of nations and the awareness of the alien priorities that exist outside the English home. There is a challenge here to individualism. The individual's desires and his or her readiness to act on them are not unique; violence and egoism are not simply spontaneous products of emotion, but part of a social reality which grants them more or less acceptability – which makes them, one might say, more or less "natural". The reader is placed at a distance from the crime: we may feel some degree of sympathy or respect for Pilar or Jacqueline, but we also see them as illustrations of certain patterns of existence, patterns of order and of conflict, and we may come to feel the strain those patterns impose on the characters' longing for free self-assertion and the acquisition of riches and power.

It has been subtly argued by Champigny (1977, 89) that the effect of references to the real world in detective fiction is not so much to add realism as to "suffuse the reader's world with unreality"; the novel becomes legend, and the real world enters into legend. There is much plausibility in this, at least in so far as we see the Imperial Shirts as not the real organization but as an imaginative equivalent of it. But it is a little too general: if in some cases we see the real world primarily as having given a model for a fictional world, elsewhere we are aware, I take it, of some more equal balance of real and imaginary or of one where the imaginary follows rather timidly, or at least modestly, on the real. There must really have been adulterers who feared writing letters because of what happened to Edith Thompson. The novels which refer to the case thus have a sort of realism. *The Orient Express* has much less. But that novel is an imagination of how the Lindbergh case *might have* turned out, and if it is not a very plausible imagination, the reader very easily recognizes that the fantasy lies not in the details of the crime but in the details of the wild justice of revenge.

If the Christie novels assert their relationship to the real world, however, they display their unreality too. They are works of convention, part of a genre which is itself highly artificial, and the author makes this very explicit. Almost every novel contains some reference to detective stories. Two detective novelists appear: Ariadne Oliver, who is conscious of the limits of her work, with its implausible Finnish detective, and the kitschy Clancy in *Clouds*. Poirot, towards the end of his career, becomes an expert on detective fiction and expounds his views at some length. Characters often read detective stories, mostly dismissing them as serving only to pass the time (*EndH*, v). If they take them too seriously we get the monstrous Josephine in *Crooked House* or the Judge in *And Then There Were None*, who seeks to put into practice his own detective story (Epilogue).

These references are often to the unreality of the detective story: Clancy, for instance, comments that realism is not what readers want in the genre (*Clouds*, xv). This is part of a strategy neatly formulated by MacDonald (1997, 69): the detective novelist can "follow the formula to the letter and deny doing so at every turn": Clancy's novels are cheap fantasies, therefore Agatha Christie's aren't. A more subtle view appears in some places: in *The Blue Train* Katherine Grey discusses detective stories with her suitor Knighton, who points out that in detective stories people who have alibis are suspect, and that this is an instance not of the unreality of fiction but of its superiority to the real from which it takes its departure (xxi). The superiority is made clear elsewhere: detective stories

are different from life, Poirot says, because detective stories contain certainties. Told that a witness isn't sure about her evidence, he remarks that unsureness is normal in reality, though avoided in literature (*EndH*, xvii). Art imposes order; the attraction of the detective story is precisely that recovery of social and intellectual order from the vastness and extremity of life.

Art provides coherence. If the characters often refer to real events, they also often refer to other novels in the Christie corpus: they remind the reader of books he or she has read, or might have read (in *Elephants Can Remember* these reminders even have footnotes identifying the books referred to). One example, chosen for its discretion: in *The Pale Horse*, the narrator is aided by his cousin Rhoda Despard – Rhoda Dawes from *Cards*, now married to Colonel Despard – and by Mrs Dane Calthrop from *The Moving Finger*. These echoes are not commented on and play no part in the development of the story, but they provide the pleasure of recognition.

And this coherent world, finally, is the work of a creator who does not hide herself in Flaubertian fashion. She enters into competition with her own character when Miss Marple confesses that she is not nearly clever enough to write detective stories (*Library*, ix). Also in *The Body in the Library* the 9-year old Peter Carmody, a fan of detective stories, has the autograph of Agatha Christie, as well as those of Dorothy Sayers and Dickson Carr (vi). In *Lord Edgeware Dies*, Ronald, the new Lord Edgeware, comments that *Lord Edgeware Dies* would make a good title for a detective story (xiii). In *Destination Unknown*, a character reads a paperback published by Fontana, the Collins imprint in which Christie's own work appears. A curious example appears in *The ABC Murders* (iii) where it is proposed that the ideal detective story would consist of a murder committed while four people are playing cards. We seem to see the author at work: the idea that struck her here was to bear fruit two novels later. (Gill notes the passage, together with a number of other pertinent cases of self-referentiality, 1991, 133–5.) A rather more sinister anticipation occurs in *The ABC Murders* (iii), where Japp comments, in what Hastings views as a piece of particularly tasteless humour, that Poirot might one day have to detect his own death. Poirot, charming and urbane as ever, replies that it will be up to Hastings to detect his death. The idea is put into a book, some six or seven years later: it is the generally grim *Curtain*, where Hastings notably fails to detect Poirot's death until he receives a posthumous solution from his friend, who has planned his death as well as detecting it. All of this suggests that Christie had a healthy pride in the volume and fame of her work, and

that she was ready to humorously invite the reader to share that sense of satisfaction, as he or she participates in that well-established and enjoyable activity, reading a Christie.

The conspicuous self-awareness of the novelist is significant for more than one reason. It is a boast of virtuosity and so a sign of the difference between an ingenious Christie crime and a real crime. It is a sign of her recognition that her work is, after all, fiction, and specifically that the comfortable connoisseurship of crime on which it often depends and the setting up of friendly and nostalgic groups of experts on murder are only possible at the distance afforded by fiction. It is a mark of her loyalty to a genre marked by self-parody or self-mockery (Light, 1991, 74; Porter, 1981, 60; Rowland, 2001, 12). This is a tendency open to various interpretations. Rowland strongly stresses it and regards it as an aspect of play, commenting that "it is this 'playfulness' with the inherited form, of course, that allows female golden age writers to construct fictions within and against a masculine Holmesian genre" (2001, 24) – against, in other words, the hegemonic – and allegedly male – rationality of Conan Doyle. Unfortunately Rowland does not discuss the playfulness of golden age male writers; and perhaps more crucially she does not show how the reader is to differentiate this undermining of the genre from the solemn religious, moral or psychoanalytic dimensions which she also finds in the novels. In fact, finally, Christie's self-consciousness is a demonstration of the textual variety of the novels. They contain elements of generalized wisdom. They contain stereotypes, largely intended for comic effects, subtle or blatant. They contain plot inventions of extraordinary deviousness and ingenuity. They contain mythical frameworks implying the inevitable victory of rationality and integrity. And they contain the confession that this complicated textual mixture is the product of a lucid and ironic intelligence, motivated by pleasure as well as by a sense of moral and intellectual rightness.

12
The Culture

A violent screaming is heard throughout Gorston Hall (*Christmas*, iii). The family burst into Simeon Lee's room, to find him dead, and blood splashed all over the walls. "Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?", one character asks. "The mills of God grind slowly", says another. Characters respond to violence with quotation: Shakespeare's Macbeth and Longfellow (paraphrasing an early German poet) give the words for coping with a moment that might transcend normal emotion. They formulate two different responses: bewildered horror and the sense of justice – and a divine justice, not simply a human revenge. Readers may remember too the origin of the *Macbeth* quotation: Macbeth is a murderer, who has usurped power by murdering the rightful king of Scotland and who here expresses his horror at the sheer physicality of his own act. In the long run, the quotations will maintain their appropriateness: if the murder is not divine in origin, it at least bears witness to the principle that sinfulness brings its own punishment, and if Simeon is not a king he is a father, and so a source of power; he has so much blood in him because he is a youthful, vigorous, vital old man. Christie places extremity of action in the context of a culture. The quoted words have a dignity, a solemnity that gives the ugly scene an almost ritual quality. One quotation gives meaning to the physical reality and the other formulates a natural law. The onlookers communicate with each other and recall the culture they share, a culture richly able to cope with death.

Christie's characters are overwhelmingly middle class, as has been very frequently pointed out. In Christie's time this meant that they were likely to share a fairly wide familiarity with literature and other arts, and some respect for them. A certain number of the cultural references in the works may seem to do little more than establish that characters (and

readers) are members of the same club, so to speak. When for instance, Dr Reilly advises Nurse Leatheran to begin at the beginning and go on to the end in her narration of *Murder in Mesopotamia*, or when Emmott, in the same novel, refers to the beautiful but emotionally invulnerable Louise Leidner as the Snow Queen (xxii), comprehension is facilitated for those who have read, or at least know of, Lewis Carroll and Hans Christian Andersen. This is not a very exclusive group of people. The references might be objectionable if it were. But what the references do is to recall a normal childhood, a situation of ordinariness against which the reader can appreciate the strangeness of a European settlement in the desert and of an atmosphere of obscure menace. The second case, in fact, gives rise to a little discussion. Emmott, a reserved, discreet character, recalls, rather vaguely, a fairy story about the Snow Queen and Little Kay. Poirot, more sophisticated, recalls the author's name and reminds Emmott that there was also a female victim, Little Gerda. Emmott thinks of Mrs Leidner's effect on men, and especially on himself; Poirot knows that women have also been affected by her provocative conduct, and perhaps thinks specially of Sheila Reilly, whom Emmott is eventually to marry. The naming of Andersen is a stroke of rhetoric; it asserts the detective's greater lucidity and detached knowledge.

A more crucial sense of exclusiveness appears in *Lord Edgeware Dies*, where Jane's assumption that the Judgment of Paris is a matter of the dictates of fashion houses brands her as the murderer. She herself is ignorant of classical learning: but she has previously been impersonated by the well-educated Carlotta Adams, who was able to discourse readily and interestingly on Greek art and so impress her learned and aesthetic-minded host. Lack of culture is a proof of a guilty identity. But it is shocking in its own right: the sophisticated guests who hear Jane's gaffe are horrified, even though not all of them are in a position to recognize the imposture. In particular, her fiancé the Duke appears to realize for the first time that their engagement might be a mistake (xxv).

Elsewhere, though, Christie seems to accept a naïve philistinism as something rather appealing; the bluff big-game hunter, the aptly named Major Blunt, although he admits to having seen *Pelléas et Mélisande* and is spontaneously reminded of it, shows his simple integrity by commenting that he finds enjoyment of opera peculiar (*Ackroyd*, ix). Some of Christie's cultural references, moreover, are not clearly related to characters' consciousness, but signal the author's expectation as to the reader's culture. The house in *The Hollow* is no doubt given that name in order to recall the "dreadful hollow" in Tennyson's *Maud*. David Hunter in *Taken at the Flood* has that surname to fit in with the

lines of Stevenson quoted (and wrongly attributed to Browning): he is a hunter who is not genuinely home from the hill, but is a disruptive outsider, whereas Lynn, the ex-Wren, is really a sailor home from the sea.

It is possible that readers' familiarity with a common culture was not always profound in understanding and did not always extend far beyond a fairly small number of canonical authors, artists and musicians. In the case of literature, readers' knowledge may well sometimes have been restricted to some well-known quotations taken out of context. This means that in some cases there may not be much difference between cultural knowledge and cliché. These clichés, moreover, no doubt contribute to the drabness of writing in Christie which some critics comment on (rather too severely). But we should not condemn clichés too readily. They may give a hackneyed and unreflective view of the way things happen, but they do give *a* view of how they happen: they define processes of relationships and responses and so prepare the speaker to recognize the potential effect of any event. They show that events, however disturbing, were not entirely incomprehensible or extra-human, because they related to a received wisdom which had established a code of emotional decorum. Thus in *Towards Zero* the phrase "a fine Italian hand" becomes a sort of *Leitmotiv*, characterizing an elusive deviousness; the reader is alerted to the sophisticated ingenuity which typifies the detective story and which is condemned by it.

Christie's culture is not that of the academic; she had little formal education, except for her training as a singer, which obviously left her with a good knowledge of music, and especially opera, and a continuing interest in it, since she refers to composers such as Hindemith and Shostakovich who were active during her later years. Nor is her culture that of the modernist. The literary works she is closely familiar with are those that were standard fare in the Victorian period: the Bible, Shakespeare, especially the best-known tragedies, Tennyson, Kipling. Mr Satterthwaite feels a little ashamed at recalling a long quotation from Tennyson in *Three Act Tragedy* (I, iv), the poet now being unfashionable. One recalls too the nostalgic (or doting) listing of the novelists of a Victorian or Edwardian childhood in *Postern of Fate*: Charlotte M. Yonge, E. Nesbit, Antony Hope, Stevenson (even the dreadful *The Black Arrow*). There is similarly the fondness for *Cranford* and Henry James on the part of the American tourists who visit Bertram's Hotel looking for old world charm. It comes as something of a shock when Christie cites some more recent figure such as T.S. Eliot or Irving Berlin. Apart from the detective story – and even here her preference goes to the classic

writers – she seems to have little knowledge of popular culture; there is little specific reference to films (though the film industry is often referred to as part of the suspect modern world) and there is a distinct sense of strangeness when Jacqueline de Bellefort comments that Simon was her man and he did [*sic*] her wrong (*Nile*, xii). All this, regrettably, allows her literary references in particular to be dismissed as "tired and threadbare" (Barnard, 1980, 68). Less pejoratively, they are largely familiar, to people of some education; they are, on the whole, the ones an author needn't hesitate to offer to her readers from any fear of pedantry. In these ways Christie avoids any undue discrepancy between the voice of the narrator and the world of the characters, and she establishes a relation with a readership that is middlebrow or at the least not culturally adventurous. Her work depends on the revelation of the sinister in the ordinary. Her cultural references amount to an endorsement of an educated ordinariness, but they also show that within that solemn and respectable culture there is a great familiarity with violence and passion.

The interest in opera is again of a largely nineteenth-century kind. The dominating figure is Wagner. He is mentioned in general terms and there are specific references to *Tristan*, *Lohengrin* and to the less well-known *Rienzi*. A character is described as a Brunnehilde [*sic*]. *Tosca* appears, as do the popular pair of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci*. There are also references to French opera (Christie studied music in Paris): Melisande, *Lakme*; the character Louise Charpentier in *Third Girl* is a cryptic hint at another. A nice discreet recollection of an earlier opera appears (as Rosemary York points out to me) in *A Murder is Announced*: Handel's *Acis and Galatea* gives the phrase "delicious death", which becomes the name of a cake (and later of a website). One may be struck by some conspicuous gaps here; even without turning to the twentieth century, one may be surprised that an opera lover should not refer to Mozart, Beethoven, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi.

There are a considerable number of references to visual art: Botticelli, Cellini, Bellini, Vermeer, Greuze, Stubbs and the Victorians: Waterhouse, Sargent and Augustus John, Orpen, Blair, Leighton, Alma Tadema. The least familiar names are probably those of Bartolozzi, an eighteenth-century engraver (*Ackroyd*, xi and *Funeral*, ix) and the sculptor Thorwaldsen (*Mirrors*). The *Roger Ackroyd* reference at least is rather surprising: Dr Sheppard has spoken of some beautiful etchings – not engravings – in a house he briefly visits and is admiring the Bartolozzi when his hostess arrives. His confidence in identifying it suggests a surprising grasp of art history and may intimidate many readers rather than enlighten them.

In *After the Funeral*, on the contrary, the identification is made by an art historian and goes to reinforce the sense of his expertise, which is crucial to the story. The Thorwaldsen reference is a neat instance of the way that artistic knowledge confers social status: the somewhat camp theatre director Alex Restarick, in conversation with the stolid Inspector Curry, condemns the victim, Mr Gulbrandsen's taste by referring to his collection of Thorwaldsen statues (a point that may well be lost on many readers, such as the present author) (xiii).

The obscurity of some references need not exclude the reader, since their purpose is often related to subject rather than artistic form: so the Bellini reference is to a Laughing Madonna which captivates Marina Gregg's eye – at a moment when all the investigation seeks to establish what she is staring at – and brings home to her powerfully the idea of motherhood, and therefore of the resentment she feels at her loss of her child. But what painting is this? The reference is to Giacomo Bellini, who is unknown to history. If this is a mistake for Jacopo, the reference is surprising, since little of his work survives and there is not much laughter in what does. The best-known Bellini is Giovanni, but I have found no laughing Madonnas in his work, since his Madonnas are thoughtful, tender, even melancholy. Similarly readers may feel that the Luini Madonna to which Nadine Boynton is compared, dark-haired, creamy-complexioned, placid, is really just a Madonna, and that ignorance of the work of Luini is barely a handicap (*Appointment*, I, ii).

The cultural references, however, do not simply demonstrate the level of education of author and reader. They serve also to imply the values by which the events of the novels – and especially the horrors of violence – are to be assessed. So they often form part of a conception of enjoyment and refinement. They afford a sense of beauty, elegance and sophistication. They are part of the novels' sense of prosperity and untrammeled appreciation of personality: so when Luke in *Murder is Easy* sees his beloved as Nevinson's Witch, he presumably identifies the element of wildness in her that ought to make her reject her fiancé the boring Lord Whitfield, and at the same time expresses his appreciation of her beauty and shows his knowledge of art. (This is no doubt the "Inexperienced Witch", referred to in Nevinson's memoirs and apparently a distinctly modernist work.)

The concern with taste is specially prominent in the references to furniture, china and glass. The names here will be familiar to many readers: Morris, Hepplewhite and Chippendale, Rockingham, Spode, Waterford, Murano. The crucial thing here is the ability to recognize these things. The ability may be one not shared by all readers: many of

us might be blind to a Charles II tazza, of the kind that is stolen in *Murder at the Vicarage*, though no doubt we can admire the characters and the author who do know what it is. In particular it is important to be able to recognize a false Hepplewhite, which is part of the general deceptiveness of the Christie world. Furniture is quite important in *Dumb Witness*, as an instance of the solidity and traditional character of the small English town. Hastings, arriving at the victim's house, notes a Chippendale bookcase, Hepplewhite chairs, heavy Victorian dining furniture; for all his generally naïve character, he can recognize an expensive and tasteful décor. Towards the end of the novel he and Poirot meet, outside an antique shop, the victim's friend Miss Peabody, a model of disillusioned wit, firm judgement and lively curiosity. After some frank, if highly biased, comments on the crime, she leaves, advising Hastings not to buy the Hepplewhite chairs he is considering, because they are a fake. The town, apparently a model of a settled order, contains falsity (as it contains murder); the acutely observant older generation is able to see through illusion and does not hesitate to say so. The characters who appreciate good things (in Jamesian phrase) are the ones who do not doubt themselves, who live in a harmony which prefigures the harmony that is to be established at the end of the novels, who have the sense of belonging which is often regrettably missing from the world of the books.

There is a striking contrast with the new house of *Endless Night*. This is presented as a possession; the narrator insists that it is his own – not a house ready made, but one created for himself. But it is also a significant artistic creation, beautiful in its exploitation of shape and light (xiv), and the narrator considers it to be his most prized possession (xxii), an answer to his unfocussed desire for some personal fulfillment. The story of *Endless Night* is that of a man who mistakes his love of architecture for a love of property and commits murder in the search for wealth.

It does not escape Christie's attention, of course, that some works of art are worth a lot of money. The plot of *After the Funeral* turns essentially on the disguising of a Vermeer. The reader needs to know that Vermeers are very expensive. He or she also needs to have some idea of what good taste is or at least that there are people who are assumed to have good taste; there is much mockery in the book of the bad paintings of the murderer's late husband. What appears to be one of these has been painted, by the murderer, over the Vermeer. The sense of a true art emerging from its disguise is part of the attainment of truth and order at the end of the novel, and it contrasts emphatically with the criminal's deceptiveness and cupidity.

With the awareness of visual beauty goes an awareness of the beauty of language. The Bible, especially, gives a fine sense of language, commented on when Miranda, in *Hallowe'en Party*, cites the phrase about Jael offering Sisera "butter in a lordly dish", and her mother explains that she is taught at school to appreciate the language of the Authorized Version. When Joanna Burton, in conversation with the partly educated Megan, cites amongst empire imports "ivory, apes and peacocks" (*Finger*, vii) there is some sense of the foreignness which the original refers to, but also a love of the rhythm of the words and the exoticness of the things referred to. The same phrase is playfully referred to in the next novel, *Towards Zero*: the spoilt wife Kay asks her indulgent husband for a décor of peacock blue with ivory satin cushions and invites him to be the ape. There is charm here – misleadingly, since neither character is in fact genuinely likeable: there is a pleasantly lighthearted marital teasing, a sense of luxury and a familiarity with the more picturesque aspects of high culture. There is also a sense of the ease of humorous conversation in frivolously referring to shared knowledge. The ease and readiness to use her experience are things Megan still lacks; she can learn from Joanna self-confidence and a superficial but valuable articulateness.

Poirot, of course, is highly articulate. When he introduces himself by saying "I am a stranger with you as were my fathers before me" (*Hallowe'en*, xiv), this is no common confession of being a foreigner, of the kind Poirot often proffers; it momentarily brings into the suburban world a sense of an absolute difference. And there is a little more than that. He is speaking to the gardener of a cemetery who recognizes the text from a gravestone; Poirot borrows conspicuously (if inaccurately) a piece of English culture, in a context of death. Beauty of language can, too, be personally enlightening: Megan learns to recognize love from reading Shakespeare. Although she is on close terms with Gerry and much indebted to him, she refuses at first to admit that she returns his love, seeking to maintain her independence: she doesn't want to be *made* to love. The catalysts for her maturing are danger and poetry: she writes to him, fearing death, and cites as expressing her own feelings the opening of a Shakespeare sonnet, from her school textbook:

> So are you in my thoughts as food to life
> Or as sweet-season'd showers are to the ground.

The arts are, however, largely considered in narrative terms; they are concerned with the passions of love and hatred, and often with death.

Operas, for instance, are about love and death, and often murder. "*Now* I can forgive him", says Tosca, looking at the body of Scarpia, whom she has murdered. David Lee, the sensitive musician son of the brutal Simeon, has reminded his wife of the line as he reflects on his own father's murder (*Christmas*, vi). The murderer is as yet unknown; but death, like music, brings a sort of imagined reconciliation. Love and death, and specifically murder, are also the subject of much of the literature that Christie cites. If Victorian literature may seem to some critics to be favored for its comfortable familiarity, we should not forget that Victorian literature is in fact the product of a period conscious of radical social and ideological change. It may represent sexuality and violence less directly than much later writing but they are nevertheless often central to it. So is the instability of personality which is of so much concern to Christie. Browning and Tennyson, in fact, have constructed much of the pattern of anxieties which is at the heart of Christie's writing.

The Bible too is a rich source of murderers. Jael gives a forceful image of female cruelty, while the stories of Uriah and of Naboth's vineyard give powerful examples of the destructive egoism of love and possessiveness. Not surprisingly also it is the murderous Shakespeare that appears most prominently: *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*; *Romeo and Juliet*, which is about love and death but only secondarily about murder, also appears quite frequently. Macbeth may hold first place because it suggests the greatness of the murderer and the link between murder and power, as well as the vulnerability of the murderer. Christie sees in the Shakespeare plays instances of strong characters and expressions of strong feelings. She finds there phrases that give dignity and pathos to hatred, loss and desire. The crimes she depicts may seem sordid; her own condemnation of the selfishness and cruelty they reveal might risk making them simply unpleasant and so uninteresting. They gain a sort of greatness through quotation: either the greatness of destruction, from the victim's point of view, or the greatness of overweening egoism, on the part of the criminal.

If in these ways the cultural references may simply reinforce the inherent emotional impact of a scene or situation, there are also works in which they have an important function of thematic structuring. A notable example is *Taken at the Flood*, where the title quotation (from *Julius Caesar*) is of major importance. It is about opportunity and the risk of losing opportunity. The final words quoted, attaining an acute pathos through the rhythm, exacerbated by the ending in mid-line, powerfully suggests frustration: if we miss the tide we may "lose our

ventures". It is developed in the epigraph, but it is difficult at first to see the relevance of it to the novel. The Cloade family appear to have been reduced to near paralysis by the loss of the strong man Gordon Cloade, and by their own incompetence or dishonesty. At most they take the opportunity of borrowing money from Gordon's widow Rosaleen – who, since she is not really Rosaleen at all but a servant in disguise, is too timid to say no. The passage is first quoted in the text by David Hunter, who cites the last words only. He recognizes the precariousness of his situation but resolves to take more risks (II, iii); the Shakespearean lines are an encouragement to boldness. They contrast a life of efficiency and courage with the shallows and miseries of a drab everyday. The reader doesn't yet fully know what boldness David has committed or exactly why he fears he may lose the splendid house in which he is living with the pseudo-Rosaleen. It seems most likely that he expects the mysterious Enoch Arden to prove that Rosaleen's marriage to Gordon, and therefore her inheriting from him at his death, was invalid because her first husband was alive. *A fortiori*, the reader doesn't know what chances he will take when he goes to see Arden, and especially whether he plans to murder him. Shakespearean boldness can justify crime, then; the life of adventure is a savage life. Near the end of the novel Poirot cites the opening lines of the quotation. This infuriates the philistine Superintendent Spence: Poirot marks himself out as a man of culture. In this he also strangely coincides with David, since he has no reason to know what David was silently thinking some 70 pages earlier. The thematic consistency of the novel overrides simple verisimilitude and the reader perceives a coherence of thought and feeling beyond the differences of character that constitute the puzzle. Poirot in fact, defining the feeling involved, sees the conflicts, the extremes of action, the opportunism, as essentially Shakespearian (II, xiv). This is most clearly a rhetorical amplification of the jealousies and hates which have been clear enough in the book. Like much rhetoric, it is strictly redundant, but serves to add thoughtfulness and dignity to the confusing events of the story. Poirot still refrains from explaining the opportunism, but he does distinguish the first death, caused accidentally in a fight, from the last, which is cold and dispassionate, so that it must be this one which is opportunistic. We soon discover that this is the murder of Rosaleen by David: eager to preserve his cover by ridding himself of the one person who may reveal that he has set her up as an imposter, he adds poison to the bromides which he encourages her to take to soothe her fraught nerves. Poirot recalls the quotation again, at the end of the last chapter in which he appears, and warns that the tide which is to be taken at the flood may

be dangerous as well as advantageous (II, xvii). David has been arrested and has commented that he is a gambler who can recognize the last throw; Poirot observes that his gambling has proved self-destructive. Taking the tide is taking risks, and risks can go wrong. The development of the quotation, then, has served to focus the story on the character of David, the outsider, the adventurer, the conspirator, the destroyer of due social order and on Poirot's sage understanding of him.

What is important in all this is that Shakespeare's characters speak formally, memorably and with an exceptional density of connotation, and that their relationships are presented as fully tense and tending to an extreme resolution. England in the twentieth century did not cultivate eloquence in everyday life. It cultivated restraint and privacy. It was not done to formulate passion or despair in ways that would impose on other people. The use of a Shakespearean rhetoric marks out the novel as different from everyday propriety. It gives a justification in established learning and literary authority for a brief elevation of emotion to a transcendent level of articulateness and generality. Characters attain articulateness as they find words with which they can face death and assert determination, and they attain generality as they see themselves as parents, children, lovers, rivals and not just as an individual here and now. The novel thus acquires both a claim to profundity and an intensified plausibility. The myth of crime as an exorcism of self-centered hostility is enhanced by the tragic associations of nobility, reconciliation and heightened awareness of other people's sensibility.

Endless Night makes acute use of two poets. The novel begins and ends with a quotation from Eliot's *Four Quartets* (which actually originates in Mary Queen of Scots): the opening words of the novel are "In my end is my beginning" and the same words recur on the last page. (The same quotation is used again in *Elephants Can Remember*, though the reversed form, that in the beginning is the end, is also cited as more apt; the line relates clearly to the author's recurrent concern with time and continuity.) The narrator, who has drawn little benefit from his education, knows the phrase only at second hand and he is puzzled by it; he identifies his puzzlement with his concern to structure his text properly, to identify the starting point of his story. He has actually in some ways confused his story, by offering as starting points his love for the Gipsy's Acre site or his meeting with the architect Santonix and delaying to the end the revelation of the murderous conspiracy which is the essence of the plot that started when he met Greta. But beyond this lies a deeper problem: his end as an insane murderer is somehow implicit in his whole character, as symbolized in the occasion, hinted at

early in the book but elucidated only at the end, when as a schoolboy he drowned a friend in order to steal his watch from his wrist. The Eliot line is made to imply a fatality of character and this is reinforced by the Blake lines that give the title of the novel. These are presented in the novel as a song sung by his victim, his wife Ellie:

> Some are born to Sweet Delight,
> Some are born to Endless Night:

The narrator has sought delight and seems to have found it in his love for the charming, sincere, affectionate, generous, innocent – and rich – Ellie; in fact he is destined for the endless night of guilt, as embodied in the treacherous Greta. He seems capable of good and evil; the development of the story defines him as evil.

The Blake citation opens:

> Man was made for Joy and Woe
> And when this we rightly know
> Thro' the World we safely go . . .

He has not gone safely, but has brought disaster to himself and those around him, because he has not really known what Joy and Woe are, but has confused them with possession and arrogance. The point is reinforced by "The Fly", the second song that Ellie sings (rather surprisingly to a gay little dance tune), in which the speaker brushes away a fly and reflects on his own mortality:

> If thought is life
> And strength and breath
> And the want
> Of thought is death;
> Then am I
> A happy fly
> If I live
> Or if I die.

Michael is assailed, at the time of writing, by mortality and guilt; if he has lived for a heightened awareness of life and strength and breath, he has not accepted his mortality with Blakean humility; purposive and cynical desire has immured him in a deathly world, in which he has lacked the wide sympathetic thoughtfulness that Blake calls for. The two

poets give a gravity and a metaphysical reach to the text beyond the level that could be expected of the only partially sophisticated Michael; they invite the reader to see the novel as the creation of a character who incarnates an egoism that can destroy an admirable aspiration to love, love of a person and of art and of the space of the world. And this implies a particular reading of the novel: it appears to be a *Bildungsroman*, tracing the growth of the narrator in personal relations and cultural awareness, but in fact no *Bildung*, no personal development, is possible: the novel is the revelation of an essence, concealed through most of its length by devious narration.

Sleeping Murder, likewise, makes interesting use of *The Duchess of Malfi*. The murderer, Dr Kennedy, has quoted during the crime the famous line "Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle, she died young". (The line is also quoted, though in a metaphorical sense, in *Pigs*, I, viii.) It is not entirely implausible that he should know the line; as a doctor he is a person of education, if he gives no other sign of literary knowledge. It is, though, a fairly extreme example of Christie's assumption that literature is a way of formulating extreme emotion: readers may reasonably doubt whether the criminal would recall the line in the heat of passion and violence. Certainly, the phrase very powerfully suggests his feelings at the time – horror at his own act in killing his sister. It is overheard by the child Gwenda (step-daughter of the victim). Eighteen years later, having returned to the same town, and the same house, after a childhood spent in New Zealand, she is disturbed to find herself recognizing parts of the house, even though she does not consciously remember it. This imprecise memory is crystallized when she attends a performance of the play and hears the crucial line (iii). She screams in horror and rushes from the theatre, and the next day is able to tell Miss Marple of a precise visual memory of the murder. Eventually the murderer is identified, and Miss Marple is able to point out that the lines are central to the mystery: they are spoken in the play by a brother who has caused his sister's death in order to punish her for a marriage of love, and Dr Kennedy has actually murdered his sister for precisely the same reason (xxv). This is a clue not to the crime but to the writing of the novel. There is no reason to assume that the line is especially likely to be remembered by a criminal who is in exactly the same situation as the character in the play. It is rather that the line has special literary appropriateness. *Sleeping Murder* can be read as a transposition of the Jacobean fascination with the warped and perverted. It is not tragic, because of the comforting presence of Gwenda's husband and Miss Marple's bringing of justice, but it hints at what it does not depict. Dr Kennedy appears to be a rather

stiff but courteous and affable elderly man, but he is really a murderer: in addition to his sister he kills two potential witnesses, attempts to kill others and drives his brother-in-law to madness. This must be the result of some passion of overwhelming intensity, which is never directly expressed. Literary reference provides the violence of feeling which the detective story cannot encompass.

These cultural references in Christie are crucial to her literary project (and I cannot see, despite Knepper, 2005, that they are any more frequent in her last works than in the general body of her writing). She works in a genre which is inherently complex: it deals with death and unrestrained malice, but it is also a puzzle, a game, an entertainment for a fireside evening. She needs to remind the reader of the depth of emotion that murder and its motives entail – revenge, cupidity – and of the emotions that can oppose egoism and hatred in the moral economy of the novels – love of persons or of beauty. She is aware that these emotions have been the matter of a vast and serious body of art and literature, and she is able to formulate and justify them by allusion to that culture. The reader knows that murder is terrible and understandable, because Shakespeare and Longfellow have said so. This may seem a sort of parasitism: Christie may seem to leave to her forebears the task of defining feeling. More seriously, it is a sort of humility. Christie does not invent emotions, or their expression, but reminds readers that she and they are part of a tradition in which they already exist. They attain solemnity because they are not just part of the individual but part of a continuing society: the lasting pertinence of art is one way in which Christie can display the continuity in people's way of living. And yet there always inheres in these cultural references also a sense of distance: emotion cited through Tennyson is emotion muted. It is emotion that is compatible with the kind of reading which belongs to the spectator of life, to the intellectual, the player of a game. The novel talks of the extremes of life and it keeps them away from us.

It can be valuable for us to think what there is in this combination which makes it satisfying, comfortable, undemanding, in a way that the crime in Dostoevsky or Dickens is not. The answer is perhaps that Dostoevsky and Dickens at least risk destroying the coherence of their own worlds. They risk suggesting that the truest feeling is violent and destructive, that the deepest relation between people is conflict, while they assert that the values of life are centered on love, trust, selflessness. Similarly Holquist (1983, 173), dealing with recent serious literature influenced by the detective genre, contrasts the "phony violence" of the detective story with the "real violence" – to the reader's assumptions – of

the post-modernist novel. Christie doesn't disrupt the reader's assumptions in this way: she asserts the values of innocence and clear thinking, and if much of her work hints that experience is deceptive, unstable and threatening, the hint is exorcised in the writing of the books and the triumph of the detectives.

13
Curtain: A Conclusion

When Captain Hastings comes to Styles in Christie's first novel, he is relaxing from the ordeal of the war and benefiting from a friendship with a man not unlike himself, an apparently simple bluff practical man of his own class and background. In the pleasant landscape of Essex he finds much to intrigue him: beautiful women, sinister men, a murder. Hastings is the innocent, a splendid comic creation whose narrative is fundamentally flawed by his vanity, his patronizing attitude to his exotic friend Poirot, and his reluctance to believe ill of the women to whose charms he is so thoughtlessly susceptible. *Curtain*, in which he returns to Styles after some twenty-five years, and during a second World War, is not a comedy. It is a work of lucid anxiety, and it formulates the essence of Christie's unease about crime and the society in which crime arises. Hastings, it is true, is still, sometimes, comically unaware of himself: he admires the man's man Boyd Carrington, the bold and self-confident former colonial governor, owner of a house which, though decaying, is grand and old enough to give him a link to history, a man whom Poirot is to dismiss as pompous and self-important (viii). Hastings is immediately offended by the blatantly charming ladies' man Allerton and suspects him of murder as soon as murder is in the air, though there is no evidence against him and he will prove to be (at least within the scope of the novel) totally harmless. He is unconscious of his own attraction to Nurse Craven, though he comments on her vigorous and well-balanced body (x), and is rather indignant about Poirot's comment on her auburn hair – for which, in Poirot's words, he has always had a penchant. But, for one thing, Hastings has matured. He has become modest, recognizing for instance his own obtuseness (viii). For another, his mistakes are not so innocent, now. His prejudice against Allerton has sinister consequences, apart from blinding him to the real murderous

dimensions of the new Styles, and his liking for the nurse blinds him to the fact that she is a schemer who is carrying on an affair with Allerton while seeking to draw Boyd Carrington into a more lasting and more profitable relationship.

More fundamentally, his situation in life is bleak. His wife Dulcie, of whom he speaks with the deepest affection and tenderness, has died (presumably in her forties), leaving him, he says with all the eloquence of which he is capable, solitary and only half alive (vii). They have had four children, but three of these are scattered around the world, and although his favorite daughter Judith is present he finds it difficult to understand her and there is much serious friction between them. Poirot, unmistakably the central fascination of his life, the man who has arranged his marriage, is dying, an enfeebled figure reduced to an invalid chair, easily tired and sometimes irascible. Hastings has become a figure of pathos. He notes that the village of Styles St. Mary has changed fundamentally (i) – and changed for the worse; what survives of the past is the decrepit buildings of Styles itself. Decay in the outside world parallels the decline in his private life. His friendship for Poirot and his hero-worship of his friend are diffused by his concern for Poirot's physical decline, as the great detective himself resists becoming a figure of pathos; he is already a figure of manifest unreal theatricality as his died hair and moustache seem ever more unconvincing. There is a reason for this, we eventually find; Poirot is not so helpless or decrepit as he wishes to seem. His decline is in part a pretence directed against his old companion. Hastings's slightly patronizing tone of pity for Poirot in his narrative is therefore misplaced. But the decline, if exaggerated, is real, nonetheless, and the reader is made very aware of physical decline and mortality. Poirot is suffering from a series of heart attacks and knows that this is his last case. The novel is thus bathed in an atmosphere of weary resignation, within which Poirot's last triumph can only seem melancholy. Hastings and Poirot will not hunt together again, as Poirot promised at the end of *Styles*, and as happened in *Murder on the Links* and many more times. This is their last hunt. Poirot continues to gain some aesthetic satisfaction from this intriguing case, involving a particularly challenging criminal (xv). But the pleasure is limited. Mortality, his grave care for the innocent, his sense of the strength of his opponent and his hesitant decision to take justice into his own hands have turned him from the player of games, the elegantly competent virtuoso of rationality, into a figure both touching and solemn. His professional skill becomes a path to self-sacrifice. Knepper (2005) perhaps goes too far in seeing the framework of the final Poirot and Marple novels as religious; but she is

surely right in noting that in them the detective becomes more unambiguously a moral agent than ever before, an avenger and not merely an investigator. But the elements of game and skill have not quite gone.

The Mysterious Affair at Styles was explicit enough about the underlying discontent of its characters, even if they were resolved by a more or less happy ending. *Curtain* reiterates the theme and relates it very openly to an analysis of the family as a locus of power and alienation. The return to Styles brings to Hastings a recognition of the restraints which pervaded the house at the time of his first visit: people were not happy there: they were prisoners controlled by their step-mother's money (iv); he sees the false sentiment that has bound him to the place, and the real frustration and cynicism of those who lived there (viii). The old woman who ghoulishly remembers him from the days of the Inglethorp murder and the constant sense of evil he perceives suggest a place unable to escape from a deathly past. The society of the new Styles is no better. We find there the new owners, Colonel and Mrs Luttrell, the husband reduced to timidity and helplessness by his wife's public bullying, the wife a blatantly theatrical character with her fake Irish accent; the Franklins, where the husband is tied only by a sense of rigid duty to a wife who seeks to dominate him and other men by her self-centredness and appearance of sickness (a more malignant version of Mrs Leidner in *Murder in Mesopotamia*); Boyd Carrington, whose apparent success and ease of manner does not prevent his feeling worn out and futile after the death of his wife and the failure of his attraction to a second woman, and whose superficial verbosity is perhaps a reaction to his fundamental solitude; Allerton, condemned by Poirot for his egoism and irresponsibility; and Elizabeth Cole, a survivor of a family where the father's tyranny has provoked his murder by her sister, and who considers herself and her siblings to be maimed by their past (viii); the word might apply to many characters in Christie, and especially to the victims of power. The power of old Mrs Inglethorp and the power of the murdered Litchfield father are echoed discreetly by Hastings's own well-meaning but intrusive attempt to exert parental authority over Judith, who makes her attitude clear in commenting on Mrs Inglethorp's control of her family as an abuse of power (iv). All forms of power, even Hastings's kindly concern for decency and responsibility, alike paralyze true personal development.

The remaining guest at Styles is Stephen Norton, a bird-watcher and therefore to all appearances harmless. In fact his lack of close personal ties, his apparent absorption in the natural world and merely casual observation of the people around him, make him the spirit of evil in the

book. Norton is an Iago figure: the literary analogy is made very explicit. The Iago structure is in fact a crucial distinctive feature of *Curtain*. The villain does not murder, but he encourages others to murder. In this way he has brought about five crimes; as well as the deaths of the five victims, there are the death by suicide of one of the killers, the hanging of a second and the death of a third in a prison for insane criminals. He is thus a psychopath exceeding most of Christie's other villains in his arrogant contempt for the life of other people. The Iago theme was a recurrent concern of Christie's; it is alluded to in *End House* (ix), *Mesopotamia* (xviii), *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* (xi) and briefly in *Mirrors* (i). It is notable too that what struck her in St John Ervine's play *John Ferguson* (not, of course *Fergueson*), to which she refers in *Curtain*, was not the themes of violence and revenge, or even the themes of power and dependency, but the scene of indirect persuasion to murder (which, incidentally, is the second act and not the third).

The Iago is the person who, out of jealousy, gives another the strength to commit the crime he weakly desires, while remaining himself beyond punishment. The theme is disturbing in two ways. First it shows - what Christie often asserts, but perhaps never demonstrates as systematically as here – that the readiness to murder is widespread. Norton, as we have seen, has provoked five people to murder before the opening of the novel; within the novel itself, he inspires Luttrell to shoot at his wife, Mrs Franklin to attempt to murder her husband and Hastings to attempt to poison Allerton. The novel alleviates all these crimes: Luttrell at the last minute aims wild, and the couple become more affectionate and intimate after this cathartic moment; Mrs Franklin dies from her own poison, after Hastings has inadvertently moved the poisoned cup; Hastings absurdly falls asleep while waiting to kill his foe. There is still some mildness in this novel and it is sometimes comic; catastrophe is averted. But that mitigation of crime does not conceal the potential for evil in the characters. Poirot speaks eloquently of the universality of murderous impulses (citing the favorite example of the child killing the kitten) and he clarifies the concept, elsewhere often put approximately and so less plausibly, by distinguishing the common *wish* to kill from the rare *will* to kill ("Postscript"). People are saved from guilt by luck. Second, the Iago theme shows crimes committed from love of power alone. Whereas the typical Christie murderer kills for profit or self-protection, Norton gains nothing from the deaths he provokes; the act of provoking them is motive enough. Woods (1997, 107) convincingly argues that this lack of rational motive, together with the indirect method of murder, "points to crime that has gotten out of control and

has broken through the boundaries erected by the detective" – whose own status as a voice of social order thus comes into question. Norton is an aesthete of death and a virtuoso of manipulation. *Curtain* therefore forms one of Christie's most radical investigations of the destructive force of power: institutionalized through the family or individually produced through an insidious persuasiveness, power undermines all possibilities of free and equal intercourse. Knepper (2005), despite her appreciative analysis of the final novels, nevertheless considers them not to be among the author's best. More explicitly still, Barnard – in general a sympathetic and perceptive reader of Christie – regards *Curtain* as "a perfunctory affair", in which the author "could not come up with a satisfactory plot, set of characters or motivation to justify the solution" (in Herbert, 1994, 417). The judgement seems astonishing; one can only suspect that Barnard was seeking the kind of ingenious and apparently unproblematic structure found in most of Christie's best work and did not recognise the thematic richness of this, her most ambitious work.

Hastings's misunderstandings may still sometimes be comic, but, because his naiveté entails an unreflecting sense of entitlement to power, the comedy is sometimes undercut by bitterness: a memorable scene is the one in which he reproaches Judith with her love for a married man and she hotly defends herself, scornfully rejecting his interference in her private life. They are at cross purposes, as the reader easily enough recognizes. Hastings believes she is falling for the cad Allerton, whose marriage is said to be an empty one, which simply gives him an excuse for not marrying the women he seduces. In fact, she is honorably in love with her employer, the upright and legalistic scientist Dr Franklin, who is oppressed by the unreasonable demands of his wife. There is to be a reconciliation of father and daughter. Christie does not let antagonism go too deep with two sympathetic characters. But she has demonstrated that a woman may have to be quite forceful to defend herself against the paternal assumption of power over her sexuality, that lasting affection entails an acceptance of difference. Power, in other words, can take the form of paternalism. This is why there is something of a debate on safety in the novel. Hastings feels responsible for the safety and happiness of his daughter (v), just as Poirot claims to be acting for Hastings's own safety (iv). But he also considers an excessive concern for safety as alien to human nature (iv). The issue is one central to much more ambitious literature (such as the work of Dostoevsky): where lies the distinction of responsibility and power? Does responsibility exclude the freedom of others? If Hastings learns that you can't control your children, he

is no doubt left confused by the extent to which he himself has been controlled.

The issue of power underlies many other aspects of the book, which is a strangely disquieting one. Many of the themes of the earlier work recur, and have become a source of anxiety and discomfort. The difference of morality between the generations, frequently asserted in other novels, is manifest when Judith and Franklin, unsentimental scientists, assert that they do not regard human life as sacred and defend involuntary euthanasia: the reader may easily suspect that they intend to kill the sickly – or would-be sickly – Mrs Franklin, and in a terrible moment shortly before the end of the novel Hastings himself comes to the same suspicion. Judith has in fact asserted that one is only justified in denying another person's right to live if one is free from any personal benefit, and this allows us to continue to respect her integrity. But it is not absurd to fear that she might have lapsed, and the reader may well be chilled to find that she plans to marry Franklin, who has declared – during the war against Nazism – that 80% of the human race do not deserve to live. Judith, moreover, has the secretiveness which is often admired in Christie characters, as a form of discretion, reserve or self-possession; but her secretiveness contributes to her alienation from her father. If her intelligence, which he clearly recognizes, has made her one of Christie's most assured professional women, it has perhaps impoverished her as well.

Where there is power there is illusion. Hastings in *Curtain* is immersed in illusion – and this illusion, of course, is what he passes onto the reader in his narrative, written before he receives Poirot's posthumous elucidation. *Curtain* is unusual amongst Christie's novels not only because of the "motiveless malignancy" of the criminal (to quote's Coleridge's phrase on Iago), but also because it turns on an illusion created not by the criminal but by the detective. Poirot gives Hastings a rather unclear task, that of keeping an eye on the other guests, apparently to forestall a murder. But Poirot – acting on his own, solitary initiative like so many people in Christie – asserts from the beginning that he knows who the murderer is. He purports to keep this information from Hastings for his own protection. Hastings, in effect, therefore, has the task, not so much of seeing into the motivation and methods of an unknown murderer, but of guessing what Poirot knows. In fact Poirot is weaving him into a web of deception of his own, making him into an unwitting accomplice of his murder of the wicked Norton.

Like Poirot in *The Orient Express*, Hastings is awoken in the night to see a mysterious figure in a conspicuous dressing gown approaching the

scene of the crime; Poirot realizes that he is being exploited by a disguise, but Hastings doesn't. Hastings, of course, takes the wrong angle; he falls for Poirot's deception and he seeks to find ways in which the various murders which Poirot is considering might have been committed by someone other than the actual and obvious perpetrators. Poirot does remain true to the spirit of their previous adventures and to the rules of the detective genre, by hinting at the truth; the hints are insufficient for Hastings's mind, still constitutionally unable to see outside the set frame. He ends with a recognition that his friend and hero has been manipulating him, deluding him, finally arranging a second marriage for him in a spirit which may seem close to arrogance (and we do not learn whether Hastings accepts Poirot's final matchmaking). He has been the victim of malicious deception by Norton; it might be even more hurtful to be the victim of benign deception by Poirot, who for instance saves him from himself by secretly administering a sleeping draft when he is about to murder Allerton. Ina Rae Hark acutely notes that Poirot treats Hastings as Christie treats her readers, by mystification (1997, 115), and this recognition may well unsettle us as readers. Unlike Hastings, we enter into a contract with the author to be mystified and then enlightened – but ought we to accept the contract so blithely?

There is something very disturbing in Poirot's end. We have already seen in Christie's work someone who puts to death people who have caused the death of others in ways not open to legal punishment and who then commits suicide, recording his strategy in a posthumous document. This is the judge in *And Then There Were None*. There are great differences between the judge and Poirot. Poirot does not have the judge's wholehearted certainty of the justification of his acts and he certainly does not have the sense that the punishments are a virtuoso demonstration of lethal ingenuity. He stops short of suicide, merely failing to take the medicine which would counter the heart attack he expects. But he resembles the judge in stepping over the line between investigation and intervention, and in doing so he usurps the right to punish which is properly the responsibility of the legal apparatus of the state.

Legally, Poirot is a murderer and Norton is a victim. Christie, in what she planned as her own posthumous document, makes the act of detecting into an act of murder. The effect is double. Artistically, there is a brilliant inversion of the genre: while her novels often feature criminals who establish themselves as associates of the detective, the one character who *cannot* be the criminal is the series detective (though it has to be added, incidentally, that Gladys Mitchell's Mrs Bradley *starts* her

career by a murder). The criminal is then, in these exceptional circumstances, the least likely person, to the point of being inconceivable as a suspect throughout the body of the novel: he is, as Hark puts it (1997, 114) "this most impossible of [Christie's] murderers". In extending the puzzle, the mystery of the identity of the criminal, to its extreme form, the author strains the whole conventional structure of the genre.

Morally, the novel falls short of a condemnation of murder, and so of the sense of an unchallenged rule of justice. Murder is not simply wicked in *Curtain*; the cases that Poirot is coping with involve murderers who to varying degrees invite sympathy or at least understanding: the wife who presumably poisons a sadistic husband and then commits suicide, the niece who kills an elderly aunt suffering extreme pain, the labourer who shoots an unfaithful wife and the wife who poisons an unfaithful husband, the daughter who liberates her family from their tyrannical father. Even Poirot's assertion, frequently made in the other novels, that he disapproves of murder, is abandoned. "Once justice executes itself", Woods comments (1997, 109) – that is, once Poirot punishes himself for his murder of Norton – "there is no longer any barrier between the community and crime. We are all susceptible, all criminal". Hastings, the decent old-fashioned English gentleman, continues to assert that murder is never justified. But he finds himself agreeing – mildly – with the view that blackmailers deserve to be killed (vii), he thinks the henpecked Luttrell would be justified in taking a hatchet to his wife (viii), he reflects that if there were to be a victim of murder he would like it to be his *bête noire* Allerton (viii) – whom he is finally himself tempted to murder. We have, rather than a world of good and evil, a world of conflicting wills or conflicting personalities, Norton's viciously random murderousness competing with Poirot's reluctant and carefully targeted murderousness. The detective story approaches a justification of murder; and perhaps Christie may have reflected on how far the genre's fascination with murder itself implies some sympathy for it.

In *Curtain*, more than anywhere else, Christie makes the mystery genre into an image of a world of conflict and confusion. Illusion, essential to the genre, and power, which she perennially diagnoses as the cancer of personal and family relationships, constitute the mysteries of the book and their solution. They are less mitigated by optimism than in other works, and such elements of an happy ending as do appear are very partial. The Luttrells are reunited, but their differences of temperament remain. Hastings and Judith are reconciled, but she is to leave for Africa with Franklin, and he is left with the suggestion of marriage to Miss Cole, who has given him the slightest of encouragement. Poirot

has succeeded in eliminating the enemy, at the cost of his life and of his moral certainties. His success looks not unlike a defeat, and if his last written words are to look back with nostalgic satisfaction on his partnership with Hastings, the sense of finality is perhaps as important as the sense of fulfillment. More crucially still, the illusions and the exercise of power are not wholly the work of an evil force which is to be overcome by the heroic intelligence of the detective and his allies. They are the work of the detective himself; the whole plot of *Curtain* arises from Poirot's wish to make Hastings a witness to his crime – or his restitution of order. The reader, as often, shares with the Watson the role of spectator and admirer of the detective's manoeuvres; but the reader this time is the victim of them as well (the obvious contrast is with *Roger Ackroyd*, where the reader is the victim of the Watson's manoeuvre; Bayard (2000,113) reflects interestingly on the similarities of the two works). Illusion and power pervade the whole of the fictional world; death or an empty survival are the only alternatives to them.

Illusion and power, the erosion of time and the alienation from family and community: these themes are present throughout Christie's most substantial work. They are obviously serious themes. They correspond to a measure of bewilderment in the face of a changing and insecure world, in which identities are uncertain, social status precarious and moral values no longer consensual. They are grim themes, not obviously apt to light-hearted relaxation. They could be the themes of major literature. Why is it then, that in her work they are generally the material of middle-brow entertainment? Why is it that *Curtain* is a good deal less clearly middle-brow than most of her other works?

The question is a strangely difficult one to answer precisely. One may suggest this: that in most of Christie's writing, the threats to a humane and confident way of life are seen as a soluble problem. The insights of the detective, the courage and initiative of the heroes, the organization of a state police serve to identify crime and punish it appropriately, and so to restore a civil order. Poirot insists repeatedly that he seeks to protect the innocent. Miss Marple insists that she acts to eliminate wickedness. The story of the novels, then, is the discrimination of the wicked from the innocent, and this is the work of reason and of decisive action. It is pleasing, at quite a deep level, to see this assertion of the values of reason and decisiveness; readers can feel that the author is offering a model of unambiguous rectitude, of a kind not always found in the real world. Readers are reassured: the criticism made by some commentators, that the detective genre is essentially a source of reassurance, is accurate, at this level. But the readers know that this rectitude is fictitious. The

incongruities of the detectives – the eccentric foreigner, the unmarried elderly woman with her apparently limited perspective and her decorous manner – are enough to show that these stories are fabrications and contain much that is arbitrary; the point is implicit in the whole conventionality of the genre, with its set functions of detective, Watson, police rival, victim, suspects, and its standard progression towards a scene of systematic explanation. Christie often draws the attention of her readers to this conventionality, which is often conspicuously varied as a demonstration of the author's ingenuity. We read knowing that the novel's orderly world of distinct innocence and guilt is unreal, a temporary relief from the ambiguities and obscurities of our everyday life or of the newspapers. Christie, far more than many of her contemporaries in the classic detective story, is conscious of the real confusingness of life. The textual form of many of her novels constitutes an alternation of an element of game, puzzle, artifice, ingenuity, with an element of moral or social reflection, in which the implications of criminality and of mystery are spelt out – though these elements may often seem undernourished or even commonplace because the characters and events which might illustrate them are subject to the reductive force of game.

There are, however, memorable elements in the works which escape this undernourishment and gain a real symbolic force, elements of textual construction, character development or scenes of exceptional intensity: Dr Sheppard elaborately contriving a text which both implies and denies his own guilt, the Reverend Len Clement, in *Murder at the Vicarage*, coming to recognize his true feelings for his wife, the unashamed courage of the murderer Anne Protheroe in the same book, the joyous gloating of Sir Charles Cartwright over his own virtuoso acting performance, the various ways the passengers in the Orient Express feel about their act of irregular justice (Colonel Arbuthnot insists on an approximation to legal form, Princess Dragomiroff proudly justifies the killing, Linda Arden revels in her theatrical performance), the powerful Buddha-like figure of Mrs Boynton dominating the desert landscape of Petra... There is a level of truth to experience that shows through the artifice of the genre; this is why the Christie novels can offer readers – and perhaps especially young readers – a model of relationships and personal development that merits respect. Most crucially, this truth to experience will require the author to question the discrimination of good and evil that the genre seems to entail; and that questioning is carried out in *Curtain*, the conclusion of which, as Grossvogel (1983, 12) soundly comments, "does not return the world to a pristine innocence". The work is a bleak one; in this novel, the problems are not wholly

soluble. It focuses on the harshness of the world-view that is muted in the rest of Christie's work, and in doing so it comes close to overriding the distinction of genre fiction and literary writing. It is based on a reflection on what the genre takes for granted; and so it offers its own view of what we, the readers, take for granted, in life as in fiction.

Bibliography

Works by Agatha Christie

The following works are referred to in the text. They are listed under the standard British titles, with American titles in brackets. Date of the first publication is given. Works are referred to in the text by an abbreviated form of the British title, given in square brackets in this list. Since there have been so many editions of the novels, references are to the chapter numbers and not to the page. The current standard edition is published by Harper-Collins in the United Kingdom and by Dodd Mead in the United States.

4.50 from Paddington (*What Mrs McGillicuddy Saw*), 1957 [4.50]
The ABC Murders, 1936 [ABC]
The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding, 1960 [Pudding]
After the Funeral (*Funerals Are Fatal*), 1953 [Funeral]
And Then There Were None, 1939 [None]
Appointment with Death, 1938 [Appointment]
At Bertram's Hotel, 1965 [Bertram]
Autobiography, 1977
The Body in the Library, 1942 [Library]
By the Pricking of My Thumbs, 1968 [Pricking]
Cards on the Table, 1936 [Cards]
A Caribbean Mystery, 1964 [Caribbean]
Cat among the Pigeons, 1959 [Cat]
The Clocks, 1963 [Clocks]
Crooked House, 1949 [Crooked]
Curtain, 1975 [Curtain]
Dead Man's Folly, 1956 [Folly]
Death Comes As the End, 1945 [Comes End]
Death in the Clouds (*Death in the Air*), 1935 [Clouds]
Death on the Nile, 1937 [Nile]
Destination Unknown (*So Many Steps to Death*), 1954 [Destination]
Dumb Witness (*Poirot Loses a Client*), 1937 [Witness]
Elephants Can Remember, 1972 [Elephants]
Endless Night, 1967 [Endless]
Evil under the Sun, 1941 [Sun]
Five Little Pigs (*Murder in Retrospect*), 1943 [Pigs]
Hallowe'en Party, 1969 [Hallowe'en]
Hercule Poirot's Christmas (*Murder for Christmas*), 1938 [Christmas]
Hickory Dickory Dock (*Hickory, Dickory, Death*), 1955 [Hickory]
The Hollow, 1946 [Hollow]
The Labours of Hercules, 1947 [Labours]
Lord Edgeware Dies (*Thirteen at Dinner*), 1933 [Edgeware]
The Man in the Brown Suit, 1924 [Suit]

The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side (*The Mirror Crack'd*), 1962 [Crack'd]
The Moving Finger, 1943 [Finger]
Mrs McGinty's Dead (*Blood Will Tell*), 1952 [McGinty]
Murder at the Vicarage, 1930 [Vicarage]
Murder in Mesopotamia, 1936 [Mesopotamia]
Murder in the Mews, 1937 [Mews]
A Murder is Announced, 1950 [Announced]
Murder is Easy (*Easy to Kill*), 1939 [Easy]
The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, 1926 [Ackroyd]
Murder on the Links, 1923 [Links]
Murder on the Orient Express (*Murder in the Calais Coach*), 1934 [Orient Express]
The Mysterious Affair at Styles, 1920 [Styles]
The Mystery of the Blue Train, 1927 [Blue]
Nemesis, 1971 [Nemesis]
One Two, Buckle My Shoe (*The Patriotic Murders*), 1940 [Buckle]
Ordeal by Innocence, 1958 [Ordeal]
The Pale Horse, 1961 [Pale]
Passenger to Frankfurt, 1970 [Frankfurt]
Peril at End House, 1932 [End H]
A Pocket Full of Rye, 1953 [Rye]
Poirot Investigates, 1924 [Investigates]
Sad Cypress, 1940 [Cypress]
The Secret of Chimneys, 1925 [Chimneys]
The Seven Dials Mystery, 1929 [7D]
The Sittaford Mystery (*Murder at Hazelmoor*), 1931 [Sittaford]
Sleeping Murder, 1976 [Sleeping]
Sparkling Cyanide (*Remembered Death*), 1945 [Cyanide]
Taken at the Flood (*There is a Tide*), 1948 [Flood]
They Came to Baghdad, 1951 [Baghdad]
They Do It With Mirrors (*Murder With Mirrors*), 1952 [Mirrors]
Third Girl, 1966 [Girl]
Three Act Tragedy (*Murder in Three Acts*), 1935 [3Act]
Towards Zero, 1944 [Zero]

Other works cited

Ackershoek, Mary Anne, "The daughters of his manhood", in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 119–128.

Ascari, Maurizio, "Vidocq or the French Jonathan Wild", in *Two Centuries of Detective Fiction*, ed. Maurizio Ascari, Bologna, Università di Bologna, 2000, pp. 29–46.

Barnard, Robert, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, London, Collins, 1980.

Bayard, Pierre, *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd? The Mystery Behind the Agatha Christie Mystery*, London, Fourth Estate, 2000.

Birns, Nicholas and Birns, Margaret Boe, "Agatha Christie: modern and modernist", in *The Cunning Craft*, ed. Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer, Essays in Literature, Macomb, Ill., Western Illinois University, 1990, pp. 120–134.

Blake, Nicholas (C. Day Lewis), "The detective story – why?" in *The Art of the Mystery Story*: *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Howard Haycraft, New York, Carroll and Graf, 1983, pp. 398–405.
Butor, Michel, *L'Emploi du Temps*, Paris, Minuit, 1957.
Caillois, Roger, "The detective story as game", in *The Poetics of Murder*, ed. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe, San Diego, HBJ, 1983, pp. 1–12.
Cawelti, John G., *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, Chicago, IL, Chicago University Press, 1976.
Champigny, Robert, *What Will Have Happened: A Philosophical and Technical Essay on Detective Stories*, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1977.
Chandler, Raymond, "The simple art of murder", in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Howard Haycraft, New York, Carroll and Graf, 1983, pp. 222–237.
Chaney, Hanna, *The Detective Novel of Manners*, Rutherford, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981.
Craig, Patricia and Cadogan, Mary, *The Lady Investigates, Women Detectives and Spies in Fiction*, London, Gollancz, 1981.
Gill, Gillian, *Agatha Christie, the Woman and Her Mysteries*, London, Robson, 1991.
Grella, George, "Murder and manners", in *Dimensions of Detective Fiction*, ed. Larry L. Landrum, Pat Browne and Ray B. Browne, Bowling Green, OH, Popular Press, 1976, pp. 37–57.
Grossvogel, David I., "Death deferred", in *Essays on Detective Fiction*, ed. Bernard Benstock, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1983, pp. 1–17.
Hark, Ina Rae, "Impossible murderers, Agatha Christie and the community of readers", in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 111–118.
Heissenbüttel, Helmut, "Rules of the game of the crime novel", in *The Poetics of Murder*, ed. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe, San Diego, CA, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, pp. 79–92.
Herbert, Rosemary, *Oxford Companion to Crime and Mystery Writing*, New York, OUP, 1994.
Holquist, Michael, "Whodunit and other questions", in *The Poetics of Murder*, ed. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe, San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, pp. 149–174.
Hühn, Peter, "The politics of secrecy and publicity", in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 39–50 .
Hutter, A.D., "Dreams, transformations and literature, the implications of detective fiction", in *Two Centuries of Detective Fiction*, ed. Maurizio Ascari, Bologna, Università di Bologna, 2000, pp. 95–114.
Klein, Kathleen Gregory, "Truth, authority and detective fiction: the case of Agatha Christie's *The Body in the Library*", in *Analyzing the Different Voice*, ed. Jerilyn Fisher and Ellen S. Silber, Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, 1998, pp. 103–116.
Knepper, Marty S., "The curtain falls: Agatha Christie's last novels", *Clues*, 23, 4, 2005, pp. 69–84; at Lion.Chadwick Literature Online.
Knight, Stephen, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1980.
——, "Radical thrillers", in *Watching the Detectives*, ed. I.A. Bell and G. Daldry, London, Macmillan, 1990, pp. 171–187.

——, " 'A great blue triumphant cloud', *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*", in *Two Centuries of Detective Fiction*, ed. Maurizio Ascari, Bologna, Università di Bologna, 2000, pp. 115–152.
——, *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000, Detection, Death, Diversity*, London, Palgrave, 2004.
Kyzlinková, Lidia, "Social issues in Agatha Christie's mysteries: country, class, crime, clothes and children", *Brno Studies in English*, 1997, http://dkf.ics.muni.cz/~xvalicek/journal/ff_bse/vol1997num1/vol1997num1/9.html.
Lathen, Emma, "Cornwallis's revenge", in *Agatha Christie, First Lady of Crime*, ed. H.R.F. Keating, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977, pp. 79–94.
Light, Alison, *Forever England, Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars*, London, Routledge, 1991.
Lovitt, Carl R., "Controlling discourse in detective fiction, or caring very much who killed Roger Ackroyd", in *The Cunning Craft*, ed. Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer, Essays in Literature, Macomb, Ill., Western Illinois University, 1990, p. 68.
MacDonald, Janice, "Parody in detective fiction", in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 61–73.
Makinen, Merja, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2006.
Mandel, Ernest, *Delightful Murder*, London, Pluto Press, 1984.
Merrill, Robert. "Christie's narrative games", in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 87–99.
Moretti, Franco, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, London, New Left Books, 1983.
Morgan, Janet, *Agatha Christie*, London, Fontana, 1985.
Most, Glenn W., "The Hippocratic smile", in *The Poetics of Murder*, ed. Glenn W. Most and William W. Stowe, San Diego, CA, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983, pp. 341–365.
Murch, Alma E., *The Development of the Detective Novel*, London, Peter Owen, 1958.
Pawling, Christopher, *Popular Fiction and Social Change*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1984.
Peach, Linden, *Masquerade, Crime and Fiction*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2006.
Peirce, Charles Sanders, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, selected and edited with an introduction by Justus Buchler, New York, Dover, 1955.
Porter, Dennis, *The Pursuit of Crime, Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1981.
Priestman, Martin, *Crime Fiction from Poe to the Present*, London, Northcote House, "Writers and Their Work", 1998.
Ramsey, Gordon C., *Agatha Christie, Mistress of Mystery*, New York, Dodd Mead, 1967.
Robyns, Gwen, *The Mystery of Agatha Christie*, Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1978.
Routley, Eric, "The case against the detective story", in *Detective Fiction, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks, Woodstock, VT, Foul Play Press, 1988, pp. 161–178.
Rowland, Susan, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell*, London, Palgrave, 2001.
Rushing, Robert, "Traveling detectives: the 'logic of arrest' and the pleasure of (avoiding) the real", *Yale French Studies*, 108, 2005, pp. 89–101.

Sayers, Dorothy L., "The omnibus of crime", in *The Art of the Mystery Story, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Howard Haycraft, New York, Carroll and Graf, 1983, pp. 71–109.

——, "Aristotle on detective fiction", in *Detective Fiction, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robin W. Winks, Woodstock, VT, Foul Play Press, 1988, pp. 25–34.

Sova, Dawn B., *Agatha Christie A to Z*, New York, Facts on File, 1996.

Symons, Julian, "The mistress of complication", in *Agatha Christie, First Lady of Crime*, ed. H.R.F. Keating, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977, pp. 25–38.

——, *Bloody Murder*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985.

Taylor, Anne-Marie, "Home is where the hearth is; the Englishness of Agatha Christie's Marple novels", in *Watching the Detectives, Essays on Crime Fiction*, ed. Ian A. Bell and Graham Baldry, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1990, pp. 134–151.

Todorov, Tzvetan, *Poétique de la Prose*, Paris, Seuil, 1971.

Watson, Colin, "The message of Mayhem Parva", in *Agatha Christie, First Lady of Crime*, ed. H.R.F. Keating, London, Weidenfekld and Nicholson, 1977, pp. 95–110.

Woods, Robin, " 'His appearance is against him': the emergence of the detective", in *The Cunning Craft*, ed. Ronald G. Walker and June M. Frazer, Essays in Literature, NP, 1990, pp. 15–24.

——-, " 'It was the mark of Cain', Agatha Christie and the murder of mystery", in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy, Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 103–110.

Index