

The Classical Detective Story

"In all of Barzun's works there is a demand, and a frequent prescription, for order."

C. P. SNOW

For the sake of argument, which is of course always simpler than the truth, there are two species of detective story. In the first, the detective solves his problem by reason—deductive reason based on observation—rather like recent models (hypothetico-deductive) of the scientific process. The progenitors of this category of story were Edgar Allan Poe and Conan Doyle, though ingenious persons have suggested earlier examples.

This category was at the height of its popularity and esteem just before and after the First World War. It attracted both as working practitioners and readers a good many professional academics, and among its readers there was a high proportion of trained professional minds. There were attempts to set down rigid rules of how such stories should be written, including prohibitions of "illegitimate" devices.

Since the thirties, this kind of story has been under continuous critical attack by such authorities on the whole detective genre as Julian Symons. However, within the last few years it has attracted some admirable new writers, such as P. D. James in England, who can be compared favourably with the writers of the twenties. She belongs to the family of what we now call the classical detective story.

The other family is slightly harder to define, but it has recognisable features. It is indifferent to the puzzle element, which is essential in the classical stories; it usually includes violence, and is most comfortable with one solitary person plunging into the muck of mysterious crime. It is happiest with a derelict private eye at its centre,

as in the work of its first major exponent, Dashiell Hammett. Its vogue increased with the vogue of free expression in literature, and in literary terms it is obviously and passionately romantic.

It doesn't need saying, or it ought not to, that no serious investigation of crime has ever followed either of these two paper patterns. Both are conventions, and the romantic one, though somewhat better disguised, is as much a convention as the other. No crime has been solved by the intellectual operations of Sherlock Holmes, or his more sophisticated successors. Nor by private investigators wandering about, preferably in an impenetrable haze on the fringes of society, gun under the armpit and on the hip.

Real police work has not yet been satisfactorily conveyed in fiction, though John Creasey had a stab at it. All expert policemen are emphatic in their dissatisfaction, and the literary evidence is completely on their side. It would require both insight and knowledge of a very high order, such as Balzac used to explore the performance of early nineteenth-century French finance. There aren't enough Balzacs to go round, and a modern one is unlikely to devote himself to detective stories (Simenon is the nearest approach, but a long way off). Further, however well equipped the talent was, the result might be distinctly tedious. So we have to make the best of what we have, and not expect too much in the way of factual truth. Here is a minor art. As with many minor arts, each of its branches, sensation stories (to use the nineteenth-century name for the romantic ones) and classical detective stories, has often given more pleasure than works in a major art.

In the midst of his main avocations, so many more than most men's, Jacques Barzun has been an addict of detective stories for most of his life. Together with his friend Wendell H. Taylor, he has organised in *A Catalogue of Crime* by far the most scholarly treatment of the whole subject. But it will not surprise anyone that, between the two main branches of detective fiction as defined above, Barzun gives most of his interest, and all his affection, to the classical form. It isn't hard to divine at least one reason. There is an echo of Baudelaire's great poem. At the end of the voyage, there in the desirable country, one is invited to find *beauté, luxe, calme, volupté*. But not only those allurements. Also *ordre*. Most of all, and as a condition of the rest, *ordre*. In all of Barzun's work, there is a demand, and frequently a prescription, for order. In this minor formalised art, he has discovered at least a comforting hint of it.

Isn't that, in fact, true of a good many of us? People don't really read classical detective stories for excitement. It is doubtful whether they read them, as much as they think, for the puzzle, although it is

nice to pick out the answer, even the most ingenious and conscientious puzzle solvers, such as the great mathematician G. H. Hardy, don't feel disagreeably frustrated if they fail. There is a satisfaction deeper than getting the answer right. The final blessing of the classical detective story is another of Baudelaire's invitations: it is *calme*. And it is the calm—moral calm, if one can use a pretentious phrase—which comes from order, and will come from nothing else.

Think of the Holmes stories. The plots are pretty unsophisticated by the standards of those that follow. Like other great originators, Doyle was in technical respects nothing like as good as the writers who wouldn't have existed without him. Holmes's detective processes seem often mildly absurd, set against the classical examples of the 1920s and 1930s. The atmosphere is marvellous, but the dialogue is frequently careless and inept. Nevertheless, there is magic. Doyle had a reassuring touch of genius, which supremely popular writers sometimes possess, and aesthetic writers don't. Who has finished a Holmes story without feeling sheltered in a secure world, where decency, honour, and courage in the long run triumph, and where with will and effort righteousness and order can be made to prevail? At the conclusion of a Holmes case, Baker Street, with supper sent in from Fortnum's and a couple of good bottles of wine, is a delectable representation of the end of Baudelaire's voyage.

That same promise of order is the emotional basis of the classical detective stories which succeeded Holmes. It isn't often so powerful, because the writers, though more ingenious and disciplined, hadn't Doyle's primary gift. But it is there.

The form developed and to an extent divided. Some of the practitioners carried ingenuity to the extreme, which is nearly always a mistake in an artificial form. A good many concentrated on the validity and honesty of the puzzle. Monsignor Ronald Knox laid down statutes, which respect-worthy detective writers were ordered to obey. These had an effect similar to Boileau's instructions about verse.

Classical art, even in its minor expressions, is a delicate growth, and tends to wither or, alternatively, to break out in non-classical offshoots, if it has too much regulation. Knox's own stories were not much good. He was one of those singular products of indeed English upper-class education who have enormous charisma at school and university and a lifelong impact on their contemporaries which is not easy for later generations to understand. Another of these phenomena was Max Beerbohm, and there are two or three recent examples.

However, minds addicted to classical purity paid attention to the Knox doctrine. My own taste in art is on the impure side of the classi-

cal. Barzun, a purer character, isn't as comfortable with departures from the strict form. But he has a comprehensive knowledge of all classical detective story writers, and his favourites carry their own message.

Let us have a look, in chronological order, from before the First World War into the thirties, at a few of the English examples: R. Austen Freeman, H. C. Bailey, Freeman Wills Croft, Anthony Berkeley, Dorothy Sayers—and in a sub-category of her own covering a much longer span of time, Agatha Christie. Freeman was himself a man of scientific education (there were several others, including an eminent professor of chemistry, who during the same period wrote detective stories—usually correct but not enlivening—in their off-moments) and invented a peculiarly austere medical detective, Dr. Thorndyke. The detection in these stories, granted the artificialities of the genre, is impeccable. Sometimes the presentation is as near systematic as a detective story can be: clues, presented with faithful scrupulousness and no tricks, and then afterwards the chance for deduction. There are no literary concessions, though now and then the massive integrity of the enterprise does produce, outside the domain of the puzzle, a suspension of disbelief. At the height of the classical vogue, people were known to work away at the clues and emerge with the right answer.

It seems unlikely that, in spite of the present renaissance of classical stories, which I have already hinted at and will return to, Freeman's will be much published again. One gets the impression that they are a bit too unalluring even for Barzun's upright mind. That, however, is not true of H. C. Bailey. Unlike most of Barzun's admirations, this, which other cognoscenti approve of, is one I can't share. Like Freeman, Bailey had some scientific knowledge, and his detective Reggie Fortune was a forensic specialist. The detection is as honest as Freeman's, and the plotting more ingenious and subtle. But the mannerisms, the general atmosphere of giggling and what the English now call jokeyness, for me take away from any kind of narrative conviction. Once again, I would bet heavily against a revival of Bailey.

Freeman Wills Croft is too much for Barzun and everyone else. His was the classical detective story carried to the limit of bathos. Crofts was by origin a railway engineer, and the stories depend on an exact and scholarly interpretation of the English railway system—in the twenties, a good deal more elaborate and widespread than it is now. The unfortunate Inspector French had to make more railway journeys and study more timetables than any detective in the literature. Railway addicts, of whom there were always a fair number in England, may have enjoyed the stories, but no one else did.

By the time of Anthony Berkeley, well into the twenties, detective story writers were beginning to show the first signs of restlessness at the classical confines. Just as Bailey gets on my nerves by his oversprightliness, Berkeley seems to have the same effect on Barzun. But he was an interesting man. He was well-to-do, and wrote and reviewed detective stories for many years as a wealthy man's hobby. The result was a certain preciousness and over-elaboration. *The Poisoned Chocolates Murder*, bizarrely cunning, is a concealed parodic exercise on the over-elaboration into which others were developing the classical detective story. Berkeley had a good deal of wit and light-weight literary talent. In the thirties he wrote, under the name of Francis Iles (his real name was Cox), several suspense novels of crime, not detective stories, which were effective in a manner at the same time idiosyncratic and surreptitiously perverse.

Some of his books bear re-reading very well. I can forgive him a lot for certain of his jokes. In one story, he has an irascible colonel who finds it difficult to distinguish between poets and unfortunate coloured denizens of the former British Colonial Empire. In the course of the mystery, he is compelled to have social relations with some poets. "Kick them," he says heartily, "kick them. The only language they understand."

With Dorothy Sayers, there are other signs of the classical form becoming oppressive to a fine practitioner. It wasn't that she cheated on the detective story rules. She obeyed them as faithfully as any of the duller masters, and, being a scholar *mangé* as well as a kind of George Sand *mangé*, she wrote an admirable history and analysis of the genre. By purist standards, her only fault was that some of her methods of homicide were remarkably over-clever, and had the additional disadvantage, at least for an enthusiastic murderer, that they probably wouldn't have worked. (Incidentally, a great experimental physicist once proposed the most complex and sophisticated method of murder so far invented. In a detective story, the trouble would have been that the only possible culprit was bound to be the great experimental physicist himself.)

In all technical respects, Dorothy Sayers—more potent than other gifted women, including Ngalo Marsh and Margery Allingham—loomed in the thirties as the last larger-than-life figure in the classical detective story. She was only unsatisfactory in that role because she got tired of it and gave it up. She devoted herself to religious writing and Dante scholarship, and lived robustly the fag-end of an unhappy life. At the time, this seemed to symbolise the obsolescence of the classical story; but the prognosticators had read the symptoms wrong.

They ought to have paid more attention to the work of Agatha

Christie, whose books were becoming, through the forties, fifties, sixties, more popular than ever all over the world. (If any magazine in the Soviet Union is getting into trouble with its circulation, there is one simple prescription—publish a story by "Agia.") Agatha Christie had begun writing detective stories during, if not before, the First World War. The dates of her publications cover sixty years; there are going to be some difficult problems for bibliographers and textual critics. In many ways, not only in her abnormal productivity—she wasn't an orthodox detective story writer. She broke the rules of legitimacy when she felt like it, often glaringly, as in *Rogue Ackroyd* and in *Curtain* (Poirot's last case). Her secret, and one which makes her in a singular fashion supreme, is a trick—partly technical but much more emerging from natural, intuitive cunning—of something like psychological sleight-of-hand, or a literary version of the three-card trick. In the whole history of the detective story, she is perhaps the greatest oddity; not the greatest writer, but quite alone, with no one remotely like her.

Nevertheless, the theoreticians ignored her as they followed the rise, and expected the complete domination, of the sensation novel. In its twentieth-century manifestation, it began, as the classical detective story had begun, with a writer of major literary talent. Dashiell Hammett, in a strict literary sense, was a better writer than any of his classical contemporaries. That appealed to cultivated taste, and was a factor, for a time a decisive one, in celebrating the death of the classical form and the take-over by the new one.

Right up to the present day, good writers have been attracted to it. An excellent example in America is Stanley Ellin, who could have written almost anything well. In England, Julian Symons, a good poet and distinguished critic, was so impressed, on the literary evidence, by the superiority of the suspense mode that he became its chief theoretician. Just to prove his point, he abandoned his own accomplished classical detective stories, and proceeded to write even more accomplished suspense stories. He is properly respected in England, and, through both theory and practice, his views carried much weight.

And yet, Barzun isn't alone in disapproving of this romantic wave. Hammett was, of course, as romantic as Hemingway, and so have been his successors. In the language of literary textbooks, this is a romantic age, with all the consequences—good and bad, anti-rational, personalised—which that means. Romantic art, though, has a tendency, at least to sceptical and critical minds, to emphasize the virtues of its opposite. One can't dispense with order for ever, either in society or in the literature which emerges from it.

Minor arts often show an underground hunger some time before

major ones. Certainly there have recently been sharp signs of a return to classical detective stories, both among readers and writers. In fact, the form never lost its readership as much as critical opinion suggested. (It is important to remember that this readership hasn't at any time, except for singular phenomena like Doyle and Agatha Christie, been an enormous one. Most well-known practitioners sold in hard-back a few thousand copies, no more.) Agatha Christie, the sempiternal, has continued down the decades to attract a large audience. Her survival has taught, or ought to have taught, a simple lesson. People might predict that the classical detective story, or anything like it, was dead. A considerable public took not the slightest notice and went on reading it.

Further, while writers as good as Ellin were giving new sophistication to the suspense novel, others of comparable gifts were applying themselves to the classical. In England most of these have been women—Gwen Butler, Ruth Rendall, Elizabeth Ferrars, Celia Fremlin. Quite recently there has appeared another (mentioned at the beginning of this article) as gifted as any of the founding fathers and mothers—P. D. James. She is not only as gifted as the forerunners, but has added skills that they didn't possess. She is as scholarly as Dorothy Sayers, but much more cool-headed and critical. She would have made an admirable straight novelist. When anyone as good as this is bringing new excellences to a nice minor art, it is a fair presumption that others will follow. She is the best living testimony to the durability of the Barzun taste.