

Adam, Eve and Agatha Christie: Detective Stories as Post-Darwinian Myths of Original Sin

by John Wren-Lewis

The longest running play in human history is now approaching its second half century on the London stage. Agatha Christie's detective thriller *The Mousetrap* has become almost a British National Monument. When I went to its opening night on Nov 25th 1952, to see the young Richard Attenborough playing the detective, we were still only just emerging from the shadows of World War Two. The possibility that forty years on I'd be in Australia wasn't in my mind then, but even more remote was the thought that the play could still be going in the next century. And I don't think the idea had crossed anyone else's mind either; Christie herself, interviewed in 1962 on the (then) phenomenal occasion of the play's tenth anniversary, said she'd expected a run of no more than three months and was greatly buoyed by the assurance of impresario Peter (now Sir Peter) Saunders that it was good for at least a year!

In fact the extraordinary success of this rather ordinary well-made play is itself something of a mystery, and the detective in me has been stimulated to investigate. In so doing, I've been led into some rather deep waters of the human psyche, regions where psychology overlaps with anthropology and even theology – bringing some surprising insights about the underlying forces that make detective stories so fascinating, especially, it seems, to people with religious interests. For it's not only English vicars who are notoriously 'whodunit' fans: Jiddu Krishnamurti, who read practically nothing else, delighted in them, as did Carl Jung, who read almost everything else. Religious thinkers have also been prominent among producers of the genre: G K Chesterton, Dorothy L Sayers and Father Ronald Knox were co-founders, with Christie, of London's famous Detection Club in the 1930s. And after Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Miss Marple, probably the most famous of all fictional detectives is a priest - Chesterton's Father Brown, who latterly has been joined on the shelves and on screen by several other persons of the cloth, such as Harry Kemelman's Rabbi Small, Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael, and Brother William of Baskerville in Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose*.

I now see something more than coincidence in the fact that the whodunit is a fairly new literary phenomenon. Tales of good defeating evil after a struggle are probably as old as humanity, but until the second half of the nineteenth century, the age of Poe, Wilkie Collins, and Conan Doyle, there were hardly any stories in which the struggle took the form of a mystery, with the unmasking of a *hidden* villain at the climax. The ascendancy of detective fiction as we know it coincides with the post-Darwinian period when, for the first time in human history, religious belief was declining sharply among the literate Western public. The detective emerged as a saviour-image as people began to lose faith in those more traditional saviours, the holy man, the righteous ruler, and the knight in shining armour. And stories about evil as a mystery became popular when ancient myths about the so-called 'roblem of evil' began to seem discredited.

Public debate on 'science versus religion' revolved around issues like the conflict between new discoveries and the literal truth of Bible-stories, but the real conflict, we now know, went deeper. Few serious thinkers in the Judeo-Christian/Muslim tradition have ever been overmuch concerned with the literal truth of the Adam and Eve story or the six-day timetable for creation, and the same holds for myths of origin in other religious traditions. The primary reference for all such ideas has always been to the felt existential human situation, and that was what science in general, and Darwinian science in particular, seemed to have changed in a radical way. It appeared to undermine the notion of harmony as the basic characteristic of reality, for which metaphors like *Tao* or Divine Purpose could be appropriate expressions, replacing it with the principle of 'nature red in tooth and claw'. And human destructiveness needed no explanation if we are simply children of a universal struggle for survival: the only problem of evil in that case is the practical one of preventing the struggle from making life intolerable, and the best hope for doing so seemed to lie in developing the faculty of intellect, which was apparently where the wish for something better had entered the picture in the first place.

But evidently the feeling of evil as something out of tune with the general nature of things and requiring explanation wouldn't go away, for there grew up in the West this new addiction for stories in which an act of violence shatters a previously harmonious scene, causing waves of conflict and suspicion to spread everywhere until the new-style saviour figure, the detective, brings to bear a special kind of intelligence in ferreting out where the violence came from.

For three reasons, I'm sure there's much more to this than an outdated habit of thought lingering on in a form of popular entertainment, like the myth of the Evil Angel surviving as the Demon King of pantomime.

In the first place, science itself has now shown, with the study of dreams, that while the expression of thoughts and feelings in dramatic form may be an older kind of mentation than rational analysis, it is in no way outdated. On the contrary, it is the basic mode of all mental activity, underlying rational analysis itself - so we are well advised to pay attention to its collective manifestations in popular entertainment. Secondly, if violent struggle for survival really is the basic reality of everything, where does the human desire for something better come from? Thirdly, evidence has emerged from biological science during recent decades to indicate that the popular perception of nature as essentially red in tooth and claw was a gross over-reaction to Darwin's discoveries, a failure to see the wood for the trees.

Darwin was not, after all, the first to observe the ubiquity of conflict and violence in the organic world - it was every bit as obvious to anyone with half an eye in earlier cultures as to us today, and probably more so, since urban life has never been really sheltered from nature until quite recently. When earlier cultures assumed harmony underlying the conflict, and expressed that assumption in various kinds of theistic image, it was because elementary logic dictates that unless something like this were the case, nothing would ever survive at all - and Darwin as a naturalist took this as much for granted as any theologian, even if he was a little more tentative about the use of theistic imagery.

In fact it would be fair to say that biological science has provided massive confirmation for what was earlier just an assumption of basic harmonious order underlying nature's apparent conflicts. Microscopes and, in more recent times, cine-cameras and a plethora of other instruments, have uncovered in minute detail the astonishing built-in mechanisms which *limit* the expression of competitive and destructive urges throughout the sub-human biosphere, curbing them so that they are always ultimately contained by harmony. In the years since World War II biologists themselves in growing numbers have begun to articulate this thought, a notable example being the work here in Australia of Professor Charles Birch, which won him the prestigious Templeton Prize and is very clearly set out in his excellent book *On Purpose*. And the specific contribution of evolutionary theory, of which Darwin is the archetypal representative, has actually been to extend our understanding of this principle into the time-dimension, by showing how conflict and competition serve development by selecting the strongest and most flexible strains for breeding.

This means there is indeed something almost *un-natural* about our human species, where aggression and competitive greed continually shatter harmony - between individuals, between tribes and nations, and between us and the rest of the biosphere. *Something has been going wrong throughout recorded history*, so that the best efforts of holy men, well-meaning rulers, and knights in shining armour to contain the destructive urges always come unstuck. To paraphrase a famous declaration of St Paul, the human mind dreams of harmonies more wonderful - more gentle and loving - than the rough but powerful balances of the animal kingdom, yet in practice human intelligence again and again finds itself sidetracked into the service of greed, aggression, and even cruelty, such as would shame any animal. And here too, science has served to make explicit something which formerly could only be intuited in a general way; the 'unnaturalness' of human nature, which was formerly expressed in myths about a primordial Fall, has today become inescapable, as the cumulative results of our intelligence threaten to destroy our species altogether, and maybe even the whole planet.

When I was young, and the nuclear arms race was just beginning to make these dangers apparent, scientists and religious folk alike thought in terms of humanity's 'higher ideals' battling with 'lower animal instincts' - but we know now that if our instincts were really animal the drives towards harmony would always contain the destructive ones. It is at the level of mind or spirit itself that something goes wrong, and I believe it's a gut realisation of this fact that finds expression in the popularity of detective fiction, where in all the best stories the harmony-shattering act of violence is tracked down to a source quite unexpected by the society concerned; the hidden villain turns out to be someone who, until the denouement, is considered beyond suspicion.

True, in the very early days of the genre this feature was by no means universal: in fact one famous classic, Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, is a perfect expression of the belief that our troubles spring from animal instincts getting out of rational control - the murders are eventually traced to an escaped savage ape! But as the art-form developed, the main focus came to be on the author's skill in finding ingenious ways to keep the villain above suspicion until the end, and the Detection Club even drew up rules about it. On the hypothesis I

have been developing here, this can be seen as something more than a need to tickle the reader's crossword-solving faculty: it is nothing less than a new mythological form for understanding humanity's great existential problem of evil.

Against this background, the extraordinary success of *The Mousetrap* would imply that it contains some particularly acute, nerve-touching insight into the origin of evil in the human psyche, and I believe this to be indeed the case. For the play gives a very special twist to the 'least likely suspect' theme, a twist anticipated occasionally in earlier stories (for example, in more than one by G K Chesterton), but never (to my knowledge) before put into drama form, the mode which appeals most directly to the mythopoeic imagination. After all these years of exposure on the London stage, I don't think I shall be giving away any secret by mentioning what that twist is. At the end of *The Mousetrap* the detective himself, the young policeman who appears as the protector of the innocent and the guardian of law and order, turns out to be the murderer. I find a clear echo here of a theme expressed in different ways in many of the world's ancient Fall myths, but most clearly in the one which, more than any other, has exercised emotional appeal across many different cultures - the biblical story in which the Loss of Eden comes about because of a 'snaky' temptation to assume a divine role of moral guardianship, 'knowing good and evil'.

I would translate this as a diagnosis that the responsibility for humanity's destructiveness lies with the very element in the psyche that purports to aim at harmony, the moral impulse - not that it is too weak, as conventional social wisdom assumes, but that it usurps power and tries to control all other impulses by judging and repressing. 'The punisher alone is the criminal of Providence,' wrote the mystical poet William Blake - and this too is something we are in a better position to understand today than any earlier generation, thanks to the detailed investigations of psychologists and sociologists.

There is now ample evidence that behind all really violent and destructive human behaviour, whether it be the ridiculously excessive ambitions of military conquerors and empire-building capitalists, or the sadism of tyrants great and small, or the insatiable violence of the rapist, or the blind destructiveness of the hoodlum or child-batterer, there lies a screaming protest on the part of some much more limited desire that has been repressed by overweening morality - in society, in the family, or in the individual psyche itself. And on the other side of the same coin, egoistic, aggressive and destructive urges become really dangerous and outrageous precisely when they are moralised and amplified by righteous indignation. The inquisition really did think they were saving souls, and while mere greed or ambition would never lead any sane person to plunge the world into nuclear winter, a holy war might easily do so.

'Better to rule in Hell than to serve in Heaven' were words which Milton put into the mouth of Satan himself. His poem followed much Christian tradition in linking the biblical story of paradise lost with yet another ancient myth, thereby giving it a definite whodunit flavour of its own by suggesting that the serpent was just a disguise for the cosmic Mr Big - Lucifer, the Archangel of Light who subverts humanity in the course of trying to usurp the role of God. The moral impulse, or 'conscience', could indeed be described as the angel (i.e. messenger) of light in the human psyche, and the loss of Eden myth unmasks its constant tendency to get above itself and rule the roost instead of simply serving life. Thus a vicious circle is created, because repression and moralisation exaggerate the very impulses they claim to control, thereby giving 'conscience' the excuse for still more repressive measures and still more moral outrage against others. This was why Blake went beyond Milton's interpretation of the story and represented Satan as having to all intents and purposes taken over the place of God in most religions, Christianity included, by making them agents of repressive moralising. That, he argued, was why Jesus "died as a reprobate.....punished as a transgressor" - because he had seen what was going on in the world and tried to reverse the process by urging "mutual forgiveness of each vice", only to have his name and image taken over in their turn to serve repression and moral indignation.

The Mousetrap doesn't attempt to pursue the story into these depths: its villain simply gets killed at the end, much as in most other whodunits. But Chesterton did take that extra step: Father Brown never sought punishment or death for his villains, but unmasked them only as a first step in trying to redeem them. For Blake that was the ultimate life goal both in society and the psyche itself, to "have pity on the punisher" and restore the moral sense to its proper role as servant of life, by subordinating its judgements to forgiveness - or as Shakespeare's Portia famously said long before "*And earthly power doth then show likest God's/When mercy seasons justice*". Blake had the mystics' vision that while no individual can make more than a small impact on the patterns of society by pursuing this goal, determined exposure of satanic

judgementalism within the psyche will open up direct experience of eternity even in the midst of the world's unresolved conflicts. He identified this as "the Everlasting Gospel of Jesus", yet he also insisted that "All Religions are One" prior to satanic perversion. And in our own day this insight, expressed in different terms, has been the core 'gospel' of Krishnamurti, who stood apart from all formal religion: he urged the regular practice of non-judgemental 'choiceless awareness' as a way of opening to the eternal. Maybe it was no coincidence that he was a detective story buff.

The ending of any detective story after the unmasking of the villain is inevitably something of an anticlimax, and in my view one of Blake's most powerful insights was that the unmasking of the Great Originator of Sin in human life brings something of the same feeling. Like the Wizard of Oz, pretension is the essence of Lucifer's power in the world and in the psyche: unmasked, he becomes something of a joke:

*Truly, my Satan, thou art but a Dunce,
And doth not know the Garment from the Man.
Every Harlot was a Virgin once,
Nor canst thou ever change Kate into Nan.
Tho' thou art Worship'd by the Names Divine
Of Jesus and Jehovah, thou art still
The Son of Morn in weary Night's decline,
The lost Traveller's Dream under the Hill.*

Perhaps that was what Chesterton was getting at, in a different idiom, when he said that if humanity were to be sufficiently struck with a sense of humour, we would find ourselves automatically fulfilling the Sermon on the Mount. And perhaps too it's why the murderer's motivation in *The Name of the Rose* is suppression of humour. So do join me as a detective buff, for the sheer fun of it - and do go to see *The Mousetrap* if you're in London - it's fun even if you

know the end.

This essay has been selected in the USA for studying in universities as an example both of drama criticism and good writing.