

The Labyrinths of the Detective Story and Chesterton

The English live with the turmoil of two incompatible passions: a strange appetite for adventure and a strange appetite for legality. I write "strange" because, for a *criollo*, they are both precisely that. Martín Fierro, the sainted army deserter, and his pal Cruz, the sainted police deserter, would be astonished, swearing and laughing at the British (and American) doctrine that the law is infallibly right; yet they would never dare to imagine that their miserable fate as cutthroats was interesting or desirable. For a *criollo*, to kill is to "disgrace oneself." It is one of man's misfortunes, and in itself neither grants nor diminishes virtue. Nothing could be more opposite to "Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts" by the "morbidly virtuous" De Quincey or to the "Theory of the Moderate Murder" by the sedentary Chesterton.

Both passions—for physical adventure and for rancorous legality—find satisfaction in the current detective narrative. Its prototypes are the old serials and current dime novels about the nominally famous Nick Carter, smiling and hygienic athlete, that were engendered by the journalist John Coryell on an insomniac typewriter that dispatched 70,000 words a month. The genuine detective story—need I say it?—rejects with equal disdain both physical risk and distributive justice. It serenely disregards jails, secret stairways, remorse, gymnastics, fake beards, fencing, Charles Baudelaire's bats, and even the element of chance. In the earliest examples of the genre ("The Mystery of Marie Rogêt," by Edgar Allan Poe, 1842) and in one of the most recent ones (*Unravelling Knots*, by the Baroness Orczy), the story is limited to the discussion and abstract resolution of a crime, often far from the event or many years after it. The everyday methods of police investigation—fingerprints, torture, accusation—would seem like solecisms there. One might object to the conventionality of this rejection, but the convention here is irreproachable: it does not attempt to avoid difficul-

ties, but rather to impose them. It is not a convenience for the writer, like the confused confidants in Jean Racine or theatrical asides. The detective novel to some degree borders on the psychological novel (*The Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins, 1868; *Mr. Digweed and Mr. Lumb* by Eden Phillpotts, 1934). The short story is of a strict, problematic nature; its code could be the following:

A.) *A discretionary limit of six characters.* The reckless infraction of this law is responsible for the confusion and tedium of all detective movies. In every one we are presented with fifteen strangers, and it is finally revealed that the evil one is not Alpha, who was looking through the keyhole, nor Beta, who hid the money, nor the disturbing Gamma, who would sob in the corners of the hallway, but rather that surly young Upsilon, whom we'd been confusing with Phi, who bears such a striking resemblance to Tau, the substitute elevator operator. The astonishment this fact tends to produce is somewhat moderate.

B.) *The declaration of all the terms of the problem.* If my memory (or lack of it) serves me, the varied infraction of this second law is the favorite defect of Conan Doyle. It involves, at times, a few particles of ashes, gathered behind the reader's back by the privileged Holmes, and only derivable from a cigar made in Burma, which is sold in only one store, which is patronized by only one customer. At other times, the cheating is more serious. It involves a guilty party, horribly unmasked at the last moment, who turns out to be a stranger, an insipid and torpid interpolation. In honest stories, the criminal is one of the characters present from the beginning.

C.) *An avaricious economy of means.* The final discovery that two characters in the plot are the same person may be appealing—as long as the instrument of change turns out to be not a false beard or an Italian accent, but different names and circumstances. The less delightful version—two individuals who imitate a third and thus provide him with ubiquity—runs the certain risk of heavy weather.

D.) *The priority of how over who.* The amateurs I excoriated in section A are partial to the story of a jewel placed within the reach of fifteen men—that is, of fifteen names, because we know nothing about their characters—which then disappears into the heavy fist of one of them. They imagine that the act of ascertaining to which name the fist belongs is of considerable interest.

E.) *A reticence concerning death.* Homer could relate that a sword severed the hand of Hypsenor and that the bloody hand rolled over the ground

and that blood-red death and cruel fate seized his eyes; such displays are inappropriate in the detective story, whose glacial muses are hygiene, fallacy, and order.

E.) *A solution that is both necessary and marvelous.* The former establishes that the problem is a "determined" one, with only one solution. The latter requires that the solution be something that the reader marvels over—without, of course, resorting to the supernatural, whose use in this genre of fiction is slothful and felonious. Also prohibited are hypnotism, telepathic hallucinations, portents, elixirs with unknown effects, ingenious pseudoscientific tricks, and lucky charms. Chesterton always performs a *tour de force* by proposing a supernatural explanation and then replacing it, losing nothing, with one from this world.

The Scandal of Father Brown, Chesterton's most recent book (London, 1935), has suggested the aforementioned rules. Of the five series of chronicles of the little clergyman, this book is probably the least felicitous. It contains, however, two stories that I would not want excluded from a Brownian anthology or canon: the third, "The Blast of the Book," and the eighth, "The Insoluble Problem." The premise of the former is exciting: it deals with a tattered supernatural book that causes the instantaneous disappearance of those who foolishly open it. Somebody announces over the telephone that he has the book in front of him and that he is about to open it; the frightened listener "hears a kind of silent explosion." Another exploded character leaves a small hole in a pane of glass; another, a rip in a canvas; another, his abandoned wooden leg. The *dénouement* is good, but I am positive that the most devout readers correctly guessed it in the middle of page 73. There is an abundance of the characteristics typical of G. K.: for example, that gloomy masked man with the black gloves who turns out to be an aristocrat and a fierce opponent of nudism.

The settings for the crimes are remarkable, as in all of Chesterton's books, and carefully and sensationally false. Has anyone ever noted the similarities between the fantastic London of Stevenson and that of Chesterton, between the mourning gentlemen and nocturnal gardens of *The Suicide Club* and those of the now five-part saga of Father Brown?

[1935]

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