

SOME ASPECTS OF A PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

AS CONTAINED IN A POPULAR FORM

OF MODERN LITERATURE

(The Hidden Wisdom of the Classical Detective Story)

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Vice-President Niehuss, members of the Board of Regents, honored guests, faculty, graduates, and friends, I express to you my sense of honor and privilege for being here this afternoon.

The title of my address is a dreadful one, sounding like an 18th century sermon or a German doctor's thesis; but, lifting the veil on it at once and relieving any apprehensions you may have, I inform you that "the popular form of modern literature" is the classical detective story, at first glance a most unlikely topic for a commencement address.

All of us here would agree that the detective story is not great literature, and for a clear reason: If the characters were delineated in depth, the murderer would be spotted long before the last chapter. And, if that were the case, it would be a poor detective story; for a mystery that can be guessed is no mystery. The detective story is actually the one contest in which we enjoy being beaten. If, playing fair and withholding no clues, the author can fool us, turning us upside down in the last chapter, it is a good story. If, however, we can guess who-dun-it, and how, half way through, we have beaten the author, and it is not a good story.

Because the important facts about the characters cannot be revealed until the last chapter, the detective story is a puzzle, a form of intellectual chewing gum, pleasant but not nutritious. "It is a masquerade ball", says Chesterton, "in which everybody is disguised as somebody else, and there is no personal interest until the clock strikes twelve". This is why they are not great literature, why reading them is a pleasant self-indulgence, and why the only character we remember is the detective. Not a likely subject for a commencement address!

But, still, when I learned that detective stories are a product of the great democracies, and that Hitler and Mussolini banned them from their respective countries, I said with Conan Doyle, "There is more here, Watson, than meets the eye". What have the detective stories of Conan Doyle, Dorothy Sayers, Gilbert Chesterton, or Agatha Christie got to do with Fascism, Communism, or politics? The answer, "my dear Watson, is elementary".

The detective story assumes the power of reason and the scientific accumulation of evidence. They are full of finger prints, foot prints, clocks, post-mortems, etc. -- "facts, my dear Watson, facts!" If you are interested in facts, you think independently, and are somewhat immune to propaganda. In a detective story you take nobody's word at its face value, and you develop the kind of mind that wonders who did set the Reichstag fire and how good the evidence was in Stalin's trials.

The detective (Holmes, Wimsey, or Poirot) is a superior, intelligent, and independent figure who, because he is better than the local police inspector, may even be said to represent the virtues of free enterprise. Sherlock Holmes is an individualist, not a conformist or mass man. You cannot possibly imagine him as a storm-trooper marching in faceless ranks. (What would he do with his pipe?)



But, most important, individual rights in a free society are the assumption of every story. The evidence necessary before an arrest, the respectful court procedures were dangerous reading for people who lived under arbitrary power. In a detective story sympathy is on the side of the law, because the law protects human rights. No wonder they were banned.

And then when I learned that the father of the detective story is Edgar Allen Poe, whose stories were enjoyed by Lincoln; that President Wilson was an addict; that Charles Dickens, A.A. Milne, Jacques Barzum, James Moffett and Ronald Knox (both translators of the Bible), James Hilton, Lord Charnwood, W.H. Auden, Joseph Wood Krutch and others have written detective stories or written about them, I almost came to believe Philip Guedalla's statement that "The detective story is the normal recreation of noble minds". Is it an exaggeration to say that Sherlock Holmes is the best known figure in all English fiction, that people know his habits, clothes, work, and words ("Elementary, Watson") who never heard of Macbeth?

We take as our text these words by Dorothy Sayers, "The tale must be about dead bodies or very wicked people, preferably both, before the Tired Business Man can feel really happy". Why do tired business men, or presidents, or professors like these stories? Let this address suggest, along with the amusement, three reasons that have to do with human history.

## I.

First, consider the scene of a detective story. Generally speaking, they take place indoors (The Corpse in the Closet); westerns take place outdoors. The setting of the classic detective story is an ordered and good society. But, still, when all the people in the house with the body are gathered together, they are all suspect, everyone. How refreshing that is in an age whose chief spokesmen have insisted on flattering the human race. Behind the smooth front there are dark depths, beneath the manners there is wickedness, beneath the good society are forces that can destroy it.

Dorothy Sayers begins a story with a body found in the telephone booth of the Bellona Club, of which Lord Peter Wimsey, the Eton-Oxford-aristocratic sleuth, is a member. Lord Peter is asked if he will undertake the investigation, refuses, and when asked why, he replies in effect, "Because, when I was a boy I remember taking walks at Denver Castle. One of the paths went beside a bog on the surface of which grew lovely flowers. But I remember, when I poked my stick in the bog, a stench arose, and how ugly it was beneath the surface. I am a member of this club. Let someone else investigate."

And when we poke beneath the surface of history, beneath the



superficial books, we find the same. No man, no nation, is half as good as he or it pretends to be. When we see the struggle for power, the jealousy, the cupidity, the self-interest of groups, the stiff-necked self-righteousness, the dark crimes that are hidden from popular view, we know in the words of an English historian that "it is a serious mistake to imagine the world filled with wise and righteous men". When we approach history, we should assume (with the detective story) that there is a deep inadequacy in human nature, that no man or group needs to be taught to be selfish, that men are frail and corruptible. Beneath the surface there are dark forces which make order a precarious thing.

Now, we like the mystery story because there is in it a realism which much of the modern world has lacked. If there is an eerie atmosphere of foreboding, of dread, of evil in the great house, we know this is true of the world. We thought that, because science had conquered some ancient evil, the road ahead was smooth. We imagined ourselves on the edge of Utopia, and woke to find it was an abyss. And now, like our forebears, we know there is evil in the house, in the air, and history has again become risky, dangerous, and cataclysmic. "There are dark things afoot, Watson."

How much better it is to see human frailty and corruption than to flatter the human race. We then value the disciplines, social structures, and the Grace of God which alone keep the human race half decent. We are saved from utopianism in politics, that illusion which says that when we get rid of the Kaiser, or Hitler, or Khrushchev, we can resume the smooth road to earthly perfection. We understand the checks and balances, the fragmentation of power in our Constitution; for, since power corrupts, no group may be trusted with unchecked power. We begin to wonder realistically whether there is any form of government which human cupidity cannot wreck. The faith in the goodness of human nature is a new teaching of the modern world, and a disastrous one. One of the few places which, with clear realism, will have none of it, is the good old, classical detective story.

## II.

Second, consider the criminal whose identity is to be uncovered. Who is he? (a) He is someone who seems outwardly good. It is only a "shocker", says Chesterton, when grandmother's throat is cut by the curate. (b) He is an intelligent person with whom the detective can match wits. Since knowledge is a tool for good or evil, there is one thing worse than a devil, and that is an educated devil. I hesitate to mention it here, but the arch-criminal, against whom Sherlock Holmes pitted his skills, was Professor Moriarity. Only when the heights of human nature are corrupted can there be effective evil; the devil is a fallen angel.

(c) There is, next, an excess in the criminal's character which leads him to crime, and prepares his downfall. He is a self-centered,



arrogant, vain person who decides to impose his will on human affairs, and who takes into his own hands matters which should be left to Providence. Rather than wait for the old man to die so that the money can be inherited, he kills him. His sin is an inordinate pride and vanity; he thinks of himself more highly than he ought to think.

His vanity and willfulness prevent him from seeing that there is a judgment (short term or long term) in the affairs of men, that something will happen he does not foresee. If he were reverent, he would know that his action will release an unforeseen avalanche of consequences. But his pride corrupts his intellect; he will force his will upon events. He thinks he can control events; but they end by controlling him, and driving him to more desperate action. It is willfulness that destroys him.

Hitler was such a criminal in history. In arrogance he played God, and wanted men made in his image, or destroyed. Stalin, translating the Communist program in the grim language of power, was also such a man. Those who stood in his path were marked for destruction. He did evil that good might come; but the evil was real and the good a mirage.

And then, as in the detective story, they meet unforeseen events, and find they have released an avalanche of social forces they cannot control. They begin by controlling events, and then events control them. Hitler did not foresee Winston Churchill, or that his barbarism would unite men against him. Caught in events he could not control, becoming more and more desperate, he went to a fiery death, almost destroying a Germany he wanted to make great.

Stalin, in pride, imagined that his truth was the truth, "Scientific socialism" was the world's final truth; and he, the doctor, would operate on Russia for Russia's good. Like all utopian fanatics, he made in arrogance a premature claim to final knowledge.

But his utopian dream did not come true, and he is in history a mass murderer. History could have told him there would be a judgment, that ideas would be altered, and his name condemned. The criminal pretends to be more than he is, to know more than he does. He takes into his hands things that should be left alone. He does evil that good may come, forgetting that the evil is real and the good may be a pipe dream. The reverent man knows that he should work patiently where he is, letting the good work like leaven in the lump. We like mystery stories because, curled up by the fire and reading, we see (subtly or obviously, short term or long term) the inexorable working of the moral law. "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

### III.

And now, finally, we come to the detective. He is, as we have said, a superior person. A perfect stranger gives Sherlock Holmes his name, and the great detective says, "You mentioned your name as if I should



recognize it, but beyond the obvious facts that you are a bachelor, a solicitor, a Freemason, and an asthmatic, I know nothing about you". The classic detective is a gentleman in contrast to the modern "private eyes" who drink too much and never take their hats off in the living room. The gentleman is replaced by the dead-pan tough guy. O Tempora! O Mores!

The classical detective is a highly moral figure. As Matt Dillon protects the innocent and maintains order in a primitive society, so the detective does the same in a high civilization. He is personified retribution, stalking the wickedness of murder. He makes the city streets, which we sometimes imagine to be dull, places of high adventure and romance. He is a modern knight in armor, a man with a cause; and, therefore, in contrast to television's "private eyes" he does not seem to work for money.

As personified retribution the classical detective presides over judgment day, that final clarification in the last chapter, when the sheep are divided from the goats, and the secrets of men's hearts are revealed. During most of the story we have "seen through a glass darkly"; but at the end, as in a great biblical scene, all the people are gathered in the drawing room for the revelation which reveals that the first are last and that he who finds his life shall lose it. The trumpets sound, and the masks, which all we humans wear, are removed.

At this point the detective becomes personified wisdom, understanding, and revelation. He is light in our darkness. He brings together in a true way all the confusing facts and clues of the mysterious drama. His role as revealer of wisdom is pointed up by the dull and obvious satellite who moves around him. As Hercule Poirot has his Captain Hastings, so Sherlock Holmes has his Dr. Watson with "his dim eyes and bemused mind".

The satellite fails because there are facts he does not see; and he, therefore, puts together the meaning of events in an obvious manner. Like a poor philosopher, he starts from too narrow a base, ignoring facts, or squeezing them out of the picture because they will not fit his little theory. He arrives at a neat, simple, clean solution by tidying up the mystery of life. When Lord Peter Wimsey said, "There is nothing you can't prove if your outlook is only sufficiently limited", I thought of dialectical-materialism, the neat answer of the Communist world to life's mystery. All art, literature, philosophy, politics, morals, ideals, and religion are explained as by-products of an economic system, like the ephemeral smoke that comes from a real and solid diesel. How obvious, clean, neat, and tidy! It does not explain; it explains away.

Or the satellite collects all the facts and clues, and then fails because he does not know what to do with them. They are like a scrambled radio message. Information is not wisdom, and accumulating facts does not give insight into their meaning. Lincoln's greatness was not superior



information, but the power of his mind that ordered the information, his powerful grasp of the meaning of the whole; he was wise. So, the greatness of the detective lies in the meaning he sees, in the ordering of the facts.

The classical detective, therefore, is not simply a mechanical man who gathers fingerprints and timetables, and then, like the satellite, has eyes but does not see, and ears but does not hear. Rather, he is seen puffing his pipe like Holmes, reading like Lord Peter, or using his "little grey cells" like Hercule Poirot; and often the answer comes to him in an intuitive flash as it has come to the artist, the saint, and the scientist. We have more scrambled facts in our heads than any generation; God give us wisdom.

Lord Peter Wimsey is reading a book written by a prominent doctor, involved in the story, but unsuspected. He turns the last page, reflects on the book, and then says, "A man who believed what this book says could do murder". And all the jumbled facts fall into place as information turns into wisdom, as facts are crowned by understanding, as disorder is replaced by meaning.

One final word. This address has not meant to suggest (heaven forbid!) that the detective story should be read for uplift. They are intellectual chewing gum, and should be read for pleasure. All of life or reading is not meant to be earnest. What we have said is that even in this froth tossed up by our civilization there can be seen some of the greatness of our free western tradition, some hints of a total world-view. We see strong individuals, a belief in reason, an orderly society that protects human rights, retribution in a moral universe, and the meaning of wisdom. I find myself intrigued by the fact that Moffatt and Knox (both translators of Scripture) have written detective stories, and that Chesterton went from theology to detective stories, and Dorothy Sayers from detective stories to theology. But at any rate we see that Dorothy Sayers had something when she said, "the tale must be about dead bodies or very wicked people, preferably both, before the Tired Business Man is really happy".