

Murder – A Dying Art? George Orwell, Raymond Chandler, and the Mysterious Death of English Crime Writing

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In February 1946, the pages of *Tribune* were enlivened with a brief but witty piece by George Orwell, entitled “The Decline of the English Murder”. It began like this:

It is Sunday afternoon, preferably before the war. The wife is already asleep in the armchair, and the children have been sent out for a nice long walk. You put your feet up on the sofa, settle your spectacles on your nose, and open the *News of the World*. Roast beef and Yorkshire, or roast pork and apple sauce, followed up by suet pudding and driven home, as it were, by a cup of mahogany-brown tea, have put you in just the right mood. Your pipe is drawing sweetly, the sofa cushions are soft underneath you, the fire is well alight [...] In these blissful circumstances, what is it that you want to read about? Naturally, about a murder. (Orwell 1946, 108)

Orwell then asks “But what kind of murder?” He offers, in the remainder of his essay, an attempt to provide an answer to his question: “let me try to define what it is that the readers of Sunday papers mean when they say fretfully that ‘you never seem to get a good murder nowadays’” (108-9).

It comes as no surprise, given the roast beef-eating, tea-drinking readership of this kind of writing, that the genre Orwell has in mind is characterised by its quintessential Englishness. The piece both charts and laments the demise of a specific kind of criminal: the English gentleman-murderer, who commits his crimes in a domestic, often suburban setting; whose motives arise largely from status anxiety or sexual repression (or both); and who commits his crime in a manner that befits his gentility. Surveying a number of what one might call “classic” murders – that is, famous (or infamous) murders committed in the Victorian and Edwardian eras that seized and held the popular imagination for years afterwards – Orwell elucidates the characteristics of the definitive English murder.

In most of the cases, the murderer belonged solidly to the middle class, the victim was the wife or husband of the murderer, the motive was, in large measure, sex, and the murder weapon was poison. Orwell continues:

In more than half the cases, the object was to get hold of a certain known sum of money such as a legacy or an insurance policy, but the amount

involved was nearly always small. In most of the cases the crime only came to light slowly, as the result of careful investigations which started off with the suspicions of neighbours or relatives; and in nearly every case there was some dramatic coincidence, in which the finger of Providence could be clearly seen, or one of those episodes that no novelist would dare to make up, such as Crippen's flight across the Atlantic with his mistress dressed as a boy, or Joseph Smith playing "Nearer, my God, to Thee" on the harmonium while one of his wives was drowning in the next room. (109)

Crucially, moreover, there is frequently an additional motive to these bizarre crimes, which Orwell defines as "respectability – the desire to gain a secure position in life, or not to forfeit one's social position by some scandal such as a divorce" (Orwell 1946, 109). In other words, these murders are bound up both with the English class system, and the notoriously English trait of sexual repression. "With all this in mind", Orwell wrote:

one can construct what would be, from a *News of the World* reader's point of view, the "perfect" murder. The murderer should be a little man of the professional class – a dentist or a solicitor, say – living an intensely respectable life somewhere in the suburbs, and preferably in a semi-detached house, which will allow the neighbours to hear suspicious sounds through the wall. He should be either chairman of the local Conservative Party branch, or a leading Nonconformist and strong Temperance advocate. He should go astray through cherishing a guilty passion for his secretary or the wife of a rival professional man, and should only bring himself to the point of murder after long and terrible wrestles with his conscience. Having decided on murder, he should plan it all with the utmost cunning, and only slip up over some tiny unforeseeable detail. The means chosen should, of course, be poison. In the last analysis he should commit murder because this seems to him less disgraceful, and less damaging to his career, than being detected in adultery. With this kind of background, a crime can have dramatic and even tragic qualities which make it memorable and excite pity for both victim and murderer. (109)

It is as against this "perfect English murder" that Orwell contrasts a very different species of crime represented by a case known as the "Cleft Chin Murder". This was not a carefully orchestrated murder, but a pointless and seemingly random killing spree, committed over a period of just six days by a young man and young woman who absconded together when they barely even knew each other. Indeed, Orwell observes, "it seems doubtful whether, until they were arrested, they even learned one another's true names" (Orwell 1946, 110). The man was "an American army deserter, posing as an officer, named Karl Hulten" (109-110), who "described himself as a big-time Chicago gangster" (110), when he was in fact nothing of the kind. The woman, 18-year old Elizabeth Jones, "described herself as a striptease artist", which she was not, and "declared that she wanted to do something

dangerous, ‘like being a gun-moll’” (110). The killing spree began with “a ride in a stolen army truck”, during which Hulten deliberately ran over a girl bicycling down the road “to show how tough he was” (110). From that, things deteriorated further.

Orwell views this case with some dismay. Decrying “its atmosphere of dance-halls, movie-palaces, cheap perfume, false names and stolen cars” (Orwell 1946, 110), he observes “The background was not domesticity, but the anonymous life of the dance-halls and the false values of the American film” (109). And this is indeed his chief concern: the advent of “Americanized” murder. Orwell concludes by suggesting, with a superbly English sense of understatement, “Perhaps it is significant that the most talked-of English murder of recent years should have been committed by an American and an English girl who had become partly Americanized” (110).

The contrast between the two species of crime is indeed stark. Whereas the typical English murder involved discreet poisoning, the American murder involves sickeningly gratuitous violence. Whereas the English murder involved careful plotting, the American murder is random and seemingly motiveless, as if committed merely for the sake of its own brutality. Whereas social pressures had been integral to the English murder, in the form of prying neighbours, business partners, husbands, or wives, the American murder is characterised by its anonymity, as if it took place in a social vacuum. Indeed, Orwell describes the “Cleft Chin Murder” as a “meaningless story”, not least because “There is no depth of feeling in it” (Orwell 1946, 110, 109). He voices nostalgia towards what he calls “the old domestic poisoning dramas, product of a stable society where the all-prevailing hypocrisy did at least ensure that crimes as serious as murder should have strong emotions behind them” (110).

Now this is, perhaps, a good example of Orwell’s paradoxical love-hate relationship with the English class system he described so well elsewhere.¹ But it is also an example of Orwell having to choose between the lesser of two evils: the class-ridden vagaries of “Englishness”, and, as he saw it, the violently sociopathic individualism of “Americanness”. He had, in fact, faced this dilemma before, in his 1940 essay on boys’ weekly magazines, which contrasted English magazines for boys with their American counterparts. Stories from the English magazines were typically set in an ancient, aristocratic, English school, and were shot through with the very class hierarchy and imperialistic nationalism Orwell so despised. Stories from the American weeklies – with tell-tale names like *Action Stories* and *Fight Stories* – were centred on “some single all-powerful character who dominates everyone about him and whose usual method of solving any problem is a sock on the jaw” (Orwell 1940, 69-70). Whereas the English stories had a range of characters with a variety of traits, calculated to appeal to a broad social spectrum, the American stories had just one aggressively individualistic character whose only trait was violence:

In the Yank Mags you get real blood-lust, really gory descriptions of the all-in, jump-on-his-testicles style fighting, written in a jargon that has been perfected by people who brood endlessly on violence. A paper like *Fight Stories*, for instance, would have very little appeal except to sadists and masochists (70).

Orwell was confronted here with the very same phenomenon he addresses in "Decline of the English Murder" – "the process of Americanization" (Orwell 1940, 71). In both essays, despite the insularity and class snobbery he vilified, he nevertheless champions the English version over the American, deeming it the lesser of two evils. As he put it in his "Boys' Weeklies" essay, "the moral code of the English boys' papers is a decent one. Crime and dishonesty are never held up to admiration, there is none of the cynicism and corruption of the American gangster story" (Orwell 1940, 70). And this comment in turn suggests why he felt the perfect English murder was under threat from an American variant that drew inspiration from the Hollywood genres of gangster and detective films, themselves inspired in turn by the works of writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

I mention Raymond Chandler because he presents us, quite neatly, with the exactly opposing view. Just over a year before, in December 1944, Chandler had published his essay "The Simple Art of Murder" in the *Atlantic Monthly*.² Though normally read for its spirited defence of American "hard-boiled" detective fiction, of which Chandler was a master, this essay is just as concerned with the very same topic as was Orwell: the quintessential "Englishness" of traditional crime writing.³ Chandler notes the genre is burdened by a "heavy crust of English gentility and American pseudo-gentility" (Chandler 57), which chimes closely with Orwell's comments on the importance of respectability and class status to the perfect English murder. Surveying a range of detective writers from Arthur Conan Doyle to Agatha Christie, Chandler observes "The ones I mentioned are all English because the authorities, such as they are, seem to feel that the English writers have an edge and that the Americans [...] only make the Junior Varsity" (Chandler 56). There is, of course, a reason for this, namely that the classic detective novel rose to prominence in England, so that the "authorities" Chandler mentioned are themselves principally English: "These were the people who fixed the form and established the rules and founded the famous Detection Club, which is a Parnassus of English writers of mystery. Its roster includes practically every important writer of detective fiction since Conan Doyle" (Chandler 57).

Chandler's argument is, at first blush, the exact counterpart to Orwell's: the institutionalised Englishness of the perfect murder is so stale and stuffy that "I [...] have to go back to page 47 and refresh my memory about exactly what time the second gardener potted the prize-winning tea-rose begonia" (Chandler 56), while, on the other hand, the writers of the American hard-boiled style are underappreciated, even dismissed. But his case is more complex than that. He writes:

Personally I like the English style better. [...] There is more sense of background, as if Cheesecake Manor really existed all around and not just in the part the camera sees; there are more long walks over the downs and the characters don't all try to behave as if they had just been tested by MGM. The English may not always be the best writers in the world, but they are incomparably the best dull writers. (56)

To understand what Chandler means by such a strangely barbed compliment, we need to bear in mind his analysis of the problematic genre of detective fiction. He opens his essay with the following remarks, as incisive as they are provocative:

The detective story, even in its most conventional form, is difficult to write well. Good specimens of the art are much rarer than good serious novels. Second-rate items outlast most of the high-velocity fiction, and a great many that should never have been born simply refuse to die at all. They are as durable as the statues in public parks and just about as dull.

This fact is annoying to people of what is called discernment. [...] They do not like it at all that “really important books” (and some of them are too, in a way) get the frosty mitt at the reprint counter while *Death Wears Yellow Garters* is put out in editions of fifty or one hundred thousand copies on the newsstands of the country, and is obviously not there just to say good-bye. (53)

Chandler begins his attempt to account for this strange state of affairs by observing that:

The average detective story is probably no worse than the average novel, but you never see the average novel. It doesn't get published. The average – or only slightly above average – detective story does. Not only is it published but it is sold [...] And the strange thing is that this average, more than middling dull piece of utterly unreal and mechanical fiction is really not very different from what are called the masterpieces of the art. (53)

There is something more than a little paradoxical about this. By way of explaining the anomaly, Chandler argues that there is a basic incommensurability at the heart of detective writing. Its subject matter requires a lively style, while its intricate structure of clues requires meticulous logic. These two qualities are so incompatible that they are rarely to be found in the same writer. As Chandler puts it, “The grim logician has as much atmosphere as a drawing board [...] The fellow who can write you a vivid and colorful prose simply will not be bothered with the coolie labor of breaking down unbreakable alibis” (Chandler 54). We might call this incompatibility “Chandler's Paradox”. But there is a second incompatibility in the genre's subject matter, in that the specialist knowledge required to write convincingly of enthralling settings and esoteric motives is rarely to be found

alongside the more mundane knowledge of the down-to-earth, inescapable structures of the legal system, or the insurmountable medical facts of murder. "If you know all you should know about ceramics and Egyptian needlework, you don't know anything at all about the police", writes Chandler:

And if you know enough about the elegant *flânerie* of the pre-war French Riviera to lay your story in that locale, you don't know that a couple of capsules of barbituric acid small enough to be swallowed will not only not kill a man – they will not even put him to sleep if he fights against them.⁴ (54)

The upshot, according to Chandler, is that detective stories tend to get caught between two stools: "they do not really come off intellectually as problems, and they do not come off artistically as fiction. They are too contrived, and too little aware of what goes on in the world" (Chandler 56). This last comment points towards the crux of Chandler's criticism of the traditional English detective story – it is so hopelessly out of touch with life as it is lived as to forfeit any claim to realism:

If it started out to be about real people [...] they must very soon do unreal things in order to form the artificial pattern required by the plot. When they did unreal things, they ceased to be real themselves. They became puppets and cardboard lovers and papier-mâché villains and detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility.

The only kind of writer who could be happy with these properties was the one who did not know what reality was. (57)

Chandler goes so far as to claim that this is indeed the case with authors who aspire to write the perfect English murder: "The only reality the English detection writers knew was the conversational accent of Surbiton and Bognor Regis" (57). Instead of trying to aspire to an aesthetic of a more challenging realism, these writers remain endlessly caught up in their own formulaic rules and conventions, which accounts for the repetitious, self-perpetuating nature of the genre:

But if the writers of this fiction – much loved and much admired as I know it is – wrote about the kind of murders that happen, they would also have to write about the authentic flavour of life as it is lived. And since they cannot do that, they pretend that what they do is what should be done. (56)

Ultimately, Chandler wields the challenge of realism as a touchstone with which to approach the paradox he notes in his essay.⁵ "Realism takes too much talent, too much knowledge, too much awareness" (58), and consequently will

not permit itself to be sidetracked by superfluous complexity of plot, or by the distractions of contrived settings. He puts it succinctly when he argues that “writers who have the vision and the ability to produce real fiction do not produce unreal fiction” (57). But what is Chandler’s version of “the real”, what is the “realism” which writers of crime fiction should seek to capture? The answer is provided in an oft-cited, superbly dystopian passage at the end of the essay:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be a fingerman for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing; a world where you may witness a holdup in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the holdup men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defense will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge.

It is not a fragrant world, but it is the world you live in. (59)

And this, of course, is why Chandler champions the American hard-boiled school of crime writing, epitomised in his own work – though his essay modestly prefers to cite Dashiell Hammett as a champion of the genre. Whereas English writers “wrote about dukes and Venetian vases” (Chandler 57) of which they knew absolutely nothing,

Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley [...] Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols [...] He put these people down on paper as they were, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes. (58)

This kind of fiction was written in a style that “begins with speech, and the speech of common men at that”, because it was “written in the kind of lingo they imagined they spoke themselves. It was, in a sense, but it was much more” (Chandler 58). It is a style that “does not belong to Hammett or to anybody”, because it “is the American language” (58). So, *pace* Orwell, Chandler’s perfect murder is definitively American. Its ideal readership share the very traits Orwell

deplored in American culture, since Chandler claims that the American version of the genre is written “for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life. They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street” (58).

It would seem, then, that Chandler and Orwell are diametrically opposed on practically all points. The only convergence between them is that both note what Orwell called the “process of Americanisation”, or, as Chandler put it:

There are more frozen daiquiris and stingers and fewer glasses of crusty old port, more clothes by *Vogue* [...] more chic, but not more truth. We spend more time in Miami hotels and Cape Cod summer colonies and go not so often down by the old gray sundial in the Elizabethan garden. (Chandler 56)

Their radical disagreement, however, is troubling in itself, since it raises many questions of its own. If Chandler is right that the kind of fiction he wrote was deliberately aimed at the working class, and consequently deliberately rejected the absurd pretensions to gentility that inhered in English detective writing, then one might have expected this gesture to appeal to Orwell. And if, as Chandler’s long passage on realistic detective fiction seems to suggest, the American hard-boiled genre is indeed socially engaged, sniffing out the contradictory, dystopian, and even criminal nature of life under American capitalism, then one might suppose it would find a sympathetic reader in the author of *Nineteen Eighty Four*. Why, then, was Orwell so opposed to the Americanisation of murder?⁶

To answer this, we might look at the most crucial figure in the genre of crime writing, namely the detective himself. As Chandler says of the sleuth of the hard-boiled novels, “He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people” (59). This completely inverts the class basis of the traditional English genre, of which *The Red House Mystery* by A.A. Milne – he of *Winnie the Pooh* fame – serves Chandler as an example:

The detective in this case is an insouciant amateur named Anthony Gillingham, a nice lad with a cheery eye, a nice little flat in town, and that airy manner. He is not making any money on the assignment, but is always available when the local gendarmerie loses its notebook. The English police endure him with their customary stoicism, but I shudder to think what the boys down at the Homicide Bureau in my city would do to him. (55)

Clearly, there is a strong class distinction between Chandler’s detective, an “Everyman” figure, and this representative of the upper classes. But if it seems surprising that Orwell did not champion the former, then we would do well to remember what it was that he found so compelling about the English poisoning

dramas – namely, their relation to the underlying class system. That the cases Orwell described were seen as so titillating reveals both the hidden assumption of a link between social status and morality, *and* that this assumption is deeply problematic: Orwell implies that they absorbed the nation because they demonstrated how ungentlemanly a gentleman could behave.

The moral code of Chandler’s detective is altogether different from that implied by the English class system. Chandler describes it thus:

down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. [...] He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor – by instinct, [...] without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world[...] If there were enough like him, the world would be a safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in. (59)

Clearly, this is a moral code that is not defined by any social system, but is instead centred firmly and immovably on the individual. And this strong emphasis on a strong individual in turn recalls why Orwell found the American boys’ weeklies so distasteful: because they were populated by violent and aggressively individualistic “heroes” – whereas the English version was not only less violent, but also less cynical, or, as Orwell put it, more “decent”.

Orwell put the point rather more clearly when he asked, in a book review, “Why is it that the typical English novel is staid to the point of primness and the typical American novel is bursting with noise, ‘action’ and physical violence?” He answered his question thus:

In England life is subdued and cautious. Everything is governed by family ties, social status and the difficulty of earning a living, and these things are so important that no novelist can forget them. In America they either do not operate or it is the convention for novelists to leave them out. Hence the hero of an American novel is presented not as a cog in the social machine, but as an individual working out his own salvation with no inhibitions and no sense of responsibility. (qtd in Hitchens 106)

Whether such a sweeping statement can approximate a fair evaluation of American fiction there is not the scope here to judge. But it is richly suggestive of why, despite the American roots of detective fiction (Poe’s Dupin, for instance), and despite moreover the sociology of the American murder, with its working class *dramatis personae* and readership, Orwell nevertheless preferred the perfect English murder to the mean streets described by Raymond Chandler.⁷

Notes

¹ See, *inter alia*, his famous essay “The English Class System”, *Complete Works of George Orwell*, vol. XVI – *I have tried to tell the truth: 1943-1944*, ed. Peter Davison, London: Secker & Warburg, 1998, 213-217.

² Chandler re-worked this essay substantially when it was reprinted in the book that bears its name. However, as the article first appeared so shortly before Orwell’s, I prefer to use the original 1944 version. A facsimile of the piece as it appeared in the December 1944 *Atlantic Monthly* is available online at: <http://facstaffwebs.umes.edu/drcooledge/engl324/images/Simple%20of%20Murder.pdf> (accessed January 5th 2007).

³ It could reasonably be objected at this stage that whereas Chandler is discussing the genre of crime fiction, Orwell is discussing ‘real life’ murders that actually happened, and that the two essays are thus about very different things. However, most of Orwell’s murders nevertheless belong to a genre of crime writing similar to the ‘true crime’ or ‘faction’ popularised by Capote, and Orwell notes this: “Of the above-mentioned nine cases, at least four have had successful novels based on them, one has been made into a popular melodrama, and the amount of literature surrounding them, in the form of newspaper write-ups, criminological treatises and reminiscences by lawyers and police officers, would make a considerable library” (Orwell 1946, 108).

⁴ As an aside, this last comment offers a pointed dig at the domestic poisoning plot for which Orwell was so nostalgic.

⁵ The revised version of Chandler’s essay which appears in the book *The Simple Art of Murder* pays much more attention to the issue of realism. It begins with a discussion of this subject.

⁶ Orwell was not alone in his views. The same question could be asked of another left-leaning English writer of the time, W.H. Auden, whose opinions and tastes in this area closely mirrored Orwell’s. In an essay entitled “The Guilty Vicarage” that first came out in 1948 – four years after Chandler’s essay, and two years after Orwell’s – Auden confessed his “addiction” to detective stories. He observed “I find it very difficult [...] to read one that is not set in rural England” (Auden 146). Moreover, he continues:

Mr Raymond Chandler has written that he intends to take the body out of the vicarage garden and give the murder back to those who are good at it. [...] I think Mr Chandler is interested in writing, not detective stories, but serious studies of a criminal milieu, the Great Wrong Place, and his powerful but extremely depressing books should be read and judged, not as escape literature, but as works of art. (Auden 151)

⁷ For a broader discussion of Orwell’s ambivalence towards both Americanization and “Englishness”, see Hitchens, who dedicates a chapter to each of these areas.

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