

Defining Detective Fiction in Interwar Britain

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In an autobiographical anecdote, the British novelist Jeanette Winterson describes how she was awakened to literature after being sent to the public library to collect some books for her adoptive mother, who, apart from religious tracts, read only detective fiction:

[O]n the list was *Murder in the Cathedral* by T. S. Eliot. [Mrs Winterson] thought it was a bloody saga of homicidal monks.

I opened it—it looked a bit short for a mystery story—and sometimes library books had pages missing. I hadn't heard of T. S. Eliot. I opened it, and . . . read . . . and I started to cry. Readers looked up reproachfully, and the Librarian reprimanded me, because in those days you weren't even allowed to sneeze in a library, and so I took the book outside and read it all the way through, sitting on the steps in the usual northern gale.

The unfamiliar and beautiful play made things bearable that day.

This story is framed as, in part, a paean to Britain's continually under-threat public library services, a reminder that they are not just the providers of a "weekly haul" of detective stories for readers like Mrs Winterson (Winterson), but can also introduce a literature-deprived youngster like Jeanette to high culture. In this story, the joke is on Mrs Winterson for her mistake; her desire for escapism inadvertently provides a different sort of escape for her daughter. What has to be omitted in this tale of the opening up of the world of "proper" literature to the young Winterson is the extent to which Eliot himself, especially during the 1920s, engaged with the kind of writing that Mrs Winterson enjoys: the title of *Murder in the Cathedral* is a not unknowing reference to similarly-named

detective novels of the period (Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot* 135). The dichotomy between popular and high culture is less extreme than Winterson makes it in order to give force to her story, and their purposes for their readers may indeed, as she shows, be similar. Discussions about the nature of detective fiction at the time of its emergence as a dominant cultural force show that although contemporary commentators attempted to locate detective fiction and modernism at very different points on the cultural map, this separation often proved untenable. Interwar debates about detective fiction were no less vigorous than debates about modernism at the same period and indeed, I will argue, were continuous with them.

Winterson's exile from the library to read the play on the steps outside and her description later of hoarding forbidden literary fiction under her mattress at home echo the secretive and even shameful sentiments that are sometimes associated with the reading of detective fiction. In an essay published in 1929, Marjorie Nicholson, an American academic, admitted that, tired out by the brain-work demanded of them by complex modernist texts, readers, particularly "scholarly readers" like herself, turned with relief to something lighter at the end of the day, and that detective fiction, admittedly escapist, was "an escape not from life, but from literature" (113). This scenario is echoed in Dodie Smith's *I Capture the Castle* (1948) in which the narrator's father, supposedly at work on a modernist novel, passes his time by reading detective fiction (Smith 35). Ostensibly, as Maria DiBattista argues, for Nicholson detective fiction displays "a healthy suspicion of the high modernist's preoccupation with a besieged, often purposeless and erratic subjectivity. Its interest in human beings is sensibly confined to the question, Whodunit" (Di Battista 178). Nicholson suggests that detective fiction has an "objectivity" and "straightforward appeal to the intellect" that is lacking in other contemporary fiction (114), but this did not make it immune from a similar kind of scrutiny to that which more highbrow writing was receiving, as Nicholson's essay itself shows.

Nicholson was writing at the end of a decade which had seen the rise of new experimental and challenging authors such as Eliot, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, as well as the emergence of what later came to be termed the "Golden Age" of detective fiction, with Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Margery Allingham among the most prominent names. Both kinds of writing have been seen as a response to the First World War, with modernism attempting to depict a new understanding of fragmented subjectivity in the war's aftermath and rejecting previous literary methods as inadequate to this task, and detective fiction a means of encountering death in contexts in which it is explainable and explained, in contrast to the multiple and senseless losses of wartime (Plain 42). Modernism's stylistic inventiveness and often deliberate obscurity meant that it was deemed, at its inception, to be elitist; when seen as taking a "reassuring" role in the face

of social and historical change, detective fiction, especially of the “Golden Age” variety, is condemned as conservative and resistant to change. But the discourse about each of these apparently very different kinds of writing converged in the 1920s and 1930s on the issue of discrimination.

Maurizio Ascari has argued that the process of defining detective fiction from the late nineteenth century onwards necessitated the exclusion of its “sensational lineage,” and a focus instead on rationality, “grounding its literary status on its associations with scientific method and highbrow literature” (1). Christopher Pittard goes so far as to describe this exclusionary process, which downgrades the influence on detective fiction of, for instance, sensation fiction and the supernatural, as a “eugenics of genre” (26). However, I will argue that discourse about detective fiction in the interwar years suggests that the greater the proliferation of generic “rules,” the more resistant detective fiction was to such strictures. Detective fiction remained a contested form throughout this period. It was also a varied form; the kind of “indulgent imaginative union” (Humble, “Sitting” 50) that commentators such as Q. D. Leavis and George Orwell observed in readers of popular fiction was not necessarily to be provided by the texts which Nicholson views as having a “straightforward appeal to the intellect.” Detective fiction was a broad church. Part of the task of reviewers, one of the main sources of orientation for readers of detective fiction, was to describe and situate each example in ways which would allow those readers to make meaningful decisions about what to read, to help them to discriminate. As I will show, this meant that reviewers referenced generic conventions as a kind of critical shorthand, but were also keen to point to examples that over-rode these apparent rules, and therefore, potentially, to expand readers’ horizons. This ongoing process of genre formation and critique is complicated and enriched when the reviewers in question are themselves practitioners of the detective form.

Initially in this essay, I will examine some of the writing on the purposes and parameters of detective fiction that was produced by T. S. Eliot and Dorothy L. Sayers, and suggest why it might have been felt necessary for this popular form to be subjected to a kind of canonical policing. As a writer of detective fiction, Sayers continued to debate the nature of the form within her novels, some of which feature a detective story author as a protagonist, and which expose for the reader the kinds of commercial pressures to which authors are subject. This self-reflexive doubling of roles is echoed by Nicholas Blake, a detective author who also wrote poetry under the name Cecil Day-Lewis. Blake made no secret of the fact that his decision to write detective fiction was financially driven, with his biographer Peter Lewis noting: “Nicholas Blake might . . . never have appeared in print if the roof on [his home] Box Cottage had not needed £100 of repairs” (129). Nevertheless, Blake also engages in debate about

the nature of the form in reviews, essays, and in his fiction, in ways which belie the apparent pragmatism of his initial motives. Sayers's *Strong Poison* (1930) and Blake's *The Beast Must Die* (1938) in particular show how anxieties – and indeed certainties – about the boundaries and continuities between the modernist and the middlebrow were worked through within detective novels themselves.

In his study of pre-First World War popular literature, Nicholas Daly, drawing on and critiquing Andreas Huyssen's notion of the "great divide" which opened up between popular and modernist culture at this period, notes that "an influential strand of modernism . . . defined itself against the popular," notwithstanding the fact that "even that high modernist mandarin, T. S. Eliot, was drawn to . . . popular forms like music hall" (Daly 120). Detective fiction might in some analyses be deemed one of the popular forms against which modernism "defined itself," and, in this regard, Eliot's interest in detective fiction could be viewed as little more than knowing one's enemy. However, as Daly indicates, and as David Chinitz has shown, especially in the 1920s, Eliot was "ambivalent towards popular culture rather than needlessly oppositional" (Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot* 154); for Chinitz, Eliot was "no uncomplicated cultural conservative" ("T. S. Eliot" 237). My interest here is not so much in showing, as Chinitz has done, how a more detailed understanding of Eliot's attitudes to popular culture can enrich a reading of his own work. Rather, it is to assess Eliot's contribution to the debate about the nature of detective fiction, identifying the extent to which his interventions, especially when placed alongside those of a more familiar commentator such as Sayers, attempt to repair the "great divide" between modernism and the middlebrow as represented by detective fiction. In Eliot's essay "Wilkie Collins and Dickens" (1927), published as the preface to an edition of *The Moonstone*, Chinitz identifies an echo of the "dissociation of sensibility" thesis that Eliot expounded in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919): "Noting the passing of the 'golden age of melodrama' within his lifetime, Eliot describes the disjunction between the 'high' and the 'popular' as a sort of iron curtain that has only recently descended across the arts" (Chinitz, *T. S. Eliot* 55). Notably, given Ascarì's claim for an increasing emphasis on rationality in both discourse about detective fiction and the form itself during the early twentieth century, Eliot expresses a preference for Collins over a different tradition of which Edgar Allan Poe is his exemplar: "The detective story, as created by Poe, is something as specialized and as intellectual as a chess problem; whereas the best English detective fiction has relied less on the beauty of the mathematical problem and much more on the intangible human element" ("Wilkie Collins and Dickens" 464). As I will show, this division between "chess problem" and "human element" is one to which Sayers and Blake return in their discussions of detective fiction. If the "chess problem" is the

apogee of the rationalised version of detective fiction described by Ascari, and indeed Nicholson, it is notable that it was not necessarily the most highly prized by these authors. The so-called “clue-puzzle” form was still being practised in the interwar years, but “Golden Age” writers were increasingly drawn to what Eliot terms the “human element.”

Aside from the essay on Collins, Eliot wrote three reviews of detective fiction for the *New Criterion* between 1927 and 1929. Rather than providing detailed commentary on the texts in question, although he does rank them in order of merit, Eliot in each case uses the review to reflect in general terms on the nature of detective fiction. The first two reviews, both published in 1927, are based on his reading of, between them, twenty-six recent works of British and American fiction, with the best-known authors being R. Austin Freeman, H. C. Bailey, Ronald Knox and S. S. Van Dine, the latter two of whom themselves composed influential lists of “rules” for detective fiction, while the final essay, from early 1929, assesses *The Complete Sherlock Holmes Short Stories* and a reissue of the influential early American detective novel, Anna Katharine Green’s *The Leavenworth Case* (1878). In the first these reviews, Eliot reinforces his opinion that “the great book which contains the whole of English detective fiction in embryo is *The Moonstone*” (140), and goes on to outline a provisional list of five rules for the form. Notably, Eliot disallows the inclusion of a “highly abnormal” criminal, as this introduces “an irrational element . . . which offends us” (“Books of the Quarter” 1927 141). Similarly, he insists that the story “must not rely either upon occult phenomena,” which again introduces “an irrational element” (141). Such exclusions, not uncommon in lists of rules for detective fiction, tend to be linked to a desire that the author should “play fair” with the reader, that is, that the reader should have the opportunity to mimic the reasoning process of the detective and, potentially, reach the solution of the crime independently. However, Eliot’s strictures seem to be based more on a desire for a degree of realism or naturalism in the narrative. He continues: “The detective should be highly intelligent but not superhuman. We should be able to follow his inferences and almost, but not quite, make them with him” (142). Turning to the example of *The Moonstone*’s Sergeant Cuff, Eliot notes that Cuff does not have “superhuman” powers, rather a “trained mind and trained senses” (142). What Eliot does not quite imply is that the detective novel demands, to a greater or lesser degree, what could be termed “close-reading” skills; his preference is for a variant of the genre that is perhaps a more amenable and recognisable one to the present day reader than the “clue-puzzle” form.

When discussing Holmes, however, Eliot admits that he has trouble “placing” him: “It is a great convenience to the critic to be able to compare what he is writing about with something else. But I cannot think of anything to which to compare Sherlock Holmes. He does not seem to be descended

from either Sergeant Cuff or Monsieur Dupin” (“Books of the Quarter” 1929 553). Given the explicit references made to Dupin within the Holmes canon, it seems surprising that Eliot does not place Holmes in this tradition; earlier in the essay, Eliot states: “We have now come to a point of time at which it beings to be possible to separate with some assurance the permanent from the transitory in detective fiction” and *The Moonstone* and “The Mystery of Marie Roget” are identified as “two standard works by which to judge” (552). Eliot seems to hesitate over whether the Holmes stories can be included as benchmark texts in the genre, but later in the essay, it is implied that Holmes is situated as an intermediary figure between these two examples: “There is no rich humanity, no deep and cunning psychology and knowledge of the human heart about [Holmes]; he is obviously a formula . . . yet . . . he is just as real to us as Falstaff or [Sam] Wellers [sic]. He is not even a very good detective. But I am not sure that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is not one of the great dramatic writers of his age” (556). Unpicking this final double negative, it seems that Eliot recognises Doyle’s adeptness without really knowing why it works. There is an echo within this discussion of Eliot’s comment in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” about the need for “the historical sense” which “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (23). The detective novelist, emerging from a shorter tradition, has an easier task, but must still be conscious of this lineage. In this context, part of what is puzzling for Eliot about Sherlock Holmes is the extent to which he is *sui generis*, existing both within and beyond the detective tradition.

Dorothy L. Sayers shared Eliot’s enthusiasm for the works of Collins, especially *The Moonstone*. In an essay published in 1930, she suggested that much current detective fiction did not attract the wide readership that she ascribes to Collins, and, like Eliot, identifies “a deep and wide gulf extending to-day between the mystery-story of sensation and the mystery-story of pure intellect, and we need a great new popular genius to fuse once more these two widely-separated elements and give us a new *Moonstone*” (“Present Status” 48). In her preface to *The Moonstone*, published in 1944, she again identifies it as a foundational text in the detective genre. A classic work, she argues, in terms that echo Eliot’s, “is a work that achieves perfection in its own kind, and by so doing sums up and contains, not merely everything that preceded, but also everything that follows it. It is not only a ‘standard’ work, the best of its class: it actually makes the class and sets the standard” (v). *The Moonstone* is evidently such a work.¹ As Eliot’s foray into reviewing makes clear, the identification of the “best of its class” was an ongoing task. Sayers

contributed to this process a number of ways: at the time when Eliot was writing his essay on *The Moonstone*, she was beginning the task of editing *Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror* (known in the USA as *The Omnibus of Crime*) which eventually expanded to three hefty volumes, published in 1929, 1931, and 1934, each including an introduction by Sayers in which she simultaneously explained her selections and mapped out her own version of the history of detective fiction, particularly in the short story form. Probably her best known contribution to detective fiction criticism is the essay “Aristotle on Detective Fiction” (1935) in which she considers detective fiction in the light of Aristotle’s theorisation of tragedy. Here, however, I want to focus briefly on her work as a reviewer for *The Sunday Times*, a respected, conservative, broadsheet weekly for which she wrote a column between June 1933 and August 1935.² Book reviewing, especially in a crowded market like detective fiction, had, and arguably still has, an important role in assisting the reader to negotiate a path through the variety of available offerings. Sayers used these columns, as Eliot used his articles, to expound her views on what constituted best practice in detective fiction, judging the reviewed works accordingly.

Sayers examined between three and six novels each week and was often explicit about what she felt characterised a successful work, thus enabling her readers to take their own bearings. She shares with Nicholas Blake an occasionally tongue-in-cheek tone. For instance, in one of her early reviews, she compares the selections of different crime book clubs to runners in a horse-race, identifying them by their jackets as one might identify horses by their colours. (“Tipsters of Crime Stories” 9) Yet Sayers is implicitly critiquing contemporary marketing practices, and indeed throughout these reviews she is not slow to pass judgement on what she feels to be the negative side of the proliferation of texts in the marketplace. (Towards the end of her time as a reviewer, she often ended her column with a quotation from one of the books under review which she felt exemplified “The Week’s Worst English.”) What soon becomes clear, unsurprisingly given the prominence of these qualities in her own work, is that Sayers values above all else a combination of “good writing and good characterisation” (“A Crime Writer” 7) Christie’s *Why Didn’t They Ask Evans?* (1934) is praised for its “charming characters” (“Three Good” 8), and, discussing *Three Act Tragedy* (1935), Sayers identifies in Christie “the great gift that distinguishes the novelist from the manufacturer of plots. Mrs Christie has given us an excellent plot, a clever mystery, and an exciting story, but her chief strength lies in this power to compel belief in her characters” (“Mrs Christie” 9). What seems to be implied here is not so much psychologically naturalistic characterisation, but a convincing and economical use of detail and dialogue.

The corollary of this is a warning she issues in July 1933 against

“the greatest peril that besets the detective story . . . over-mechanisation” (“A Sleuth” 7), and later, in December 1934, she notes her “approval of the efforts made of late to give the detective story a more reasonable psychology than it used to have and to link it up with problems of less ephemeral interest than the barren ingenuities of murder mechanics” (“Detective Novel” 5). However, acknowledging that some readers prefer their detective fiction to be “just a puzzle,” she changes direction and implies that, as a critic, there is simply little that she can say about this latter form other than that it is well or badly executed. Implicitly, she is here seeing her aim as a critic not simply to sift the sheep from the goats on behalf of the potential reader but to appeal to those who can already recognise what is “less ephemeral” and guide them towards what she feels to be the best examples. For example, earlier in 1934, she describes the American author C. Daly King as “a highbrow of highbrows” (“A Development” 9), partly on the grounds that the author also produced academic works on psychology, but also because a debate between psychologists representing different schools of thought forms part of the working out of the plot of *Obelists En Route*; this novel is, according to Sayers, “caviare [sic] to the general, perhaps, but authentic caviare” (9). In contrast, Val Gielgud and Holt Marvell’s jointly authored *Death at Broadcasting House* “may be called middlebrow . . . not caviare, but a light and savoury omelette” (9). This food analogy cuts in a number of different directions: not all readers will be discriminating enough to find caviar to their taste; some readers will be happy to eat whatever is put in front of them, so long as it is new to them, like the frighteningly voracious readers observed by Orwell in “Bookshop Memories” (1936): these books, like food, are all, good and bad, a commodity, nourishing or not. Notably, in her 1930 essay, Sayers used the comparison with caviar as a warning for authors against losing touch with “the common man” (“Present Status” 47). What also unpins these comments, and what is sometimes passed over in discussions of detective fiction, are the minute gradations of taste that are in operation, in this period of proliferation in particular. From the outside, “detective fiction” is often condemned en bloc, but from the inside, it is a complex and highly variegated field of production, and the reader implicitly requires the guidance of a knowing commentator such as Sayers, just as they might need the waiter’s help with the menu.

Sayers’s praise for novels which contain convincing characters can be seen as a defence of her own practice. Especially in the later 1930s, she was condemned for over-emphasising “human interest” at the expense of detection. Nicholas Blake, who started reviewing for *The Spectator*, a weekly current affairs magazine, in the autumn of 1935, shared Sayers’s preference for novels in which the characters are more than merely ciphers, emphasising the role of dialogue: “Where character is concerned, an ounce of revealing dialogue outweighs a pound of description” (“Fact, Fiction”

482). But although Sayers, in one of her later reviews, praised Blake's first novel, *A Question of Proof* (1935), including the dialogue, expressing only the reservation that "the plot is perhaps not the strongest point" ("Trouble" 9), Blake was not quite so generous in his review of *Gaudy Night* (1936). He admires Sayers's evocation of the academic milieu in this Oxford-set novel, but is less sure about the balance between "the character-motif" and the "detective motif" ("Gaudeamus" 828), concluding his review by commenting: "We may feel, too, a puritan twinge at seeing so much erudition, sensibility and humour devoted exclusively to this kind of fiction. Still, if Miss Sayers prefers the halls to the legitimate stage, that is her business; and it is silly to carp at an old favourite who has always given great pleasure" (828). It seems strange that Blake, himself a practitioner, condemns detective fiction through a comparison to music-hall, aligning it with cheap entertainment rather than high art, though it is characteristic of a strand of mild self-hatred that arises in some of Blake's and Day-Lewis's comments about writing detective fiction. Peter Stanford quotes a 1934 letter from Day-Lewis to Stephen Spender: "I've been trying to write commercial prose . . . I am horrified but secretly fascinated at the ease with which I can write good, window-box, bloody awful entertainment stuff" (129). Part of how he manages his "horror" is by separating Day-Lewis the poet from Blake the detective writer; Day-Lewis is able to express his own "sensibility" through the "legitimate stage" of poetry, although that Blake was a pseudonym for Day-Lewis did not remain a secret from the reading public for long. Day-Lewis was not only concerned that being known as a detective writer might damage his reputation as poet but also believed that "people who read detective novels don't like the detective novelist to be anything like a serious poet" (qtd. in Stanford 129). However, as I will show, Blake was himself not averse to pressing at the boundaries of genre, and indeed displaying "erudition" in his detective fiction, as Sayers does.

Blake's most intensive period of reviewing was during 1936, when he wrote a column more or less monthly, usually covering half a dozen works, and, like Sayers, identifying in the process his own criteria for judging detective fiction. A review from February 1936, in which, among others, he examines Christie's *The A.B.C Murders*, G. D. H and Margaret Coles's *Scandal at School* and Ngaio Marsh's *The Nursing Home Murder* exemplifies an approach which sees balance between different elements as crucial. He finds Christie's characters to be too "perfunctorily sketched," despite the novel being "a masterpiece of construction"; the Coles he believes to be more convincing in their characterisation in this novel than in previous efforts, but their plot "rather resembles a clockwork mouse: erratic in direction, and requiring too frequent winding-up"; in Marsh's novel, meanwhile, the elements of characterisation, situation, and plot "form the ingredients of a mix-up that can be unreservedly recommended and

will elicit loud cries for ‘more!’ from all who taste it” (“Up” 272). The recipe analogy, echoing Sayers’s references to food, is a reminder that detective fiction is sometimes condemned as “formulaic”; this type of criticism is given leverage by the existence of lists of rules such as Ronald Knox’s “A Detective Story Decalogue” (1928), which appear to offer a formula or recipe for the construction of such works. In some respects, Blake’s model of detective fiction is more normative than Sayers. In February 1938, he gives a warning, albeit tongue-in-cheek, against the “regrettable tendency” in recent crime fiction to allow the murderer to escape: “Such high-handed behaviour, if permitted to continue, will lay the axe to the root, if not of public morality, at least of the law of detective fiction” (“Nothing” 192). Some orthodoxies, however, are best dispensed with (“Experiment” 764); Blake dismisses what he calls the “Wills-Crofts-Austin-Freeman school, which deliberately reduces the characters to the subordinate rôle of ciphers in a mathematical problem” (“Romances” 1118).³ The ratiocinative element is not to be dispensed with completely, and Blake occasionally points out flaws in plot mechanics, or notes that he managed to solve the crime before the revelation of the perpetrator within the narrative, but where the dichotomy between Poe and Collins is concerned, Blake veers more towards the Collins camp, albeit not so decidedly as Sayers.

Blake was just beginning to review detective fiction as Sayers came to the end of her employment with the *Sunday Times*, and, similarly, Blake was at the start of his detective-writing career in 1935 (he would continue to publish detective novels until 1968), whilst, after *Gaudy Night*, Sayers published only one further novel, *Busman’s Honeymoon* (1938), following instead in Eliot’s footsteps by turning to religious drama. In some respects, Sayers and Blake can be seen as the old and the new guard of detective fiction, although, as I have noted, in the period of their overlap in the 1930s, there is a degree of consonance in their ideas about the direction that detective fiction should take; they each share with Eliot a desire for a “humanised” version of detective fiction. To include a character within a detective novel who is an author of detective fiction is a strategy each uses to continue the debate about the nature of the form that is begun in their critical writing. The reader is invited to measure the work s/he is reading against the paradigm presented within the work itself, and, simultaneously, the author displays self-consciousness about the task of writing. (A similar self-consciousness, and the inclusion of a writer or other artist as a protagonist, can also be found in many modernist works, of course.)⁴

There is evidence in the work of both Sayers and Blake, as I will show, to support Nicola Humble’s suggestion, made while discussing Agatha Christie, that although middlebrow texts often debunk “the effortful intellectual attitudes of the highbrow” (*Feminine* 21), they tend to show respect towards the highbrow creative artist (*Feminine* 22). When Lord

Peter Wimsey first encounters Harriet Vane in *Strong Poison* (1930), she is on trial for the murder of her lover, Philip Boyes. Harriet's trouble stems in part from her research for her latest crime novel; Boyes died of arsenic poisoning, and she is known to have purchased arsenic and signed the poison book with a false name, claiming this was "to prove by experiment how easy it was for an ordinary person to get hold of deadly poisons" (Sayers, *Strong* 9). Boyes was also a novelist, though of a more "highbrow" sort, and even after Wimsey has rather abruptly decided that he is in love with Harriet, and has discovered that she was badly treated by Boyes, he nevertheless admits that he thinks Boyes's books to be "very fine" (93), a view shared by Boyes's austere cousin Urquhart: "His books were very cleverly written – he had a fine intellect, Lord Peter – but they did not bring him in any great sums of money" (70). This echoes the "respect" that Humble finds in Christie, though Sayers does not go so far as to allow Boyes's skill as a writer to justify his poor treatment of Harriet and his sense of entitlement: as Harriet reveals, Boyes believed that "great artists deserved to be boarded and lodged at the expense of the ordinary man" (47). One of her friends tells Wimsey that, in Boyes's view, Harriet: "ought to have been ministering to his work, not making money for them both with her own independent trash" (103).

However, if Boyes is constructed as having been no great loss to Harriet, Sayers's exposure in this novel of the role of the market, including publishers and reviewing, makes Boyes appear to be naive rather than simply bloody minded as regards his own talent. This is brought home when Wimsey visits, in turn, Boyes's publisher, Grimsby & Cole, and Harriet's agent, Mr Challoner. Cole tells Wimsey that Boyes "could not have done better for himself than to go out and get murdered" (72), and describes how the publishers have reprinted his complete works in various editions: "We shall always feel a melancholy pride in . . . in knowing that we recognised his quality, before there was any likelihood of financial remuneration" (73). Wimsey is cynical about Grimsby & Coles's cashing in on the author's death, but the fickleness of the market is also indicted here: few are interested in reading Boyes's work until his death brings him into the spotlight. Harriet's agent Challoner is also, albeit reluctantly, cashing in: "We have to do the best for our client, whatever the circumstances" (74). But he also implies that Grimsby & Cole might not have been doing their best for Boyes, saying he would "never contemplate" (75) offering an author to them. These details tend to divert the reader's attention away from the question of whether either author's reputation is based on the intrinsic quality of the work: Sayers essentially positions both Harriet and Boyes as subject to the same market-forces, perhaps anticipating her later joke about the runners and riders in the crime book club stakes.

Later, Wimsey's mother makes some apparently blithe comments about reviewing which tend to the same conclusion: "We owe a great deal

of gratitude to the Press,' said the Dowager Duchess; 'so kind of them to pick out all the plums for us and save us the trouble of reading the books, don't you think, and such a joy for the poor dear people who can't afford seven and sixpence, or even a library subscription'" (142). (Seven shillings and sixpence was the standard price for a new novel at this period.) Reading reviews is here seen as a substitute for reading the books themselves; the duchess might believe that the "plums" are simply waiting there to be picked out by the reviewers and presented to the reader, but as Wimsey has already shown, the network of forces leading to a novel becoming a bestseller, and implicitly, even to it being reviewed, are much more complicated.

Harriet's writing, and her ambivalent feelings towards it, can be seen as echoing Sayers's move away from detective fiction once she had the opportunity to pursue other kinds of work. In *Have his Carcase* (1932), discovering a dead body on a beach while on holiday, Harriet wonders what Robert Templeton, "the hero who diligently detected between the covers of her own books" (9), would do. Discussing the developing case with Wimsey, Harriet reflects on the difference between what people do in books (implicitly, detective novels) and what they do in real life (99). Knowledge of "real life" can usefully feed into fiction, but the reverse is not necessarily the case; this is one of the moments when the reader is invited to consider *this* novel as something rather different from the works Harriet herself writes, despite the fact that, as in her book "The Fountain Pen Mystery" (47), details of timing and alibis become crucial in *Have his Carcase*. Sayers is appealing to a knowing reader, or, in the terms she uses of C. Daly King, a "highbrow." Later, at the request of the newspaper which is serialising her latest work, Harriet is expected to include "a spot of love-making" and she struggles with this "distasteful task" (188). In setting down this technical challenge and foregrounding it as a problem for Harriet, Sayers implicitly presents her own practice in *Have his Carcase* as the more skilful example.

These references to newspaper serialisation, like Wimsey's interview with the publisher and agent, bring to the reader's notice the forces of cultural production by which the author is constrained. The detective novelist might more readily find a publisher than the "highbrow," but this might itself involve intellectual compromises. Facing the task of revising her earlier works for a new edition in *Gaudy Night* (1936), Harriet reflects that: "The books were all right, as far as they went; as intellectual exercises, they were even brilliant. But there was something lacking about them; they read now to her as though they had been written with a mental reservation, a determination to keep her own opinions and personality out of view" (64). What she feels she requires, however, is not more subjectivity, but a different approach altogether: "If she could succeed in standing aside from herself she would achieve self-confidence and a better control" (64). "Standing aside from herself" might sound reminiscent of Eliot's notion of poetry as

“an escape from personality” (Eliot, “Tradition” 30), but Harriet believes that scholarly work, “the single eye, directed to the object, not dimmed nor distracted by private notes and beams” (65) would be preferable. Returning to her old Oxford college, for the rest of the novel, in an echo of Sayers’s never-completed book on Wilkie Collins, she undertakes a biographical study of the Victorian gothic author Sheridan Le Fanu, a task interrupted by the investigation of a series of malicious crimes against students and staff.

Nicholas Blake, as I have noted, suggested that Sayers was somehow slumming when she wrote detective rather than literary fiction; a more charitable assessment would be that although she recognised the imperatives of the market when it came to classifying both her own works and others, she also recognised that these were conventions rather than laws. Blake’s treatment of detective and indeed “highbrow” fiction within his novels is differently inflected. Nigel Strangeways, Blake’s investigating protagonist has, it is revealed in *There’s Trouble Brewing* (1937), authored a “little book on the Caroline poets” (3), something he describes as “dabbling in literature” (4); his choice of scholarly field would not have been especially outré at the period, Harriet’s probably more so.⁵ However, on his first appearance, Strangeways is marked as an intellectual maverick, who has left university two years into his degree after answering his exam papers with limericks (*A Question* 7). Blake makes free throughout his novels with literary allusions of a more or less obscure kind, with Jacobean tragedy featuring in *Thou Shell of Death* (1936) and a surrealist poet making an appearance in *There’s Trouble Brewing*. Most pertinent to the present discussion, however, is Felix Lane, the detective novelist who features in Blake’s most formally innovative work, *The Beast Must Die* (1938).

The first third of this novel is presented as Felix Lane’s diary. In the aftermath of the death of his son in a hit-and-run accident, Lane manages, painstakingly, to identify the culprit, George Rattery, gets to know a young woman, Lena, who was in the car with Rattery at the time of the accident, and inveigles himself an invitation to Rattery’s cottage, intending to find, or indeed create, an opportunity to kill him. The first entry in Lane’s diary begins in this way:

I am going to kill a man. I don’t know his name, I don’t know where he lives, I have no idea what he looks like. But I am going to find him and kill him . . .

You must pardon me this melodramatic opening, gentle reader. It sounds just like a first sentence out of one of my own detective-novels, doesn’t it? (9)

Where Harriet Vane’s research for her novel leads to her being a suspect, Lane acknowledges that he has only “a smattering of forensic

medicine, criminal law, and police procedure” (13) but he does also have righteous anger, stemming from the loss of an innocent life and the refusal of the perpetrator to stop and admit their guilt. The diary is constructed as a truthful confession that can never be published (9) and it is also implied that the truth of subjectivity cannot be conveyed in the detective novels that Felix usually writes. Notably, “Felix Lane” is a pseudonym; Lane starts writing detective novels as a kind of therapy after the death of his wife: “They are rather good [novels], as it happens, and bring me in a surprising amount of cash: but I am unable to convince myself that detective fiction is a serious branch of literature” (13). The paradox is that, although the diary is from the outset placed apart from Lane’s usual output, it is, of course, the opening section of a detective novel: the diary itself later becomes evidence in a murder investigation, with Felix as a suspect.

Initially the diary seems to prove Felix’s innocence, as although he describes his plan for the murder, Rattery dies before he is able to put this into action. However, once Strangeways arrives to investigate and the novel switches to third-person narration, it gradually becomes evident that the diary is not all that it seemed, and is in fact an elaborately constructed fake alibi. Strangeways has to bring his close-reading skills to bear on Lane’s writing, and the diary is shown to be not a spontaneous and private document but a text which has been emplotted, like the novel of which it is part. Felix has, in fact, been using his writerly skills in order to try to disguise his crime and when Strangeways points out a telling mistake in the diary, Felix is “faintly disappointed, as if [Strangeways] had found a flaw in one of his books” (196). Reflecting that “George Rattery was no loss to the world” (201), Strangeways allows Felix to escape at the climax of the novel, rather than handing him over to the police, having first extracted a confession from him. He does this, however, in the knowledge that Felix is unlikely to survive the boat trip by which he intends to make his getaway. Strangeways’s merciful gesture is in fact a way of administering rough justice, which even an unpleasant victim deserves. Blake’s novel might at first appear to be similar to, for instance, Francis Iles *Malice Aforethought* (1931), a third-person novel which tells of the planning and execution of a murder from the perpetrator’s perspective. But with the introduction of Strangeways the narrative switches track, reverting to a more familiar investigative structure, with the reader gradually realising, as Strangeways does, that the diary is not all that it seems. *The Beast Must Die* is, as a result, a different sort of experiment than initially appears, its novelty arising not so much from its insight into the criminal mind, than from its narrative structure and Felix’s attempt to use his advantage presumptions about the nature of the diary as a narrative form.

Blake’s and Sayers’s narrative self-referentiality is differently configured, but both attempt to situate the detective narrative, either directly

or indirectly, within a wider framework of literary references, and therefore, within wider literary culture. Blake lays himself open to the criticism which Q. D. Leavis made of Sayers, whom she felt gave “the impression of intellectual activity to readers who would very much dislike that kind of exercise if it were actually presented to them” (336). For Leavis, Sayers’s literary references show a surface knowledge without “any sensitiveness” or “feeling for quality” (336). Like Nicholson, Leavis notes that detective fiction has become an accepted recreation among academics, but she is at a loss to explain how those who should be the arbiters of taste can have so failed to “refine [their] perceptions” (339) that they claim to enjoy a writer like Sayers. However, it seems evident from their reviews and their fiction that both Sayers and Blake had a much more complex view of the relationship between detective fiction and literary culture more widely than a commentator such as Leavis would allow. Within their own contexts, these authors were as concerned as modernist writers with pushing at boundaries. Each shows an acute awareness of the potential, as well as the limitations, of the genre within which they chose to work.

Notes

1. It should be noted that that Eliot’s and Sayers’s revaluations of this novel can also be contextualized in relation to a wider reassessment of Collins as a Victorian novelist that occurred during the 1910s and 1920s, with important contributions from Walter de la Mare and Michael Sadleir.
2. See Ralph E. Hone, “Dorothy L. Sayers: Critic of Detective Fiction” for an overview of these reviews including extensive extracts.
3. Blake is referring to Freeman Wills Crofts (1879-1957), whose novels, featuring Inspector French, involved the painstaking accumulation of factual information. R. Austin Freeman (1862-1943) is credited with inventing the “inverted” detective story, in which the focus is on explaining how, rather than why, a crime was committed. His investigator, Dr Thorndyke, is sometimes compared with Sherlock Holmes and uses detailed scientific knowledge to reach a solution. Blake’s linking together of these names is reminiscent of Roy Fuller’s mocking reference to Cecil Day-Lewis and his fellow poets W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Louis MacNeice as “MacSpaunday,” a term that first appeared in Fuller’s 1946 collection *Talking Bronco* (Stanford 111).
4. For a consideration of the broader effects of such self-consciousness on texts’ realism, see Stewart, “True Crime Narratives and Detective Fiction in Interwar Britain”.
5. LeFanu, like Collins was being reconsidered at this period, with M. R. James publishing an edition of his short stories in 1923. Thanks to Dr Nicholas Freeman for pointing this out. Thanks also to Professor Martin Dzelzainis for his comments on the interwar reputation of the Caroline poets.

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