# FORENSICS RATHER THAN JUSTICE: THE QUIRKE SERIES VERSUS THE CLASSIC DETECTIVE NOVEL

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*Abstract: While the classic detective novel is a genre of order and rationality, whose hero (the detective) is invested with powers of reasoning of a higher order which help him/her bring back the temporary chaos of evil to a stable state, the universe of the Quirke series is the universe of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and of Einstein's relativity, the universe of quantum laws and blurred demarcation lines. The detective's job, in this newly refashioned universe, is no longer to restore the previous equilibrium by doing justice, as the very idea of equilibrium becomes obsolete. The detective's job (at least this is what the Quirke series propose) becomes more akin to that of a forensic specialist: to investigate the traces of the crime in order to find out an uncertain truth that offers a semblance of stability.*

*Keywords: the classic detective novel, the noir detective, postmodernism, subversion*

Forensic medicine, everybody would agree, is not a nice speciality to choose. Darkness, depression and death are the companions of the forensic specialist, a doctor who, instead of healing and attending to the living, spends his days cutting up the dead. There is a certain aura of mystery and dread surrounding the pathologist, and most often they appear as eccentric characters to the public. When choosing Quirke, a consultant pathologist and head of the pathology department of the Holy Family hospital, as his main character for a crime series, Benjamin Black had undoubtedly all these in mind.

Benjamin Black is the pen name of John Banville, the most acclaimed and successful Irish writer today, a winner of the Booker Prize in 2005 for his novel *The Sea* and a contender for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Confessing that the Quirke series came from „the dark recesses of his Irish soul", Black admitted that the genre of the roman noir allowed him to make sense of much of his unhappy and troubled past. Set in Dublin in the 1950s, the Quirke novels paint the picture of a closed society run by a mob-like elite, in the grip of a strong Catholic tradition, whose best men are like Quirke, self-tormenting and self-destructive.

Quirke's career as an amateur detective starts at the St. John's Hospital Morgue, where one late night he discovers his brother Malachy Griffin (a consultant obstetrician working at the same hospital) busily writing a file on a dead girl. Intrigued by the verdict of pulmonary embolism, he conducts a post-mortem on the girl himself and finds out that she has died of a massive hemorrhage in childbirth and Malachy has falsified the records of a post partum death. Following a trail of evidence with the stubbornness of man intent on finding out the truth, he stumbles on a gruesome discovery, which he finds hard to acknowledge at first and then to come to terms with. What is so fascinating about the Quirke series is not so much the plot, which appears more or less predictable, especially for the avid detective novel reader, as the eerie atmosphere of the hospital, of Dublin and its streets, suggestive of an oppressive and calamitous



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past. In the noir fiction, murder becomes a pretext for exploring the past and the traces it has left in the present. Waking up the next day among the body-bearing trolleys in the morgue, Quirke notices that "the walls of the corridors were matte green and the woodwork and the radiators were thick with many coats of a bilious yellow stuff, glossy and glutinous, less like paint than crusted gruel" (14) Compared with the haziness and oppressiveness of reality, Quirke's work as a pathologist allows him to regain control over his environment. The dissection of a body comes to resemble the logical process of reasoning, and by performing an autopsy, Quirke ritually performs the work of reason itself:

In the harsh, grainy light the cadaver that had been Christine Falls lay on its back, the breast and belly opened wide like a carpet bag and its glistening innards on show. It sometimes seemed to him that he favoured dead bodies over living ones. Yes, he harbored a sort of admiration for cadavers, these wax-skinned, soft, suddenly ceased machines. They were perfected, in their way, no matter how damaged or decayed, and fully as impressive as any ancient marble. […] Yes, he was fascinated by the mute mysteriousness of the dead. Each corpse carries its unique secret – the precise cause of death – a secret that it was his task to uncover. For him, the spark of death was fully as vital as the spark of life. (36)

Quirke the eccentric pathologist prefers the cadaver to the living person, as the cadaver is just the perfect machinery without the further complication of a soul, mind or psyche. Finding the cause of death is detective work of another sort, and when Quirke decides to take upon himself the role of investigator into the causes of Christine's death, he looks upon his job as an extension of pathology into ordinary life. Yet ordinary life is not a perfect machine, and the pure rationality that he applies so successfully ("Christine Falls was quick to give up her poor secret") in dissection does not serve him well when delving into the psychological abysses of the potential murderers.

The conflict between the rational and the irrational/meta-rational is one of the basic premises of the detective novel. The classic detective novel is a genre of order and rationality, whose hero (the detective) is invested with powers of reasoning of a higher order which help him/her bring back the temporary chaos of evil to a stable state. As P.D. James remarked, "Detective stories help reassure us in the belief that the universe, underneath it all, is rational. They're small celebrations of order and reason in an increasingly disordered world." (qtd. in Kinsman, 22) The detective fiction of Agatha Christie best illustrates this case: the endlessly fussy Hercule Poirot with his 'grey cells' and the spinsterish Miss Marple always looking for a chat with strangers have an indomitable respect for justice and the ethics of life: in their view murder constitutes an unforgivable offence both to the society and an unnamed deity, who turns them into instruments of justice, as the title of one of Christie's novels, *Nemesis*, suggests. Although at first sight it seems ridiculous to associate an old frail lady with the image of the Greek goddess of revenge and justice, this is exactly what Miss Marple proves to be in the end. Both she and Hercule Poirot possess the intelligence and the will to solve complex affairs with the only purpose of seeing justice done. Confronted with a murder/theft mystery, a case that is too difficult to solve for the ordinary police, the detective applies his high powers of reasoning, a process Edgar Allan Poe called ratiocination, in order to solve it. The appeal of the classic detective fiction lies in the direct proportion of mystery and the rational ingenuity that is employed to solve it: the final scene, that of the unmasking of the villain, has to be a revelation, but a revelation of an analytical kind, in which the cunning detective lies bare the threads of his complex thinking and the perplexed reader finally finds out who had done it, why or how. The form of the classic detective novel is based on a simple triad, like the classic Greek tragedy: the



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initial situation (apparently balanced) which is disturbed by the perpetration of the crime, then followed by the investigation which leads to the unmasking of the villain (the retribution) and thus to a return to normality. Unlike the Greek tragic hero, whose only fault may lie in the hubris he committed unintentionally, the criminal bears full responsibility for his guilt and thus the final moment of revelation takes on the appearance of a fateful act, meant to restore the world to its initial harmony. The detective, as the hero that makes this possible, plays the same role as the gods in ancient tragedy – hence the well-chosen appellation Nemesis for Miss Marple. The triadic structure may account for the universal appeal of detective fiction, yet its ontology and function differ greatly from those of the Greek tragedies. The detective novel is a modern genre which focuses on a central modern value: reason and its triumph. However dark, absurd and incoherent the crime may appear in the eyes of the world, the detective, a true Chevalier de la Raison, will unravel it, thus establishing rationality and order as supreme values.

How do the Quirke series relate to the classic detective novel? In their "Theoretical Approaches to the Genre" of detective fiction, Jerome Delamater and Ruth Prigozy note that "subversion is basic to a postmodern detective." (2) Subversion may be total or partial, and a first analysis shows that subversion in the Quirke series operates on every level: the narrative structure, character construction, and even the ontological presuppositions.

Compared to the usual storyline of a classic detective novel, full of false tracks, false clues, false identifications, misinformation and disinformation, the plot in the Quirke series is extremely simple. The investigator is spared the intense work of ratiocination, as the criminal is not a mastermind of dark intelligence like Dr. Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Akroyd* or Professor Moriarty, the arch enemy of Sherlock Holmes. In *A Death in Summer*, the murderer of Richard Jewell turns out to be the most likely character, his wife, with whom Quirke has been having an affair. Likewise, the murderer of Deirdre Hunt, a.k.a. Laura Swan in *The Silver Swan*, is her husband, who becomes the suspect as soon as he enters the story with a strange request: that Quirke should not perform a post-mortem on the body of his deceased wife, who is declared dead by accidental drowning at the inquest. In *Elegy for April*, the murderer of April is again somebody from the family, her brother, with whom she had been having an illicit and incestuous affair. The fake post-mortem signed by Malachy Griffin on Christine Falls in the eponymous novel already points in the direction of the criminal/criminals, though here the effect of the revelation is intensified by the large network of officials that are involved in the organization, Judge Griffin, Quirke's adoptive father, being one of the leaders of this mob-like secret brotherhood. The most thrilling plot is perhaps that of *Vengeance*, which opens rather dramatically with the suicide of Victor Delahaye at sea, in front of his rival's son, Davy Clancy. The expectations of the reader, who already sees Davy Clancy as a scapegoat, are thwarted in an ingenious move, halfway through the book Jack Clancy is murdered, his murder mimicking the circumstances of Victor Delahaye's suicide. From here to the criminals, Victor Delahaye's twin sons, there is only a small step, yet the reader is kept in constant doubt by Maggie Delahaye's irrational and erratic conduct after the death of her brother, so that only in the end the part she played in Clancy's murder becomes obvious.

What the novels lose in terms of suspense, however, they gain at the level of character construction. In the classic detective novel, character was somewhat summarily sketched; what mattered most was the identification of possible motives (greed, hatred, jealousy) for the crime, and the identity of characters was 'mapped' according to the opportunity and the motive they had to commit the crime. The character of the detective acquired, throughout the whole series of murder mysteries, a 'poignant' personality, where certain features were made to



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stand out, such as the vanity and fussiness of Hercule Poirot, the nosiness of Miss Marple, the fake absent-mindedness of Father Brown, etc. In the noir detective of the Quirke series, the revelation of character brings with it the revelation of the crime. Although, judging by all evidence, the murderer is 'known' to the reader from the very beginning, what one misses is the 'why', which will be revealed through a kind of psychological forensics, carried out throughout the events of the plot. What Quirke is called to perform, besides the opening of the body, is the 'opening up' of the criminal mind, to reveal its workings. This revelation often takes on a gruesome note, as the criminals prove to be people from Quirke's social circle, people he has known for long (like Judge Griffin, his adoptive father) or just for a short period (like Billy Hunt, his former colleague). Since the focus of the Quirke novels is the psychological investigation of the dark recesses of the mind (criminal or otherwise), this explains the slow pace of events, the atmospheric descriptions and the long conversations between the characters. What is subverted as well in the Quirke series is the one way investigative practice of the detective and its unchallenged authority. At the same time that Quirke is conducting his deep psychological studies on the characters involved in a murder, the story turns backs on himself, and because often the crime involves people from his past or his family, the reader is able to conduct his/her own investigation into Quirke's turbulent and unhappy past. As the series progresses, the reader finds out about the post-partum death of his wife, about his love for Sarah, his wife's sister, now married to Malachy, and about Phoebe, his daughter, whom he had given to Sarah and Malachy to raise following the tragic death of his wife. Meditating on the murders and their possible solutions, or analysing prospective criminals' motives, Quirke remains permanently aware of his own not too innocent past. In the Quirke series, the clear boundaries between good and evil are effaced, more porous and more unstable than in the classic detective novel.

One reason for this is a different set of ontological presuppositions; one may say even a different universe. The universe of the classic detective novel is still the Newtonian universe with its stable certainties and unbreakable laws, whose correlative is a moral perspective in which good and evil are differentiated and clearly defined. Both the world and human society function like a mechanism whose workings are interrupted and endangered by the perpetration of a crime. The detective, who is called to solve the (apparently) insoluble mystery of the criminal, is a true hero (in spite of the parodic undertones that his character sometimes acquires), a kind of mythological Gilgamesh who restores the world to its initial harmony by helping justice follow its course. But when Quirke embarks upon finding out the true cause of death of Christine Falls, he does it not because he feels morally responsible towards society, but prompted by his past history (the death of his wife) and his pathologist's *déformation professionnelle*. He wants to find out the truth, not knowing yet that truth in its narrow scientific sense is not wholly applicable to complex human situations. However, it is his determination to arrive at the truth that ensures his success in finding out who lies behind the vast network who organizes the transport of children born out of wedlock to the United States. This discovery will not help him, though, but it will further complicate his life and put him in a position to make difficult moral choices, as the leaders of the clandestine organization (The Knights of St. Patrick) are none other than his adoptive father, Judge Griffin, and his former father-in-law, Josh Crawford. The truth he finds out in the end has little to do with justice, like in the classic detective novel: on the one hand, it is a truth that concerns mostly himself (as he realizes that he was one of those orphans, like Christine Falls' child, forcefully separated from his mother and given away to a Catholic orphanage), and on the other hand his discovery does not lead to the punishment of the criminals. In the Epilogue we find Quirke asking Inspector Hackett to proceed with his investigation of



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Judge Griffin, even though the Inspector warns him that "There'll be a lot of dust […] if these particulars pillars of society are brought down." (177) Eventually the Inspector promises only that he will try to do it.

The universe of the Quirke series is definitely not the one of Newtonian immutable laws and sharp differences. It is the universe of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Einstein's relativity, the universe of quantum laws and blurred demarcation lines. The detective's job, in this newly refashioned universe, is no longer to restore the previous equilibrium by doing justice, as the very idea of equilibrium becomes obsolete; the detective's job, at least this is what the Quirke series propose, becomes more akin to that of a forensic specialist: to investigate the traces of the crime in order to find out an uncertain truth that offers a semblance of stability. In an uncertain universe, this is, after all, the only sort of order one could aspire to.

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