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DEATH AND NARRATIVE IN THE QUIRKE SERIES BY BENJAMIN BLACK

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Abstract: *The acclaimed Irish writer John Banville has penned a series of ‘noir’ crime novels, whose main protagonist is Quirke, a forensic pathologist working for the Holy Family hospital in the Dublin of the 50s. Unanimously classified by its publishers as noir fiction, the Quirke series is and is not adhering to the requirements of its genre. My paper focuses on the analysis of the narrative in the Quirke series, revealing that the key to the interpretation of the novels can be found in the doubling of the plot: each individual novel consists at the same time of a detective story (the particular murder case which is solved according to the rules of the genre) and a private story, the story of Quirke, who unfolds throughout the seven novels in the series only to find its resolution in the last novel of the series, *Even the Dead*.*

Introduction

Booker prize winner John Banville, who sees himself as “a mole digging away blindly in the dark not knowing where he’s going” (Brown, “John Banville slips”) has fashioned a sort of double identity for himself: under the pen name of Benjamin Black he has authored seven crime novels featuring Quirke, a forensic pathologist who works for the Holy Family hospital in the Dublin of the 50s.

Classified by its publishers as noir fiction (maybe under the spell of the author’s pen name), the Quirke series is and is not adhering to the requirements of its genre. Noir fiction, itself an indefinable mixture of dark brooding characters, an oppressive atmosphere, moral ambivalence translated in a plot where emphasis is not placed on the unraveling of the mystery by logical deduction as in the classic whodunit, but on narrative strategies that reveal the psychological intricacies of the characters, has been traditionally the prerogative of the hard-boiled detective fiction. Often turned into movies, noir fiction novels find their equivalent in the noir cinema, a quite productive genre with roots in the early 20th century German expressionist films or French poetic realism.

What can be said with certainty about the Quirke series is that they are crime novels of a sort: the fact that the investigator is a medical examiner could lead us to classify it as a forensic mystery or thriller (a genre pioneered by yet another ‘dame’ of crime, Patricia Cornwell); the pessimistic character of Quirke, coupled with the oppressive atmosphere of Dublin, whose description is made hauntingly melancholic by the sensory genius of Banville would argue in favour of the noir; Black’s pseudonym would suggest it, moreover, as a kind of authorial index of the genre,

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and so would his revival of another key figure in noir fiction, Philip Marlowe, in another piece of crime that Black wrote, *The Black-Eyed Blonde*.

At first glance, like the hard-boiled novels, the Quirke series places more emphasis on character and psychological analysis, and less on the logical deduction and ratiocination typical of the classic detective novel. Indeed, in some novels of the Quirke series, especially the later ones, the astute detective novel fan can guess the murderer from the inception – and the novel provides the ‘clues’ in a kind of careless way, as if the revelation of the murderer would interest no one but the feeble-minded. Ironically twisting the requirement of plot subversion in the classic detective novel, what is subverted in the Quirke series is the readers’ ‘educated’ guess: in *A Death in Summer*, the murderer of Richard Jewell turns out to be the most likely character, his wife; similarly, the murderer of Deirdre Hunt or Laura Swan (*The Silver Swan*) is her husband, who arouses suspicion as soon as he comes up to Quirke with a peculiar request: that he should not perform a post-mortem on the body of his wife, who had been declared dead by accidental drowning at the inquest. There is very little puzzling evidence about the murders, and the shock of crime is not rendered through any subtleties of judgment on the part of the murderer, but through the lenses of the forensic investigation. The reader’s experience of the shocking reality of crime is mediated by Quirke’s (and Sinclair’s¹, his assistant) job as a pathologist, which enables the narrator to conjure up before our eyes the picture of the dead body, of the corpse², that abjection that constitutes a transgression and which triggers the investigation:

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. (Black, *Christine* 36)

The body on the slab was that of a young man, early twenties, slight build. It was badly burnt, and smelt of petrol and scorched flesh.[...] Sinclair guessed this was the first dead body he had been called on to deal with, or certainly the first one in this scorched state, clothes burned off, save for a few blackened tatters, the flesh as crisp as fried bacon, the eyeballs bursting from their sockets. (Black, *Even* 6)

¹ David Sinclair, Quirke’s assistant, echoes the name of another protagonist of detective pulp fiction, John Sinclair, the Scotland Yard inspector in the horror detective series written by German author Helmut Rellergerd under a pen name that echoes that of Banville’s: Jason Dark.

² The deaths that Quirke investigates evoke the mystery that surrounds them through the palpable, material corpse, which is likened to a machine. It is their ‘mechanical’, orderly quality and their apparent perfection that draws Quirke to being a pathologist, and by admitting that he favours dead bodies over the living, he acknowledges the superiority of the dead machine over the living chaos of a human being.

On the other hand, the Quirke series do not strictly adhere to the requirements of the thriller detective, either. There is prospection as well as retrospection: we are told about a “crime anterior to the moment of the narrative” (Todorov 47)³, yet at the same time the reader is involved in the ‘suspense’ that, according to Todorov, is the main feature of the noir detective. Starting with a mystery in the sense of the classical whodunit, this mystery is approached and solved in a typical ‘thriller’ mode, engendering, in its turn, another mystery – what kind of detective fiction can that be?

Death and the Narrative

In order to make sense of the Quirke series, I propose to have a look at the general narrative of the detective story and its particular instancing in Black’s novels. The main subject of the detective novel is death, the murder and its investigation, the discovery of the murderer and his/her subsequent punishment. It seems to support and contradict at the same time Walter Benjamin’s famous pronouncement that what the reader seeks in every narrative is the knowledge of death that remains obscure to us while we live, so that “death is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell”, and that meaning can be made only from the totalizing and unifying perspective of death. The end of the narrative, like the end of a life, marks the beginning of the possibility of interpretation. While for novels in general death as a symbolic end and the end as a symbolic death bring the closure needed for the reader’s interpretive exercise, detective novels start where the usual novels end. By making murder the trigger of the narrative, they act on the presupposition of another, hidden narrative, the narrative of the life that has just been ended. The point of the detective novels is for the detective to retrace that ground that the criminal had covered (hence Todorov’s remark that the detective story is the narrative of narratives) and offer the most plausible interpretation of the facts that led to murder. Thus, while the aim of the ordinary narrative ‘plotting’ is to structure events and characters so that they make sense, the plot of the detective story is designed as a guideline for the interpretation of events and characters. In other words, the detective novel functions as a kind of hermeneutic guide to truth, leading its readers along a path strewn with pitfalls towards the final revelation. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes remarked that every text might be regarded as a topos characterized by a network of five codes that intersect: the hermeneutic and the proairetic, the semic, symbolic and cultural codes (20-1). What is particular to detective stories is the hermeneutic code - those plot elements that are presented to

³ In the chapter “The Typology of Detective Fiction” from *The Poetics of Prose*, Todorov argues that retrospection is characteristic for the whodunit, whose narrative rests on solving an initial mystery, while prospection is the feature that characterizes the thriller, whose narrative develops suspense, “the movement from cause to effect” (47). In Roland Barthes’ terms, while detective fiction is characterized by the hermeneutic code (the solving of the initial enigma offered by the murder), in the thriller it is the proairetic code that is predominant, as suspense is created by actions that make the reader wonder what is going to happen next.

the reader as enigmas to be solved. Detective stories, however, do not just consist of predominantly hermeneutic codes, they are particular instances of interpretation, asking the reader to engage and immerse himself/herself in the hermeneutic process. Unlike ordinary narratives, detective stories exercise tight control over the possibilities of interpretation: there can be no double or multiple interpretations; there is just one 'correct' interpretation of the events and circumstances leading to the murder. Consequently, the discovery of the murderer and the fulfillment of justice depend on the right reading of events. By offering clues and devising traps, detective stories immerse their readers in the experience of interpretation, asking him/her to employ his/her hermeneutic capabilities in order to discover the truth, and offering, by the final revelation, the much-needed feedback on the 'unraveling' of the mystery they have just performed. In detective stories there can be no parallel lines, no simultaneous explanations, and no open ends: if at some point in the novel the clues lead to two possible interpretations, one must be false and the other right. 'Ratiocination' in detective novels functions in a similar fashion to scientific reason: one begins from two or three hermeneutic possibilities/hypotheses and only by testing them (by experiment and observation) can a conclusion be reached: a conclusion that will exclude all the other possibilities/hypotheses. Now, just because 'ratiocination' tends to reproduce the mechanisms of scientific thought, detective novels are usually founded on a fallacy: they seem to conflate the knowledge about the world of 'physis' (nature) with that of the world of human beings. Scientific reason works best when it deals with physical objects and physical laws, and less well when applied to subjects and individuals. Yet all detective novels try to convince us that there is only one 'just' reason for murder, only one explanation excluding every other, and they manage to do so through the limits of narrative: we are never introduced to two people who might have committed the murder, two motives, two places, etc., or, if we are, one of them must be the wrong one.

What I am going to argue is that the Quirke series is not simply a crime novel or a piece of noir fiction. It is definitely a critical reflection on the structure of the detective novel and its 'hermeneutic' totalitarianism. Paradoxically, it does so without openly contradicting this totalitarianism, and by keeping to the usual detective plot. It does so by introducing the character of Quirke, the pathologist, respecting the Aristotelian prescription that narrative should concern itself simultaneously with events/actions (praxis) and character (ethos).

The first novel in the series, *Christine Falls*, opens with a double mystery: the mystery of the death of Christine Falls, and the mystery of Quirke, the pathologist. Quirke and Christine Falls seem to be connected by more than the usual post-mortem that the medical examiner has to perform on the dead body. The investigation carried out by Quirke and Inspector Hackett will touch on a sensitive spot in Quirke's past: his childhood, spent at a Catholic orphanage, which left an indelible mark on his psyche. In the course of the investigation Quirke finds out that his adoptive father, the honourable Judge Griffin runs an illegal network of kidnappers, who take away babies from young Catholic unmarried mothers to give away for adoption in the United States. He realizes with horror that he himself has been similarly deprived of his mother, on whom he will also perform a post-mortem: Dolly Moran, a former servant in the Griffin household, gets killed because she has

been keeping a record of the judge's affairs and illegitimate offspring. However, the revelation that Dolly Moran is his mother, although present as a kind of intuition in the first novel, is confirmed only in the last book of the series, *Even the Dead*. What we have in the Quirke series is a doubling of the plot: each individual novel consists at the same time of a detective story (the particular murder case which is solved according to the rules of the genre) and a private story, the story of Quirke, who unfolds throughout the seven novels in the series only to find its (partial) resolution in *Even the Dead*, where Quirke finds out that his father was Judge Griffin and guesses that his mother was Dolly Moran. I will call the private story the meta-plot, as it transcends and at the same time unites the individual murder stories.

The meta-plot is related to the individual plots, as I have mentioned before, by the character of Quirke. He is both a subject and an object of the 'unraveling'. In the meta-plot, Quirke is the hero of a Freudian drama: as an orphan that has suffered the effects of a constraining Catholic education in a patriarchal Ireland run by some mob-like elite he is deeply traumatized, and the subconscious realization that his adoptive father might have killed his real mother only makes matters worse. The atmosphere of the first novel is a dark, obsessive one, in which the melancholy of Dublin pubs, streets and rooms pervades through the dark musings of a depressed, alcoholic Quirke. His job as a pathologist ('body-snatcher' and 'bone-sawer' as he is jokingly called by Evelyn Blake), his repeated drinking bouts, his loneliness and the incapacity of forging close personal relations point to his being driven, consciously and unconsciously, by the death-drive, the impulse towards self-annihilation. Throughout the seven novels, by means of the different experiences he engages in the course of his investigations together with Inspector Hackett and the love affairs he gets entangled in (in *A Death in Summer* he has an affair with the murderess) his death drive gradually abates, and thanks to psychologist Evelyn Blake in *Even the Dead*, at the end of the series we witness a kind of healing that is perceived by Quirke, the dark hero of dark times, as a kind of new beginning: "I don't feel sad for myself. I think I am cured of that. It's as if I had been walking through what seemed an endless night and suddenly the dawn has come up behind me. Not a very welcome dawn, but dawn nevertheless." (227)

The mystery of Quirke, which triggers the unfolding of the meta-plot, is formulated in the following terms early in *Christine Falls*: "It was not the dead that seemed to Quirke uncanny but the living" (18), and echoed in slightly different forms throughout the novels, first in Judge's Griffin response to Quirke accusations: "These are only the dead", he said. "You don't see the living" (Black, *Christine* 580), then in Inspector Hackett's thoughts: "Yes, it was not the dead that troubled him but the living." (Black, *Vengeance* 213), "Handling the dead was easy, or easy at least compared to coping with the living" (Black, *Holy* 27), and finally resurfacing in Quirke's own thoughts and self-doubts: "Give me the dead, he thought, the dead whose brief scenes on the stage are done with, for whom the last act is over and the curtain brought down." (Black, *Elegy* 68), "But would he have been able to deal with the living? As it was, even the dead were too much for him." (Black, *Even* 63)

Quirke's fascination with the dead bodies he examines is explained, at a superficial level, by the 'train of detection' they set in movement. The corpse is the carrier of a unique secret – the exact cause of death – which triggers the process of

'ratiocination' or scientific reasoning. This idea is resumed in *Elegy for April*: "For Quirke a corpse was a vessel containing a conundrum, the conundrum being the cause of death." (59) At the same time though the corpse represents the material evidence of death, itself the only experience unavailable to the living. At a psychological level, Quirke's fascination with the dead can be ascribed to his secret longing for death, or rather for death as a kind of non-being: "What he yearned for in his deepest heart was not death, not the grand and terrible thing that priests and poets spoke of, but rather a state of non-existence, of simply not being there." (Black, *Holy* 65) At the level of the narrative, however, the fascination with the dead body (the initial mystery that triggers the investigation) might stand for the author's fascination with the classical whodunit. While the corpses give up their secrets in the end (Quirke finds out that Christine Falls had died in childbirth, and not of a pulmonary embolism, as it had been written in the death certificate forged by his brother; he also discovers that Laura Swan did not take her own life, but was murdered by her husband), at the post-mortem, the limitations of this kind of 'investigation' stand out against the 'in-depth' mental forensics carried out by the meta-narrative of Quirke's inner life. By following the traces of Christine Fall's death, Quirke is faced with the demons that tormented his childhood: the Catholic asylum at Carricklea and the cruelty of the monks that had brought him up. He also discovers that he had not been alone in his suffering, that the Church protected an underground network of kidnappers and 'fixers' like Joe Costigan, and that the leaders of that network were Judge Griffin, his adoptive father, and Josh Crawford, an American businessman with whose wife Quirke had had a short relationship. Confronting them is not easy: Dolly Moran, his mother, is killed in the attempt and Quirke himself gets a severe blow to the head from Costigan. Neither Quirke, nor Inspector Hackett has the power to disclose the secret workings of the Order of the Knights of St. Patrick, and so, even though the murder conundrum is solved, justice is not done. It will take another six novels to see Costigan punished (he is murdered at the end of *Even the Dead*, the last novel in the series, by the father of a young man his men had killed), yet the criminal network is not uncovered, as they work under the protection of the Catholic Church, a backward, patriarchal institution disposing of unlimited power. Worse even, whereas during Judge Griffin's life the network is supposedly doing God's work by providing illegitimate children a family, after his death the business is taken over by Costigan, who makes a lot of money out of selling the babies to American families. The picture that Quirke paints of a conservative Ireland in the grip of the Catholic Church is a grim one:

'The Church controls this country, the Church and its agents in organizations like the Knights of St. Patrick. You can't imagine the power they hold. They're not ignorant, they're not just bigots. Well, they are bigots, they are ignorant, but they're also very clever and very subtle, and they know exactly what they are doing. They have a philosophy, of sorts. Or ideology, I suppose, is a better word. "... The child they took from Christine Falls and sent to America was only one of hundreds of babies, maybe thousands, that over the years have been sent abroad in secret and given to Catholic families to bring up as their own. "... There's nothing the Church can't get away with.' (Black, *Even* 170-1)

Confronted with his inner demons, Quirke has to face his guilt, too. Emotionally crippled by his childhood trauma, after his wife dies in giving birth to a girl, Quirke gives his child Phoebe away to his half-brother Malachy and his wife. Remorse, guilt, shame – this is a powerful cocktail which prevents him from telling Phoebe the truth, and later from forging an emotional bond with his estranged daughter. As Phoebe loves to get herself entangled in the murder cases (two of the victims happen to be her friends), Quirke will have to keep her safe from injury and thus learn to be a father. In the course of the murder cases he solves together with Inspector Hackett he gains what we might call social and psychological competence. One can even speak of ‘bildung’, and in a way, the Quirke series plays with the idea of the Bildungsroman. In the penultimate novel in the series, Quirke’s attitude undergoes a sea change:

What he yearned for in his deepest heart was not death, not the grand and terrible thing that priests and poets spoke of, but rather a state of non-existence, of simply not being there. Yet that state was unthinkable, for in it there would be no being – it would not be him, inexistent, but not-him. It would be not a state at all. It would be nothing, and nothing is inconceivable. All his life, for as long as he could remember, he had wrestled with this conundrum. Was that why he had become a pathologist, in hope of penetrating nearer to the heart of the mystery? If so, it had been in vain. *The dead did not give up their secrets, for they had none; they had nothing, were nothing, only a parcel of blood and bones, gone cold.* (Black, *Holy* 65)

The mystery of the dead body, so fetishized in the detective story, turns out to be an empty one. Detection, ratiocination and scientific reasoning are reduced to nothing. It is the living that will matter from now on, and the fact that Quirke will fall in love with a psychiatrist in the last novel is evidence enough for his (belated) psychic rebirth.

Conclusion

To resume my argument, the Quirke series constitutes a reflection on the general hermeneutics of the detective novel. By setting the detective micro-plots of the individual novels against the ‘formation/transformation’ of the meta-plot it provides a fictional instantiation of the traditional hermeneutic debate around the methods employed in interpreting physical phenomena and human actions. The Verstehen vs. Erklären (Understanding vs. Explanation) debate has centered on two different approaches to the interpretation of social and cultural phenomena (Verstehen) and that of physical phenomena (Erklären) formulated by two philosophers of the neo-Kantian school (Wilhelm Windelband and Heinrich Rickert). In his famous “Rectorial Address” at Strassbourg University (1894), Windelband distinguished between natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften) and sciences of the mind (Geisteswissenschaften), arguing that they should employ distinct methodologies as their forms of knowledge are widely different (173-5). Heinrich Rickert, who was to exert a great influence on Heidegger and Weber noted that the great problem for any theory of knowledge was the opposition between the

psychic and the physical. Whereas the physical as an object of the natural sciences was to be apprehended as a generalized concept (based on selective abstraction), the aim of history was to produce the individual. While the knowledge of natural phenomena was mediated by concepts and formulated in general laws, this could not be the case in the social sciences and history, as this would entail suppressing particularity: “There is no general concept under which he (the individual) can be subsumed” (89). Rickert warned against the reductionism of scientific rationality, noting that “the problem of concept formation in history, therefore, is whether a scientific analysis and reduction of perceptual reality is possible that does not at the same time – as in the concepts of natural science – forfeit individuality” (78). By merging *Verstehen* in the Quirke transformation meta-plot and *Erklären* in the detective narratives, the Quirke series simultaneously subverts the classic detection narrative and transforms it into an open-ended narrative. And so, although we can find out whether the butler did it in each of the particular novels, the mystery of Quirke will be (partially) revealed only at the end of the series. Considering Todorov’s remark that all detective stories are narratives of narratives (present stories that retrace past stories), we can look at the Quirke series as an example of recursivity in literature: a series of narratives of narratives that simultaneously produce a meta-narrative or: present stories that retrace past stories in the process of building a future story.

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