

fusing a concept of "life-style" with a mode of cognition, imagining that self-conscious art always means aestheticism.

The confusion of realms is, I would guess, a reflection of Martin Green's desire to find some bridge between the trivial and the significant and thus justify his deep involvement in a subject which, by the light of his Leavisite education, would be deemed intellectually unworthy. In his conclusion, he repeatedly claims that the understanding of the dandy-aesthete is now crucial for "criticism," but it is precisely the lack of any real critical perspective that is the major limitation of his book.

The End

CURTAIN. By AGATHA CHRISTIE.
Dodd, Mead. 238 pp. \$7.95.

Reviewed by EDWARD ROTHSTEIN

IT was a glorious moment in Conan Doyle's *The Final Problem* when Sherlock Holmes and the arch-villain Moriarity tumbled to their deaths at Reichenbach Falls, their bodies locked together in a wrestling embrace. It had all the elements of an inevitable end, the great detective concluding his life work by destroying his own mirror image, the brilliant "Napoleon of Crime," the "spider" at the center of a web of darkness.

The death of Hercule Poirot in Agatha Christie's *Curtain* has similar elements. Like Holmes, Poirot is facing the arch-antagonist of his career, a villain who sits at the center of a web of seemingly unconnected murders, who will strike again, but who cannot be caught because there is no proof of crime. Like Holmes, Poirot faces a criminal whose powers are a twisted version of his own: Holmes's rationality was perverted into the evil genius of Moriarty, Poirot's supposed psychological acumen is tested by a killer of the "psychological" kind. And like Holmes too, Poirot goes down with his enemy, leaving behind a letter that will ex-

plain the final events to a bewildered assistant.

But here the similarities end. Poirot's death is much less dramatic. The aged, arthritic Belgian detective and his older but no wiser Watson, Captain Hastings, return to Styles, the country estate of Christie's first book which introduced the pair fifty-six years ago. The old manor has changed, along with Poirot and the old upper-class ways, and has been broken up now to form a *pension* rented out to vacationers. The setting can hardly match Switzerland's rapids, Poirot is but a dim reflection of Holmes, and his antagonist is nowhere near so terrifying as the evil professor. For all the earnest straining after legend here, it does not quite work.

Dame Agatha planned her murder of Poirot about thirty years ago along with that of Miss Marple, her other eccentric sleuth. With that same self-conscious sense of drama that marked her fiction, she stored the record of these intentions in a London vault with the proviso that they be executed after her death. At some point, however, Christie changed her plans and released Poirot's last case—just five months before she died. (Miss Marple's is still to come.) According to her publisher it was the enormous financial success of the movie version of *Murder on the Orient Express* that changed the author's mind, but it is also possible that she had planned the early release all along as a final triumph, returning for one last time as it were to the scene of her crime.

Whatever her motives, *Curtain* is not a triumph. Though written many years ago, it is already permeated by that weariness and solemnity which would become more evident in Christie's works as she grew older. One of her earlier virtues was a refusal to take herself too seriously. She enjoyed the game—laying out the false clues, the countless motives, the innumerable threads of coincidence and threats of murder, in a seemingly hopeless tangle, wasting no time on unnecessary description or character development except as these might serve as clues for the detective or red herrings for the reader. These

early books claim no motive other than entertainment—some even had “Casts of Characters” in front which read like advertisements for the movies they might go on to become: “Sir Carmichael Clarke: The eminent collector of Chinese art. He had an unfortunate habit of taking solitary walks.” Or, “Major Blunt: A courageous cool-headed big-game hunter, he felt ill at ease in a world that wouldn’t let a man solve his problems with a gun.” But *Curtain*, though written at a time when Christie could still turn out an engaging story, has little of this lightness and playfulness. Already there are hints of that bombastic and moralizing side of Agatha Christie—the one given to railing at the “younger generation” and such things—which would become more and more apparent as she aged.

In *Curtain* there is little respite from Christie’s earnestness and “insights”; the book is all but buried under them. Worst of all, the puzzle and its solution—usually the centerpiece of Christie’s mysteries and the part she executed best—simply do not come off. Her most memorable books, *The ABC Murders*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and *And Then There Were None*, are memorable chiefly for that final unraveling when, most often, the suspects are gathered together to witness the unveiling of the murderer. The reader too witnesses an almost magical transformation of the events of the book through a paradigmatic act of understanding. But in *Curtain* this transformation fails to occur because the design of the book violates the rules of the genre. For one thing, the puzzle itself is a fraud, involving as it does a partial deception by Poirot of both Hastings and the reader. Secondly, the criminal’s methods are absurd, even in the permissive context of mystery fiction. Thirdly, and most important, the criminal acts themselves are performed out of motives which are irrational and hence inaccessible to the reader. In mystery stories the introduction of unpredictable, irrational elements is inexcusable—one cannot play chess when one’s opponent overturns the board.

BUT if *Curtain* itself is a failure, it still leaves open the question of Agatha Christie’s enormous popular success. It is not equal to the success of Sherlock Holmes, to be sure, whose fans contemplate the works of Conan Doyle as though they comprised a Third Testament, and turn out volumes and volumes of midrash upon even the least of them. Probably Poirot will never reach this cultic level because he and his cases, in their bland lack of detail, simply cannot muster the mythic appeal of Holmes and his heroic struggles against the irrational—the dark streets of London, a speckled poisonous snake slithering through a ventilator, an engineer’s thumb cut off and left hanging on a windowsill. It was an irrationality he carried in himself as well with a demonic manic intensity. But where Holmes had his violin, the bullet holes in his walls, his strange work habits, and his addictions, Poirot has only his “little gray cells,” his dandified moustaches, his conceit, his French phrases, his passion for symmetry and hot chocolate. Poirot, unlike Holmes, has few shadows. He is mild, innocuous in his addictions, and his taste in crimes is a bit too domestic to warrant comparison with the sleuth of Baker Street. Nevertheless, Agatha Christie’s eighty-six books, including the forty that star Poirot, have sold over 400 million copies, been translated into more than 100 languages, and show no signs of waning in popularity. What then is their drawing power?

At first it seems that the core of these books is just the puzzle: how was the victim murdered in a room that locks from the inside? Who could have put strychnine in the teacup? Which of the alibis is false? In the solution to these questions there is the sheer mathematical elation of a problem being solved, and also the appeal of the magician pulling motives and murderers out of a hat. But these are only partial explanations. Why this particular murder? Why these particular character types—the servants, retired colonels, rich old aunts, and bitter nephews who go to make up a quintessential Christie novel? The appeal of these

stories involves more than the satisfaction of solving a puzzle and more even than the pleasure of watching justice triumph.

Christie's crimes have a curious regularity to them. A lower-class man marries wealth and then kills in order to obtain the money. A daughter in poor financial straits murders an elderly relative so as to secure a "rich contented life in England with her children." A doctor kills to preserve his happiness and position, after having used blackmail to sustain it. A wealthy woman kills to cover an unseemly past. These, then, are "class" murders, crimes which arise out of demanding another's place and not knowing one's own, or out of a desire to preserve an illusion hitherto sustained by deceit. The setting and the characters are usually British and sufficiently affluent to warrant the presence of a "butler." Poirot, on the other hand, is an outsider to the system, and thus in a perfect position to rectify the misdeeds of the criminal—another outsider, but one who is disguised. The denouement of these stories always involves the restoration of order, the return of things and people to their proper places in the hierarchy via a ritual exorcising of the disguised criminal.

BEYOND the comforting, indeed the primal, regularity of these stories, however, there is something which also recalls the earlier, religious meaning of the word mystery: "truth that man can know by revelation alone," as Webster puts it. The unmasking of the deceiver must come as a complete surprise, as revelation; the traitor may be anyone, but he is never what he seems, and he must be subtle, crafty, and clever, a diabolical opponent. The detective for his part has the conviction of the prophet doing God's will on earth. As the criminal works from below, so does the detective work from above; he sees through the masks of men's souls and finds the one among them who is dissembling virtue. With the purging of the criminal from the community, the random collection of former suspects is bound together for a moment and transfigured into a so-

ciety bearing witness to revealed truth. Like the religious rites of ancient times, the solution of the mystery imparts "enduring bliss to the initiate." Poirot departs, leaving behind a better world; the victim, having played his necessary part in the drama, is all but forgotten.

Stretching a point perhaps, one could say that the skeleton of Christie's plots is in fact similar to that of the mystery-passion plays of the Middle Ages, with their ritualized tale of vengeance upon evil and the triumphant reversal of Christ's death.* In this similarity, perhaps, lies one reason for the persistence in the contemporary detective novel (almost alone among literary genres) of overt prejudice against Jews and other outsiders. In one of Christie's novels a Polish Jew, Dr. Blaustein, is a spy for the Germans during World War I. In another, there is witty talk of Semitic moneylenders. And examples are to be found also in the work of other British detective novelists like G.K. Chesterton and Dorothy Sayers, not to mention John Buchan and Ian Fleming, with the Jew frequently disguised as a "Levantine."

Curtain attempts to universalize the myth of the dark outsider by moving the criminal into every individual and thereby, so to speak, internalizing the Levantine. But the attempt is simply beyond the author's reach; *Curtain* is a mere gesture, a slight wave of an arthritic hand. Still, it will serve as a finish to Poirot. His death is no great loss. "I have a bourgeois attitude toward murder," he once remarked. "I disapprove of it." But though Poirot destroyed many villains before his own demise, he did not destroy the fear of these villains—the foreigners, traitors, climbers, and imposters, hiding among us, and plotting against us. It was

this fear that was at the heart of Agatha Christie's darkness, and possibly of her popularity as well.

The Shape of History

ANATOMY AND DESTINY: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE HUMAN BODY. By STEPHEN KERN. Bobbs-Merrill. 307 pp. \$10.95.

Reviewed by

ELAINE HOFFMAN BARUCH

STEPHEN KERN's *Anatomy and Destiny* is a "cultural history of the human body" over the last one-hundred-fifty years. Its excursions into art, fashion, literature, philosophy, medical and psychoanalytic theory make fascinating reading. Nonetheless there is something disturbing here—an optimism that is belied by the negative aspects of culture.

According to Kern, it was the snobbishness of the Anglo-European bourgeoisie, anxious to avoid the excesses of both the aristocracy and the lower classes, that led to large restrictions and intrusions on the body throughout the 19th century. For women these included whalebone corsets and clitoridec-tomies which permanently disfigured the female body. For men, there were metal rings that put pressure on the penis when it expanded in the night, various alarm systems designed to wake the sleeping sex offender, and blood-letting and blistering of the penis—all viewed as cures (or punishments) for spermatorrhea, the involuntary discharge of semen. And for children of both sexes there were such devices as head-holders (*köpfunghalter*) and upright-holders (*Geradehalter*) designed to mold developing young bodies into the proper posture.

Kern shows that even the most bizarre and repugnant of measures had some foundation in reality. For example, the belief that a single act of intercourse could hurt some future, as yet unconceived,

* When the detective is also a victim, as in *Curtain* and *The Final Problem*, he himself literally becomes a Christ figure, ridding the world of its most heinous villain as he dies. For Conan Doyle the myth claimed its resolution. By popular demand the frustrated spiritualist was forced to resurrect his victim. Poirot, for obvious reasons, will not suffer a similar fate.

ELAINE HOFFMAN BARUCH, a new contributor, teaches English at York College, CUNY, and is currently writing a book on women in literature.