

Ten Missing Minutes to Disavow the Passing of Hours: A Psychological, Analytic Reading of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

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Abstract

This article reviews and applies a number of analytical theories in order to perform a close reading of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. While the approach is not strictly Bayardian, the article reviews Pierre Bayard's re-resolution of Christie's article, notably by critiquing Bayard's use of intertextuality. While no new murderer is assigned in this reading, the taboo of incest is raised as a new focus of the novel. Most importantly, the proof of the Sheppards' incestuous relationship is constructed on a period of time that is elliptically erased from the text. This period of erased time is shown to be considerably longer than the ten missing minutes on which James Sheppard's guilt famously hinges in Poirot's solution.

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The title of this article looks over-insistent, as though psychological or analytical readings of text are somehow innovative. Surprisingly, in the specific case of crime fiction there is some truth to this; or rather, there is a degree of resistance on the part of critics when it comes to deploying the same tools when reading crime fiction as they do when reading mainstream, or "literary," fiction. This failure to engage critically with crime fiction as text has caused scholars like Stephen Knight to call for readers, quite simply, "to look in detail at crime fiction texts to identify what is precisely going on in them, how they work, what they say or do not say—that is, to pay attention to the voices of the texts themselves" (3-4).¹ In the present article I aim to reread Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, pointing out textual inconsistencies with a view to shedding new light on a crime fiction icon. I have two reasons for turning to this text in order to respond to Knight's call to arms: first, the novel has long been considered a classic of the genre, and this iconic status is owed (perversely, for Christie is both icon and iconoclast), to the author's shameless breaking of the rules (in this case, the breach of trust that sees the narrator "do it"); second, it has inspired some of the most original detective fiction criticism, notably Pierre Bayard's rereading, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd? (Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?)*, which Knight terms a "reverse reversal" (104).² It is this intersection of well-known, iconic text, close reading, and theoretically oriented textual analysis that is so rare.

It is not, of course, unusual for scholars to engage theoretically with crime fiction; furthermore, certain classic texts have been extensively analyzed. The difference in this case is that Christie's classic is an exemplar of the neutrally termed genre of detective fiction; stories like Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," on the other hand, which have been extensively critiqued, are typically considered worthy of criticism because they belong to a subgenre, which in turn

¹ Knight has also called for a more sustained deployment of theory in the analysis of crime fiction. I am thinking here of his keynote address at "Why Crime Fiction Matters: The Italian Case," 21 November 2014, La Trobe University, Melbourne.

² In Bayard's reading Dr. Sheppard's sister Caroline is shown to be the "real" killer. This essay has been published in English, as *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd? The Mystery Behind the Agatha Christie Mystery*, translated by Carol Cosman (New York: New Press, 2001). The edition consulted here is the French one and the translations given are my own throughout.

takes the name of the criticism that it attracts. In Poe's case we might think of John T. Irwin's work on the analytic detective story (hence my title), or Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney's study of the metaphysical detective story.³ While such criticism is remarkable in its application and its results, it may also be seen to reinforce the monolithic status of those texts deemed non-analytic, non-metaphysical; indeed, it is as if even the basic tenets of poststructuralism (the death of the author, for example) have failed to touch the classic texts of detective fiction, whose solutions are vouchsafed by detective and author alike. In my analysis I hope to show that those texts that most obviously embody the rules of the genre are those that most brazenly break them, and also that, in so doing, they openly (which is to say, overtly as well as covertly) admit readings other than those of their own manifest solutions. As Knight notes (6), there is scope for slippage between the mainstream and what he categorizes under the heading "diversity": *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is classic, even archetypal, but it also offers fertile, if well-trodden, terrain for rereading. And, of course, the word "archetype" ushers in the unconscious, ideas present but requiring close reading and analysis—even the type of "psycho-analysis" derisively mentioned by Inspector Raglan in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Christie 125)—in order to be actualized.

Pierre Bayard's Psychoanalytic Interpretation

Pierre Bayard's analysis of Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* represents both a persuasive re-resolution of the case and an influential example of creative detective fiction criticism (it was written for a broad, if well-informed, French reading public). Bayard's dominant lens is psychoanalytic, but his application of Freudian terms to a text is always already freed from the shackles of the authorial or metaphysical by a number of assumptions that owe a debt notably to Barthes's poststructuralist account of textual analysis (cf. Rolls and Gulddal). He discusses the general, and especially psychoanalytic criticism's, reliance on crime fiction's "particular type of univocal signification," which admits the reader's discovery (in the sense of finding) of a pre-existing authorial truth at the expense of the discovery (in the sense of creation) of meaning *after the fact* (104-05). In this way, the detective novel stands out for Bayard as the apogee of univocal signification (104), the detective's great reveal having the retroactive power to reduce the text's inconsistencies to the status of mere "red herrings," where—in any other genre—they would remain legitimate signposts of auto-differentiation or the text's (natural) non-self-coincidence. Clearly, there is a way in which, by defending the novel's status as text, he necessarily also undermines his own attempt to present an alternative solution. By overlaying this model with strong and clear appeals to Freudian analysis (in which an unconscious truth lies beneath consciously lived fantasy), however, Bayard appears to be able to have his cake and eat it: although his own highly innovative reading of Christie's novel is predicated on deconstructive textual interpretation, the solution that he proposes is ultimately offered up as a new univocal truth, a simple substitute for the one previously given by the author.

³ In *The Mystery to a Solution* Irwin distinguishes analytic detective fiction from detective, or crime, fiction, which remains resolutely concerned with crime or adventure and not with analysis. For their part, Merivale and Sweeney prefer the term metaphysical detective story, which they characterize in terms of the following themes: "the defeated sleuth," "the world, city or text as labyrinth," reflexivity (in the form of "textual constraint" or *mise en abyme*), a lack of clear plot or clues, ambiguous ("lost, stolen, or exchanged") identity or the use of the double, and, importantly, an absence of closure to the narrative and investigation (8).

Bayard's last three chapters are respectively entitled "The truth," "Nothing but the truth," and "But all the truth" (the last left ambiguously without a question mark).⁴ Thus, truth itself, in Bayard's essay, is simultaneously deconstructed, parodied, and reinstated.

Bayard credits Annie Combes with having proposed a general term, *une détectande* (90), that denotes both clues and red herrings; nevertheless, he declares that his own understanding of a mobile scale along which individual diegetic events can be actualized variously, as clue or red herring, according to the specific parameters of each individual reading of a given crime text goes further than Combes's approach. Although it is true that Bayard changes the status of clues and red herrings to suit his chosen interpretation, it is nonetheless also true that his reading, once actualized as such, fixes this new status with a genuine will to permanency. This ironic edge to Bayard's work extends, I should suggest, to his use of Freud and, especially, his heavy reliance on Sophocles's version of the Oedipus story. Clearly, the latter tale has its place in the critical canon of crime fiction studies; like other commentators Bayard (98) interweaves the history of psychoanalysis and the detective story at this particular oedipal source, their common point of origin. He notes how this exclusive focus on Sophocles's account places blame on the son and rather overlooks the sins of the father, Laius. Drawing on the work of Shoshana Felman, he exposes how Sophocles's play leaves room for doubt as to Oedipus's responsibility for Laius's murder (102). Interestingly, Bayard simultaneously stresses *and* glosses over another particularity of this text: "[And] one also encounters in it a narrative oddity, which will pave the way later for numerous variations, which is to say, that the murderer . . . and the investigator are one and the same person" (98-99). By challenging the univocal truth of Oedipus's guilt in Sophocles's text, Bayard seems to point to Christie's narrative ploy of having a murderer-narrator as one of the "variations" in this original story. At the same time he also undermines Sophocles's text, creating elbow room for rereading the univocal solution. But, whether by sleight of hand or textual parapaxis, he also posits as an Ur-text for the detective story a model that has the detective himself as guilty party. This model therefore must necessarily point towards a virtual solution to the mystery of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and thus one that may be actualized alongside his favored re-solution.⁵ It seems plausible, then, that Bayard offers his own new univocal solution with such force precisely in order to set the scene for his own act of lying by omission and inserting, between the lines, a nihilistic counter-reading to his own critical-authorial solution, to wit another virtual reading in which it is Hercule Poirot himself who murders Roger Ackroyd.

And if Bayard cannot countenance, at least at face value, the possibility of Poirot's guilt in this case, it is worth wondering whether this critical-creative repositioning of Christie's novel as a work of analytic detective fiction is not itself suggestive of a reading of the (guilty) detective-narrator nexus through the lens of

⁴ My translation of "Mais toute la vérité" here picks up the expression—"All the truth?"—that Poirot uses when questioning whether Flora Ackroyd really wants to find out what has happened to her uncle (Christie 104). The English expression "the whole truth" would be more idiomatic, here as in Poirot's question, but, in addition to rendering Poirot's occasional difficulty with English idiom and syntax, the idea of "all the truth" also serves to deconstruct the wholeness of the novel's meaning. In Bayard's essay truth is problematically singular-plural (singular in the sense of his proposed interpretation, and always already plural in terms of the deconstructionist principles that make this interpretation possible) in a way that "all" captures.

⁵ Bayard rules out Poirot as detective-murderer in the case of Ackroyd's murder because the former was not previously known to the central characters in the village (149), this after having devoted a number of pages to an analysis of *Curtain* and, of course, Poirot's very capacity to murder.

Poe's trope of the detective who pursues his prey only to find that he has pursued himself, as made famous in "The Man of the Crowd" or "William Wilson." In an act of analysis that unseats the authorial solution, Bayard dethrones both Hercule Poirot and Agatha Christie; if he blames the latter for sending Poirot to his failure, he may also, if only between the lines, blame the former for sending Sheppard to his (apparent) doom. Sheppard's will to self-destruction mirrors Poirot's own will to destroy his Other, and both are reoriented, in a kind of Liebestod worthy of Poe himself, in the third figure of Caroline Sheppard.

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd as Analytic Detective Fiction

By constructing a creative-critical interpretation of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in which the authorial solution is debunked as a myth, reinforced by a substitute truth presented as univocal and, finally but simultaneously, always already undermined by appeals to the elusiveness of definitive textual meaning, Bayard offers his analytic study of crime fiction as a work of analytic crime fiction in its own right, a hermetically sealed case with an inbuilt Persian thread for the attentive reader. In so doing, he offers his oxymoronic pairing of conscious and unconscious truths, of the univocal and its inherent nihilistic unreading, as a subtly, almost silently, reflexive commentary on the evenness of odd and oddness of even in Poe's crime stories and the ever-repeating chain of one-upmanship set in motion by Lacan and Derrida's successive readings of them, in which univocal criticism is always but a text to be rewritten by the next critic. And this, of course, takes us back to the son's usurpation of the father's power in the Theban plays: as Irwin notes (210-12) the challenge is for the son to seize power from the unworthy father but in such a way as to ensure that his own son will not in turn have grounds to seize power from him. This game, like Bayard's Persian carpet of an essay, is pre-set for failure.

In his final chapter, "But all the truth" (160-69), Bayard appears to play on this conundrum of his own making; indeed, his conclusion—that Sheppard is a victim of murder by interpretation (169)—seems also to relish the inversion by which his own re-resolution frames Caroline as the guilty party. In a chapter all about dyads (Sheppard is Hastings's double; Caroline stands for Miss Marple, and via her for Christie herself; Poirot and Caroline act in tandem as investigators against Sheppard, and thus as his murderers by proxy; and Poirot is at last able to carry out lethal violence against Hastings via Sheppard), the final, most powerful and least clearly enunciated is Bayard's role as critic-investigator *versus* Christie through the intermediary of her detective character, Poirot. And by condemning Christie's favorite character and Miss Marple's double, in the same interpretive act he defeats the combined forces of Poirot and Marple, taking his rightful place as father and King of Thebes.

And yet, Bayard's conclusion, in which he states that his self-styled detective fiction criticism "updates interpretive *jouissance*, which is to say, it reduces difference by replacing it with similarity" (168), creates critical room for maneuver: first, by his own admission, Bayard's focus is on "who"; second, having raised the possibility that James and Caroline Sheppard, when viewed through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, can be read as one single character (164), he dismisses the split-personality thesis in favor of a reading that sees Caroline alone as phallic (the mother to James's son, again in an analysis informed by Freud and the interpretation of dreams) and thus capable of murdering Ackroyd. I propose that the question shift from "who" to "why" and that some of the armory of Irwin's analytical school be redeployed with a view to reassessing the Caroline-James dyad. In order for this to

occur, I shall first review Bayard's use of the key intertext that is Rudyard Kipling's "Rikki-tikki-tavi."

Bayard points out that Kipling's mongoose, to which James compares Caroline on account of the latter's curiosity, is not only remarkable for its curiosity, but also insofar as it protects the house and has a remarkable capacity for killing (161). The twitching of her nose is certainly a constant reminder to the reader of Caroline's embodiment of the mongoose family motto, which Sheppard reminds us is "Go and find out" (Christie 10). A close reading of Kipling's story, however, reveals a number of contradictions that work against Bayard's interpretation. Most importantly, Rikki-tikki-tavi is washed against his will ("kicking and clucking" even) into the garden of the house where his famous fight will be set, whereupon he is rescued by "an Englishman who had just moved into the bungalow" and his curiosity is piqued: "I shall certainly *stay* and find out" (Kipling 117 and 118, respectively, my emphasis). Rikki-tikki-tavi's tale therefore is predicated on the tension between staying and going: he initially goes only *against his will* and then enacts the family motto, but *in reverse*, by staying rather than going. Rikki-tikki's foundational tension—between staying and going—marks the opening of Christie's novel: James Sheppard opens his door "and purposely delay[s] a few moments in the hall" (Christie 9). In this way, James marks liminal space as his own. The next sentence begins with a turn of phrase that will be important in light of the revelations at the end of the novel—"To tell the truth"; indeed, the phrase is repeated on the following page: "To tell the truth, it was precisely my sister Caroline who was the cause of my few minutes' delay" (9). The next sentence is the reference to the mongoose family motto. The delay referred to is, at first glance, that spent by James on the threshold. The mention of a "few minutes," however, also picks up the brief period of time that James has just spent, presumably ascertaining the cause of death, at Mrs. Ferrars's crime scene: "It was a few minutes after nine when I reached home once more" (9). This doubling up—of the reference to "a few minutes"—serves to set up another doubling, this time of the death of Mrs. Ferrars (in relation to which, for Sheppard, "[t]here was nothing to be done") and that of Roger Ackroyd, when Sheppard famously notes as follows: "I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone. I could think of nothing" (63). The time delay (of a few minutes) is the most important clue for Poirot in establishing James's guilt: in this case, the few minutes longer than necessary taken by James to get from Ackroyd's house to the gate. One explanation not given by Poirot is that James Sheppard systematically hesitates at thresholds. While the parallel reference to a "few minutes" and to doing or not doing things serves simultaneously to signal proleptically the murder of Roger Ackroyd and to desensitize the reader to that fatal moment of lying by omission (and thus performs the vital detective fiction role of allowing the truth to be told and not told at the same time), it does not simply strengthen Poirot's solution or Bayard's re-solution; it also reflects that other repetition, which is James's turn of phrase "to tell the truth." Again, Christie and Bayard might counter that this is also a simple pronouncement by the murderer or the patsy, respectively, on the nature of red herrings: Sheppard is using the term literally *and* colloquially *at the same time*. Clearly, the novel is announcing the double role of truth-telling at its core; it is also possible, however, that it is shifting, at this liminal stage of its own narrative, the object of Sheppard's lying by omission. It is possible therefore that the delay for which Caroline is precisely the cause is remarkable for its brevity (the emphasis on *few* rather than minutes). In short, if Sheppard is "upset and worried" and his instinct (as opposed to his inability to foresee events or his vexed relationship to truth) tells of "stirring

times ahead” (9), it may be argued that his haste over the examination of Mrs. Ferrars’s body, and even his hesitation in leaving Ackroyd, is predicated on his relationship to his sister.

Certainly, James’s liminal hesitation and his embodiment of the tension between coming and going are both signs of the mongoose. It is not clear therefore that Caroline alone has Rikki-tikki-tavi’s curiosity or proclivity to kill. And neither is it clear whether the mongoose is hero or villain. Bayard’s interpretation hinges on a coupling of the popular portrayal of the mongoose as protector of the family home with his lesser-known role as harbinger of death (although Caroline, in his rereading, kills only to protect her brother and thus her home). Kipling’s story, for its part, opens with a poem in which Red-Eye (the mongoose) taunts his opponent (Nag, the cobra), beckoning him to “come up and dance with death!” (117). The poem ends with Nag’s failure to strike down the mongoose, at which point the cobra is referred to as “the hooded Death.” While the mongoose is cast as the aggressor here, both mongoose and cobra bear the name Death. It is here that Bayard’s use of this intertext to make his case exclusively against Caroline Sheppard is undermined by his concluding chapter’s dissolution into a muddle of dyads: if Caroline is the mongoose, then her opponent cannot be James, since he is part of the home that she is protecting. Bayard’s pairing of Caroline and Poirot as detectives working against James Sheppard is also difficult to map onto Kipling’s intertext. If the pairing is reversed, on the other hand, and James and Caroline are pitted against Poirot, which accords with Bayard’s re-resolution, then a much better fit emerges. Indeed, “Rikki-tikki-tavi” describes a division of labor similar to that attributed to James and Caroline Sheppard by Bayard, according to whom there is one true killer despite a common cause and some collaboration on the part of the brother and sister:

This is the story of the great war that Rikki-tikki-tavi fought single-handed . . . Darzee, the tailor-bird helped him, and Chuchundra, the musk-rat, who never comes out into the middle of the floor, but always creeps round by the wall, gave him advice; but Rikki-tikki did the real fighting. (117)

The contradiction between single combat and a team effort is clearly marked here. What is obfuscated is the number of Rikki-tikki’s enemies, for Nag ultimately proves less dangerous than his wife Nagaina. (In fact, Rikki-tikki kills another snake, Karait, in the story as well.) It is my contention here that the intertext works better in support of Bayard’s theory if the role of mongoose is allocated to Poirot and the pairing of James and Caroline is mapped onto the combined role of Nag and Nagaina. This reading has the benefit of providing for Caroline’s escape (as Bayard points out, Poirot excludes her from the list of suspects; indeed, he goes as far as to warn her not to attend his soirée at the end of the novel because he intends to produce the guilty party from among those present [Christie 329-30]), since Rikki-tikki is not witnessed killing Nagaina in her hole but tells those present simply that “[i]t is all over” and that “[t]he widow will never come out again” (Kipling 130). There is the potential here for a secret pact to have been made by mongoose-Poirot and cobra-Caroline,⁶ with Sheppard as the scapegoat-cobra. More importantly, the domestic relationship of the mongoose protecting the family home morphs into a different type of domesticity, that between husband and wife.

⁶ Caroline’s sibilance lends her a snake-like edge to counter her twitching nose: she hisses Miss Russell’s name at one point, “aided by the fortunate number of s’s at her disposal” (Christie 175).

The solution that I wish to present has at its basis a secret that is told and not told, but which is not to do with the murder of Roger Ackroyd; instead, it is a love story lived in secret, a case of passionate love between brother and sister. Incest, of course, is at the core of Oedipus's story and, as such, is fundamental to analytic detective fiction criticism. Seen in this light, Sheppard's hesitation on the threshold incarnates the "incest taboo [that] serves as a principle of differentiation between human and animal" (Irwin 221). Where Caroline is attributed the curiosity of the mongoose, James too is from the outset torn between knowledge and instinct. An application of Irwin's study of mythological incest to his character casts him in a suitably Protean light, more specifically as biform—half-human, half-animal (be it half-cobra or half-mongoose):

On the one hand, the Sphinx and the Minotaur symbolize the monstrous condition resulting from the failure to solve the problem, the condition of humans who behave like animals, with instinct overruling reason, body directing mind; while on the other, these creatures function within their respective myths as posers of specific problems requiring an analytic solution by the hero. (Irwin 221)

On the one hand, the weakness detected by Bayard may be considered a result of this hesitation between instinct and reason; on the other hand, Sheppard is the classic narrator-murderer and thus, in the analytic detective fiction tradition, the classic incestuous hero. Furthermore, the epistemological breakdown evidenced in James's overvalued, and thus ever-devaluing, repetition of the turn of phrase "to tell the truth" corresponds to the same failure, in the Theban plays or Poe's short fiction, to recognize one's kin, which leads to incest and which ultimately equates to a failure of self-recognition. The incestuous hero fails to see himself in the beloved because, so often, the lover (or the detective or pursuer) and the beloved (or the murderer or pursued) are one and the same. James's position is also therefore that of someone to whom a(nother) biform creature has posed a riddle: as Irwin notes, "If the hero fails to solve the riddle or unravel the labyrinth, then he dies. But if he succeeds, then the monster dies" (221). In the win-loss situation of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* Sheppard appears to die because he is guilty, or in Bayard's account because he has not understood his sister's guilt, but in the analytic scenario he appears to die (I use the word "appears" because, as in Nagaina's case, there is only the suggestion that death is the outcome) because he cannot distinguish between himself and her.

There are indications that Poirot has not been blind to the nature of James and Caroline's relationship, as can be inferred from the following comments that he makes apropos of the written account of the case: "[Unlike Hastings] you have kept your personality in the background; only once or twice does it obtrude—in scenes of your home life, shall we say? I blushed a little before the twinkle of his eye" (Christie 329). For his part, Bayard does not infer incest from such comments; he continues to see in the pair a brother and sister "entirely devoted to, and protective of, each other" (Bayard 157). And yet, his choice of language seems to contradict this message of platonic love: his solution, he explains, "amounts to transforming a sordid matter of money into a love story"; and again, their love is described as "*un amour passionnel*," a term that, while technically still valid for filial affection, usually denotes more strictly amorous passions (159). Of course, the platonic and the sexual have been conflated in other famous literary affairs of the heart. Romeo and Juliet's love, for example, cannot exist for the simple reason that it is an Ideal, an essence, and thus unrealizable. It is nonetheless the very model of romantic love. It may also

be the very model of love that James Sheppard has in mind when he concludes the novel by proposing to take his own life:

And then—what shall it be? Veronal? There would be a kind of poetic justice. Not that I take any responsibility for Mrs. Ferrars's death. It was the direct consequence of her own actions. I feel no pity for her.

I have no pity for myself either.

So let it be veronal. (Christie 368)

For, if veronal is not poetic justice because it frames the novel, it must be an allusion to Juliet's suicide.⁷ As S. Pollitzer notes in 1912, "Veronal! How wonderfully evocative for the first barbiturate to honor the hometown of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers!" (185).

Roger Ackroyd's Murder as Freudian Screen Memory

Poirot's case against James Sheppard hinges on two matters: a question of timing and the calculated level of reticence, or partial saying, in the narrative. If there is a love story in the murder mystery, and indeed if the latter is to be considered as a veil for the former, then it is in information pertaining to these two matters that clues may usefully be sought. As has been noted, the novel opens with James returning home a few minutes after nine in the morning, a little late for breakfast. He discusses the case with Caroline; indeed, he stresses that he is in "the habit of continually withholding all information possible from [his] sister" (Christie 10) just before imparting to her all that he knows. This is repeated throughout the novel, with the result that James's relationship to Caroline, in terms of the disclosure/non-disclosure of facts, is metonymic, if not caricatural, of the conceit for which the novel is famous. Chapter 2 begins as follows: "Before I proceed further with what I said to Caroline and what Caroline said to me, it might be as well to give some idea of what I should describe as our local geography" (17). The chapter proceeds to introduce the story of Mrs. Ferrars's relationship with Roger Ackroyd, a love story that will, as we know, end in a double tragedy; it also introduces other characters that will populate the story of Ackroyd's murder. Chapter 3 begins with a conversation between James and Caroline about a dinner invitation that will see the former brought into the Ackroyd case: "I told Caroline at lunch that I should be dining at Fernly" (29). Dinner is therefore discussed at lunchtime, but the conversation that we readers were promised—"what I said to Caroline and what Caroline said to me"—must logically have followed the conversation about Mrs. Ferrars that began at breakfast, which is to say that the hours between a few minutes after nine and lunchtime are unaccounted for in the narrative. In this respect Chapter 2, the lesson in local geography, may well be considered an exercise precisely in *not* revealing "what I said to Caroline and what Caroline said to me."

Ostensibly therefore, Chapter 2 directs readers away from the precise nature of James and Caroline's domestic arrangements and leads us into the intrigue of a detective fiction classic. Interestingly, it begins with the revelation that "there are only two houses of any importance in King's Abbot" and ends with James's attempt

⁷ The novel's framing is problematic, especially in the framework of the present interpretation. As will be seen below, Mrs. Ferrars's death opens the novel, but the diegesis of the investigation proper can be deemed to begin in Chapter 2, in which case these two instances of veronal poisoning must remain virtual (veronal is not proven in the first case, and death is not realized in the second).

to interest Miss Russell in the virtues of veronal (17 and 26, respectively). The second reference lends a Shakespearean edge to the former, which duly recalls the feuding houses of Montague and Capulet. The chapter that propels the narrative into a detective intrigue is, in other words, itself framed in and as a (classic) love story. Furthermore, it ends with a reflexive quip about the transparent nature of Miss Russell's inquiry into drugs and poisons and a joke about her passion for detective stories. While detective fiction is famous for self-referentiality (it is almost *de rigueur* in the genre, in fact), its coupling in the space of one chapter with the love story genre lends extra weight to this reflexive use of generic coding. Not only that, but it also signposts the transition from romance to detective story mode.

The way in which Chapter 2 works to cast a veil over the conversation between James and Caroline recalls the disavowal at work in Freud's 1927 account of fetishism.⁸ Its manifest content, which lays the foundations for the eponymous murder and principal investigation, or diegesis proper, of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, operates as a screen memory, a survival mechanism whose double purpose is to stand in for the truth, thereby hiding it, while simultaneously symbolizing or pointing to it. Thus, Miss Russell's visit to the doctor's surgery functions *en abyme* within the chapter as a neat fetishistic vignette. Her opening gambit is both to the point and, perversely, off-subject: "Good morning, Dr Sheppard, . . . I should be much obliged if you would take a look at my knee" (Christie 25).⁹ In this case, James is not fooled and guesses that the story is a cover of some kind: "I took a look, but, truth to tell, I was very little wiser when I had done so" (Christie 25). These words are apt: they pick up James's favorite turn of phrase and juxtapose it with a lack of knowledge. If Miss Russell's truth is not seen, neither is her cover story believed. The fetish does not appear to have worked; instead it passes as a transparent device, much like that which James later fails to run past Caroline.¹⁰ And yet, this is rather the point: this is a fetish *en abyme*; its purpose is simultaneously *to disclose and not to disclose* that the chapter in which the scene is set is itself a fetishistic trap for the reader. Amongst other things, James lets slip his penchant for older women: Miss Russell is considered handsome (as well as forbidding), while Mrs. Ferrars had, in the previous chapter, been described as "a very attractive woman" ("though not in her first youth"); Caroline for her part is eight years older than James, which information she divulges in the presence of Poirot and James, who comments with an air of wistfulness that without her maternal role in his life he might have been free to marry a beautiful adventuress (25, 11, and 260, respectively).

Arguably, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is, and certainly all its apparent red herrings are, about love stories. Roger Ackroyd was courting Mrs. Ferrars, and by his own admission, he had to convince her that their engagement could be made public with all propriety, sufficient time having elapsed since her husband's death (58);

⁸ The essay is reproduced in volume 21 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 147-157.

⁹ For a fetishistic reading of Christie's *The Body in the Library* that reveals the investigation to be a screen memory veiling Dolly Bantry's feelings for the vicar's wife and that focuses on male characters' scrutiny of women's legs, see Rolls, "An Ankle Queerly Turned."

¹⁰ James takes ten minutes to get from Roger Ackroyd's study to the gates at Fernly Park. These ten minutes prove (potentially) fatal for him, as they are the foundation of Poirot's solution. This discrepancy is picked up in the following quotation, containing ten further minutes, and as such is signalled (placed in full view) and veiled (drowned in chronological detail): "Ten minutes later I was at home once more. Caroline was full of curiosity to know why I had returned so early. I had to make up a slightly fictitious account of the evening in order to satisfy her, and I had an uneasy feeling that she saw through the transparent device" (Christie 65). Whether or not this account differs from the account that we readers have just read is not apparent.

Flora Ackroyd and Hector Blunt hide their love for each other for a long time because he is much older than she; Ralph Paton and Ursula Bourne's marriage is kept secret until the final chapters because it appears to be born of a socially scorned ancillary love; the engagement into which Flora Ackroyd and Ralph Paton are coerced by Roger Ackroyd is defended on the basis that they are not *technically* related (Flora is Roger's niece, Ralph the son of his first wife);¹¹ and finally, Miss Russell hides her relationship with a young man, but he turns out to be her son, not her lover. All the love stories that make up the key relationships, or dyads, in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* test the limits of taboo, and in two cases represent cases of near, or potential, incest.

If the stories that constitute the detective story proper, or what I am proposing here as the story *en abyme* or James's transparent device, enumerate various, and variously improper, love stories, there are running through and amongst these stories glimpses of Caroline and James's love story; these barely said, virtually unsaid obtrusions into the couple's home life include the following instances of going to bed together:

At ten o'clock I rose, yawned, and suggested bed. Caroline acquiesced.

With which obscure pronouncement we went up to bed.

A fourth or super-theory was propounded by Caroline later as we went up to bed.

(65, 96, and 245, respectively)

At another point in the narrative, James is summoned upstairs by Caroline in order, presumably, that they may go back downstairs to dine together. The call upstairs (to dine downstairs) is arguably perverse and reversed; its perverse reversal may also extend to the fact that James is called upon to dress for dinner, which must necessarily entail his undressing. Caroline's own dressing is referred to in suitably euphemistic fashion:

[She] went upstairs to don the high mauve silk blouse and the gold locket which she calls dressing for dinner. . . . I heard Caroline's voice, rather acid in tone, calling from the top of the stairs.

"James, you will be late for dinner."

I put some coal on the fire and went upstairs obediently.

It is well at any price to have peace in the home. (176-77)

Epistemologically, the fetishistic operation of this hesitation between voicing and veiling the truth of the signified takes the form of a cleaving. The truth is, in other words, torn between itself (what it nonetheless remains) and alterity (what it is no longer, or another that it becomes). Analytically, or here according to the criticism associated with analytic detective fiction, the breakdown in the knowledge of the other (qua other) plays out as incest, and it is predicated on a fundamental failure of self-recognition. Playing on the oxymoronic nature of the verb "to cleave," it is possible to read Caroline as a failed expression of self-recognition on James's part.

¹¹ The relationship between Flora and Ralph is in fact very similar to that between Christie's parents, Clara Boehmer and Frederick Miller. Frederick was the son of Clara's aunt's husband.

When she calls out in the first, liminal (and primal) chapter, “Is that you, James?,” he replies that the question is unnecessary; indeed, as he notes, “who else could it be?” His next sentence begins, unsurprisingly, with “To tell the truth” (10). It can only be James because she and he are (only) two; but equally, it can only be he because she and he are (only) one. The truth to be told is, by the same token, both univocal (it is said) and nihilistic (it is not said, or speaks itself other). Despite Bayard’s concluding pairing of James, Caroline, and Poirot into all their possible dyads, his cleaving of James and Caroline into one character is a token gesture, for the logic of his resolution is based on a fundamental cleaving (of one into two): “First of all, nothing says—if we are to suppose a reconstruction of the plot—that the murderer and the blackmailer are one and the same person” (153). In this way, Bayard creates space for discreet roles for Caroline and James in one murder mystery.

Clearly, Caroline gathers and imparts knowledge; James’s characteristic, on the other hand, is to hoard and withhold it. Caroline’s ability to obtain knowledge, in particular, reminds Bayard of Miss Marple, and he refers to Christie’s autobiography to strengthen that link (Caroline was one of Christie’s favorite characters and influenced Miss Marple’s creation). The same autobiography, however, also provides an interesting counter-cleaving, which sees these two aspects belonging to one individual, in this case Christie herself. The young Agatha’s mother, we are told, once scolded her for having spread rumors of the family ruin:

“Really, Agatha, you must not repeat things in an exaggerated way.” . . . I said I would not, but I felt injured because only a short time before I had been criticized for *not* telling what I had overheard of another incident [the housemaid’s secret tasting of the family soup before dinner].

“But why didn’t you ever *tell* me?,” asked mother. I stared at her. I couldn’t see the point. “Well,” I said, “it seemed—” I hesitated, mustering all my dignity, and proclaimed: “I don’t care for parting with information.”

After that it was always a joke brought up against me. “*Agatha doesn’t like parting with information.*” (*An Autobiography* 103-04, emphasis original)

So, it seems certain that Caroline’s characteristics have their influence in the extroverted talking that was the hallmark of the Millers. It is equally true, however, that the author as a young woman was as much James as Caroline; indeed, the tendency not to part with information, if at first self-consciously a performance, certainly became her hallmark. Everything is there, including James’s famous hesitation. In this case, the hesitation is between two states: it marks Christie’s cleaving—of herself into another character, but also of two tendencies into one individual.

For our purposes here, James and Caroline are both one and two. Textually, and psychologically, they express a fundamental hesitation. Generically, we have in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* a reflexive work of detective fiction (indeed, a work reflexive enough to warrant Irwin’s appellation of analytic detective fiction) made up of any number of love stories, including Bayard’s account of powerful filial affection. But we also have, inverted within, a love story that contains (or frames, with the hesitation of James in the hall at the start of the novel and the parting shot that sees Caroline watching James depart with Poirot for the reveal “standing on the front door step gazing after us” [Christie 330]) within itself a detective mystery *en abyme*, which functions to disavow its incestuous truth. Cloven as one, this single-double narrative simultaneously exaggerates and refuses to part with its dirty secret. To say that the narrator is the murderer is therefore the same as saying that the brother

loves the sister: both express taboo; both celebrate (stand reflexively as analysis of) and break (analyze) the rules of generic behavior.

James Sheppard's parting wish—that "Hercule Poirot had never retired from work and come out here to grow vegetable marrows" (368)—is itself internally reflexive and externally intertextual. As Christie points out in her autobiography (147-48), Poirot's tendency to throw vegetable marrows over walls echoes a courtship method trialled in Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby*.¹² In the economy of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* it is not clear whether Poirot's is a courting marrow, and if so whether it is intended for Caroline or James, or whether it is a speculative marrow thrown into a garden of illicit courting. It may equally be the case that Poirot's destruction of vegetable marrows parodies Rikki-tikki-tavi's destruction of the cobra eggs hidden by Nagaina in a melon-bed. For intertextuality, too, combines the singularity of specific textual influence with the multiplicity of texts' pairings across the walls of autonomous identity. And it is in this tension between the text's knowledge and expression of its own identity, on the one hand, and a self-alterity that defies self-knowledge and hesitates to impart information, on the other, that a classic whodunit's animal instincts speak by omission.

¹² For a full account of this particular intertextual relationship, see Rolls, "Creative, Critical, Intertextual."

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