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Figures of Memory: The Gentleman Detective

Authors of Golden Age crime fiction were engaged in reconstructing an idealised past in order to comfort the people after the Great War, including certain milieus and figures that reinforced the myth of Englishness. In the novels symbolic figures are used to sustain the memory world, nevertheless, their position seems more problematic and ambiguous in the course of the investigation than it would first seem. One such character is the figure of the gentleman-detective who, as a gentleman, is meant to reproduce what was lost and what once was great on the one hand, but as a detective, he necessarily undermines the integrity of the world he is destined to sustain. The gentleman-detective is invested with a symbolic meaning, appearing as a site of memory – a *lieu de mémoire* as Pierre Nora calls it – of middle-class recollections in the post-war era. The aristocratic gentleman returning as a detective should stand for permanence and grandeur, nevertheless, his competence and dynamism in the course of the investigation unceasingly erode his image. It becomes evident that he can only partly live up to his imagined status while the closed society of people uses him to escape from history. Unsurprisingly, the continuity of the cosy world of interwar crime fiction is not only corrupted by the crime event itself but also by the presence of the gentleman-detective who unceasingly reminds one of the irretrievability of the past in the present. The concept of using the gentleman figure in modernist literature is also described in Christine Berberich's *The Image of the English Gentleman in Twentieth-Century Literature* (2007):

[...] the image of the gentleman was increasingly used for nostalgic regression, in a concerted effort to look at the past through rose-tinted glasses. At the same time, however, there were attempts to react against this, and to liberate the ideal of the gentleman from its iconic and mythical position, in order to adapt it to the challenges of the new century. (23)

Relying on Berberich's suggestion, I would argue that the gentleman-detective is exactly the type of gentleman who is liberated from many of the constraints he should display, due to which he appears like a chameleon rather than an immobile symbolic figure. This feature can be traced in Dorothy L. Sayers's and Margery Allingham's crime fiction. In the present paper, I am going to analyse Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey in *The Nine Tailors* (1934) and Allingham's Mr Campion in *Police at the Funeral* (1931).

In the opening scenes of the two novels, one learns that even the word 'gentleman' is open to several interpretations in the post-war period, reflecting knowledge of both the past and the present. In *The Nine Tailors*, the coroner coming to Fenchurch St. Paul

to investigate the circumstances of a murder case defines the occupation of Lord Peter Wimsey – or the lack thereof – as that of a ‘gentleman’: “...occupation?...what?...Well, we’d better say, Gentleman...” (100). In Allingham’s *Police at the Funeral*, one of the characters, Marcus, apologises to Mr. Campion for using the “revolting term, gentleman” to refer to him: “[...] I feel [...] that it would be very useful for me to have someone [...] who would hold an intelligent watching [...] and, if you will forgive me, my dear Campion, for using the revolting term, someone who is a gentleman” (32).

In both cases, there seems to be something shady about being a gentleman: the word is used by the coroner as the very opposite of ‘occupation’, and the connotations seem to be even worse in the Allingham quote. The two quotes suggest a crisis and duplicity in the meaning of the term. Although the word ‘gentleman’ denoted a “man of a good family” (9) in 1929 in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the expansion and internal diversification of the middle class(es) due to the social, political changes, as Christine Berberich explains, meant that the term – along with the aristocratic manners – was adopted in the self-definition of the upper middle classes which marked the “ultimate benchmark” (19) for them.

In *Police at the Funeral*, Marcus might be thinking of the resulting vagueness of the term in the contemporary world, yet in the same breath he also implies that Campion’s presence during the investigation is a privilege, ensuring the presence of a revered ideal of confidence and morality (a ‘genuine’ gentleman), corresponding to the traditional interpretation of this label. Although the idea of the gentleman has changed through history, the traditional image of such a figure has always been that of someone who is distinguished by blood (a member of the landowning gentry), who has no profession (which had been thought of as demeaning), who embodies and maintains tradition, and – and this is where a value judgement becomes part of the term – someone who upholds the chivalric attitude; this set of features came to be completed with public school background in the nineteenth century.

In *Masculinities and Culture* (2002), John Beynon points out that “the Victorian public school is [...] nothing less than a factory for gentleman” (41) where “masculinity was both attained and displayed through athleticism, strength, speed [...] and muscularity” (42). This remark also alludes to the fact that the concepts of gentlemanliness and manliness in the 19th century were strongly intertwined. Beynon also reflects on this idea by referring to Thomas Arnold – the influential headmaster of Rugby School – who “equated manliness with intellectual energy, moral purpose and sexual purity” (27). Reproducing the image of the manly gentleman of the pre-war era seems thoroughly problematic, since both Wimsey and Mr. Campion embody a fairly reduced form of masculinity despite their public school education. Although their presence replays the 19th-century revival of the chivalric tradition, confirming the idea that the ruling class deserved to rule as they were “morally superior” (21), explains Berberich, their non-heroic looks and reactions disqualify them for this traditional ideal. In *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s*, Nicola Humble argues that one

result of the Great War was the discrediting of pre-war, military ideas of masculinity, characterised by physical prowess, and the appearance of male figures who “rejected the old masculine values of gravitas and heroism in favour of frivolity” (197). Since both writers sought to be realists – as Richard Martin claims of Allingham and Catherine Kenney of Sayers –, the gentleman-detective can be seen as an embodiment of this reduced masculinity. Mr Campion is not at all a great detective in its traditional sense. In *Police at the Funeral*, we learn that he “was not a man who enjoyed horrors” (43), as well as someone with an imbecile look. In *Forever England*, Alison Light points to the fact that

the post-war world [...] needed to give way to a more modest, sometimes agonised sense of English manliness. Most writers solved the problem of embarrassment at aggressive virility by the age-old recourse of reinstating the clever foppishness of the aristocrat. (72)

Wimsey elicits absolute trust and emanates an air of reassurance as a revered ideal coming to a remote place called Fenchurch St. Paul – unlike the police, who are seen as uncouth intruders. Mrs Gates, one of the villagers, for example, flatly refuses to talk to Inspector Blundell, pointing out that the latter only feels competent to deal with the murder case because Wimsey is with him: “I suppose, since being patronized by the aristocracy, you consider yourself quite competent to deal with any description of crime” (158). Mr Venables, the rector of the village, is convinced that Wimsey’s knowledge and experience of the outside world – as well as his connections with the London police – can help their case. “I...ask you to give us some advice out of your great experience” (98) – he writes in his letter to Wimsey. Nevertheless, Wimsey’s intimate connection to detection not only hurts the families involved – though a gentleman is someone who “never inflicts pain” (Berberich 7) – but he himself suffers considerably, too. From this perspective, Wimsey’s position is also fairly ambiguous, given that it is he who dismantles the myth of the innocent countryside, although he is also seemingly part of the idyll. He articulates his failure in the following passage:

Well, padre, I dare say you’re right. Probably I’m trying to be too clever. That’s me every time. I’m sorry to have made so much unpleasantness, anyhow. And I really would rather go away now. I’ve got that silly modern squeamishness that doesn’t like watchin’ people suffer. (307)

Wimsey calls his squeamishness “modern” – possibly a reference to the trauma of seeing his men suffer and die in the trenches. He is shell-shocked and for him, detection is a therapy, enabling him both to forget about the war and do justice to all the innocent ones. In *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction*, Gill Plain comments on this feature in interwar detective fiction as follows: “Someone is to blame, and the wartime absence of explanation is superseded by detective fiction’s excess of possible solutions” (34). At the same time,

Wimsey understands the workings and disorders of memory as he reflects on the amnesia that overpowered the victim, Deacon, after desertion from the war. "He seemed to have forgotten the War.' 'Lucky devil!' said Wimsey, with feeling" (211). Wimsey's passionate reaction can be interpreted as a wish to suppress his own wartime trauma, yet, the process of detection leads him "inexorably back into the reworking of the very depression he seeks to assuage" (Plain 48).

Wimsey's and Campion's involvement in detection is questionable not only because they lack masculine authority but also because it simply does not fit their aristocratic background. Take the following example from *The Nine Tailors*: "No difficulty, no fun', [says Wimsey]. 'Fun?' said the Superintendent. 'Well, my lord, it's nice to be you' " (156). This remark on Wimsey seems to define him as part of the cosy world of middle-class memory relying on images of Englishness, such as of the authentic gentleman. His knowledgeability only adds to the illusion, as Catherine Kenney says: "[Wimsey] knows something about everything, so that just being in his company provides readers with endless tit-bits of history, science, literature, music and philosophy [...] Wimsey knows too much, [...] no one could be so knowledgeable" (61). For all the trust he inspires in people, Wimsey also has to face some hostility regarding his 'hobby'. One villager, for instance, refuses to be introduced to him, as his 15-year-old orphaned niece Hilary Thorpe explains: "He disapproves of mysteries, too. It's rotten for Uncle[...] He thinks your hobby is unsuited to your position in life. That's why he's rather carefully avoiding an introduction" (133). Uncle Edward sees Wimsey as an irresponsible person who does not realize the harm he might do with his frivolity and foreshadows Wimsey's hysterical reactions to the outcome of his intrusion.

Campion's engagement in detection leads to similar doubts. Being a member of the aristocracy, he is expected to maintain the image associated with his class and status; being engaged in detection on the side of the police – dealing with murders mostly – is, on the one hand, a demeaning occupation, while, on the other hand, it demands from him a thorough knowledge of and competence in the modern world. Coming to Cambridge to investigate a crime in the Faraday family as an amateur obliges him to belong to them on the one hand, and see those people objectively, as an outsider, on the other. To ease the tension resulting from this ambiguous position, Campion claims at the very beginning: "In the first place, I'm not a detective...I'm a professional adventurer – in the best sense of the word" (13). Mr Featherstone, the family lawyer comments on Campion's efforts in the following way: " 'You Campion,' he said. 'I don't know what good Mrs Faraday thinks you are going to be to her[...]No amateur jiggery-pokery ever has done anybody any good' " (64). Mr Featherstone's hostility is that of the professional upper middle class against the idleness and amateurism of the aristocracy, also suggesting the incompetence of the aristocracy in dealing with the real world. The same view is echoed by Inspector Oates, whose suggestion that the case has grown beyond Campion's limits also associates the

gentleman-detective with medieval heroism: “This is police work, my lad, not the high-class feudal warfare you’ve been accustomed to” (129). Nevertheless, his knightly performance to help the needy may also be questioned, especially if one keeps in mind that he is very probably paid for his services. In the novel, Mrs Faraday promises to pay him “one hundred guineas if [he] remain[s] in [her] employ for less than a month” (57). Whether he accepts the money or not remains dubious, yet his aristocratic background is inconsistent with his services for money.

Campion’s breakaway from his allocated position can also be traced in his observation of the memory world of the Faraday family. In the novel, he is called in to investigate the murder of Andrew Faraday, the son of the late Cambridge academic, Doctor Faraday, in Cambridge. The old family is controlled and dominated by Mrs. Caroline Faraday, who insists that her Victorian world should be maintained through everyday practices and the objectified milieu in their huge timeless mansion, Socrates Close. Campion’s presence during the investigation is crucial for several reasons. He is, first of all, a family friend – the family has secrets and refuses publicity, as Joyce Blount, a family member remarks: “It – it isn’t a matter for the police’ ” (13). Second, he is an aristocrat, with an understanding of the secrets and manners of his class, and his presence is therefore not an intrusion, maintaining even reinforcing the illusory nostalgic memory world with his fanciful clothes, including the “monstrous tweed erection” (5) on his head, he incarnates a different era, however ironically. He is treated very differently from the police, considered to be their own kind: “I am not insulting you by suggesting that you behave like a policeman – Mrs. Faraday remarks –; I need the presence of an intelligent person in the house” (58). Nevertheless, as suggested earlier, he ceaselessly performs ungodly acts that would deconstruct his memory image. The following conversation takes place after Inspector Oates has committed an ungodly act by using the armchair of the late Doctor John Faraday: “‘Big policeman makes fatal error’, said Mr Campion laughing, and went on to explain. “Well I’m hanged, said the Inspector ruefully. But who’s to know a thing like that? It’s as bad as a caste system” (68). Campion is equally at ease with the Faraday family and with Oates: unlike Oates, he understands the proprieties of the Faraday world while, on the other hand, he is also fluent in the modern discourse of newspaper headlines, blowing up the trivial incident into tabloid bombast. The gentleman detective is positioned as a mediator – a time traveller too – between the police and the Faradays, belonging everywhere and nowhere at the same time. This ambiguity explains why he is able to see the memory world of the Faradays from a distance and observe ethnographically the rituals which organize their lives from one day to the next, as described in the following quote: “Mr Campion realized that he was looking upon a nightly ritual, and waited, not without apprehension, to see where he himself fitted into this ceremony” (84). He understands Joyce’s frustration with the old lady (Mrs Faraday) who does not let her smoke a cigarette in public, and he sympathises with Inspector Oates when the officer admits that Mrs. Faraday is beyond him: “She speaks another new language I’ve got to learn” (68).

Similarly to Wimsey, he understands modern trends of psychology and dysfunctions of memory. Campion seems to understand how memory controls unpleasant events in Uncle William's life (Mrs Faraday's middle-aged son) and explains the mechanism of amnesia to Oates. As a memory expert, he understands the inhibitions and restraints that the past imposes on someone, and this is what enables him to sense the power of evil, even if his warnings are not taken seriously. By experiencing the destructive forces of the memory world in the house, he reconsiders the position of Uncle Andrew and the significance of his murderous acts. Uncle Andrew, branded within the family as evil and cruel, chooses to commit suicide instead of conforming to the rules of the house. His eccentric attitude is unveiled through the description of other characters. Marcus, Campion's solicitor friend, says that what frightens him is the family itself, as "There's rank evil there" (32), referring to Mrs Faraday's watchful eyes surveilling the mode of life which "hasn't altered since 1870" (17). The house, Socrates Close, is like a great mausoleum imprisoning the family members, all of whom are "vigorous and energetic by temperament" (33). Uncle Andrew's frustration and anger both seem to have originated in the recognition of the sustenance of their imaginary life. The inhibitions and repressions he has to experience in the family seem to be a "hot-bed, a breeding ground of those dark offshoots of the civilized mind" (49), presumes Campion. Uncle Andrew, recognizing the futility of their lives stuck in the past, starts his revolt by displaying books about sex on his shelves, getting into the habit of going to bookmakers – a vulgar act according to Mrs Faraday – or rearranging his own room to demonstrate complete simplicity and poverty as if the place was a prison. Bearing in mind that "there is no escape" (33), he finally takes revenge on the family members by leaving traps before his death and kills two of them. The closer Campion gets to the depth of the sustained image of the past, the less he intends to take part: "Mr Campion began to understand Marcus's remark of the previous evening: 'If I lived in that house I might easily feel like murder myself.' That atmosphere of restraint...where...human nature had begun to ferment, to decay, to become vile" (86).

In Sayers's and Allingham's novels of the interwar period, the gentleman detective stands for the past and the present at the same time. After the Great War, he embodies a glorious English world of the past, a *lieu de mémoire* of middle-class memory. However, the gentleman detective as a revived ideal turns out to be an ambiguous character, standing – through being associated with crime and the police, war traumas, as well as through his competence in the modern world – for modernity and the present as much as for the past. Their recognition of their role and responsibility in the detecting game as well as their interaction with the police tend to deconstruct the nostalgic, quasi-mythical image of the impeccable gentleman. After all, far from a passive memory figure, the gentleman-detective comes to be seen as the restoration of the individual very much aware of his place in modernity.

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