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Gulddal, Jesper. "Beautiful shining order": detective authority in Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express" Published in Clues, Vol. 34, Issue 1, Pages 11-21, (2016)

Accessed from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1319998>

Clues: Journal of Detection 34.1 (2016): 11-21.

**“BEAUTIFUL SHINING ORDER”:
DETECTIVE AUTHORITY IN AGATHA CHRISTIE’S
*MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS***

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Abstract. Drawing on the work of Pierre Bayard, this essay presents a “counterinvestigative” reading of *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) that highlights how Christie’s novel undermines Poirot’s authority as a detective and thereby also undermines his solution. The essay argues that the dénouement fails to bring about complete transparency and reduce the literary complexity of Christie’s plot.

W. H. Auden’s “Detective Story,” a multilayered poetical analysis of the clue puzzle genre, concludes with a sentiment that, although an inalienable part of the reader experience, has only recently received more systematic critical attention: “Yet on the last page just a lingering doubt/
That verdict, was it just? The judge’s nerves, / That clue, that protestation from the gallows, /
And our own smile . . . why yes . . .” (122). From a scholarly perspective, this sentiment is little more than idle speculation; after all, detective fiction of the type discussed by Auden is a genre that, quite literally, provides its own interpretation and underwrites it with the authority and intel-

lectual prowess of its protagonist. Yet, its seeming futility aside, Auden's "lingering doubt" highlights an important theoretical problem: whether the reader of detective fiction is compelled simply to defer to the authority of the master sleuth (and hence be condemned to the role of passive consumer) or whether this most "readerly" of genres, in the terminology of Roland Barthes (4), can instead be read in "writerly" ways that circumvent the apparent interpretative inaccessibility of the classic detective text.

A key figure in this regard is French literary theorist and psychoanalyst Pierre Bayard (cf. Gulddal and Rolls). Across three books devoted respectively to Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (the last regarded as a detective story), Bayard has developed an idiosyncratic strategy for against-the-grain readings of detective fiction. Taking Auden's doubt to its logical extreme, this "detective criticism" aims "to be more rigorous than even the detectives in literature and the writers who create them" (Bayard, *Sherlock* 57) and thereby address what Bayard sees as the miscarriage of justice in these works. The *pièce de résistance* is the volume on Christie that challenges the investigative authority of Poirot while also questioning the reliability of narrator Dr. Sheppard, who at the end of the novel famously confesses to the murder. In the face of seemingly incontrovertible evidence, Bayard undertakes a meticulous "counter-investigation" that demonstrates the impossibility of Poirot's solution and instead throws suspicion on the only character who has escaped scrutiny: Sheppard's inquisitive sister Caroline. Importantly, this approach, in spite of its ironies (Rolls and Gulddal), is based on careful textual analysis, and the numerous inconsistencies and logical problems that Bayard uncovers therefore seem almost impossible to refute. Bayard's radical conclusions may be ignored or disparaged as frivolous, yet the counter-investigative analysis itself, which is supported by ample evidence, nevertheless

seems to have changed *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* forever—in part by calling attention to the logical problems of Poirot’s solution but also, more fundamentally, by collapsing the authority differential between Christie as an author and her overly compliant readers.

This essay tests the replicability and assesses the ramifications of Bayard’s experiments by undertaking a “counter-investigation” of another of Poirot’s most well-known cases: *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). Yet, it also seeks to branch out from Bayard in two directions. First, unlike Bayard’s reading, the analysis presented here does not focus primarily on the logical flaws of the murder plot but uncovers how this novel systematically undermines the authority of the detective protagonist, sowing doubts about his methods and casting him as a storyteller rather than a master of observation and deduction. This ironical turn not only enables but also necessitates a closer scrutiny of the solution that is supported mainly by Poirot’s standing in the novel as the guarantor of interpretative truth. Second, the essay discusses some of the wider implications of Bayard’s critical approach, particularly the challenge it poses to the common perception that detective fiction, as the epitome of popular literature, is generically static and textually simple and hence does not warrant being read with the care and attentiveness devoted to “Literature.”

* * *

The classic detective novel is structurally tilted toward the ending as the moment where the mystery finds its solution, and social order is re-established. The ending is meant to offer narrative closure by tying up loose ends and demonstrating that all individual events are part of a coherent picture. However, this finality has an authoritarian aspect: the ending is the point where the authoritative stance of the protagonist is vindicated and his solution consecrated as the final word in the matter, to the exclusion of all other interpretative possibilities. Although *Murder on the Orient Express*, as this essay will argue, ultimately punctures this fiction of absolute trans-

parency, a counter-investigative reading should start at the beginning as a point of emerging possibilities rather than closure. Resisting the end-orientation enables a style of interpretation that does not take the protagonist's authority for granted, exploring instead how it is established but also challenged in the course of the novel.¹

As it happens, Poirot achieves the first investigative breakthrough very early in the novel when identifying the murder victim—the abrasive millionaire Simon Ratchett—as Cassetti, the alleged murderer of the young American girl Daisy Armstrong. Although all parties accept this identification—crucial to the investigation—it appears to be founded on prejudice rather than firm evidence. Even before boarding the train Poirot is shown to be strongly predisposed against Ratchett. After observing him, briefly and from a distance, in the restaurant of Istanbul's Tokatlilan Hotel, the detective feels justified in characterizing him, with extraordinary emphasis, as a “wild animal,” an “animal savage,” and an “evil” person who hides his true nature under a veneer of respectability (Christie 29). This, almost allergic, reaction informs the early investigation of Ratchett's murder. Although normally uninterested in technical details, Poirot undertakes a thorough forensic examination of both the crime scene and the dead body, which brings to light, among other clues, a charred scrap of paper. Using a pair of moustache tongs, a piece of wire, and a spirit stove, Poirot is able to recover a few words of writing: “—member little Daisy Armstrong” (91). On the basis of these words alone, the detective not only concludes that Ratchett is Cassetti, whom he remembers from old newspaper reports, but also that the scrap of paper is the remains of a threatening letter sent by relatives of the murdered girl.

Yet, these conclusions seem precipitous and rely on multiple interpretative leaps. First, the paper fragment does not in itself prove that the dead man is Daisy's murderer, especially as nothing else—his belongings, his appearance, or his passport, which is never scrutinized as a possible

forgery—supports this conclusion. Moreover, Poirot never considers that this clue may have been planted like the two other easily discovered suspicious items, the handkerchief and the pipe cleaner, even though it seems an extraordinary coincidence that the attempt to destroy the letter would leave intact only those three words that could put an inquiring mind on the right path. Second, if someone intended to track down and kill Ratchett/Cassetti, it would make little sense to announce this intention to him in a letter. The purpose of such a letter is incomprehensible as it enables the target to take precautions, as Ratchett/Cassetti has in fact done by sleeping with a loaded pistol under his pillow, hiring a private detective for protection, and even attempting to hire Poirot as well, telling the detective that he fears for his life. Third, Poirot not only exhibits undue confidence in identifying the murder victim on the basis of a few words on a scrap of paper but also places undue trust in sensational and perhaps only half-remembered newspaper reports suggesting that Cassetti was acquitted due to technicalities yet was in fact guilty of murdering Daisy. This strangely uncritical attitude, which contravenes both Poirot's method of systematically questioning appearances and the legal principle of presumed innocence in the absence of proven guilt, is crucial as it is ultimately Cassetti's guilt that justifies Poirot's decision to offer an alternative solution exonerating the conspirators entirely.

In the absence of solid evidence linking Ratchett to Cassetti, Poirot repeatedly tries to lift the burden of proof by means of a rhetoric of unassailable certainty. After displaying an uncanny ability to recall the details of the Armstrong murder case five years previously, he effortlessly transitions from remembering to imagining, achieving rhetorically the conviction that the American jury was unable to pass: "Now, I will make clear to you this, my friend. Cassetti was the man!" (97). Moving even further into speculative territory, Poirot invents an entirely unsubstantiated narrative intended to explain Cassetti's presence on the Orient Express: "It is now clear to

me what happened. He changed his name and left America. Since then he has been a gentleman of leisure, travelling abroad and living on his *rentes*” (97). When Edward Masterman, Ratchett’s valet and a man who ought to have a certain knowledge of this matter, expresses well-placed doubt about Poirot’s identification of Ratchett as Casseti, the detective simply reasserts the truth of his conclusions before quickly changing the topic: “Nevertheless, it is true. Now, to pass to your own movements last night . . .” (124). Importantly, these early yet foundational conclusions do not result from logical deduction or interpretation of clues but are products of a freewheeling imagination communicated apodictically to the other passengers who are effectively cajoled into taking the detective’s word for it.

Before further substantiating that unrestrained speculation of this sort is in fact central to Poirot’s investigative practice, it is worth calling attention to Poirot’s two sidekicks: Dr. Constantine, who barely has a personality beyond his obliging obtuseness, and Poirot’s old acquaintance M. Bouc, a director of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagon Lits, who, conversely, is a more developed character with a clear narrative function. Ostensibly, M. Bouc plays the classic role of foil to the detective hero: both his association with sleeping cars and his name, which is French for “goat,” suggest that his intellectual abilities are limited. Yet, there is an ironic edge to the relationship between M. Bouc and Poirot. In the course of the novel, M. Bouc repeatedly guesses at the identity of the murderer, mostly basing his conclusions on ethnic or gender stereotypes. Venturing an early guess that the guilty person must be either a person with “the Latin temperament” or a woman, he later elaborates on this conclusion “with magnificently certainty”:

No, it seems all *quite clear and above board*. It seems *quite plain* that the crime was committed at 1.15. . . . For my mind, I will make a guess at the identity of the murderer. I say, my friend, that it is the big Italian. He comes from America—

Clues: Journal of Detection 34.1 (2016): 11-21.

from Chicago—and remember an Italian’s weapon is the knife, and he stabs not once but several times. ... *Without a doubt*, that is the solution of the mystery. *Doubtless* he and this Ratchett were in this kidnapping business together. (146–67; emphasis added; see also 65)

Whereas M. Bouc’s apodictic manner of expression is exaggerated for comedic effect, it is nevertheless strikingly similar to that of Poirot, whose elaborate conclusions on the basis of a scrap of paper rely on a similar display of “magnificent certainty.” Accordingly, although the director is seemingly present in the novel mainly as a means of enhancing Poirot’s standing, he achieves the exact opposite by exposing Poirot’s willingness to engage in bold and unfounded guesswork. By ridiculing M. Bouc, the novel also pokes fun at its detective protagonist and thereby calls his interpretative authority into question.

The benchmark that Poirot sets for detective work in this novel is generally low, and his solution appears to rely to a large extent on *idées fixes* and investigative automatisms bordering on laziness. The detective almost instantly comes to the conclusion that the murderer is still aboard the train in the Istanbul-Calais coach where the murder took place. This conclusion, which conveniently reduces the number of suspects to around 12, rests on a series of less-than-convincing deductions coupled with a parallel series of omissions. First, Poirot discovers that the only passengers in the next two coaches are his two sidekicks who are never considered as suspects and “an old gentleman with a lame leg” (68) who is ignored even though physical defects are hardly a bulletproof alibi in Christie’s novels.² Second, the open window in the victim’s compartment is immediately, and with characteristic certainty, ruled out as a point of escape. Voiced by the otherwise dim Dr. Constantine, this rejection is based on a simple yet seemingly irrefutable observation: “[I]n my opinion that open window is a blind. Anyone departing that

way would have left distinct traces in the snow. There were none” (63). This characterization of the open window as a “blind”, which is accepted by Poirot, generates significant ironies. On the one hand, Dr. Constantine’s conclusion ironically transforms the window from a means of communication between inside and outside to a means of achieving the prerequisite closure around a limited group of suspects. On the other hand, the juxtaposition of window and blind involves a rapprochement of transparency and opacity, suggesting that the doctor’s rare moment of insight may have been a (less surprising) moment of blindness and that the window declared to be a blind may be a window after all, opening up to alternative investigative pathways. It is entirely possible, for example, that the murderer, rather than placing footsteps in the fresh snow, climbed from the window onto the roof of the coach or passed along the side of the train, re-entering either by another window or by the door at either end. Poirot’s failure to explore these possibilities is baffling and renders dubious his decision to focus the investigation exclusively on the passengers in his own coach. Narratively, in terms of crafting a detective plot, this reduction of the playing field makes perfect sense, yet from an investigative perspective, in terms of the rigorous unraveling of the mystery, it appears lazy if not informed by more sinister motives.

Once Poirot has established, however hastily, that the murderer is still on board the train and has interviewed the suspects, the logical next step is to conduct a search of the passengers’ luggage. This search offers another example of Poirot’s peculiar negligence. Even though it is presented as a crucial investigative step, Poirot clearly does not commit the required time and rigor to the task. The first search, of Mrs. Hubbard’s compartment, is a case in point: “The examination was quickly over. . . . The contents of all three [baggage items] were simple and straightforward” (232). This pattern repeats itself from one compartment to the next: Mr. Hardman’s two bags “were soon examined and passed” (234); the examination of Colonel Arbuthnot’s belong-

ings “took only a few minutes” (236); the search of Count and Countess Andrenyi’s luggage is “rapid and perfunctory,” with Poirot casting nothing more than “a rapid glance at its contents” (241); Greta Ohlsson’s possessions “were soon examined” (243); and the “examination of the luggage of the big Italian and of the valet yielded no result” (252). If these instances emphasize the hurried nature of Poirot’s search, other instances demonstrate its (literal) shallowness as, for example, when the examination of Hildegarde Schmidt’s suitcase probes no deeper than the Wagon Lit uniform left at the top (249) or when Mary Debenham’s luggage is opened but never actually examined, the interesting conversation seemingly leading Poirot to forget his original purpose (242–48). The highpoint of negligence is the visit to the compartment of Princess Dragomiroff, where Poirot converses with the elderly lady while incomprehensibly “leaving M. Bouc to the task of searching the luggage” (238). It could be argued that Poirot is uninterested in the luggage search because he already knows what he is looking for and where it can be found. Yet, his inattention forces readers to query the detective’s authority, as he is shown to be overly committed to preconceived ideas and hence incapable of conducting the investigation with the appropriate rigor. The repeated highlighting of Poirot’s negligence therefore adds itself to the early instances of precipitous reasoning to form a portrait of the investigator as lazy and biased.

Bayard’s subversive readings of detective fiction devote considerable energy to the task of showing the illogical or impossible nature of the murder as explained by the detective protagonist; his analysis of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, for example, demonstrates that the alleged murderer, Dr. Sheppard, would have had to invent a timer-operated Dictaphone—quite a feat of engineering in 1926—in the space of just a few hours on the afternoon of the crime (*Who Killed* 61–62). Given Poirot’s desultory effort in *Murder on the Orient Express*, it comes as no surprise that the proposed solution is riddled with logical inconsistencies. As already noted, the idea that

the conspirators would have sent threatening letters to Ratchett/Cassetti seems absurd; it could be surmised, of course, that the letters were needed to induce the victim to hire Cyrus Hardman as a detective with a security brief, yet Hardman could still have performed his role of drawing “a clear circle round the Stamboul-Calais carriage” (334) without an employment contract. The main issues, however, concern the train setting. Choosing to commit the murder on board a train (rather than using the train as a means of escape) already seems illogical, as the success of this plan relies on a number of factors that cannot be controlled such as Ratchett/Cassetti’s return to Europe via the Orient Express (instead of, for example, by boat). More important, it is hard to understand how the conspirators, who allegedly have planned everything down to the last minute (338), could have failed to secure the compartment adjoining that of the intended victim even though the conductor is in on the plan. Similarly, it is incomprehensible why they would proceed with their plan even though a world-famous detective with a specialty in murder cases is occupying this neighboring compartment.

The proximity to the crime scene also makes it unlikely that the detective would fail to hear the actual murder. Poirot is described throughout this novel as a man of acute hearing, easily listening in, for example, on the hushed conversation between Mary Debenham and Colonel Arbuthnot in chapter 1. Lying in bed on the night of the murder, Poirot is literally inches away from Ratchett/Cassetti, separated from the next compartment only by a thin dividing wall. After the locomotive halts, the “noises on the train seemed unusually loud” (53), and readers learn that Poirot can “hear Ratchett moving about next door—a click as he pulled down the washbasin, the sound of the tap running, a splashing noise, then another click as the basin shut to again” (53). Moreover, Poirot is awakened twice, first by a “loud groan” (51) and later by a “thud against the door” (56). Together, these facts—keen hearing, minimal distance, poor soundproofing, light

sleeping, and the absence of any engine or track noises—make Poirot’s solution seem all but impossible. Given whodunit conventions, it is perhaps not surprising that Poirot seemingly hears everything that happens early in the night but then falls asleep and hears nothing at all while the murder takes place. However, as reconstructed by Poirot, the murder could not have failed to produce a considerable amount of noise. The detective’s account assumes that 12 individuals entered the victim’s compartment in turn, each stabbing him violently with a dagger before going through the washing routine that previously kept the detective awake. It assumes, moreover, that the conspirators opted for this drawn-out procedure so that “[t]hey themselves would never know which blow actually killed him” (339). In other words, Poirot would have readers believe that Ratchett/Cassetti might have been stabbed non-lethally up to 11 times, presumably over an extended period of time, without stirring from his medicated (but not anesthetized) sleep or indeed without making any noises that would have woken the light-sleeping detective who is separated from the victim only by a screen of wood veneer. This is clearly absurd.

What prevents readers from questioning this incredible story line is ultimately Poirot’s authority, both as a master detective and as the embodiment of the narrative desire for closure and meaning. However, *Murder on the Orient Express* persistently questions and undermines this authority. This is already evident from the discussion of Poirot’s overconfidence and investigative negligence, yet it becomes even more apparent, and with wide-reaching consequences, in a sequence of figurative characterizations that associate Poirot with the virtualizing dimensions of fiction and theater rather than with the closing of possibilities inherent in the detective’s role.

The first of these sequences occurs before the murder has been committed, when over breakfast Poirot and M. Bouc survey the motley group of passengers that seems to include people “of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages” (38). M. Bouc notes that this diversity “lends

itself to romance” and wishes that he had “the pen of a Balzac” (37) so that he could represent it in the form of a literary description. This remark is ironic insofar as it pre-empts and frames the narrator’s own depiction of the passengers, which follows hard in the wake of this conversation. Yet, its significance extends far beyond this irony. M. Bouc clearly thinks of the scene as raw material for a novel, explicitly highlighting its unprocessed incoherence when describing the passengers as “strangers” who spend three days together on the train and then “go their separate ways, never, perhaps, to see each other again” (38). Poirot, on the other hand, immediately takes it upon himself, in the manner of a novelist rather than a detective, to supply the missing connections and hence recraft the scene as a coherent narrative:

“And yet,” said Poirot, “suppose an accident—”

“Ah no, my friend—”

“From your point of view it would be regrettable, I agree. But nevertheless let us just for one moment suppose it. Then, perhaps, all these here are linked together—by death.” (38)

M. Bouc and Poirot are both thinking like novelists, yet whereas the former focuses only on scene and characters, Poirot emphasizes the *plot* in the dual sense of narrative structure and conspiracy. Poirot insists, in the narratological tradition originating in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (50b–51a), on necessity or probability linking actions rather than pure contingency, which has no place in a classically conceived plot. Accordingly, an “accident”—that is, a murder—would be regrettable, as Poirot notes, from the commercial point of view of director Bouc, but not from the perspective of Poirot for whom the narrative interconnectedness of events and characters, even when forged “by death,” is *aesthetically* preferable to an arbitrary agglomeration. The detective’s *modus operandi* is thereby cast not as one of analysis of clues, but rather, following Paul Ricœur’s neo-

Aristotelean definition of the plot, as a “synthesis of the heterogeneous” (66)—that is, an imaginative reconfiguration of narrative raw material that links together individual elements in a causal sequence. By looking for links between the passengers, possibly in the form of a lethal conspiracy, even before the murder has been committed, Poirot in these early parts of the novel becomes an avatar of the detective writer herself: constantly scanning the surroundings for potential plots and for “savage” people to populate them, he is more raconteur than investigator.

If the opening conversation with M. Bouc serves to locate Poirot’s subsequent investigation halfway between the fictional and the factual, this movement is extended toward the end of the novel. The final steps of the investigation, conventionally seen as the novel’s authoritative auto-interpretation, are in fact riddled not only with nonlogical conclusions but also with fictionality, now in the guise of theater and performance rather than novelistic writing. The subjunctivity of Poirot’s consecutive identification of each passenger is a telling case in point. Avowedly based on guesswork, these identifications are presented in language that foregrounds their hypothetical nature: “I imagine,” “I decided,” “supposing that,” “I could guess,” and “I could only imagine” (340–43). Moreover, picking up on the theater motif that features prominently throughout the novel, Poirot explicitly likens his procedure to the craft of the dramatist, claiming that his “scheme of ‘guessing’” consists in “casting each person for a certain part in the Armstrong drama much as a producer casts a play” (333). These observations add to the perception that the novel, intentionally or not, is casting doubt on the neat distinction between the detective and the creative writer, suggesting that the two activities share a common imaginative basis that renders the solution more a matter of devising than discovering. This writerly dimension of Poirot’s craft is understandably met with bewilderment and incredulity among his assistants: M. Bouc declares that “the whole thing is a fantasy” (220), whereas Dr. Constantine, expanding on

the theme of the detective as novelist, attacks Poirot's speculations as "more wildly improbable than any *roman policier* I have ever read" (322).

The dénouement in the dining car, although ostensibly intended to provide closure, further underscores the status of fiction as a subversive counterpoint to the authority of the master detective. All suspects are present, but although Poirot's second solution incriminates them all, no one interrupts the detective or contests his claims. Whether guilty or innocent, the passengers can be expected to defend themselves. The fact that they listen to the hypotheses in silence suggests bemusement rather than acquiescence—that they listen with astonishment to the rambling performance of a deluded detective. Tellingly, the first person to respond and the *only* character to confirm Poirot's theory is Mrs. Hubbard, alias the famous Broadway actress Linda Arden, the grandmother of Daisy. As a professional actress who has been playing "comedy" throughout the novel, this character is by far the least suited among the 13 conspirators to underwrite the solution. When beginning her alleged confession, her voice is twice characterized as "dreamy" (344), a word equally suggestive of resigned authenticity and crafty manipulation, and the confession itself is explicitly cast as a theatrical performance: "Her voice was wonderful echoing through the crowded space—that deep, emotional, heart-stirring voice that had thrilled many a New York audience" (346). Infused with histrionics, her vital testimony uncomfortably blurs the lines between truth-telling and play-acting, thereby producing a version of the liar's paradox and leaving readers with no means of ascertaining whether the comedy has in fact come to an end or whether the actress has simply slipped into a new role.

Accordingly, the ending of *Murder on the Orient Express* is compromised. Pitting two performers against each other—Poirot the dramatist-cum-producer and Arden the actress—it erodes the credibility of both, thereby failing to achieve the "beautiful shining order" that the protago-

nist envisions as the ultimate outcome of his investigation (338). As this striking phrase conveys, detective fiction of the Golden Age—and Christie’s works more than any other—fetishize the ending as a moment of closure and absolute transparency where all details of the plot have been fully elucidated. However, in this novel the ending becomes instead a point of ambiguity where the easy alternative posed by Poirot’s two solutions obscures a more fundamental choice, namely that of either accepting the authorized solution in spite of its evident flaws or, conversely, going on the hunt for more satisfying explanations in contravention of the authority invested in the detective protagonist.

Apart from the various inconsistencies and implausibility of the plot, an alternative solution to *Murder on the Orient Express* would have to account above all for what can only be described as Poirot’s strange behavior in this novel: his rash but overly confident conclusions, his remarkably lazy investigation, and his recurring self-fictionalization as a novelist or dramatist. These behavioral oddities make the detective himself a person of interest, either as an accomplice or as an actual murderer. External evidence supports this idea. Murders tend to take place with alarming frequency wherever Poirot happens to be, and the detective indisputably does commit murder in the final installment of the series, *Curtain*, which proves that he has the required mental constitution as long as the murder serves a higher justice. Based on the latter case, it might be surmised that Poirot knew all along that Ratchett was Cassetti and had decided to mete out justice where the U.S. jury had failed; this would explain his surprisingly detailed knowledge of the Armstrong murder case and the people involved in it. Occupying the compartment adjoining the victim’s would make the murder relatively easy to execute undetected, and covering it up would not pose much of a challenge given the ineptitude of his two assistants.

However, there also is less circumstantial evidence in favor of Poirot's involvement. First, the handkerchief with the monogram letter H is considered in relation to a number of suspects before Poirot identifies it as belonging to Princess Dragomiroff, yet the H could also stand for Hercule, and it is perfectly reasonable to assume that Poirot, with his dandified habits, would own a monogrammed handkerchief of superior Parisian quality. Much more damagingly, four witnesses report seeing a "small man with a womanish voice" who sports a "little moustache" and says "*Pardon*" (211, 339–40). Poirot contends that this description does not fit any of the passengers and ultimately decides that the description of this—as he insists, fictitious—person is simply chosen so as not to match any of actual conductors on the train. Yet, what is never discussed in the novel is the fact that the description perfectly fits Poirot himself as a small mustachioed man (11) with distinctly effeminate mannerisms. As a latent admission that this is potentially incriminating, Poirot in his final monologue conveniently leaves out the two items of information that most clearly point toward a link between himself and the mysterious stranger: the moustache and the French language (339). Even if the ultimate Bayardian conclusions are rejected, this bizarre similarity must be acknowledged as a self-reflexive joke, which, by ironizing the protagonist and exposing his blindness, once again casts doubt on his authority and thereby lends credence to alternative readings.

Implicating Poirot in this way begs the question why the passengers play along with the detective. Yet, far from being an insurmountable difficulty, this is in fact an opportunity to strengthen the alternative solution. It is entirely possible to invent supporting hypotheses, for example by positing that the passengers think Poirot is deluded and simply opt to play along until the police arrive. More plausibly, however, it can be argued that Poirot is part of the conspiracy and has devised his elaborate solution not only to let the 13 passengers escape prosecution but

also to escape suspicion himself. This relatively minor addition to the plot—less a fully fledged alternative solution than an “improvement” in the sense of Bayard’s *Comment ameliorer des livres ratées?*—has no moral implications, as Poirot clearly sympathizes with the conspirators and their act of vigilantism. More significantly, it enhances the internal logic of the story line by explaining the protagonist’s peculiar investigative approach as a ploy designed to throw competing investigators off the track. It also fixes a number of aspects of the dénouement that would otherwise be inexplicable such as, for example, the detective’s rapid transition from hearing everything to hearing nothing, his detailed knowledge of the Armstrong case, and his repeated self-characterization as writer of fiction, which, seen in this light, becomes a playfully ironic yet virtually risk-free admission of his involvement. In this reading, Poirot’s concluding explanations are aimed solely at M. Bouc and Dr. Constantine as the *only* characters uninvolved in the murder (and the only characters not traveling in the Istanbul-Calais carriage, a fact that makes the murder very easy to commit).

Making Poirot an accomplice and perhaps even a murderer may not be “fair play” in the sense of Ronald A. Knox and S. S. Van Dine’s classic rule sets of detective fiction; yet these rules are mainly observed in the breach. Arguably, the alternative solution has a certain fairness to it in the sense that it uncovers a key structural aspect of Golden Age detective fiction. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, Poirot himself becomes an embodiment of the detective writer who aims—Bayard identifies this as fundamental to the profession—to prevent certain ideas from emerging in the mind of the reader. By the same token, Poirot’s two assistants become stand-ins for the reader: the slow-witted M. Bouc and the distracted Dr. Constantine are precisely duped by Poirot in the same way as the reader is duped by the detective writer. The unequal battle of minds between a detective with a secret and his inept helpers can therefore be read as a fitting

allegory for the cat-and-mouse game between author and reader that defines the whodunit.

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Murder on the Orient Express is a novel that showcases Poirot's status as the champion of "beautiful shining order" while actively challenging and even undermining it. Not only is Poirot represented as lazy in his investigations and rash in his conclusions, he is also described via metaphors of novelistic and dramatic writing, which ultimately implies that "*thinking out the truth*" (273), as Poirot calls it, might be indistinguishable from thinking it up. Moreover, Poirot's authority is called into question by recurring ironies, most tellingly his failure to recognize that witness accounts of a mysterious, small francophone man sporting a moustache might actually refer to himself. These otherwise inexplicable aspects of the story suggest that the concluding dénouement is a fiction designed to cover up a less palatable truth whose traces have been almost completely obliterated—and hence lends credence to the search for a more satisfactory solution.

Yet, although the identification of Poirot as a likely co-conspirator no doubt violates the "rules" of detective fiction, not to mention those of conventional detective fiction criticism, the counter-investigative method in itself is not as radical as it would seem. If applied to a contemporary modernist novel by an author such as William Faulkner or Virginia Woolf, the same analytical questioning of the narrator or an allegedly truth-telling protagonist would be unlikely to raise eyebrows. Detective fiction as a genre designation seemingly invalidates such irreverent reading practices, encouraging instead the view that detective novels are eminently "readerly" and therefore unsuitable as objects of the hermeneutics of suspicion that they themselves both model and advocate. Yet, as the case of Christie demonstrates (Bayard, *Who Killed*), this preconception is a case of blindness induced by interpretative categories and a likely reason why detective fiction criticism, as Stephen Knight argues, has typically neglected to undertake close textual

analysis of individual detective texts so as 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” (Knight 3–4). Doing justice to detective fiction would involve dismantling the genre-stabilizing emphasis on rules and patterns, developing instead an eye for the textual dynamics of the individual work.

In this sense, the counter-investigative approach is not just a matter of exposing the detective genre’s multifarious strategies for hiding the truth in plain sight, nor is it about analyzing, in the manner of Bayard, how the final “movement of *foreclosing meaning*” is unable to contain fully the explosive “movement of *opening meaning*” that has gone before (Bayard, *Who Killed* 67). Importantly, this approach also paves the way for a “normalization” of detective fiction—a critical dismantling of the elite versus popular divide that acknowledges this genre as genuine literature rather than a popular, but decidedly inferior, derivative. Like many of her fellow detective writers, Christie saw her writing simply as light entertainment more akin to crossword puzzles than high art (Morgan; see Christie, *Autobiography* 417). Yet, the works themselves tell a different story: far from being puzzles with neat solutions, they are complex interactive language games that richly deserve the name of literature.

Keywords: Bayard, Pierre; Christie, Agatha; detective authority; *Murder on the Orient Express*; Hercule Poirot

NOTES

1. This end-orientation, understood as a reading practice, has been criticized by, among others, Gill Plain (6) and Merja Makinen (1–2).
2. For example, Poirot commits murder in *Curtain* (1975), the final novel in the series, in a plot that involves feigning severe arthritis.

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