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P.D. James (1920-2014): 'Lighten our darkness' ¹

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Veteran novelists often become moral arbiters. In her later years, the detective novelist P.D. James assumed this role, combining it with a championship of traditional Anglican liturgy and an unusual willingness to speak about her Christian faith in public.² As a Tory peer, she presented an attractive and responsible version of conservatism even to those who disagreed with her politics; as an Anglican, she was able to make non-Anglicans take her seriously. It can be a struggle to reconcile her public persona with her fiction: how could a woman of such rectitude, gentility and warmth have dreamt up such bleak and violent novels? Yet a dissonance is not a contradiction, and this essay will argue that both James's public utterances and her fictional worlds reveal an unruly theological imagination.³

Anglicanism in detective fiction

It seemed appropriate to have James as the final novelist in this book, given that her career and writings often recall her predecessors. As both writer and pundit she could be called the Dorothy L. Sayers of her generation, theologically informed and unapologetically learned, and the bleak East Anglian landscapes in her fiction consciously recall Sayers' classic evocation of the Fenlands, *The Nine Tailors* (1934).⁴ James also offers interesting points of correspondence with another mid-twentieth-century female Anglican intellectual, Rose Macaulay; her best-known detective, Adam Dalgleish, hovers on the threshold of the church in a manner reminiscent of Laurie in Macaulay's novel *The Towers of Trebizond* (1956).⁵ Sometimes James used

her precursors' treatment of Anglicanism to point up differences between past and present, as when Father Barnes, the ineffectual parish priest in *A Taste for Death* (1986), harks back to the time when the clergy were lionised simply because of their office:

His most recent library book had been a Barbara Pym. He had read with envious disbelief the gentle and ironic story of a village parish where the curates were entertained, fed and generally spoilt by the female members of the congregation.⁶

The reference – as James's ideal reader would instantly recognise – is to *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950), making light-hearted use of a theme which preoccupied James throughout her career: the decline in Anglicanism's social centrality and status.⁷ Here and elsewhere, James's work demonstrates the persistent three-way relationship between the Anglican church, detective fiction and women novelists: a tradition of which she was very aware.⁸ Her engagement with the receding fortunes of Anglicanism may owe something to Agatha Christie's sense in her later works that she was chronicling a transitional period, well illustrated by a comment of Miss Marple's in *Nemesis* (1971): 'in my own village, St Mary Mead, things do rather revolve around the church. I mean, they always have. In my young days, that was so. Nowadays of course it's rather different.'⁹

Nemesis marks Miss Marple's last appearance in a full-length novel; *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), in which she is introduced to the public, epitomises the importance of the Anglican church within Golden Age detective fiction, and the

imaginative tradition to which James is responding. Christie's title is suggestive in itself: murder at the vicarage, the centre of a parish community, is a social outrage as much as anything. In Christie's hands, whodunits contain strong elements of comedy: one can compare Philip King's farce, *See How They Run* (1945), set in a vicarage living room, and containing a memorable scene where four clergymen – some real, some bogus – are threatened with arrest.¹⁰ Perhaps the similarity is only to be expected; farces and murder mysteries both show the temporary disruption of respectability and normal social rhythms, while re-imposing order at the end. Christie, who saw herself primarily as an entertainer, would probably have acknowledged that comic resolution was part of her agenda.

But she is now valued at least as much for another, more accidental solace. Christie's work, like other Golden Age detective fiction, has taken on a nostalgic glow in retrospect; this, combined with her downplaying of graphic violence, has given a blueprint to present-day writers of so-called 'cosy' detective novels, marketed as suitable for those who dislike hard-boiled crime fiction. In the world of the cosy whodunit, bloody murder is as toothsome English as strawberry jam on a scone.¹¹ The Anglican church figures prominently, sometimes just to evoke, as Christie did, a world of parochial order ruptured by murder and reinstated by the detective.¹² But in an age where Christian communities tend to be ignored or treated stereotypically within mainstream novels, the genre also provides opportunities for writers wishing to undertake more ambitious depictions of church life.¹³ Here, James does have points in common with the authors of cosy detective fiction, yet she is the least cosy of writers herself. For all her own homage to Christie, her novels are far more violent and

desolate than her predecessor's; if Christie is the quintessential Golden Age detective novelist, James's fallen world locates her within an Iron Age of crime fiction.¹⁴

The Church of England and the Gothic imagination

James's novels could also be thought of as exercises in Anglican Gothic. Within literary criticism, the term 'Gothic' refers both to a literary fashion of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and a more general imaginative fascination with the ruined, the haunted and the moribund.¹⁵ At its outset, Gothic fiction drew inspiration from the history of Catholicism in England, both its medieval past and troublingly half-concealed present. But in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it has been Anglicanism's turn to be cast into part-shadow. As the introduction to this volume has shown, this is not a simple story of decline.¹⁶ But it has meant that outside clearly delineated contexts, such as BBC Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day', expressions of belief have long been discouraged within England's public sphere.¹⁷ James nods to this in *A Taste for Death*, in which a murdered politician, Sir Paul Berowne, experiences an abrupt religious conversion before the novel begins.¹⁸ A Tory stalwart in Berowne's constituency describes to Dalglish the embarrassment of a conversation with the dead man:

He said that it wouldn't be right for him to continue as our Member. It was time that his life took a different turn. Naturally I asked what he meant by a different turn. ... He said that he didn't know yet. He hadn't been shown. 'Hadn't been shown by whom?' I asked. He said 'God'. Well, there's not much

a man can say to that. Nothing like an answer like that for putting a stopper on rational discussion. (280)

While this constraint affects all denominations and faiths, it has had an especially pronounced effect on the Church of England because of its previous cultural dominance: which is where the notion of Gothic comes into play. If, as Freud put it, 'the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar', the current position of Anglicanism has considerable power to generate uncanniness.¹⁹

James's densely imagined church buildings are a focus for this kind of disquiet – and, often enough, a location for murder. In *Death in Holy Orders* (2001), an unpopular archdeacon set on modernising a theological college is found battered to death beneath a medieval painting of the Last Judgement, as if he too is hell-bound. But not all James's Gothic catastrophes occur within a medievalising *mise-en-scène*. In *Death of an Expert Witness* (1977), a stately home repurposed as a forensic science laboratory has a chapel by the classical architect Sir Christopher Wren in the grounds, largely unused under the new regime; when asked about its security, the laboratory director comments 'There's nothing left there of real value', a comment which functions more broadly as a secularist dismissal.²⁰ Later in the novel, Brenda Pridmore, a young employee of the laboratory, believes she is being followed by the murderer and rushes there for safety:

And now there was a belt of trees before her and, gleaming through the autumn branches, the Wren chapel, lit from within, beckoning and holy,

shining like a picture on a Christmas card. She ran towards it, palms outstretched, as hundreds of her forbears in the dark fens must have rushed to their altars for sanctuary. ... She threw herself against the oak, and the great door swung inwards into a glory of light.

At first her mind, shocked into stupor, refused to recognise what her dazzled eyes so clearly saw. ... Stella Mawson's face, dreadful in death, drooped above her, the eyes half open, the palms disposed outwards as if in a mute appeal for pity or for help. (315-6)

This startling scene, focusing on the corpse's gesture of unanswered prayer, subverts any sense that churches yield sanctuary – and a similar point is made about the building itself. We learn that it has hosted an adulterous liaison, and that it was a safe place for this because the locals avoided it: 'The fen villagers ... would have a half-superstitious dread of visiting this empty and alien shrine' (322). In this and other ways, it appears spiritually void; reflecting on her experience there, Brenda comments 'It's a funny chapel, isn't it? Not really a holy place. Perhaps it hasn't been prayed in enough' (336), while Dalgliesh ponders, in a passage which dispels any idea that his creator might be indiscriminately nostalgic for the Anglican past:

Its formal classicism rejected emotion. It enshrined man, not God; reason, not mystery. This was a place where certain reassuring rituals had been enacted, reaffirming its proprietor's view of the proper order of the universe and his own place in that order. (321)

Exploring, Dalgleish finds a copy of the Book of Common Prayer which, tellingly, 'looked unused'.²¹ It falls open at the passage from Psalm 39 which forms part of the burial service: 'For I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. O spare me a little, that I may recover my strength: before I go hence, and be no more seen.'²² These words, and the book from which they are taken, constitute the chapel's only source of spiritual efficacy; in the following chapter, we are shown Dalgliesh 'sitting quietly in one of the stalls, apparently engrossed by the Book of Common Prayer' (331). Discreetly, James leaves us to ponder whether he is praying or just reading.

When Dalgliesh first handles the Prayer Book, he finds some human hairs under it. As if to frustrate simplistic expectations of providential intervention, this clue proves inconclusive. Providential implications, though, do undergird a later novel, *A Taste for Death*, again in the context of the Prayer Book. Dalgleish has been listening to 'Evensong, that most neglected and aesthetically satisfying portion of the Anglican liturgy', in an Anglo-Catholic church where he is investigating a double murder:

Father Barnes's voice, as if from a far distance but very clear, perhaps because the words were so familiar, was speaking the Third Collect for aid against all perils: 'Lighten our darkness we beseech Thee, O Lord; And by Thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night for the love of Thine only Son, our saviour Jesus Christ.' (434)²³

The Collect's plea for enlightenment and defence, so appropriate for policemen and detectives, heralds the moment just after the service when a crucial clue – a silver button from the murderer's jacket – is found in a money-box for votive candles by a statue of the Virgin and Child. This recalls an earlier episode when, just after Dalgliesh's first inspection of the bodies, he lights a candle in front of the same statue and leaves payment for it, conscious of how strange the action might appear to his junior colleagues:

On impulse he felt in his pocket for a tenpenny piece and dropped it into the box. The clatter was unnaturally loud. He half-expected to hear Kate or Massingham moving up behind him to watch, unspeaking but with interested eyes, his untypical act of sentimental folly. ... He stuck the candle upright in a socket then sat and gazed at the flame, letting it mesmerize him into memory.

(78)

At the very least, Dalgleish is meditating – James suggests more, not least because the chapter section stops here – and the clue emerges later as if in response to an unspoken, barely articulated prayer.

James was well used to burying clues, James's readers are primed to look for them, and once noticed, the convergence between these two moments is hard to ignore. Indeed, it could seem obtrusive, verging on the idea that prayer is a slot machine. But James has anticipated this problem by suggesting that there is nothing supernatural about how it happens. The button probably gets in the box because Darren, a ten-year-old boy who is one of the first to discover the bodies, substitutes it

for a coin. As he walks up to the church with his friend Miss Wharton, she hands him 'the usual tenpenny piece' for a candle: 'now she heard a faint tinkle and watched while he stuck his candle in the socket' (9), a noise that could, of course, be made both by a coin and a metal button. We learn later in the story that Darren is badly brought up and a habitual pilferer, even less likely than most children of his age to see no contradiction between lighting a votive candle and stealing from the church. Readers looking for a material explanation can stop there; those searching for a providentialist outcome are given the option of one, though in a way which is anything but glib. On the one hand, we are invited to speculate on the contingent, subterranean workings of a providence that can redeem Darren's petty crime in a way that brings a far worse criminal to justice; on the other, it is hinted that an answer to prayer may bring additional horrors in its wake. When the button is discovered, it leads directly to the murderer, but because of Darren's action, this key piece of evidence emerges too late to avoid an extra death. If this borderline-providential moment stretches Ronald Knox's famous tenet that all supernatural agency should be ruled out in detective stories, it also challenges the idea that God necessarily brings about happy endings.²⁴

Confession and death

As this episode illustrates, James writes about prayer the way the Victorians wrote about sex, with the utmost delicacy and indirection.²⁵ This is entirely in keeping with Dalgleish's character: a vicar's son, he is shown as comfortable within Anglican surroundings, but also as intellectually fastidious, emotionally inhibited and equivocal towards religious faith. James may have had pragmatic reasons for this, given that depicting Dalgleish as a paid-up Christian would have compromised his cleverness for some of her readers. But this sceptical distancing from belief makes him, if

anything, an especially authoritative witness to the evil he encounters. For a genre that foregrounds the process of rational deduction, detective fiction often has a lot to say about supra-rational perceptions of good and evil. For instance, when it is suggested to Miss Marple that she has a 'very fine sense of evil', she responds:

Yes, perhaps. I have at several different times in my life been apprehensive, have recognised that there was evil in the neighbourhood, the surroundings, that the environment of someone who was evil was near me, connected with what was happening. ... It's rather, you know ... like being born with a very keen sense of smell. (113)

James echoes this idea in her portrayal of Michael Baddeley, the priest whose murder precipitates the plot in *The Black Tower* (1975). Chaplain to Toynton Grange, a nursing home run by a bizarre Anglican religious community, he dies because he correctly suspects that the organisation is being used as a front for criminal activities: not because of tangible clues, but 'a deep-rooted instinct for what he would describe as evil' (266). On the face of it, suspicion of this kind is a strikingly inadequate reason for murder. While this testifies to the murderer's unbalanced state of mind, it also conveys a vivid impression of Father Baddeley's spiritual perceptiveness, made all the more suggestive by the fact that the reader never encounters him directly.²⁶

Suspicious about Father Baddeley's death first arise because his corpse is found wearing a purple stole, as if he has been interrupted in administering the sacrament of confession: a practice that is often useful to the detective novelist. An early instance, which James surely knew, occurs in Dorothy L. Sayers's *Unnatural*

Death (1927); here, the high-church piety of Lord Peter Wimsey's assistant Katherine Climpson is crucial to the finding and interpretation of one particular clue, which she happens upon as the result of a minor accident after vespers:

Miss Climpson gathered up a quantity of little manuals, and groped for her gloves. In doing so, she dropped her office-book. It fell, annoyingly, behind the long kneeler, scattering as it went a small pentecostal shower of Easter cards, book-markers, sacred pictures, dried palms and Ave Marias into the dark corner behind the confessional. (359)²⁷

Back home, she goes through her devotional books re-inserting the prayer cards, and finds something she has picked up by accident: a sheet of notes made in preparation for confession, which contains a vital pointer to the identity of the murderer. This puts her in a dilemma as to whether she should disclose it or not – after all, it was not intended for her eyes, and could be seen as affected by the seal of the confessional. She asks to put a case of conscience to the Vicar, and writes a letter to Lord Peter and his collaborator Inspector Parker 'so obscure and mysterious and so lavishly underlined and interlined that it was perhaps fortunate for their reason that they were never faced with it' (364). Providentially, perhaps, the identity of the murderer later becomes clear for other reasons.

In *The Black Tower*, the practice of confession is differently revelatory, not least because Father Baddeley is killed when his priestly obligation to provide it is exploited by the murderer. In the end, it is Dalglish who hears the confession instead,

reminding the reader that detectives and priests have overlapping concerns. The murderer triumphantly recounts their final confrontation to Dalglish as follows:

When he accused me of ... using Toynton for some purpose of my own, I said that I would tell him the truth, that I wanted to make my confession. He must have known in his heart that this was death, that I was only amusing myself. But he couldn't take the risk. If he refused to take me seriously, his whole life would have been a lie. (267)

Fr Baddeley is murdered because of his terrifying spiritual insight, and we are invited to believe that he goes to his death living out his faith and vocation. Within a literary genre so concerned with bad and violent deaths, this discreet martyrdom is unusual. But the idea that, despite everything, a murder victim can achieve a good death is explored elsewhere in *The Black Tower* through the fate of Grace Willison, a resident of the nursing home. A high Anglican spinster from the same stock as Sayers's Miss Climpson, Grace is killed because she is responsible for sending out the community's newsletter – the quintessential task of an 'excellent woman' – and has perfect recall of the names and addresses on the mailing list; the fact that some of these contacts are criminal means that she would be able to compromise the murderer. Father Baddeley is Grace's spiritual director and close friend – a relationship which James sympathetically distinguishes from that recurrent theme in mid-twentieth-century English fiction, a spinster's crush on a clergyman – and his death leaves her emotionally desolate.²⁸ As she reflects: 'She had hoped to be able to feel that [he] was close to her; but it hadn't happened, it just wasn't true. They are all gone into the world of light. Well, gone away; not interested any more in the living.' (187)

James is using free indirect discourse here; Grace's thoughts are conveyed to us without inverted commas, and so too is a quotation she recalls from the work of the seventeenth-century Anglican religious poet Henry Vaughan, 'They are all gone into the world of light'.²⁹ While it is perfectly possible to read the passage without picking up on this quotation, it is one of the best-known lines from a well-known poem, and given James's conscious literariness throughout her career, she would have expected at least some of her readers to notice it. In turn, this recognition could operate at several levels: recalling the line, identifying its author, and recognising the relevance of the entire poem to Grace's present and future situation.³⁰ Vaughan's speaker starts by celebrating the memory of dead friends, apparently the only positive feature of his life, and ends by longing for the unity with God that death will bring.

Half a page after this quotation, Grace herself is killed, seemingly by a personification of death: '[a] cloaked figure, hood well down obscuring the face, moving swiftly towards her on silent feet like an apparition' (188). Explicable on a literal level by the fact that members of the community wear monks' habits, this passage unashamedly channels the Gothic element in the novel, and with it a twinge of superstitious fear. Yet the atavistic horror of this is mitigated in several ways. As James's narrator reports, '[Grace] did not die ungently, feeling at the last through the thin veil of plastic only the strong, warm, oddly comforting lineaments of a human hand' (188).³¹ The notion of a 'veil' is simultaneously sinister and reassuring; it describes the murderer's method of suffocating victims, but also evokes a familiar metaphor for the thin division between life and death, often used to comfort the bereaved.³² At a more overt level too, the passage reminds us that death may be

welcome, even though the act of murder is shocking. Grace is terminally ill, with nothing to live for; as a devout Christian, she has everything to die for; and she has recently been shriven, one of Father Baddeley's last acts before being murdered. Even a bringer of death can be given the kind of welcome expressed in a later verse of Vaughan's poem: 'Dear, beauteous Death! the jewel of the just, / Shining nowhere, but in the dark; / What mysteries do lie beyond thy dust / Could man outlook that mark!'³³ James's ideal reader, able to recall the metaphysical poets in detail, would appreciate the appositeness of this sentiment to a detective novel, a genre centrally engaged with the mysteries lying beyond death.

God's absence

Another quotation within Grace's final musings is even more ambivalently deployed. 'Lighten our darkness; her mother had always liked that collect; and by Thy great mercy defend us from all the perils and dangers of this night. Only there was no peril here, only sleeplessness and pain' (187). The Book of Common Prayer's Collect against all Perils, drawn on here, has already been discussed in relation to *A Taste for Death*.³⁴ There it heralds enlightenment; in *The Black Tower* the allusion is inevitably more ironic, given that Grace is about to be murdered. As discussed above, many features of her death are presented as positive, but the reader cannot help noticing that, on a literal level, the collect's plea for divine defence is not answered. Consequently, this exemplary death stimulates notions of God's own death or absence, which have a double purpose in discourse about religion. On the one hand, they are impeccably orthodox: Jesus dies on the Cross lamenting in the words of Psalm 22 that God has forsaken him, while apophatic theology overturns conventional concepts of God, attempting to describe him through what he is not.³⁵ But such ideas can also be used as shorthand for an agnostic or atheist position, which is how they

usually function in writing not undertaken by theologians. Though neither agnostic nor atheist, James can certainly be called apophatic at times. In a field-defining work on female detective novelists, Susan Rowland argues that 'Dalgleish acts as the sign of the absence of God. He is the representative of cultural authority plagued by his awareness of the inability of the police to substitute for God in healing pain and providing justice.'³⁶ This inability is, of course, not complete – Dalgleish and his team do bring about resolutions – but James never shrinks from showing how imperfect and compromised these are. The denouement of *A Taste for Death*, discussed above, is one illustration of how, in James's fictional world, human attempts to bring about justice can result in appalling collateral damage.³⁷

In the same novel, another of James's high-church spinsters, Emily Wharton, apprehends a divine dispensation to which violence is intrinsic. After the traumatic discovery of a corpse in church, her night-time Bible-reading leaves her 'burrowing and scurrying like a tormented animal':

The passage from St Luke's Gospel had been the parable of the good shepherd.³⁸ It was one of her favourites, but tonight she had read it with a sharpened, perversely questioning mind. What, after all, was a shepherd's job? Only to care for the sheep, to make sure they didn't escape so that they could be branded, sheared and then slaughtered ... (164)

Prima facie, Miss Wharton is a character from whom one might expect platitudinous piety, making the violence of the passage all the more striking. For her Christ, the existence of cruelty and slaughter is a given; he looks after his sheep with the ultimate

aim of preserving them for suffering and death. While this is completely in keeping with the notion of sacrifice set out in both the Old and the New Testaments, which Christ himself exemplifies, it is too biblical to be comfortable.

More immanent, and almost as painful, is the low-key rejection Miss Wharton experiences at St Matthew's. At the end of the novel, her young companion Darren, whom she has done much to support, drifts away from churchgoing. Miss Wharton says to him, 'I miss you at St Matthew's', he replies, 'Yeah. Well, I reckon I won't have time for that now', and the narrator comments: 'she had glimpsed in his face a curiously adult embarrassment and had suddenly seen herself as he saw her, ... a pathetic, rather silly old woman' (510-11). Darren's is an understandable childish reaction, and readers empathise with his discomfort – yet James also intends them to be angered by those, whether children or adults, who see only the dowdiness in the Miss Whartons of this world, and are blind to their virtue. Humble to the point of slavishness, Miss Wharton projects this rejection onto the congregation as a whole: noticing how the church's numbers have swelled thanks to its notoriety, she wonders 'how long there would be a place in it for her' (511). James often uses her characters' spatial relationship to buildings to reflect their psychological state, and at the end of *A Taste for Death*, Miss Wharton locks herself out of church but gazes in at the sanctuary lamp through a grille in an entrance passageway. The final paragraph gives us her thoughts: at first bleak, then drawing strength from the Gospels.

[God] wasn't any longer in the church. Like Darren, he had gone away. Then she remembered what Father Collins had once said in a sermon when she first came to St Matthew's: 'If you find that you no longer believe, act as if you still

do. If you feel that you can't pray, go on saying the words.' She knelt down on the hard floor, supporting herself with her hands grasping the iron grille, and said the words with which she always began her private prayers: 'Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak but the word and my soul shall be healed.' (512-3)³⁹

Liturgy and the presence of evil

As the archaic language signals, Miss Wharton – unsurprisingly for someone of her generation and churchmanship – is drawing on the King James Bible for her devotions. This choice, as well as fleshing out her character, echoes James's own advocacy of traditional Anglican worship. During James's lifetime, as part of a move towards liturgical modernisation, the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer had ceased to be standard provision in Church of England services, even in revised form: a move that was deplored by many, both inside and outside Anglicanism.⁴⁰ The non-believers who voiced their disapproval saw the sidelining of Anglicanism's literary heritage as an act of cultural philistinism, and James would have agreed.⁴¹ Within her fiction, she seldom misses an opportunity to advocate what she saw as liturgical soundness. *The Skull Beneath the Skin* (1982), for instance, features a service of Morning Prayer commissioned by an obsessive Victorianist, Ambrose Gorrington, but after James's own heart; we are told that it uses 'the 1662 Book of Common Prayer without deletions or substitutions', and that the congregation 'proclaimed themselves miserable offenders who had followed too much the devices and desires of their own hearts and promised amendment of life in a slightly ragged but resolute chorus'.⁴² Afterwards the detective Cordelia Gray, whose charge Clarissa Lisle has just been murdered, reflects that

for the first time since [Clarissa's] murder, her restless, menacing spirit was subdued. For a few precious moments the weight of guilt and misery lifted from her own heart. It was possible to believe, innocently talking in the sun, that life was as well ordered, as certain, as austere decent and reasonable as the great Anglican compromise in which they had taken part. (254)

The service may be a historical re-enactment, but it is also a cathartic event, simultaneously soothing and disturbing. On the one hand, it provides psychological reassurance for the members of a house-party after a shocking murder; on the other, the fact that the killer may be one of their number gives the congregation's self-accusation an urgent pertinence. The liturgical phrases quoted by James are from the Book of Common Prayer's General Confession, which at the time the novel was published had been generally superseded by the version in the Alternative Service Book; within the latter, the congregation declare that they have sinned against God and their fellow men 'in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault'.⁴³ Though a comprehensive admission of imperfection, this contrasts markedly with the Book of Common Prayer's requirement for a body of worshippers to call themselves 'miserable offenders' who have 'followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts'. At the time when the earlier prayer was written, as James would have been well aware, the choice of the word 'miserable' would have indicated the speakers' need for mercy, recollecting such Latin terms as *miser cordia*.⁴⁴ Yet this does not exhaust its overtones, and semantic shifts between the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries have served to foreground suggestions of self-hatred and human inadequacy.⁴⁵ As an exemplary collective

affirmation, 'miserable offenders' would have been much more acceptable in the seventeenth century than in the twentieth. But it speaks far more strikingly than its modern equivalent to the evils presented in James's novel, giving us one good reason why James's dislike of liturgical change went well beyond belles-lettrism, pedantry and nostalgia. She was sensitive to its religious implications, and deplored the passing of a time when liturgy engaged with the dark.

This, in turn, demonstrates how James's thought was permeated by apprehensions of evil. When she was asked in 2012, 'Do you believe in good and evil in a Manichean way or do you see human nature as much more murky and ambiguous?' she replied 'I believe in good and evil in a Manichean way. Evil is a positive force ... to me, this seems close to human experience.'⁴⁶ An off-the-cuff interview comment should not be taken as a credo, but James was scholarly enough to know what was implied by her self-identification as a Manichean: a dualistic view of the world, governed by the perception of conflict between light and darkness. Sometimes described as a Christian heresy, at other times as a religion in its own right incorporating elements of Christianity, Manicheanism is characterised by the notion that evil has a material existence; mainstream Christianity, following the formulation of St Augustine – a Manichean in early life – defines evil differently as the privation of good.⁴⁷ In mainstream discourse the idea of Manicheanism is often used in a looser sense, typifying a tendency to see good and evil as binary opposites.⁴⁸ This dualistic way of viewing the world is very well suited to murder mysteries, and the notion of Manicheanism is a helpful way of approaching James's novels. Detective fiction was too highly evolved by the late twentieth century, and James was too sophisticated a writer within the genre, for her novels to deploy caricatured murderers and flawless

sleuths. Yet evil drives the story in detective fiction, which – it could be argued – gives the genre an intrinsic bias towards the Manichean heresy. James even features two self-confessed adherents to it in a late work, *The Lighthouse* (2005): an alcoholic priest, Adrian Boyde, and his carer, Jo Staveley. Jo and Dalgleish talk about Boyde's struggles with his vocation as follows:

'... he came to believe that God couldn't be both good and all-powerful; life's a struggle between the two forces – good and evil, God and the devil. That's some kind of heresy – a long word beginning with M.'

Dalgleish said, 'Manichaeism.'

'That sounds like it. It seems sensible to me. At least it explains the suffering of the innocent, which otherwise takes some sophistry to make sense of. If I had a religion, that's what I'd choose. I suppose I became a manichaeism – if that's the word – without knowing it the first time I watched a child dying of cancer. But apparently you're not supposed to believe it if you're a Christian and I suppose particularly not if you're a priest.' (278-9)

James's fascination with evil goes well beyond the narrative demands of a detective story; as this exchange illustrates, the problem of undeserved suffering is ubiquitous in her work. So is a near-apocalyptic vein of social disenchantment, especially in her later novels, where political arrogance is identified as evil. Often enough, James' anger cuts across policies typical of the Conservative party she knew. For instance, in *The Murder Room* (2003), the knock-on effect of cuts in welfare drives a desperate wife caring for a husband with Alzheimer's to kill him and take her own life. Because heresies throw up points of tension within Christianity, they have a history of

reinventing themselves when new difficulties arise; the fierce topical commentary in this novel indicates how the Manichaean tendency in James's writing could be stimulated by contemporary problems.

But, paradoxically, it could also suggest the desirability of taking flight from the ordinary world. Manicheanism is a form of gnostic belief, and like all gnosticism, it is characterised by the idea that spiritual enlightenment can only be achieved through knowledge.⁴⁹ During James's lifetime, modes of thought with a gnostic ancestry had some currency among commentators – notably the critic Harold Bloom – who shared her keen respect for England's literary heritage and her distrust of populism.⁵⁰ In James's fiction, her leanings towards this position are played out against the backdrop of Anglican modernisation, nowhere more insistently than in a late novel, *Death in Holy Orders*. Its plot revolves around St Anselm's, a conservative and intellectually elitist theological college, being threatened with closure by Archdeacon Crampton, an insensitive moderniser. Crampton's *grand guignol* death has already featured in this essay; earlier in the novel, he passes the remark that the college has become 'irrelevant to the new age', and the college principal, Father Sebastian, replies:

What is it that you want? A church without mystery, stripped of that learning, tolerance and dignity that were the virtues of Anglicanism? A Church without humility in the face of the ineffable mystery and love of Almighty God? A service with banal hymns, a debased liturgy and the Eucharist conducted as if it were a parish bean-feast? A church for Cool Britannia? (180)⁵¹

James has no time for Crampton, while Father Sebastian's views echo her own well-publicised ecclesiological conservatism. Yet the novel does not endorse the members of St Anselm's uncritically. In one scene, for instance, the learned Father Peregrine comments dismissively of a scholar researching the Oxford Movement: 'I sought his views on the effect of the Gorham case in modifying the Tractarian belief of J. B. Mozley and it was apparent he had no idea what I was talking about' (49). Most of James's readers would have been similarly ignorant; the reference is to a Victorian controversy over whether infant baptism was only efficacious if the baptised individual committed to Christianity in later life, notorious in its day, but now familiar only to specialists. Moreover, one can have an interest in the Oxford Movement without having heard of J.B. Mozley, not a household name even as 19th-century churchmen go.⁵² We are meant to think that Father Peregrine is showing off his own mastery of the field – but there is more to the speech than that. On the one hand, James is signalling to the fogey coterie within her own audience who are familiar with the detailed contours of the Oxford Movement; on the other, she is teasing them for being Father Peregrines themselves, and warning that they should not despise those less well up in nerdy church-historical minutiae.

If we think James is writing from inside a bubble, the joke is on us. Yet self-parody is a risky business, and James's use of it renders the novel vulnerable to misreading. The characters' lengthy dialogues on the state of Anglicanism read like the dramatization of James's personal concerns, and displace the plot at times, rather as if the Church of England were the real murder victim. Yet this, in turn, encapsulates the paradox of James's career: that, in feeding an appetite for Gothic narratives of Anglican decline, she gave new life to its literary heritage. Using a mass-

market genre, the detective story, she may well have done a better job than her clerical contemporaries in disseminating knowledge of the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer: not just because she was unusually sensitive to their stylistic merits, but because, in her view, they spoke to a fallen world, succeeding where modern translation and liturgy failed.

Conclusion

At the Reformation, Anglican vernacular texts were intended to popularise the faith; the passage of time has done much to render them the exclusive preserve of the educated. Nevertheless, one of James's characters, the housekeeper Tally Clutton in *The Murder Room* (2003), illustrates her creator's belief that they remained accessible to the well-affected. Tally is uneducated but intelligent and sympathetic, returning to her Anglican roots in old age, and even visiting the famous Anglo-Catholic church All Saints' Margaret Street in a pilgrimage inspired by Simon Jenkins's popular gazetteer, *England's Thousand Best Churches*.⁵³ When she searches for solace after finding a burned corpse, James gives us, yet again, the Collect Against All Perils:

It was a prayer [Tally] had not heard for sixty years, but now the words came as freshly to her mind as if she were hearing them for the first time. *Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord; and by thy great mercy defend us from all perils and dangers of this night; for the love of thine only Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ.* She held the image of that charred head in her mind and spoke the prayer aloud and was comforted. (173)

This contrasts with Dalglish's response to the same scene, more spiritually inhibited than within the earlier novels quoted above. Looking at the body, he reflects that Father Sebastian of *Death in Holy Orders* would have made the sign of the cross, while his own clerical father would have 'bent his head in prayer':

... the words would be there, hallowed by centuries of use. Both, he thought, were fortunate in being able to call on instinctive responses which could bestow on those awful charred remains the recognition that here had been a human being. (138)

Both Dalglish and Tally feel that prayer is appropriate, but only the latter is able to pray; we infer that James thinks her wiser than Dalglish. Yet Dalglish's reaction reminds us that perils and dangers continue despite prayers for deliverance, sometimes climaxing in violent death. These two responses to a victim of murder span the full complexity of James's approach to pain and evil, acknowledging both the believers and unbelievers within her readership. Typically for James, they also hark back to the past, and show the desire for God stimulated by abjection and horror.

In her lifetime, James was thought the consummate Anglican novelist, yet she herself was aware of being imaginatively goaded in a direction incompatible with orthodox Christianity. For one of England's most prominent lay Anglicans to call herself a Manichaeist illustrates the gulf between eras in the period covered by this book: in the Victorian age such an admission would have sparked public controversy, in our own time it comes across as recondite, quaint and harmless. Yet, as articulated by James, it reminds us that detective novels are shaped by the formal acknowledgement of sinfulness, embodying the Manichaeist idea that evil is a positive force. Dealing, as any detective novelist must, with extreme human

wickedness, James finds no adequate secular response to it; instead, she uses the Anglican literary heritage to recall a time when evil was, at least, explicitly confronted in public liturgy. Her advocacy of traditional Anglicanism taps into the vein of cultural and political conservatism within her writing; but it transcends simple nostalgia, through a sense that language and practice hallowed by generations of believers can act as both a consolation for human failure, and a partial bulwark against the world's cruelty.

Further reading

In addition to the novels of James's discussed in this chapter, *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* (1st ed. London: Faber & Faber, 1977) and the dystopian fantasy *The Children of Men* (1st ed. London: Faber & Faber, 1992) are particularly interesting in the context of her Anglicanism. Girton College, Cambridge holds collection of James's personal papers (GCPP James).

See also:

James, P.D. 'As It Was in the Beginning', ch. 2 in Caroline Chartres (ed.), *Why I Am Still An Anglican: Essays and Conversations*. London: Continuum, 2006.

---- *Talking About Detective Fiction*. Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2009.

Rowland, Susan. *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.

Young, Laurel A., and Elizabeth Foxwell. *P.D. James: A Companion to the Mystery Fiction*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017.

¹ My thanks to Bev Botting, Alison Felstead, Clare Flook, Beatrice Groves, Carol Heaton, Arnold Hunt, Simon Jones, Julia Jordan, Oliver Mahoney, Judith Maltby and Eileen Roberts for help in completing this chapter. Versions of this paper were given to the Barbara Pym Society and the 'Excellent Women' lecture series held in Westminster Abbey, both in 2017,

and I would also like to thank the audience members on those occasions for their interest and suggestions. Quotations from James's work are reproduced by kind permission of the copyright estate of the late P.D. James.

² On James's Anglicanism, see her essay 'As It Was in the Beginning', in Caroline Chartres (ed.), *Why I Am Still An Anglican: Essays and Conversations* (London: Continuum, 2006), ch.2; on her public service, see her entry in the online *ODNB*. Famously, she interrogated the Director-General of the BBC over the misuse of public money: see John Plunkett, 'BBC Director General Mark Thompson Thrown by P.D. James's Detective Work', *Guardian*, 31 December 2009.

³ On James as a theological thinker, see Jo Ann Sharkey, 'Theology in Suspense: How the Detective Fiction of P.D. James Provokes Theological Thought' (M. Phil. thesis, University of St Andrews, 2011).

⁴ CROSS-REF SAYERS/MARTIN XXXX.

⁵ See Judith Maltby's essay in this volume, XXXX.

⁶ *A Taste for Death* (London: Penguin, 1986), 92.

⁷ On James's admiration for Pym, see the account of her after-dinner speech to the Barbara Pym Society in its newsletter: *Green Leaves* 9:2 (November 2003), 2. WILLIAMS/ PYM X REF

⁸ James pays tribute to Dorothy L. Sayers and Agatha Christie in *Talking About Detective Fiction* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2009), ch.5. On Christie's religious beliefs and practices, see Janet Morgan, *Agatha Christie: A Biography* (1985: this ed. London: HarperCollins, 2017), especially chs 13-14.

⁹ *Nemesis* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), 91. Cf. Suzanne Bray, 'A New Generation of Anglican Crime Writers', ch.5 in Linda Martz and Anita Higgie (eds), *Questions of Identity in Detective Fiction* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars' Publishing, 2007).

¹⁰ See *How They Run* (London: Samuel French, 1947), Act III.

¹¹ Maxim Jakubowski, the owner of a bookshop specialising in crime fiction, has described the readership as 'the sort who don't touch anything with a stamp of realism -- they like the murder to be a bit like in Agatha Christie, where it doesn't really feel real': quoted in Alison Flood, 'Murder Most Cosy', *The Guardian*, 3 August 2015.

¹² On 15 April 2018, the Pan Macmillan website page recommending cosy crime fiction was illustrated by the picture of an English village, dominated by a church spire:

<https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/crime-thriller/cosy-crime-books-lavender-ladies-agatha-christie>.

¹³ Detective novelists deploying an Anglican backdrop sometimes invoke Barbara Pym. Kate Charles, for instance, has described Pym as 'the most profound literary influence on my work': <http://www.katecharles.com/about-the-author>. See also Kathy Ackley, 'What is a "Pymish" Mystery Novel?', paper at the Barbara Pym Society of North America, Harvard University, 24-5 November 2007, available online at www.barbara-pym.org.

¹⁴ Cf. Ulrike Tancke, *Deceptive Fiction: Trauma and Violence in Contemporary Writing* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars' Publishing, 2015).

¹⁵ Avril Horner, "'Refinements of Evil': Iris Murdoch and the Gothic", in Anne Rowe and Avril Horner (eds), *Iris Murdoch and Morality* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 70-84. *The Black Tower* recalls Iris Murdoch's earlier novel *The Bell* (1958), also set in an alternative religious community: CROSS-REF HAWKINS/MURDOCH XXXX.

¹⁶ CROSS-REF INTRO

¹⁷ The political adviser Alastair Campbell's remark, 'We don't do God', pre-empting comment from a Christian prime minister, Tony Blair, has come to emblemise this unease. See Colin Brown, 'Campbell Interrupted Blair As He Spoke of his Faith', *The Telegraph*, 4 May 2003.

¹⁸ Berowne's first name may allude to the conversion of St Paul (Acts 9).

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, intro. Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003), 124.

²⁰ *Death of an Expert Witness* (London: Faber and Faber [1977] 2010), 143.

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- ²¹ Given that James frequently spoke against the Prayer Book's liturgical sidelining and served as vice-president of the Prayer Book Society, this is a loaded comment. However, she also served on the Church of England's Liturgical Commission between 1991-2000, while the Church of England's current official liturgical resource, *Common Worship*, was being compiled. See Anthony Kilmister, 'Remembering P.D. James', *Prayer Book Society Journal*, Lent 2015, 18.
- ²² *BCP*, Psalm 39, 14-15.
- ²³ She described herself as reciting the 'Collect against all perils' every night (Kilminster).
- ²⁴ *The Best Detective Stories of the Year, 1928*, ed. Father Ronald Knox and H. Harrington (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1929), xi.
- ²⁵ See Claire Jarvis, *Exquisite Masochism: Marriage, Sex and the Novel Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).
- ²⁶ However, when *The Black Tower* was adapted into a mini-series (dir. Ronald Wilson, Anglia Television, 1985), Father Baddeley appeared as a character.
- ²⁷ Quoted from the edition in *The Lord Peter Omnibus* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1964).
- ²⁸ A caricatured relationship of this kind features, for instance, in Ngaio Marsh's *Overture to Death* (1st ed. 1939).
- ²⁹ 'They are all gone into the world of light', *Henry Vaughan: The Complete Poems*, ed. Alan Rudrum (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, this ed. 1983), 246-7.
- ³⁰ Dalgleish's eventual wife, Emma Lavenham (first featured in *Death in Holy Orders*), is a literary scholar specialising in the metaphysical poets.
- ³¹ A very similar scene figures in Ch. 4 of *Death in Holy Orders*.
- ³² A famous elegiac use of the metaphor comes in Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*: 'O life as futile, then, as frail! | O for thy voice to soothe and bless! | What hope of answer, or redress? | Behind the veil, behind the veil.' Quoted from *In Memoriam*, ed. Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), LVI, 25-28.
- ³³ 'Outlook': outstare, look beyond (*OED*).
- ³⁴ See above, p.XXXX.
- ³⁵ Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34, alluding to Psalm 22:1. See *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Theology, Philosophy, Literature and the Arts*, ed. William Franke (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2007).
- ³⁶ Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 35.
- ³⁷ CROSS-REF to Sayers chapter
- ³⁸ James appears to be conflating Jesus's self-characterisation as the Good Shepherd (John 10: 1-16) with the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15: 1-6, Matthew 18:12-14); the intention may be to suggest both Miss Wharton's familiarity with Scripture and her mental agitation.
- ³⁹ This adapts the centurion's words in Matthew 8:8: 'Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed'. Cf. the prayer before receiving communion in *The Anglican Missal* (this ed. London: Society of SS. Peter and Paul, 1921), C 41, and the congregational response to the invitation to Holy Communion in Order 1 of *Common Worship* (available online at www.churchofengland.org) which post-dates *A Taste for Death*. 'But speak but the word' seems intended as Miss Wharton's personal adaptation, emphasizing her diffidence.
- ⁴⁰ On liturgical modernization, see Jeremy Morris, 'Anglicanism in Britain and Ireland', ch. 16 in the *Oxford History of Anglicanism*, vol. IV, ed. Jeremy Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 425-6.
- ⁴¹ E.g. Hannah Furness, 'Modern Bible Is Too Dull, Says Philip Pullman', *Telegraph* (14 January 2015).
- ⁴² *The Skull Beneath the Skin* (London: Sphere Books, [1982] 1983), 254. James used the phrase 'devices and desires' as a title for a novel in 1989.
- ⁴³ *The Alternative Service Book 1980* (London/ Cambridge/ Colchester: Clowes/ SPCK/ Cambridge University Press, 1980), Morning Prayer, 48. For the 1662 General Confession, see *BCP*, 240-1.

⁴⁴ James is likely to have known C.S. Lewis's *Miserable Offenders: An Interpretation of Prayer Book Language* (Boston: Editorial Board Advent Paper, 1950): Beatrice Groves, personal communication. My thanks to Dr Groves for discussions relating to this point.

⁴⁵ *OED*, 'miserable'.

⁴⁶ Interview in *Observer*, 15 July 2012. James's interlocutors were the detective novelists Nicci Gerrard and Sean French, a husband-and-wife team who collaborate under the *nom de plume* 'Nicci French'.

⁴⁷ The doctrine is best-known for its importance in the life-story of St Augustine, who converted from Manichaeism to Christianity: see *Confessions*, trans. & ed. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1st edition 1992).

⁴⁸ *OED*, 'Manichaeism', *n* and *adj*.

⁴⁹ The Catholic Encyclopaedia describes it as a 'literary and refined' mode of thought (www.newadvent.org, under 'Manichaeism').

⁵⁰ On Bloom's affinity with gnosticism, see Douglas Robinson, *Exorcising Translation: Towards an Intercivilisational Turn* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), section 2:3:4.

⁵¹ On contemporary uses of the phrase 'Cool Britannia', see John Ayto, *Movers and Shakers: A Chronology of Words that Shaped our Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 233.

⁵² See 'Mozley, James Bowling', online *ODNB*. On the Gorham Judgement, see Michael Wheeler, *The Old Enemies: Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), ch.7.

⁵³ *England's Thousand Best Churches* (London: Penguin, 1999).