

AN ATHEIST APPROACHES HIS END

In his novel, *The Remorseful Day*, English Crime writer Colin Dexter, creator of the celebrated *Inspector Morse*, does something unusual in the genre, he kills off his hero. Dexter paints Morse as an atheist and he has him prepare for his end in a fashion which reflects the emptiness of that ideology, an issue also reflected (perhaps unconsciously by the author) in the title of the work. Contrary to the modern habit which tends to use the two interchangeably, remorse is not contrition. The one is as opposed to the other as is pride to humility. The concept expressed by the word 'remorse' derives from the Latin verb meaning *to vex*, or *to disturb oneself*. The contrite man disposes himself for heaven; the remorseful for hell.

Dexter's crime writings represent for the later, what those of Dorothy L Sayers had done for the earlier, twentieth century—Morse's atheism countering Lord Peter Wimsey's High Church Anglicanism. The creator of each detective was a Classics scholar, each using epigraphs in chapter headings to demonstrate the saw of Qoholeth that there is nothing new under the sun.¹ But of the two, this habit operated more logically in Sayers.

Which may be seen from Dexter's citing as a comment on the actions of one of his minor characters², Aristotle's assessment (said to be found in the *Nichomachean Ethics*) that suicide is a species of cowardice—

"Whilst it is true that the suicide braves death, he does it not for some noble object but to escape some ill."

It hardly lies in the mouth of one who sympathises with atheism to offer criticism of the suicide or, for that matter, to quote Aristotle.³

It may be that of the two Dexter is the better Crime writer, but the superiority comes at a price. His hero is afflicted with various of the evils attendant upon materialism and atheism. While sharing the moral defects of his contemporaries,—characters like Michael Connelly's *Harry Bosch* and Ian Rankin's *John Rebus*—(a penchant for fornication and alcoholic indulgence) he is more degraded yet, a voyeur and indulger in pornography. Though Morse may be invested with a talent for crime detection, it is a bit rich that his author should invite his readers to forgive him these perversions.

In anticipation of his death, Morse drafts a will after the fashion of Michael Henshard, the miserable hero of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* whose author Chesterton incisively, if somewhat unkindly, mocked as "a sort of village atheist brooding and

¹ *Ecclesiastes* 1:9

² Something he does more than once.

³ For suicide is the logical end of the atheist. If he has not been created by a being who exceeds him infinitely; if there is no *One* to whom he must give an account of the use he has made of the talents given him; if his essence and his existence are nothing but the inevitable results of blind evolutionary forces - there is nowhere he can look for a reason for his existence. Dumb matter cannot provide it. When that existence becomes unbearable, then, why should he not (as he thinks) terminate it to escape that ill?

blaspheming over the village idiot"⁴. Thomas Hardy has Henshard inscribe a self-pitying litany which rejects God and all human friendship—

“...& that I not be buried on consecrated ground.
& that no sexton be asked to toll the bell.
& that nobody is wished to see my dead body.
& that no murners walk behind me at my funeral.
& that no flours be planted on my grave.
& that no man remember me...”

Which is like a yearning for the darkest of the depths of hell.

No man, regardless of his beliefs, can do away with reality or do away with the moral law. They are inscribed in his being by the *One* who made him. The folly of the subjectivist—“*reality is what I say it is*”—comes to flower at the moment of his death. It is *matter* that impedes knowledge and when that part of him which is material is removed, the atheist comes face to face with that which he has striven throughout his life to avoid—reality. He knows the truth, that he is, and will ever be, a fool—

& knows that he has allowed himself to be deluded;
& knows the extent of his folly;
& knows that he has wasted his talents;
& knows himself for the vain and selfish creature that he is;
& knows that he has never truly loved anyone but himself.

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The wise man is he who can stand outside the preconceptions of his age, whatever they be, and judge it *sub specie aeternitatis*. The student of the Classics has before him the best of materials for the task, for the wealth of the great writers takes arms against fatalism and folly. But wisdom requires more than matter; it requires form, the proper formality of judgement in the light of the highest causes. He who thinks that causation resolves into nothing but matter has no prospect of attaining wisdom.

Materialism, with its accompanying atheism, kills the human spirit. It murders true poetry which has ever acknowledged, at least implicitly, the aspiration of the human heart for the eternal *because the human heart is itself eternal!* It is the reason our culture, our music, our art, and even our detective fiction, are almost uniformly execrable.

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⁴ G K Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature*, London, 1912, ch. II