Deep mysteries: The world of P. D. James

by Ralph C. Wood in the September 27, 2000 issue

Time to Be in Earnest, by P. D. James

Though often compared with Agatha Christie, P. D. James is a different kind of detective writer. She is not chiefly concerned with escapist delight. While fulfilling the page-turning requirements of the mystery novel, she also creates characters who have moral complexity and depth. She reveals their tangled motives through careful attention to their bodily gestures and their ambient scene no less than their words and their deeds. The thick social texture of James's novels makes them resemble the fiction of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Anthony Trollope.

Just as these 19th-century English masters often sought to address the clamant issues of their time, so does James agitate the vexing questions of ours: abortion and euthanasia, drug addiction and environmental disaster, political terrorism and juvenile crime, religious belief and unbelief. Nowhere has the moral and theological import of fiction been stated more succinctly than by two of the other great writers, Thomas Hardy and Henry James. "We trust to novels," declared James, "to maintain us in the practice of great indignations and great generosities." "The secret of fiction," Hardy is reported to have said, "lies in the adjustment of things uneven to things eternal and universal."

Yet only with considerable dubiety does P. D. James cite these noble notions of fiction in her recently published "fragment of autobiography." She confesses that such ideals are now impossible if not laughable. Writers can no longer stir the passions of their audiences for the sake of moral reform and religious redemption. The triumph of television—with its dreadful coarsening of the imagination—is but a single symptom of the larger disease. James believes that our culture's real sickness unto death results from the collapse of the Christian liberalism that once undergirded Western art and society alike.

We get a glimpse of James's brand of liberalism when she describes her schooling. Hers was not the age, she notes wryly, of "child-centred education." Her teachers sought to build strong character—"personal morality, social responsibility and good behaviour." Knowing that teenagers in the mass are prone to barbarism, her instructors imbued her with a profound sense both of limitation and aspiration. James describes these teachers as unabashedly "liberal, Christian, scholarly."

She writes, "We were taught, as much by example as precept, to respect our minds and to use them; to examine the evidence before rushing in with our opinions; to distinguish between fact and theory; to see history through the eyes of the poor and vanquished, not merely those of the powerful and the conquerors; not to believe that something is true simply because it would be pleasant or convenient if it were, and, when exposed to propaganda, to ask ourselves, 'In whose interest is it that I should believe this?'"

According to the liberalism James espouses, governments should create a culture that enables its citizens to sustain a morally valuable life. Churches and schools make their essential contribution to this joint communal enterprise not only by promoting the virtues but also by teaching that morally harmful choices are indeed injurious, both to oneself and others.

James's version of Christian liberalism stresses the individual autonomy—and thus the pluralism—that grants people the liberty to decide among the many morally valuable forms of life. Christian liberals of James's kind want, therefore, to avoid any sort of moral paternalism that would use coercion to produce character. In her dystopian novel *The Children of Men* (1994), James offers a frightening account of a future Britain whose populace has surrendered its individual freedoms to a paternalistic government, welcoming a rigid despotism in exchange for easy security.

But James also worries that contemporary liberalism has made autonomy its only good. It denies that we are obligated to any ends—whether given by religion or nature, by families or peoples or traditions—that we have not chosen utterly for ourselves. The result, she contends, is a terribly fragmented and secularized social world. This religious and political calamity has been compounded, she adds, by the widespread belief that the natural order itself is the product of chance and perhaps of chaos. How can the novelist have moral and religious responsibilities, James asks, in such a shattered world—a world having no "immutable value system, [no]

accepted view of the universe and man's place in it, [no] set of ethical rules of conduct to which all right-minded people conform"?

James's answer lies in the nearest equivalents of the old-fashioned Christian liberalism handed down to her. Religiously she is a high-church Anglican and politically she is a Thatcherite Conservative. More than a little nostalgia is at work here. James looks back, rather wistfully, to the time when throne and altar were still united in a national church that symbolized England's "moral and religious aspirations," its "generally accepted values . . . [its] common tradition, history and culture." She recalls, for example, the annual Armistice Day observances that brought the nation to a reverent standstill, as the whole country shared its grief over the slaughter of an entire generation of young men.

James acknowledges that there was something delusory about this ostensibly unified culture. Its deceit was evident, she admits, in the detective fiction it produced. The world of Agatha Christie and even Dorothy L. Sayers is altogether too cozy. In their novels virtue is the rule, crime the exception, murderers are monsters, and peace and order are always restored in the end. James creates a fictional realm, by contrast, that is rife with the horror and blood and grief largely absent from her predecessors. Yet the terror and panic endemic to James's novels are never gratuitous. Her Augustinian estimate of human nature enables her to discern that our worst temptations arise not from raw hatred but from disordered love. She makes us sympathize even with her murderers. Like us, they seek—albeit horribly—to protect or to avenge someone they love.

The ability to view the world with such compassionate detachment, she insists, is the key to good art. It unites a disinterested and ironic gaze with a sympathizing regard for the deepest pain and joy. While these are indeed the ingredients for fine crime fiction, they are also the requirements of a good life. They save James from a dismissive scorn for all things contemporary, even if she must sometimes scold the noisy nonsense of our age. She is adamant, for example, in her insistence that crime is not chiefly the result of malign environmental influences. Human nature is too drastically disordered, James believes, to be righted merely by the betterment of our social circumstances.

James is also astonished at the now regnant notion that the world owes us bliss. For her, by contrast, a quiet and often stoical endurance is the chief requisite for both faith and life. She salutes our forebears who stoically endured their unblissful

marriages, assured that they too had their rewards:

> Those [unhappy couples] who were able to survive the more turbulent years of youth and middle age often found in each other a reassuring and comforting companionship in old age. They had a far smaller expectation of happiness, admittedly, and a far lesser tendency to regard happiness as a right. All our brightly minted social reforms, the sexual liberation since the war, the guilt-free divorce, the ending of the stigma of illegitimacy, have had their shadow side. Today we have a generation of children more disturbed, more unhappy, more criminal, indeed more suicidal than in any previous era. The sexual liberation of adults has been bought at a high price and it is not the adults who have paid it.

James's candor enables her to acknowledge that the apparently tranquil world of her past carried its own hidden turmoil. Her mother was repeatedly hospitalized for recurrent depression, and her physician husband returned from World War II in a state of permanent shell shock. He died an early death in 1964. It was as if the outward fear and trembling inherent in the century of mass death had taken inward hold within James's own family. An immense suffering can be discerned, and not too obliquely, in James's description of the miserable marriage that linked Britain's future poet laureate Ted Hughes and his eventually suicidal wife, the American poet Sylvia Plath. "No one who has never had to live with a partner who is mentally ill can possibly understand," James observes, how it involves "two people [dwelling] . . . in separate hells, but each intensifies the other."

Though only 44 when she was widowed, James never remarried. Even before her husband's death, she was required to support her family through often tedious secretarial and administrative jobs. Yet James makes no complaint for what must have often been a troublous life. On the contrary, she confesses that she has received immensely more than she has given. She also notices the many gracious ironies that have befallen her. Not least among them is that her skill as a detective writer has been hugely enhanced by the intimate knowledge of homicide she gained from her work in the forensic and criminal justice system. She is also grateful, despite the pain entailed, to have lived at the juncture of two ages. It has required her to engage the Christian liberalism of a previous age with the hedonism and relativism of our own time. The resulting tension has made for excellent popular art.

A British critic has complained that *Time to Be in Earnest* lacks the quality of her novels. Neither diary nor memoir, the writer complains, the book is only “a genteel kind of gossip.” Another reviewer has lamented James’s prim and infuriating refusal to disclose “the hidden, inner, private impulses which drew [her] to the ordered but violent form of the murder mystery.” Such critiques fail to discern that James’s kind of Christian liberalism, with its almost Victorian regard for reticence and privacy, dictates the form no less than the substance of *Time to Be in Earnest*. Rather than writing a standard autobiography, James reflects on her life and times through diary entries. Beginning with her 77th birthday in August 1997, she reveals what it is like to live for a year as a celebrated author. James thus serves up her memories and judgments as they are sparked by dinner parties and book signings, interviews and speeches, visits with family and friends, walks in her London neighborhood and especially in the city’s magnificent gardens and parks.

Readers who care little for the humdrum details of social life will indeed be put off by James’s coolly distancing approach. Yet those who appreciate inklings and hints and subtle indirection will learn all they need to know about the inner “devices and desires” that have prompted James’s distinguished career in detective fiction. Nowhere are they more nicely revealed than in the tribute she recently offered to Samuel Johnson at his grave in Westminster Abbey: “We honour him both as a writer and as a man, remembering his generosity and humanity and the courage with which his great heart endured poverty, frustration, neglect and private pain.”