

Between Genre, Parody, and Criticism: Gilbert Adair's *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd*

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ABSTRACT

With an amateur sleuth who is also a detective novelist and a murderer who turns out to be a parodist of crime fiction, Gilbert Adair's postmodern parody of the British Golden Age whodunit, *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* (2006), encompasses a critical reflection on the genre in almost every formal and plot-related element. Yet, and this is where Adair's approach differs from that of other postmodern writers, the text never abandons the conventions of the whodunit genre but merely takes up and heightens classic generic elements, among them self-referentiality, metafictionality, intertextuality, and parody. This essay examines the ways in which Adair's exploration of postmodern concerns as to the artificiality not only of fiction but of reality builds and depends on generic structures and conventions rather than on subverting them, thereby demonstrating the potential, relevance, and interest of the Golden Age whodunit for postmodern thought and emphasizing the postmodern qualities which he identifies in the genre in general, and in Agatha Christie's work in particular. (FM)

KEYWORDS: British Golden Age whodunit, parody, metafiction, postmodernism, genre



A “celebration-cum-critique-cum-parody”—that is how Gilbert Adair described his novel *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* (2006), the first installment in his trilogy, featuring detective novelist and amateur sleuth Evadne Mount (“Unusual”). As his description indicates, the text can be read in different ways: it is a locked-room murder mystery in the style of a Golden Age whodunit,¹ and at the same time a highly self-conscious, postmodern parody of the genre—a metafictional, critical reflection on it. Adair, differing in this from other postmodern rewritings of detective fiction such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980) or Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1985–1986),² unites these different layers in a novel that never abandons the conventions of the whodunit genre. By taking up and merely heightening classic elements of the whodunit instead—among them self-referentiality, metafictionality, intertextuality, and parody—Adair demonstrates the

potential, relevance, and interest of the Golden Age whodunit for postmodern thought and emphasizes the postmodern qualities which he identifies in the genre in general, and in Agatha Christie's work (Adair, "Unusual") in particular. As Martin Edwards has noted, critics of postmodern detective fiction have not paid much attention to Gilbert Adair despite "the fact that he cast new light on the old ways of classic detective novelists" (68) through a postmodern lens.³ In this article, I will examine the ways in which Adair highlights the continuities between the whodunit and postmodern approaches, focusing especially on the formal aspects of his novel. I want to illustrate that by means of generic elements and the two most important characters in his novel—the detective and the murderer—Adair revisits the whodunit genre to uncover its postmodern awareness of the artificiality not only of fiction, but also of reality, and of the inseparableness of the two.

The set-up and plot of *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* could not be more like that of a classic whodunit from the British Golden Age of detective fiction. It is the 1930s, and a group of friends assembles for a Christmas celebration at a country manor in Dartmoor, the home of Colonel Ffolkes and his wife Mary. Among the guests are detective fiction writer Evadne Mount, actress Cora Rutherford, the local doctor, the vicar, their respective wives, and a young American, arriving with the hosts' daughter from London. It is seemingly only the one uninvited guest who disturbs the peace: gossip columnist Raymond Gentry, who soon turns out to enjoy tormenting each and every one within the group with his knowledge of secrets from their past. Tension inside increases along with the snow falling outside, until the company is snowed in completely. In the early hours of Boxing Day, Raymond Gentry's body is found in the attic, the room locked and the key still inside the door. As one of the characters remarks in the opening line of the novel, "[s]ort of thing you can't imagine happening outside of a book!" (1).

What follows is an investigation featuring a familiar rivalry: mystery novelist Evadne Mount, happy to apply her literary expertise in crime and detection to real life, cannot hold back from the investigation, even as the group recruits the help of Chief-Inspector Trubshawe, a neighboring, retired Scotland Yard detective, who agrees to investigate unofficially until the actual police can be called. And so the questioning of the suspects begins, secrets are revealed, and old friends learn to see each other in a new light. The clues, involving a typewritten note, seem straight out of the Golden Age as well, along with the structure of the plot: as it turns out

eventually, rather than Raymond Gentry's actual murder, it is the failed attempt at the life of the host, Colonel ffolkes, later on the same day that is the key event. The Colonel is shot, although not fatally. In the characters' attitudes, prejudices of 1930s' England surface. Careless displays of racism, homophobia, and antisemitism are just as conspicuous as stereotypical views about the Irish and anyone who is perceived as not English. Yet, although at first glance all these elements might create the impression that readers are encountering a classic English whodunit from the interwar period—as Sergio Angelini has put it, the novel “masquerades as an Agatha Christie-style murder mystery” (113)—upon closer scrutiny unmistakable signs of parody emerge.

These parodic elements include, for instance, the map of the first floor of ffolkes Manor at the beginning of the novel: it will not be of much help in finding out who committed the crime, since it designates each of the guests' rooms simply and identically as “bedroom,” rendering them indistinguishable—and the map useless. Upon a closer look, common stereotypes, too, are repeatedly exaggerated, such as when the gardener—who is, in a familiar cliché of a male servant figure, very popular with women—“ran his fingers through his wavy, dreamy, Brylcreemy, jet-black hair” (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 164). The working-class accents of the servants, which in traditional whodunits are often distinguished by such an exaggerated amount of apostrophes that Colin Watson has described them as “painful parodies” (106), are taken to extremes here: “[n]othin' this int'r'stin' as 'appened at ffolkes Manor since I began workin' 'ere” (165). The servants' occasional misuse of words (allergy for allegory, antidote for anecdote) further contributes to the effect of parodic exaggeration.

The seemingly classical cast of characters turns out to consist of numerous tributes to characters in other whodunits: most of the characters' names include allusions, some of them anachronistic. For instance, actress Cora Rutherford's last name refers to Margaret Rutherford, who played Miss Marple in the MGM adaptations of four of Christie's novels in the 1960s, decades after the plot of Adair's novel takes place. Such anachronisms highlight the ironic “trans-contextualization” that Linda Hutcheon describes as one of “the major formal operatives” of parody (*Parody*, 37) and which make such references recognizable as parodies rather than mere allusions. Other names allude to classic Christie novels such as *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), whose narrator Leonard Clement shares his profession and even a part of his name with Vicar Clem Wattis in Adair's novel. These meanings and associations become clear only when

taking into account Adair's target texts, so that in all these instances, we find the "double-voicedness" of parody, due to which, as Tamás Bényei has noted, "[o]ne could indeed argue that parody is by definition always ironical" (116). With its constant allusions to other texts in terms of setting, plot, and characters, which bring to mind primarily but not exclusively novels by Christie, *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* is written in a mode of irony throughout, in the sense that irony accentuates the fact that "[a]ll words bear traces of previous and other potential uses, and their meaning changes depending on the tone of utterance or the particular context in which they are uttered" (Nicol 13).

The parody of the whodunit genre extends as far as to the typeface of the text. When characters speak with particular emphasis, just as in Christie novels, italics are used. For instance, Evadne Mount explains a crucial realization of hers regarding the murderer's hiding in a hollowed-out armchair saying: "What I venture to suggest happened next is that—if I can phrase it this way—*the armchair suddenly stood up on its hind legs*" (264; emphasis in original). Here too, Adair's technique goes beyond the mere imitation of generic conventions, as he also incorporates a tongue-in-cheek metacommentary on his allusions. This becomes clear as the text continues: "Everybody in the library gasped in unison. It was almost as though she had *spoken* in italics, almost as though they could feel the hairs stand up on the napes of their necks, almost as though those hairs, too, were in italics" (264; emphasis in original). By alerting his readers so emphatically to the use of italics in the genre, Adair insists on just the "critical ironic difference" (Hutcheon, *Parody* 37) that, according to Hutcheon, characterizes parody.

In this essay, I approach Adair's novel as a parody rather than a pastiche in accordance with Hutcheon's definitions of the concepts. For Hutcheon, who describes parody as a practice of "revising, replaying, inverting, and 'trans-contextualizing' previous works of art" (*Parody* 11), the distinction between the terms is that "parody does seek differentiation in its relationship to its model; pastiche operates more by similarity and correspondence" (38). Although she regards them as closely related—"[b]oth are acknowledged borrowings"—and points out that a parody can at the same time be a pastiche (38), in parodic texts, she identifies a clearer focus on dissimilarity with the original text: it is "repetition with difference" (101). Yet even in insisting on this difference, parody simultaneously confirms its target text: "[e]ven in mocking, parody reinforces; in formal terms, it inscribes the mocked conventions onto itself, thereby guaranteeing their continued existence" (75). This aptly describes the double identity of

Adair's novel as both a classic whodunit, never abandoning its conventions, and as being noticeably different from the genre in also constituting an ironic commentary on it—a difference which Adair, as illustrated, emphasizes by means of exaggeration and by providing a different context with the use of anachronisms, among other devices. It is also in line with Hutcheon's concept of parody that the parodic nature of Adair's allusions becomes apparent only in the elements that reveal his critical distance or a changed context—for Hutcheon writes that parody can often be more clearly recognized in its function rather than its form: "While the act and form of parody are those of incorporation, its function is one of separation and contrast. Unlike imitation, quotation, or even allusion, parody requires that critical ironic distance." (34) That the ironic approach of parody is often an expression of admiration as much as a critical consideration has been observed by Adair himself, who writes in the introduction to his collection of essays on postmodernism that "each man parodies the thing he loves" (*Postmodernist* 14). And while Adair's appreciative imitation of a Golden Age whodunit is also a pastiche, it is the novel's characteristics as a parody which I want to examine in the present context.

Adair's ambivalent—that is, celebratory *and* critical—approach to the whodunit can be described as typically postmodern. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon compares the relationship to earlier forms and works of art found in both parodic and postmodern approaches as follows: "[p]arody is a perfect postmodern form, in some senses, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies" (11). Yet when the Golden Age whodunit is parodied, an additional layer must be recognized, since any parody of this genre is a parody of a parody: Janice MacDonald has elaborated on the many ways in which parody has played a crucial part in British and American detective fiction since its early adopters such as Poe and Collins (71), and has pointed out how deeply embedded parody is in the structure of the genre. Parody, then, is both a key feature of postmodern fiction and of the classic whodunit. Thus Adair's extended use of parody in *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* is an element that informs his imitation of the genre and at the same time a device he uses to distance himself from it. Many scholars have commented on the fact that the boundaries between "classic" detective fiction and postmodern writing are not clear-cut (see for instance Marcus 252–53; Merivale 308). Angelini, too, emphasizes the abundance of literary devices which are central to postmodern writing, yet also characterize the whodunit of the interwar period:

Inevitably many of the stories written then and shortly thereafter extended the “rules of engagement” to include parody but such was the sense of “gamesmanship” that knowing postmodern jokes and tropes entered the genre even before the term “postmodern” had come into general use after the end of the Second World War. (125)

In Adair’s exploration of these continuities, as I will now illustrate, several other devices besides parody are particularly central, most notably metafiction. It is no coincidence that the two most important characters in Adair’s novel, the detective and the murderer, are both writers and critical readers—and one of them even a parodist—of detective fiction.

A metafictional investigation

As the highly successful author of novels with such evocative titles as *The Timing of the Stew* and *Murder Murder on the Wall*, amateur detective Evadne Mount is an expert in whodunits. Her comments on the genre create an intertextual field of reference, ranging—just within the field of crime fiction—from Arthur Conan Doyle and G. K. Chesterton to Dashiell Hammett and John Dickson Carr, with Agatha Christie mentioned as a professional rival (6). Evadne Mount herself is characterized in reference to many fictional counterparts: her first name echoes that of Christie’s Ariadne Oliver, while the “matelot’s tricorne hat which had become her trademark in London’s literary world” (202) is reminiscent of Sherlock Holmes, and a remark about her “perhaps not-so-little grey cells” (256) conveys her desire to distinguish herself from Hercule Poirot. A character who writes detective fiction is a familiar figure in the Golden Age whodunit—Ariadne Oliver and Sayers’s Harriet Vane being the most prominent but by no means the only examples. Here again, Adair simply takes up and amplifies a generic element by turning a character who is often only a sidekick into the main investigating detective.

Throughout the novel, extensive use is made of the ironic metalevel that such a character allows for: almost all of the titles of Evadne Mount’s novels hint at other works of fiction, whereas some are references to the publishing industry involved in the production of whodunits. Thus, *The Mystery of the Green Penguin* alludes to the series of crime fiction published by The Bodley Head from 1935 onwards (see Edwards 62). The novel *Faber or Faber*—a reference positively brimming with irony considering the close association of Faber and Faber with modernist writing—nods to Adair’s own publishers (see Angelini 119), as well as to the twin motif deprecated—

not to be used “unless we have been duly prepared”—by Ronald A. Knox in his “A Detective Story Decalogue” (196). Consequently, on the one hand, Evadne Mount is a character type familiar enough from the generic tradition to increase the reader’s sense of encountering a classic whodunit. On the other hand, she reminds the reader of the fact that detective fiction, including the novel they are reading, is an artificial product, not least in the many instances throughout the novel when she discusses her writing or the Detection Club (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 25, 205–7, 241) with the other characters.

As Bran Nicol has noted, “[s]elf-reference is the literary version of the postmodern ironic attitude” (16), but again, the element of self-reference is already dominant in Golden Age detective fiction, which has been called “the most noticeably self-referential branch of crime fiction” (Bernthal 228). Almost all whodunits explicitly acknowledge genre conventions or other whodunits, and it is in precisely such instances that Malcah Effron locates the self-referentiality of detective fiction as well, that is in moments that “acknowledge the existence of the detective genre, either through explicit statement or through intertextual allusion” (58). Effron establishes three modes of self-referentiality that are common in the genre, all of which are taken up by Adair: “moments that explicitly situate themselves in relation to detective fiction”; “intrageneric intertextual references . . . to generic tropes, iconic fictional detectives, and classic detective writers”; and “detective novels that use a fictional detective writer as the detective protagonist” (61). With examples such as Christie’s *The Body in the Library* (1942), in which a character mentions not only other crime writers but also Christie herself, readers of the genre are used to references and allusions that draw attention to the fact that they are encountering a fictional text. Edwards has also commented on the parodies of fellow authors and their fictional detectives included in the works of Golden Age writers (62–63). As he points out, “Adair was, therefore, working in a long-established tradition, but the postmodernist touch that he brought to *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* supplied an extra dimension for those familiar with ‘Golden Age’ whodunits” (63–64).

I agree that Adair does not introduce a new element but that it is a matter of the degree to which he makes central his metafictional commentary on and criticism of the genre that creates this “extra dimension,” distinguishing his novel from classic whodunits where, as Effron points out, “self-referential statements . . . fulfill a metafictional function in that they interrogate boundaries, both generic and fictive” (42), yet where they merely “create an *impression* rather than an *awareness* of

metafictionality: they never wholly reveal the disjuncture associated with metafiction” (4, emphasis in original). Agreeing with Effron that “a sustained argument” rather than “a brief encounter” with such disjunctures is necessary to establish a text as “overt metafiction” (19f.), I want to illustrate that this is the case for Adair’s novel in that—in accordance with Effron’s definition of the concept—he seeks to “both interrogate and disintegrate boundaries between reality and fictionality” (19). In Patricia Waugh’s words, what metafiction does is “simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction” (6), and Adair’s endeavor to do so becomes increasingly prominent as the novel progresses. An intimation of this is, for instance, the common reproach of “cardboard characters” (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 253) that is addressed to Evadne, while she herself dismisses “those utterly pointless ground-plans which some of my rivals insist on having at the beginning of their whodunits and which only the most naïve of readers would ever think of consulting” (256). The genre’s focus on upper-middle-class characters is criticized when the gardener reassures the cook that the servants need not be afraid of the murderer: “if we ain’t good enough to invite to cocktails we ain’t good enough to murder neither” (171). Even some of the scholarship on detective fiction is evoked in the novel, which is reminiscent of other postmodern writers such as Eco (whom Adair admired), who engaged with the genre of detective fiction both creatively and as literary scholars, and who commented on scholarly discourses in their works of fiction. Edmund Wilson’s scathing criticism of the genre, voiced in the mid-1940s, is anachronistically acknowledged by Adair when one of the guests declares his disinterest in whodunits, saying, “I mean, who cares who killed—” (251; Wilson 338), before he is broken off. Another anachronism is Evadne Mount’s claim that it was the Detection Club that came up with the term *Mayhem Parva* (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 241), referring to the cozy, enclosed setting of the classic whodunit that is “epitomized by the English country village” where “ordered and conservative world views” dominate (Herbert et al. 282). In fact, the term was coined by Colin Watson in 1971 (Watson 169; see also Herbert et al. 282). Also, readers learn that Evadne Mount launched her career with a rewriting of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 227), a play that is often regarded as a founding text for crime narratives in literary criticism. With a character who is both an author and, to a certain extent, a critic of the genre, even scholarship is thus seamlessly incorporated into the discussions of detective fiction in the novel. Yet, rather than acknowledging other postmodern writers in this context, Adair employs

metafiction as a device to emphasize the propensity of the classic whodunit itself for meta-commentary, theoretical reflection on, and criticism of the genre. Evadne Mount mentions, for instance, John Dickson Carr's discussion of the genre in *The Hollow Man*, a novel from 1935 (257). Adair thus demonstrates that while making the elements of self-referentiality and metafictionality particularly central to his novel, he is merely taking up and highlighting aspects of the Golden Age whodunit.

Raymond Gentry's murderer, Roger Farrar, turns out to be just as much steeped in fictional traditions as the amateur detective. The tribute to *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) in the title of Adair's novel already hints at the double identity of the murderer, who is the narrator at the same time. For more than two hundred pages, however, the homodiegetic narrator might escape one easily enough (see Angelini 121), since until he is revealed as the murderer, he never speaks in the first person. It is by means of small clues that the reader is eventually alerted to his presence, for instance when the narrator describes his narratological decisions, observing that "it will make better sense to edit out all extraneous comments" (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 123). Or when he wonders at the opening of a chapter about a remark made by Trubshawe: "[w]ho knows what comment, or whose, prompted so typically cautious a response from him?" (185). Moments like these make readers aware of a personified narrator unnoticed for a long time—and at the same time, these instances serve as clues, since they provide information as to the narrator's presence or, sometimes crucially, his absence. In the passage quoted above, he cannot know the context for Trubshawe's remark because he has just been outside, shooting Colonel Ffolkes.

Apart from these small clues, however, the murderer's personality barely makes it onto the page. As the Colonel's secretary, he can be found at the margins of the action, as the recipient of orders and instructions, being only ever addressed by his last name, Farrar. He is perhaps best characterized by Evadne Mount as "[s]omebody who saw and heard everything yet said nothing or next to nothing. Somebody who is among us now yet not among us. Somebody who is present yet almost transparent" (267). This invisibility is due to his backstage role, making sure everything runs smoothly, handing out glasses of water when necessary, and being categorized by the other characters as part of their group or as one of the servants, depending on whatever affiliation is most convenient at the moment. It is exactly this elusiveness, resulting from the other characters' disregard for him, that has enabled him to plan and commit his crimes unnoticed until now: "You see," I explained, "the advantage of my position

in your household was that, if I wasn't upstairs, everyone assumed I must be downstairs, and vice versa. So no one ever really missed me'" (269). The murderer thus hides just as much in the narration as in the role he is assigned in the household and, as indicated by the earlier criticism of the way servants are dismissed in whodunits, in the blind spots of the genre. Significantly, here again Adair takes up themes and narrative techniques which were established by Christie, who not only made the first-person narrator the murderer in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, but also repeatedly had crimes hinge on the invisibility of and disregard for servants, for instance in *Three Act Tragedy* (1935) or *After the Funeral* (1953).

The solution and the motive hinge on the unreliability and performance of identities that are so dominant in the Golden Age whodunit in general and, as R. A. York has observed in an often-quoted remark, shape "Christie's . . . world of theatricality and secrecy" (6) in particular. What none of the other characters realizes is that Farrar only took his post so as to eventually revenge his father, who died after a severe injury when Farrar was a child. He is convinced that what actually led to the death was his father's disappointment when Colonel ffolkes, his best friend in youthful days (and his son's godfather), betrayed him—a backstory which clearly echoes Rex Fortescue's past in Christie's *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953). With this insight into Farrar's past, we also find out why the title of the novel announces a theatrical performance of some sort: *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd—An Entertainment*. Farrar, in reality the eponymous Roger Murgatroyd, has been putting on an act for the last few years. In fact, so has his intended victim, Colonel ffolkes, who has been living under a false identity, too, since he moved to England from the US as a young man and changed his name. Even more importantly, the discovery of the characters' role-playing in their everyday lives is accompanied by, and increasingly extended towards, the generic roles which they also play. The description of Trubshawe's pipe is a telling example of this:

[T]he pipe that permanently dangled from his lips was also, so far as anyone could recall, permanently unlit, to the point where you began to wonder if you'd ever actually seen it emitting smoke. Like many a man of his age, he *wore* that pipe rather than smoked it, and it had become as indispensable an accessory to his self-presentation as the Vicar's dog-collar or Cora Rutherford's tonitruous tangle of bangles. (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 185; emphasis in original)

Trubshawe's "permanently unlit" pipe establishes him in the role of the detective because of its associations with Sherlock Holmes. Yet, since it is so rarely in use, it seems less of a personal choice and more of a theatrical prop, signposting his connection to fictional predecessors as well as to the other characters whose "self-presentation" is mentioned as a matter of course.

The narrator, however, provides the clearest link between theatrical performance and the self-conscious reproduction of genre conventions. Growing up, Farrar worked as an actor in the United States and then wrote and published hard-boiled detective stories (278–79). He was able to apply his skills as an actor to a way of writing that required a similar sense of role-playing: he found out he "could imitate just about any style" in his writing. Having been interested in writing a locked-room story once before (279), he has now swapped fiction for reality: "I decided to show you Brits that we Yanks could also commit—what did you call it, Miss Mount? A Mayhem Parva murder? I decided to test my locked-room plot in the real world. I liked the irony of it, his [Colonel ffolkes's] trying so hard to be English all over again" (280). The murder method, then, is itself a parody of this particular whodunit subgenre, and its significance can only be understood when its irony, its reference to the context of Farrar's backstory, is recognized. The manner in which the murder is committed, therefore, represents Adair's own way of relating to the genre he parodies—beneath the surface of generic conventions, the genre is revisited for and in the context of its parodist's own purposes. The indistinguishability of the author's and the murderer's parodic endeavors and the resulting confusion around narrative authority becomes even more apparent when Adair's parodic intent turns out to be only one reason for collecting a group of suspects who seem to be, as Evadne Mount observes, "so classic, so traditional, they could all have come straight out of, or indeed gone straight into, a typical Mayhem Parva whodunit" (256). In fact, it is precisely Evadne Mount's recognition of the "uncanny" resemblance of the murder to those in Golden Age whodunits (242) that alerts her to the parodic activity on the murderer's part. Accordingly, Effron's point that "when the detectives are detective writers, the narratives reveal issues of authorship and control that self-referentially redefine the search for truth in the detective genre" (253), could be expanded to include murderers who are also writers of detective fiction.

Although Farrar's comment—"I am a writer. Or let's say I was a writer." (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 274)—suggests that he has now turned from

fiction to reality, that separation cannot be upheld. It is due to Evadne Mount's theories on the safest way to commit a crime, on which she elaborated during the gathering, that Farrar spontaneously decides to shoot the Colonel outside in the snow, discarding the intricately planned, convoluted and whodunit-inspired murder method that he had intended for him. He uses this method to kill Raymond Gentry merely to create a red herring (283). Again, several layers of parody come together here. To start with, with his parody of a typical whodunit murder Farrar also recreates one of the structural parodies inherent in the genre: as MacDonald has pointed out, red herrings "are parodies of clues" (63), since they are artificially produced, misleading imitations of clues. With this artificial murder, it becomes impossible to distinguish between what is real or original, and what is parody. Evadne Mount explains the two types of murder featuring in the novel:

One was, as the Chief-Inspector would put it, a "fictional" murder, patently committed by somebody who'd read a lot of whodunits—though not . . . any of mine. And the other was a "real" murder, an attempt at a real murder, the kind of murder which is committed every day in the real world. (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 236)

It is significant that the terms "fictional" and "real" appear in quotation marks. For not only does the "fictional," parodic murder have real consequences in the world of the novel, namely a character's death, but also, even the "real" crime is uncovered in a scene informed by fiction. That is, the murderer is revealed, as the narrator puts it, in a "real-life rehearsal of the last—more accurately, last-but-one—chapter of a classic whodunit" (231), the drawing-room dénouement.

Detecting the omnipresence of fiction

In his above-quoted article for *The Guardian*, Adair elaborates on the postmodern qualities he identifies in Christie's writing:

Like certain postmodern novels to which they otherwise bear no resemblance, Christie's thrillers are honeycombed with authorial insinuations designed to warn her readers that the book in their hands is a product of human artifice. Identical twins invariably give one pause, for instance, as does the proximity, at the scene of the crime, of a clock and a mirror (with the implication that the dial may have been read in reverse) ("Unusual")

The fact that Evadne Mount makes an extremely similar, partly identical comment about the clock-and-mirror scenario in the novel (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 73) only further illustrates the ways in which critical commentary and fiction are inextricable in *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd* (see Angelini 121). In his essay, Adair argues that because of the well-established tropes that make the reader immediately suspicious, even a casual reader cannot but regard critically the text they are reading, since it constantly makes them aware “that what [they are] dealing with is a literary artefact.” Consequently, “like two players hunched over a chessboard, reader and author lock themselves in combat, each openly acknowledging the adversary’s existence and skill” (“Unusual”). The contest is decided in the dénouement, the suspense of which, according to Adair—and Evadne Mount (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 261)—stems less from the text itself and instead “resides exclusively in the reader’s own mind” (“Unusual”) as they prepare for a resolution that might be disappointing or convincing. It is “[t]his curious transference of narrative tension from the text itself to the reader” in which Adair recognizes “that Christie is arguably a more modern writer—even a postmodern writer, as we used to say—than she’s ever given credit for” (“Unusual”).

It is thus very fitting that at the exact moment when Adair’s own whodunit alerts readers to the well-used fictional form of the drawing-room dénouement, which shapes the revelation of “truth” at the end, he makes his point about the genre most clearly. Rather than constructing an anti-detective (or “metaphysical” detective) story, which is often characterized by “the absence or perversion of the traditional ‘solution’” (Merivale 308), Adair does let us know “whodunit.” In the process of doing so, however, he highlights the postmodern dispositions and the metafictional propensity to question “the way in which we perceive what we designate as real” (Effron 36), which are contained in the very structure of the whodunit. With its strict composition and repetitive patterns, the whodunit is a rehearsal of narrative conventions which are gone through again and again to arrive at the truth of what Todorov calls “the story of the crime” (44). Inherent in this set-up, but playfully brought to light by Adair, is the insight that the truth we arrive at is only available and understandable in narrative patterns. Trubshawe, on first arriving at the house, asks for the events of the morning to be told in “a more coherent version, one with a beginning, a middle and an end in that order” (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 38). Similarly, as long as the story of the crime has not been built into an Aristotelian, linear

narrative, it remains unavailable to readers, present only in the glimpses and clues that make it into the “story of the investigation” (Todorov 45). Adair challenges his readers to recognize this with his whodunit, in which the meta-level and the narrative pattern of the crime must be understood in order to solve the case, so that the investigation of murder becomes an investigation of genre and of the inevitability of the narratives that surround us.

Adair emphasizes his point about “the theme of authorial invisibility” (Angelini 120)—a concern that is also central in the second novel of the trilogy, *A Mysterious Affair of Style* (2007)—by drawing readers’ attention to the ways in which the narrative of his own novel frames, shapes, and limits readers’ access to the fictional world it presents. When Evadne Mount challenges the murderer to speak up, Farrar finally uses the first person: “It felt good to speak in the first person again. If I’d said so little during the past twelve hours, it wasn’t that I’m the taciturn type by nature, just that I’d had to be exceptionally careful not to give myself away” (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 268). The murderer has been hiding in the very text of the novel, and with his discovery, readers also recognize that what they have been thinking of as a fairly neutral account has in fact been a subjective, misleading, and highly selective narrative. The text in which readers have been looking for clues and facts has been shaped by a narrator following his own interests from the beginning. Everything in this novel thus is a testament to the omnipresence of narrative: the murder, the investigation, and even the narration.

Waugh has noted that metafiction “operates through exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and frame-break . . . of construction and deconstruction of illusion” (14). Laying bare the constructions, the illusions and deceptions in his own novel and the whodunit genre with the means of parody, intertextuality, self-referentiality, and metafiction, via the protagonists, the language, typological conventions, plot devices, and narrative technique, Adair makes thorough use of the form and possibilities of the whodunit. He does so to explore some of the most fundamental questions asked by postmodern writers and critics as to the ways in which “narrative is always the result of selection and interpretation” (Nicol 12) and how our access to both life and fiction is shaped by such narratives. Nicol has pointed out that postmodern detective fiction can illustrate the potential of detective fiction “as a genre which is naturally metafictional and which causes us—like all postmodern fiction does, in some way—to meditate on the practices of writing and reading

fiction” (183). It is exactly this recognition that Adair’s novel leaves its readers with.

The Act of Roger Murgatroyd was published at a time when many metafictional rewritings of crime fiction, often in the form of anti-detective stories, had explored similar issues for a few decades. The final installment of Adair’s trilogy, *And Then There Was No One* (2009), has more in common with these works, since Adair subverts many generic conventions there and becomes, similarly to Paul Auster in *City of Glass* (1985), himself a character in the book. In this essay, I have deliberately focused on the example of a text that differs from such anti-detective novels to illustrate the ways in which a return to the very form of the Golden Age whodunit, complete with an amateur detective’s brilliant resolution and a clearly identifiable culprit, can still be productive. The novel emphasizes the whodunit genre’s own postmodern potential and establishes it as a form *within* which to explore—as opposed to having to subvert its conventions—postmodern concerns regarding the boundaries of reality and fiction and to expose “all narratives as artificial and contextually processed” (Bernthal 233).

The inevitability of fiction and narrative patterns that pervades the novel from the murder to the investigation and the resolution is already signaled in the epigraph to *The Act of Roger Murgatroyd*, which quotes filmmaker Raoul Ruiz: “The real world is nothing but the sum total of paths leading nowhere.” It is thus no coincidence that with the very last words of the novel, Adair pays tribute to his character most associated with fiction. The successful detective who uncovers the truth could be none other than the writer of detective fiction who is able to recognize the narrative that constitutes this truth: Evadne Mount is the only one to be well-versed in the generic narrative patterns to notice them and to recognize their significance. On the final page, Farrar is about to take his own life, in an exit and an ending that can be found in many other whodunits. When Evadne Mount, as familiar with this generic convention as she is with others, predicts this outcome, Farrar’s reaction encapsulates both the fundamental insight that Adair explores in his novel and the parodic technique that he employs to do so. That is, in an echo of the last sentence of the Miss Marple short story “Death by Drowning”—“Miss Marple had been right again” (Christie 250)—Farrar applauds Evadne Mount for detecting the fiction that shapes our reality: “What a woman. She was right again” (Adair, *Murgatroyd* 286).

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Notes

1. I employ the term “Golden Age whodunit” because of its wide use in scholarship despite its problematic implications that have been noted, amongst others, by Stephen Knight (77). Rather than aiming to indicate a specific and limited time frame such as that between the two World Wars as a “Golden Age,” I use the term synonymously to what Stephen Knight has described as “the clue-puzzle” (77), which is most prominently characterized by fair play towards the reader, a closed setting, a small circle of suspects, and an investigation via the interpretation of clues.

2. On how Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and Auster’s *City of Glass* frustrate readers’ endeavors to read the novels in the same manner as “classic” detective fiction, see Nicol (175–83).

3. Yet, the few exceptions include Isabell Große, who examines Adair’s Evadne Mount trilogy in her forthcoming PhD thesis *Pastiche and Metafiction in Contemporary British Detective Fiction*. I am grateful to Isabell Große for her literature recommendations on Adair.

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