

Robin W. Winks. *Modus Operandi: An Excursion into Detective Fiction*. Boston: David Godine, 1982. 125 pp. \$12.50.

Detective fiction is inspiring a growing body of commentary, and yet it is still regarded as lacking respectability as a literary genre. Frequently, even those who write seriously about it feel compelled to apologize for doing so, at least implicitly (as in the striking cases of academicians who write about it in their own names while refraining from mentioning that they themselves are practitioners of the art under a variety of pseudonyms). Yet it is a prospering genre, perhaps the only one regularly reviewed in popular and literary periodicals alike. And its practitioners and commentators include such otherwise academically respectable writers—to mention only a few—as Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, G. K. Chesterton, W. H. Auden, Marjorie Nicolson, William Faulkner, S. S. Van Dine (the pseudonym of the art historian/social critic Willard Huntington Wright), A. A. Milne, Dorothy Sayers, Jacques Barzun, Amanda Cross (the pseudonym of Columbia University English professor Carolyn Heilbrun), Julian Symons, and Robin Winks himself.

In *Modus Operandi*, Winks (by profession a Yale University History professor) tries to justify the ways of detective fiction to humans and to explain his own obsession with it shamelessly, without apology. Winks writes mystery reviews for *New Republic* and has previously edited and written introductory and intercalary remarks for *The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence* (1968) and *Detective Fiction: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1980), the latter of which is dedicated “to all those who disapprove.” *Modus Operandi* might just as aptly have been dedicated “to all those who approve.” The title refers (cf. pp. 4, 13) to the m.o. of the mystery genre, the m.o. of the society on which it is a dark and too frequently ignored Jamesian window, and the m.o. of the watching self which is the link between the aperture and the scene. It is, as the author himself acknowledges, barely a book, but rather an extended essay in nine parts of lengths varying from one-half page (the ninth) to thirty-five pages (the fifth and central), followed by a useful index. And the essay’s m.o. is that of an intensely personal, autobiographical (cf. esp. section 3, pp. 22 ff.) excursion; a literary Sherlockism (Father Knox’s term, alluded to without being named at pp. 19, 93); an essay which does not try to convince or to convert, but only to sanctify and console those who share the author’s obsession if not his courage in openly declaring it. (For these, it also provides a model of breadth of reading in the genre and a list of titles to seek out in one’s forays into used-book stores.)

In the first section, the author decries the low status of mystery/detective fiction, and preliminarily suggests the reasons and the price paid: “Precisely because [they] deal with society’s fears, we prefer to keep [them] buried amid the underliterature of our culture. In the end, we are missing out on an entire set of clues . . . which <sup>[154]</sup> most reveal the modus operandi of modern America.” In section two, he begins to analyze the genre, declaring that mystery fiction is not escapist nor mindless nor sublimative, although it clearly “fills some deep need for some of us, or it would not be so widely read,” i.e. it is some form of “personal psychoanalysis.” (This is reexamined in section six.) He then examines the two literary touchstones which guide one to the methodology of reading detective fiction (and, one might add, of reading in general): (1) Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, from which one learns that to read properly requires that one begin as the detective begins, independently of presuppositions, suspecting everybody, i.e., one must begin by assuming that every word is guilty until proven innocent (pp. 9 ff.); (2) Henry James’ *Turn of the Screw*, from

which one learns that in a properly constructed writing, multiple interpretations are not simply multiple, but point in their interaction to a most authoritative interpretation. In other words, reading (as writing) requires passing through the formal phases which detective fiction, as outlined in section seven, employs: defining the subject (albeit deceptively, or else there would be no riddle); asking the right question (one which is equivocal but answerable, questioner-fitting, and interesting, i.e., one which is autobiographical); and finding, evaluating, organizing, submitting, contextualizing, and reviewing the evidence. Section four exposes the insufficiency of the reasons usually given for not taking detective fiction seriously by showing that the same reasons would lead to the casting out of so-called respectable literary genres and some of our greatest writers: if many are badly written, so too are many short stories; if the form is inflexible, so too is the sonnet; if they were written to sell, so too were Shakespeare's plays. Perhaps, then, it too openly exposes society's ills, i.e., it is a literature of protest ("the distance between Thoreau and Ross Macdonald . . . is surely . . . a straight line"). This theme is taken up again in section eight, in which the author treats detective fiction as the literature of subversive catharsis, the purgative baring/demystification of the societally abnormal which is threatening to become societally normal. But since the societally abnormal is only the individually abnormal writ large, detective fiction reveals itself as a morally autobiographical narrative in which "detection becomes self-detection." And both prevailing forms of detective fiction criticism—the sociological and the formal/literary—fail, the former producing theories for which the text is only an occasion and the latter producing texts for which the occasion is only a theory. "The body of critical literature thus depends more than is good for the genre upon amateurs, like this one [i.e., Winks himself]" (p. 116).

Section five, on the thriller, is very much an excursion within an excursion, and instead of separating it out from mystery fiction, the author treats it as the literature of action and movement within a world governed by inexorable causal necessity (p. 48), to which detective fiction corresponds as the literature of character within the same world.

This is a book which reads like a thriller and which is rewarding to read. And even if one's prior sympathy with the author's obsession means that one does not *know* any more about detective fiction than one did before, still reading it makes one feel better about knowing it. And in it the author boldly lives up to what William Gass [155] calls "the noise of his own name," fusing in himself the two cultural Robins which we all are, the archer/slayer (Hood) and the victim/fallen (Cock). And he enjoys doing so, i.e., he is a person who takes his (and who invites us to take our) fun seriously, so that, whether we fully agree with his conclusions or not, when—as he does often in *Modus Operandi*—Robin winks, we do not blush.

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