A HAUNTING STORY – DOROTHY SAYERS'S *GAUDY NIGHT*

Dorothy Sayers, poet, novelist, playwright, essayist and translator, was born in 1893 in Oxford. In 1912 she won a scholarship to Somerville to read medieval French. She took a First Class degree but had to wait until 1920 to be awarded it, when women were at last admitted to degrees. Her first novel, *Whose Body*? published in 1923, established her protagonist Lord Peter Wimsey, while a sequel, *Strong Poison*, 1930, introduced his future companion Harriet Vane.

Sayers's 1935 novel *Gaudy Night*, featuring both Wimsey and Vane, is set in an Oxford women's college closely based on Somerville, though transplanted to St Cross Road and 'the Balliol cricket ground', and re-named Shrewsbury, and it's because of these evocations of a Somerville of the past that I'm talking about it today, when we've gathered to talk (partly at least) about our own pasts in this college. Re-reading *Gaudy Night*, we notice how much Somerville changed between 1935 and 1967, when we came up, and how much it has changed again since.

Sayers's novels have traditionally been fitted into the genre she herself called detective stories. Sometimes such works would be called mystery stories. *Gaudy Night*, though it comes suitably freighted with mystery and with crime, can also fruitfully be read, I'm going to suggest, as a ghost story. Even though many of you must know the novel well, I'm going to invite you to take another look at it.

Gaudy Night is littered with references to ghosts. It is rich with hauntings, all connected to secrets buried in the past and now springing to threatening life. Ghosts often manifest themselves as

visual images. In *Gaudy Night* they also have to do, crucially, with language: language stolen, denied, repressed, destroyed.

The novel opens with a woman sitting at her desk in her flat in Bloomsbury in London and reading a letter. Harriet Vane, a successful writer of detective fiction, has been invited by Mary Stokes, an old friend from her Oxford undergraduate days, to accompany her to a Gaudy at Shrewsbury College. Harriet's memory provides her with a vision of 'a stone quadrangle, built by a modern architect in a style neither new nor old…Folded within its walls lay a trim grass plot, with flowerbeds splashed at the angles, and surrounded by a wide stone plinth. Behind the level roofs of Cotswold slate rose the brick chimneys of an older and less formal pile of buildings – a quadrangle also of a kind'.

The narrator tells us that this second quadrangle still keeps 'a domestic remembrance of the original Victorian dwelling-houses that had sheltered the first shy students of Shrewsbury College.' So Harriet's memories of her own undergraduate perception of the college buildings are immediately overlaid with those of somebody else- the novel's first step into unsettling the reader. For us, as readers of the novel who came up in 1967, a third memory-vision arises, of Somerville as we ourselves knew it in those past days. Mapping our knowledge of Somerville's topography onto Sayers's version of Shrewsbury, we can recognise the Fellows Garden for example, or the loggia outside the SCR, or Hall, or the chapel. We can wonder what for Sayers pre-dated Vaughan; we can try to work out whether her buildings, Queen Elizabeth and Burleigh and Tudor, replace Maitland or Penrose or House. We enter an architectural puzzle. Where exactly was the Scouts Wing, so crucial to Harriet's

eventual investigation of dodgy goings-on? How did that wing connect to the Buttery? Where is the wall that certain male undergraduates lay bets they will climb over at dead of night? In the reader's imagination, in mine at any rate, all these places glide back and forth like stage sets - like theatre flats – like ghosts.

After graduation, Sayers tells us, after Harriet and her friend Mary came down, Mary 'had married and scarcely been heard of; except that she haunted the College with a sick persistence, never missing an Old Students meeting or a Gaudy. But Harriet had broken all her old ties and half the commandments, dragged her reputation in the dust and made money, had the rich and amusing Lord Peter Wimsey at her feet, to marry him if she chose, and was full of energy and bitterness and the uncertain rewards of fame.'

If Mary has 'haunted' the College, Harriet is haunted by it. Agreeing to meet Mary at the Gaudy, she drives to Oxford, trying to 'ignore the whimpering ghost of her dead youth'. However, as she enters the city she feels 'a chill qualm…the iron hand of the past gripping one's entrails.' Memories of her undergraduate existence, her happy, singleminded pursuit of learning, are poignant because her old innocence- intellectual and moral- is gone. Since those days she has had extra-marital sex and been punished for it. Charged with the murder of her lover Philip Boyes and sent for trial, she has been proved not guilty, thanks to the intervention of famous sleuth Peter Wimsey.

Harriet's legally established innocence – another kind of innocence - connects to her new, worldly knowledge of desire, passion and human flaws. However, she does not use this understanding in her detective fiction, preferring to invent plots that

are coldly mechanical. In this way she has tried to repel the 'ugly phantoms lurking in the corners' of her mind, her memories of her 'queer, unhappy contact with physical passion' that had 'throttled into dumbness' her capacity for writing poetry. She has 'fought her way back to an insecure stability' based on celibacy and hard work: 'Philip Boyes was dead, and the nightmares that had haunted the ghastly midnight of his passing were gradually fading away.' En route to Oxford she imagines moving back permanently to the university, as though to a lost paradise, and becoming a scholar again, untroubled by emotion, and in particular by sexual desire.

The events of the Gaudy, however, disrupt this dream of peace. Wandering in the quad late at night, after the Gaudy dinner, Harriet sees 'something white fluttering… across the trim turf.' Ghosts are sometimes thought to be harbingers of misfortune and this 'ghost' certainly is. In fact it's a sheet of paper with a drawing on it: 'not at all the kind of thing that one would expect to find in a college quadrangle. It was ugly and sadistic. It depicted a naked figure of exaggeratedly feminine outlines, inflicting savage and humiliating outrage upon some person of indeterminate gender clad in a cap and gown.' Harriet is forced to reflect that 'haunts of ancient peace were all very well, but very odd things could creep and crawl beneath lichen-covered stones.'

Then on her way back to London after the Gaudy, stopping at a pub for lunch, fishing for her cigarette case in the sleeve of the M.A. gown she has worn for the official ceremony, she finds another sheet of 'scribbling paper'. She frowns 'at a disagreeable memory' as she opens it. 'There was a message pasted across it, made up of letters cut apparently from the headlines of a newspaper. You dirty

murderess. Aren't you ashamed to show your face?' Harriet strikes a match and sets light to the paper: 'It burned briskly, till she was forced to drop it on her plate. Even then the letters showed grey upon the crackling blackness, until she pounded their spectral shapes to powder with the back of a spoon.'

Soon afterwards, the dons ask Harriet to return to the College and undertake an informal investigation. They are being menaced by something the Dean calls 'apparently a cross between a Poltergeist and a Poison-Pen.' Anonymous letters are being sent and messages scrawled on 'the walls of passages and lavatories', one particular kind of writing being sent to a particular group of people, the dons and undergraduates, apparently (or are they?) producing writing of a different sort. Books by scholars are defaced. The college library is vandalized, the books removed and flung about and the walls adorned with 'a frieze of drawings, roughly executed in brown paint, and with inscriptions in letters a foot high, all of the most unseemly sort.' These have to be washed off and painted over by the college servants: whatever is being expressed must be repressed and denied.

All these nuisances occur at night, the time when ghosts classically walk. Harriet comments to the Dean that perhaps the perpetrator is 'somebody with a mania for creating disturbance in order to enjoy the fun' and the Dean agrees: 'like those tiresome children who throw furniture about and the servants who pretend to be ghosts.'

Is this comment a reference to Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*? Part of *Gaudy Night's* rich texture certainly derives from its literariness, shared between Harriet and the novel's narrator. I can't resist seeing Harriet as Sayers's ghostly double, her invented mirror

image. She gives a talk in college on 'detection in fact and fiction.' At a drinks party she meets 'a bunch of young men and women who wanted to talk about detective fiction. They appeared to have read a good deal of this kind of literature, though very little of anything else. A School of Detective Fiction would, Harriet thought, have a fair chance of producing a goodly crop of Firsts.'

Sayers's own wide reading is constantly demonstrated. Her prose is haunted by the ghosts of other texts. Each chapter is introduced by a quotation from the work of writers such as John Donne, Richard Burton, Francis Bacon, Shakespeare and so on. Harriet and Peter talk to each other in a nonstop flow of esoteric literary quotations: another puzzle for the detective reader is to track these down and identify them. (If I fail to do so, I feel as stupid as the plodding policemen Sayers likes to caricature in her other novels.) *Gaudy Night* does seem haunted by Sayers's writerly anxieties. Writing at a time when genre (lowbrow) was placed opposite to literature (highbrow) the highly-educated Sayers seems ambivalent about how her novels are classified, on the one hand determined to prove her literary credentials and on the other, via Harriet's perceptions of the poseurs at literary cocktail parties, mocking literary modernism. For example, Harriet goes to cheery 'shows' rather than to avant-garde plays and so has 'a nice time rather than a nasty one'.

The ghost theme continues in Harriet's choice of disguise. To conceal the real reason for her returning to College – to unmask the Poison-Pen - she dons her scholar's persona and embarks on a study of Sheridan Lefanu, the celebrated Victorian writer of ghost stories. The dons put it about that she is consulting certain vital texts in the

Bodleian. By night Harriet patrols the college corridors, wandering like a phantom, while by day she snoozes ‘in the arms of Duke Humphrey’, catching up on lost sleep. Her dreams are peopled by phantoms, her unacknowledged desire for Peter Wimsey among them.

Late one night, after dinner in Hall, she returns to her room to get on with her research. She struggles over re-drafting a paragraph comparing Lefanu to Wilkie Collins, whose ‘dream-fantasies and apparitions are too careful to tuck their shrouds neatly about them and leave no loose ends to trouble us. It is in Lefanu that we find the…master of the uncanny whose mastery comes by nature.’ At that very moment all the lights go out and the whole college erupts in turmoil as the dark shape of the poltergeist is seen by the crowd of excited students scudding across the lawn in the centre of the quad.

Ghosts in *Gaudy Night*, as I said earlier, have to do with language. To be more precise, they act as metaphors, standing as images of language not yet spoken, stories that are incomplete, that need to be told. The need for the story can be triggered off by a seemingly chance event that must be made sense of. Annie, one of the college scouts, tells Harriet that the disturbances ‘all happened since a certain person came into college…you’ll find something in that lady’s past, you may be sure of it.’ She is referring to Miss de Vine, the college’s recently arrived Research Fellow. Harriet dismisses this hint as mere gossip, and so fails to follow up the clue Annie offers, though later on she does realise that ‘Annie is …haunted by nervous terrors.’ Peter, rather than Harriet, eventually pieces the whole story together. Less troubled than Harriet by personal conflicts around sex and work

– he simply keeps these in separate compartments - he is able to see clearly and to use 'simple reasoning' to get at the truth.

The malevolence that has been unleashed turns on a question of loyalty to one's spouse versus loyalty to ideals of scholarship. Peter elicits from Miss de Vine details of some fraudulent work she encountered a few years back, before taking up her new post at Shrewbury. Examining an M.A. thesis in history she discovered, while checking the sources and archives cited, that its arrogant author, once having completed it, was unwilling to correct it, even when he found that certain newly-discovered documents disproved its argument. Accordingly he falsified certain facts in his thesis and even destroyed the documents concerned. Failed and disgraced, subsequently unable to hold down a job, he finally killed himself, or, as the furiously loyal Poison-Pen saw it, was driven to his death all because of words written on a worthless 'dirty bit of paper'.

The return of the repressed accordingly sees the return of dirty bits of paper flung about Shrewsbury College, texts whose obscene wording embodies unbearable sorrow and anger to do with events in the past, personal history and social history coming together, and an attempt at exorcism that has gradually grown murderous. Miss de Vine, belatedly accepting some responsibility for the tragedy, looks 'like a ghost.' The Poison-Pen's confession, when it finally comes, is long, rambling and vitriolic, a monologue allowing for no answering back; very unlike the swift, elegant wordplay Harriet and Peter enjoy.

The novel rehearses conflicts afflicting women that are initially seen by most of the characters as inevitable, almost impossible to overcome. Marriage would seem to be incompatible with scholarship, sex with serenity, motherhood with creating books. The dons are all

single and celibate, the Dean crying of her students: 'I've always said they are perfect fools to marry.' Only the College Secretary has children, and she only works because she is a widow who needs money. Harriet remains torn between the calm life of the mind and the more hectic joys of the body. She ponders: 'could there ever be any alliance between the intellect and the flesh?' For everyone, body and mind are split. Out of that split come the conflicts; the ghosts.

These female conflicts are felt inwardly but derive from outer circumstances. Women at Oxford in 1935 have only a few colleges to call their own and must appear grateful for this concession. Stringent rules about female undergraduates' freedoms have to be enforced to protect the women's colleges' good name. Male scholars patronise female ones.

Feminism is a spectre stalking the margins, a spectre that makes Harriet and most of the dons uncomfortable, since it appears linked to intolerance and humourlessness. Miss Hillyard, the History Tutor, who voices openly feminist opinions about sexism and injustice, is presented as harsh, bitter and sexually disappointed. Unable to admit her passionate attraction to Peter Wimsey, mortified by it, she takes herself late at night to the Fellows Garden, her sanctuary, the *hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden symbolising virginity in medieval poetry, and becomes a kind of ghost: 'the figure walking swiftly up and down, up and down…the rustle of its long skirt upon the grass'. One dark evening, after Harriet has escaped being attacked as she comes back late into College, she pictures her assailant hidden in the Fellows Garden as a kind of ghost: 'the Fellows Garden, where people walked by night.'

Once what everyone has agreed to call the College Ghost has been identified, challenged and heard out, Harriet is able to feel less haunted by her past and by her conflicts. The ghost has been laid by having its story told, and so Harriet now decides to write detective novels that will have more real life, more real dilemmas and feeling in them, even if writing in this way will 'hurt like hell.' She and Peter begin to imagine creating a new story that contains what could not previously be spoken. They will re-write the marriage plot. They will pursue a marriage of equals. Harriet will continue earning her living by writing, though, marrying a rich aristocrat, she will have plenty of financial backup and security.

For me, the spectre that continues to walk behind their new plot is one of class and class divisions. The University is presented by Sayers as an ideal community, as is Shrewsbury College before the disturbances begin. However, the College is an institution structured by hierarchies of class and money. Not all its members are equal, or seen as equal. Distinctions are strongly marked between the highly educated dons and the less well educated servants, who may wear smart uniforms and be kindly treated, but are locked into their wing at night like 'caged animals', as the Bursar, full of reforming zeal, tartly observes. Various undergraduates are described as speaking with 'a common accent' or as 'having unrefined antecedents'. Do they really belong in Shrewsbury? Do their class origins make them suspect? Are they and the scouts more likely to commit crimes than those educated in private schools?

Class distinctions and snobbery were certainly visible in the Oxford of our day, as I remember it. Oxford, far from being the earthly paradise that Harriet Vane wishes to believe in, and that I

wanted to believe in too, was inevitably a fallen place. Paradise Regained, Harriet finally discovers, has to be struggled for, in two linked ways. The community of women scholars has to prove to outsiders and insiders both that women can be cooperative, trustworthy, reliable and loyal. Personal ghosts have to be looked in the face, named, befriended, laid to rest.

Gaudy Night's plot is rooted in the dilemmas of the 1930s. It could not be written today, when Somerville is not only co-educational but also involved in inventing a different kind of story, new ways to overcome old categories dividing people against one another. The stress today is on welcoming people from a wide variety of backgrounds; making them all feel included.

In 1966, however, when I applied, Harriet Vane's conflicts around sex versus celibacy, paid work outside the home versus unpaid work inside it as a mother, spoke directly to me. Raised by nuns in an old-fashioned convent school, I had learned that virginity was superior to marriage, that you could not both work and be a mother, that female bodies were shameful. Needing to rebel, I needed to read novels that articulated my conflicts. *Gaudy Night* was such a novel.

In addition, Dorothy Sayers's work showed me a road to follow. Using a kind of reasoning that Peter Wimsey would surely have deprecated, I decided that since Sayers had gone to Somerville, if I too went to Somerville I too could become a writer.

Somerville inspired me by directing me towards its library, and thence to the Bodleian. These entrancing places gave me a way in to the paradise of the imagination and of reading and talking; a

community of friends; a community of sister readers; and I'll always be grateful for that.

Michèle Roberts
September 2017