

Sermon: “Reading Jane Langton: The Case of the Curious Theologian”

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, October 30th, 2016

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This sermon was preceded by a Story for All Ages, “The King O’ The Cats”, a traditional story from the British Isles, also by a reading from Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story, “The Naval Treaty”, in which Sherlock Holmes disguises his interest in a clue by commenting “What a lovely thing a rose is!”, digressing on the abundance of beauty in flowers as proof of the goodness of Providence, there being “nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion”.

“Reading Jane Langton: The Case of the Curious Theologian”

Let us speak of Jane Langton, a curious theologian. Langton is a mystery writer born and bred in Boston, Massachusetts. She sets much of her work in that region. And she’s a Unitarian Universalist. Let us begin with a general look at the detective fiction genre. Then we’ll take a closer look at some of Jane Langton’s work, and share a passage from her book, “Dead as a Dodo”.

Now, the study of theology is usually a deadly serious business. Theology asks the great questions: Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? What is the holy? How shall I live? Where are meaning and purpose in my life? Theology is not the sort of thing one generally dallies with on the daily commute. Even so, theologians are everywhere. They drive buses. They bake cakes. Some write popular fiction. I believe Jane Langton, writer of mystery novels, is a theologian.

The folks who study literary forms tell me that the genre of detective fiction emerged with the growth of an urban environment and a formal police structure. Robert Peel settled his “bobbies” into Scotland Yard in 1829. In 1840 Edgar Allan Poe established the detective genre with some short stories, including “The Murders at the Rue Morgue”.

Universal education and railway commutes were creating a reading public with time on its hands. By 1887, when Sherlock Holmes came on the scene, he was one of many detective heroes.

Now, there are rules in the genre of detective fiction. First, these detective stories are seldom about everyday crime. Most day-to-day crime is squalid, nasty, and largely transparent: spousal abuse; child abuse; drunken carelessness, and the arrogance of entitlement attitudes. Detection is not always a challenge.

But our topic is detective fiction, and there are rules: we enter into a willing suspension of disbelief, like a code of behaviour between author and reader. The genre is optimistic; we expect a solution. The genre is individualistic; we expect our lone detective to triumph where massed officialdom fails. Generally speaking, the story begins within a peaceable community. Enter a hostile, problematic individual. We accept the improbable gathering around of numerous persons who have motives to get rid of this annoying victim-to-be, and soon someone obliges. There follow doubt, fear, and suspicion. Enter the detective, uncannily acute, though not too quick (or our story will be brief). The rules assure us that our hero will not die. The rules assure us that the murderer is a real person, not a ghost. The rules assure us that order, in due course, will prevail.

In general, mystery stories are not about mystery; the stories are about the making of meaning and the restoring of moral order. The story engages our anxieties, and acknowledges them in a socially acceptable way. There will be no harm to the characters we truly care for; the perpetrator will be apprehended; and all will be kept at a distance from real life. Existence and the existential void and the odour of death and beyond are reduced to a play. Tragedy is transformed to comedy, Eden is healed and renewed, and all the cast take their bows, two by two, lovers re-united, community returned to harmony.

Two by two. The story will be told once, on surface appearances, as through a glass darkly, then told again, disclosing truth.

Rarely, but with powerful effect, the rules are overturned: the innocent suffer, the detective stumbles, oblivious. Outrage evades accountability. Things fall apart. And we are back to tragedy and the unanswerable endless circle of the human condition.

One more thing: the detective story is always in danger of becoming something else. The story of enquiry lends itself as a vehicle for information and social critique. The detective goes everywhere, meets everyone, explodes and penetrates social boundaries. Feminism, civil rights, HIV/AIDS, early-onset dementia, health care, child abuse, incest, the alienation of Viet Nam veterans, all these have been explored in detective fiction. Detective fiction explores regionalism and culture. The open inclusion of homosexual characters doubled plot possibilities overnight.

Totalitarian societies have usually been hostile to stories of detection and inquiry. Hitler and Stalin banned detective fiction.

Let us now consider the work of this Unitarian mystery writer. Jane Langton was born in Boston in 1922 and makes her home in Lincoln, Massachusetts. Langton's website was archived in 2008; Langton was 86 years old at that time; I have seen nothing published since then, but no obituary either. I grieve that she no longer publishes; in her work she remains very alive and present to me, even so.

Langton is a Unitarian Universalist and a veteran Sunday School teacher. She claims Henry David Thoreau as a household god. Langton holds graduate degrees in astronomy and the history of art, and illustrates her books with her own drawings. She has written a dozen books for children and youth, and eighteen mystery novels for adults.

Of her own work she says: "Few of my mystery novels have been centered around interesting crimes, although that would certainly have been a good idea. Instead, most have been self-indulgent wallowings in whatever excited me at the moment..... My research into these has been diligent but not deep, because one subject of study is soon succeeded by another, wildly different."

I love Langton's work. I find it rich, witty, lively, compassionate, and well written. And deep. Her writing style reminds me of a braided skein: a strand of mystery and detection spun out of human lives, intertwined with some elegant "wallowing" in art or science, and, often, another strand of some profound theological question: who are we, where do we come from, where are we going?

Let us look at a few of Langton's titles. First, "The Memorial Hall Murder": the setting is Harvard's Memorial Hall. The story follows several months of rehearsals for a performance of Handel's Messiah. The issue motivating murder is a shift in academic power. The theological theme is rebirth, renewal, resurrection. Langton works with Pico de la Mirandola's late medieval concept of the great chain of being, but she reconfigures it from vertical to horizontal. In other words, how shall we live with one another?

Next, "Good and Dead": the setting is a Unitarian Congregation in Massachusetts. The plot engages the ethics of euthanasia, murder, and terminal illness. A very special committee emerges within the congregation, the ultimate self-help group.

Another: "The Shortest Day" tracks the sun across the solstice sky as the mummings of Harvard prepare their Christmas mystery play. This book is a treat. I re-read it every Christmas.

A more difficult book: "The Face on the Wall": this one demands the reader sit with pain that cannot be made right again. "The Face on the Wall" overflows with beauty and beastliness, the suffering of the innocent, love and tenderness, greed and ambition. The problem of evil plays out across a painted wall celebrating children's literature. Terrible faces begin to appear there, Bluebeard and Grimm horrors among the cheerful whimsies. I find this book, "The Face on the Wall", perhaps Langton's deepest and most challenging theological exploration.

Next, “The Thief of Venice” is about faith and faithlessness, holocaust, relics, hope, and the power of prayer. And children. There are always children and young people in Langton’s world, and the old and the sick and the weak and the noble and those of us who are merely confused. We’re all there, doing the best we can, through all her pages.

The title I wish to consider more closely today is “Dead as a Dodo”, written in 1996. The setting is Oxford in England, specifically the Oxford University Museum, a shrine to natural history. It’s a gorgeous building, with a statue-lined courtyard and stone pillars carved with leafy vines. This museum building is a cathedral of science. Some years ago I chose to complete sabbatical in Oxford, in part so I could see this building, so compellingly did Langton bring it alive. I was not disappointed.

Langton writes of the bustle of the town and the university community, itself a ferment of natural selection. Ambitious young academic thrusters compete for advantage, forgetful of science herself. A stubborn young cleric, lost in privilege and religiosity, lost in praise, worship, and the beauty of the ancient liturgies, is forgetful of the call to service and prophetic voice. A police officer quotes the poetry of Rabindrinath Tagore.

At the heart of our story is Charles Darwin’s challenge to theology, that faith should encompass and embrace his theory of natural selection even as it overturns cherished notions concerning the nature of man and God and our place in the universe.

It is easy to forget how like a hammer blow was Darwin’s “Origin of Species”, and how it called us to a new humanity within the chain of an evolving creation. Darwin showed us, that we were wrought, not by the noble hand of God, but by chance, our form not the sole image of God, but an accident, and our hope of heaven, a myth, like other myths, a projection of our own hopes and fears. We are still dealing with the implications of that vision, six generations later. Is sheer beauty enough to be going on with? Is it enough to respond to life from a posture of wonder and awe? Darwin wrote once, in a letter, that it felt like confessing to murder, to say that species do change.

Langton's drawings are especially important to this book. She makes us see the rich cathedral-like environment that will be the setting for Darwin's trial for the murder of God: the statues of the scientists, the silent witness of the articulated skeletons of the extinct beasts, the great hall that holds them all, and the glass roof above it, open to the stars.

Langton's style for this book includes a magic realism, much like Lewis Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland". As Langton's story draws to a close, the detective's imagination brings the museum's creatures to life, and Darwin's statue stands his trial for the death of God: a charge of murder in the sublime degree. (320-27) The verdict: "impossible to tell".

Langton's detective goes on to speak of Henry David Thoreau and his "simple undergirding reverence for the world" (334). God or Darwin? "The answer [isn't] yes and it [isn't] no—it [is] both at the same time..... Every time a bird [sings], something unanswerable and demanding reassert[s] itself." (335) Did Darwin Murder God? The mystery remains.

In conclusion, we have here a Unitarian Universalist theologian at work. Her name is Jane Langton. Her work includes a rich, vivid engagement of theology. She explores the making of meaning and the beauty of the universe. I delight in the profound, compassionate insight and reflection of her work. I am excited that she did this work in the accessible, popular medium of detective fiction. I commend her to you.

For further information on Jane Langton and her writing, I would invite you to seek out her work on the web, especially the Wikipedia article. Jane Langton was born on the 30th of December, 1922; her web page was archived in 2008; she has not published since then.

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