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‘I read him much’: Agatha Christie and Poetry

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Abstract

This essay explores the pervasive and underexamined role of poetry in Agatha Christie’s crime fiction, life writing, and creative practice. While Christie is rarely discussed as a poet or as a writer shaped by poetic traditions, her work is saturated with verse: from Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Keats, Tennyson, Eliot, and Carroll to her own neglected poetry collections, *The Road of Dreams* (1925) and *Poems* (1973). Focusing on titles, epigraphs, and moments of citation in novels such as *Sad Cypress*, *Sparkling Cyanide*, and *The Hollow*, the article argues that poetic allusion in Christie is neither decorative nor merely a marker of shared cultural literacy. Rather, poetry operates as a structural and tonal device through which Christie explores fatalism, remembrance, concealment, and the irreversibility of action – central concerns of crime fiction itself. Hercule Poirot’s poetic citations, for instance, reveal detection as an interpretive practice that borders on the poetic, arranging fragments until meaning emerges. The article also reassesses Christie’s own poetry, situating it within nineteenth-century lyric and ballad traditions, and demonstrating how its themes reverberate through her prose. In doing so, it offers the first sustained account in decades of Christie’s poetry and its significance for understanding her crime writing.

Keywords: Agatha Christie; archaeology; life writing; literary allusion; Romantic poetry

This article does two things. First, it examines the use of verse in some of Christie’s best-known – and some of her lesser-known – writings: how poetry is used in discussions of crime in novels such as *Sad Cypress* (1940), where Hercule Poirot speaks of his love of the work of William Wordsworth – ‘I read him much’. It also examines how English verse resounds revealingly through the nomenclature and epigraphs of several of her titles, from the aforesaid *Sad Cypress*, an echo of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (‘Come away, come away, death, / And in sad cypress let me be laid’) to Agatha Christie Mallowan’s *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (1946), which borrows its title from Lewis Carroll’s ‘The White Knight’s Song’ (1871), a famous parody of Wordsworth. And in some of Christie’s fictions, *Sparkling Cyanide* (1945) and *The Hollow*

(1946) for instance, poetry resounds through the text in a highly suggestive manner, contributing to tone, mood, and atmosphere.

Second, the article looks at Christie's own adventures in verse, notably in her 1925 collection *The Road of Dreams*, a volume little known even among some of her most devoted admirers. I do not wish to make large claims about this body of work, but I do want to propose that it is significant, that it is writing which merits careful critical attention and there are themes in her poetry which reverberate through the author's prose. Christie's engagement with poetry, both as reader and writer, provides a revealing insight into her broader literary sensibility, her education in English verse, and her fascination with rhythm, recurrence, and concealment – some of the very qualities that animate her crime fiction. This essay offers the first sustained critical account of Agatha Christie's poetry in forty years and situates that work within a broader analysis of how poetic allusion, citation, and rhythm inform her fiction and life writing.

I

Poetic Allusion in Christie's Titles

To begin at the beginning; Agatha Christie's use of poetic allusion often starts with her very titles. Sometimes the nomenclature of Christie's novels serves to set a tone and atmosphere even before the reader has begun the story, by invoking familiar cadences from earlier literatures: scripture (*The Pale Horse*, 1961); nursery rhyme (*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*, 1940; *Hickory, Dickory, Dock*, 1955; *A Pocket Full of Rye*, 1953); and (verse) drama (*Sad Cypress*, 1940; *Taken at the Flood*, 1948; *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*, 1968 – all Shakespearean). The web of allusion includes poets beyond Shakespeare, for instance Tennyson (*The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, 1962),¹ T. S. Eliot (*The Rose and the Yew Tree*, 1948), and James Elroy Flecker (*Postern of Fate*, 1973). Christie's writing can be understood through the lens of intertextuality; the author's fiction, life writing, and verse are frequently densely woven with literary echoes, citations, even transformations, ranging from Shakespearean drama and Romantic poetry to nursery rhyme and modernist verse. These allusions are not decorative but rather structurally productive, shaping tone, meaning, and narrative expectation.

That said, I do not wish to suggest here that all this citation constitutes any remarkable display of erudition on Christie's part. The sources she draws upon (with the possible exception of the now little-read Flecker and her early adoption, so to speak, of Eliot's *Four Quartets* [1943]) are, for the most part, those that would have been familiar to a large number of readers of her social bracket and to generations of middle-class and aspirational working-class readers: Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Tennyson and so on. What Christie achieves, rather, is an appeal to the shared cultural inheritance of her readership. Her titles work by activating a common reservoir of remembered verse and proverbial wisdom – fragments of poetry and song that would have resonated as collective memory rather than demonstrating an erudite, possibly alienating, scholarship.

At the same time, many of these sources carry with them ominous undertones. Death on his pale horse rides out in the Book of Revelation, Tennyson's 'Lady of Shalott' drifts on towards her own, inevitable demise, and the witches of *Macbeth* (1623) speak bleakly from an uncanny

world of fatality and foreknowledge. Christie thus fuses the reassuringly familiar with the ominous and uncanny: the reader recognises the references and feels their chill. Her titles evoke not only the comfort of shared culture but also its shadowy side, a sense that death and danger are inscribed in the very heart of English poetry. This instinctive doubleness – the play between the known and the unsettling – marks a sharp contrast between poetic allusion in Christie and the comic deployment of quotation in her near-contemporary P. G. Wodehouse (1881-1975). In the latter's Jeeves novels and stories, Bertie Wooster's misremembered lines and whimsical citations from the poets become instruments of bathos, narrative irony, and social comedy. Christie's echoes, however, darken the mood.

To discuss one particular example, many of her original readers would have recognised that the title of Christie's *The Moving Finger* (1942) refers directly to perhaps the most famous quatrain from Edward FitzGerald's translation of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* (1859):

The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
 Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
 Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
 Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it. (ll. 1-4)

The title is not only apt inasmuch as the poison-pen letters which act as an alembic for the plot are 'typed by someone using one finger' to minimise the chances of detection (95), but also thematically. FitzGerald's quatrain's themes of fate, the passage of time, and the irreversibility of human action resonate deeply with the novel's structure and atmosphere. In *The Moving Finger*, the inevitability of revelation and the fatal consequences of deception align with the studied determinism of Khayyám's verse. Throughout her fiction, Christie frequently returns to this poetic fatalism, her plots (as in *The Moving Finger* or *Sparkling Cyanide*) sharing an underlying sense that what is done cannot be undone. But, reassuringly, murder will out, despite the worst efforts of the likes of Richard Symmington's criminal obfuscations in *The Moving Finger*, intended to give the impression that his wife, whom he has murdered, has died by suicide. 'In everybody's life there are hidden chapters which they hope may never be known' (Christie, *Moving* 63), writes Christie, but Symmington's crimes and his attempts to hide his murderous acts by false inscription will, in the end, be revealed, explained, teased out (by Jane Marple in this case), much like a poem being analysed by a literary critic. They cannot be unwritten, and 'Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it'. Christie here positions herself, metaphorically, as a kind of recording angel, as a chronicler of deeds irrevocable. Murder is not to be undone, and not – in the final analysis, to be 'hidden'.

Christie's alter egos, so to speak, Mary Westmacott and Agatha Christie Mallowan, also use the allusive method in their titles. Westmacott's *Giant's Bread* (1930) echoes Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 'The Building of the Ship' (1849) and the title of *Absent in the Spring* (1944) is borrowed from Sonnet 98, but *The Rose and the Yew Tree* (1948) uses a more rarified form of quotation than the likes of Shakespeare and Tennyson, in echoing T. S. Eliot's 'Little Gidding' from the *Four Quartets* (1943), a work which was still fairly avant garde only five

years after its first book-length publication. Eliot's introspection in *Four Quartets* and his moving, paradoxical method in addressing the emotional complexity of human experience, and the sometimes-grievous pressures upon it are mirrored in Westmacott's text. Here again, the thinking starts with the title. The unravelling of Isabella Charteris's life, which might be understood in terms of a domestic variant of classical tragedy, demonstrates, as in the author's murder mysteries, how destructive impulses to do with love, pride, and moral blindness operate beneath the surface of the everyday. Westmacott engages, like Eliot, with time and mortality and belated self-knowledge, where revelation arrives too late to redeem; the 'moment of the rose' – short-lived beauty, fleeting passion, vitality – and the 'moment of the yew-tree' – death, endurance, guilty memory – ineluctably linked together. As the final chapter of the book reminds us, 'there are some horrible memories that you can never manage to forget' (271).

One of the most intriguing titles in the Christie canon is used by the author's third *nom de plume*, Agatha Christie Mallowan. I refer to *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (1946), her self-described 'light-hearted and frivolous' memoir of archaeological life in the Middle East, notably Syria, with her second husband, Max Mallowan, and a cadre of British archaeologists toiling – and sometimes at a loss – in the Levant. Tonally, this text is a long way from detective fiction, and is notable for its understated humour, keen observation, and the manner in which it blends personal recollections with vivid evocations of character, place, and experience. To the modern eye, *Come, Tell Me How You Live* might be seen as somewhat condescending to the Arabs depicted in the memoir, who are sometimes described as crafty, sometimes astute, sometimes baffling, and at other moments played for laughs. But there is a great deal more to the book than this, and here again poetic allusion offers ways to read the narrative.

That Christie Mallowan's book is, at least in part, in comic mode is hinted at in its title, *Come, Tell Me How You Live*. The first, albeit in-joke, jest here is the pun on the word 'tell', the mounds or small hills that form over the remains of ancient settlements. Tells *tell*. The second is wider, and lies in the fact that Christie's title refers to a well-known nineteenth-century comic poem by Lewis Carroll, one of the highlights of *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), the 'White Knight's Song'. Carroll's poem describes the White Knight, who promises 'I'll tell thee everything I can / There's little to relate', meeting an old man 'A sitting on a gate' and asking him, in escalating levels of insistence, "'Who are you aged man?'" [...] And how is it you live?'" (219). The first time he asks, he is too distracted by 'thinking of a plan / To dye one's whiskers green' that he has to ask again:

So, having no reply to give
To what the old man said,
I cried, 'Come, tell me how you live!'
And thumped him on the head. (220)

And again:

I shook him well from side to side,

Until his face was blue:
'Come, tell me how you live', I cried,
'And what it is you do!' (220)

The thematic parody in Carroll's poem is of Wordsworth and of the insistent questioning of the peasantry in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798; 1800) and the *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), in which the poetic persona frequently asks a young girl, or an old man, or a rural labourer, how they do, and how it is they live. The most famous example of this is found in 'Resolution and Independence' (1807) in which the poet, out for a walk, comes across an old man beside a pond, and questions him as to his business: 'My question eagerly did I renew,/ 'How is it that you live, and what is it you do?' (ll. 97-101)

In poems like this, or in 'We are Seven' (1798), where the narrator insists that the little girl he meets in a country churchyard is only one of 'five' (as two of her siblings lie buried there) while the child repeats 'We are seven', there is a sense that the well-intentioned middle-class voice, while seeking to understand the rural poor, is always a little over-inquisitive in its interrogations. There is something elusive about their interrogatees, no matter how well-meant the curiosity. Wordsworth's gentle critique (later made violently explicit by Carroll) is of the middle-class, rationalising voice that seeks to impose understanding on the other, be it through insistent questioning or *de haut en bas* interpretations which fail to grasp the complexity or mystery of their lived experience.

In one sense this is Christie's point too, the implication of her title being that her joke is sometimes upon the white, western archaeologists by whom she was surrounded. As in Wordsworth, there is perhaps a subtle critique embedded in this, where the pursuit of knowledge from a position of intellectual or cultural dominance can lead to misinterpretations or an incomplete understanding. The little girl in 'We are Seven' has her counterpart in *Come, Tell Me How You Live* where Christie writes: 'I smile at a little girl with a tattooed forehead, and offer her a hard-boiled egg. She immediately shakes her head in alarm and hurriedly moves on. I feel I have committed a solecism' (90).

Perhaps the most heart-rending of all the episodes of cultural misunderstanding in *Come, Tell Me How You Live* is the moment when the Arab mother, with her 'imbecile' son, asks for medicine to cure him:

Max looks at the boy and turns gently to the woman. 'The boy is as he is by the will of Allah', he says. 'There is no medicine I can give you for the boy'. The woman sighs – I think a tear runs down her cheek. Then she says in a matter-of-fact voice: 'Then, Khwaja, will you give me some poison, for it is better he should not live?' Max says gently that he cannot do that either. She stares at him uncomprehendingly.
(70)

Perhaps there is an ineffable quality of ancient and modern Syrian culture that cannot be captured in careful digging and sifting – ‘with picks and spades and baskets’ (1) as Christie puts it – and the tidy post-facto rationalisations that the archaeologists seek to impose upon the past. Christie was aware of the power dynamics at play in these colonial contexts, and this subtle critique of over-inquisitive outsiders (whether archaeologists or others) is one way in which she can be seen to be making a pointed comment about the Western gaze and its limitations. ‘The question’, writes Christie in the ‘Introduction’ to *Come, Tell Me How You Live*, ‘that Archaeology asks of the Past – *Come tell me how you lived*’ (1) can only have a partial answer, in both senses of the term. But the poem referenced in the title – to which I will return later in this essay – offers considerable guidance in helping us understand Christie’s book.

The Power of the Epigraph and the Use of Citation

‘I shook him well from side to side, / Until his face was blue’: these Carrollian words, as we have seen, are hinted at in *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (1946), a volume which appeared a year after another book, *Sparkling Cyanide* (1945), which begins in gruesome echo of Carroll and which also uses poetry, this time a sonnet of Keats, to set the tone. This novel, like *Through the Looking-Glass*, also features someone whose ‘face was blue’. At the book’s opening, ‘Six people were thinking of Rosemary Barton who had died nearly a year ago’. One of them is her sister Iris who recalls her sister’s death, supposedly by suicide and demonstrably by cyanide infused in champagne: ‘For nearly a year she had deliberately tried to put the thought of Rosemary away from her. She hadn’t wanted to remember. It was too painful – too horrible! The blue cyanosed face, the convulsed clutching fingers’. (3)

This novel is a meditation on remembrance, and the first victim has a name, Rosemary, which directly evokes remembrance, as the flower of that name was used in ancient times in Greek and Roman funerary rites. More pertinently here, it also directly evokes Shakespeare, and Ophelia’s famous words, in her madness: ‘There’s rosemary, that’s for remembrance; pray you, love, remember’ (*Hamlet*, IV, v, 173-74).

Christie’s epigraphs, like her titles are never innocent, and *Sparkling Cyanide* begins with a citation from a poem which captures the wish to erase the remembrance of a lovely woman, Keats’s mournful question ‘What can I do to drive away / Remembrance from mine eyes?’ (375). The answer to this question, in the context of the novel, is not very much:

Once the inquest was over, Iris had deliberately tried to put the whole thing out of her mind. Of what good was remembrance? Forget it all! Forget the whole horrible business.

But now, she realised, she had got to remember. (3)

Iris, however much she wishes *not* to remember, is forced to do so, and so is Rosemary's somewhat unimaginative widower George Barton, not least after he receives a letter suggesting his wife's death was not what it initially seemed:

'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have reminded you'.

George Barton shook his head. He said gently: 'No, no, I don't want her forgotten. Never that.

After all', he spoke awkwardly, his eyes averted, 'that's what her name means. Rosemary – remembrance'. (21)

In *Sparkling Cyanide*, Christie demonstrates that memory and remembrance are inescapable, and that, indeed, forgetting is not always desirable. Through Iris and George, the novel asserts that the past, and those we have lost, must be confronted, with the sister/wife Rosemary's very name a testament to the persistence of memory. Christie returns to this notion, and to Shakespeare, at the bleak conclusion of the first chapter of *Sparkling Cyanide*: 'Iris shivered. She was frightened now – horribly frightened [...] She must think – go back – remember. *Rosemary, that's for remembrance*. There was to be no oblivion. (36)

As Christie's narrative insists, the past cannot be banished, and in echoing Keats and Shakespeare, she reminds us that memory – and the very names that enshrine it – demands our attention, in the end forbidding the comfort of oblivion, whatever its initial attractions.

The highly suggestive quotation from Keats's sonnet 'To ...' (1819), generally seen as being addressed to the poet's lost love Fanny Brawne, which, as we have seen, is used as the epigraph to *Sparkling Cyanide*, reappears elsewhere in Christie's work. Indeed, it appears in one of the most studied parts of her life writing in *An Autobiography* (1977), in the passage when she addresses the collapse of her first marriage, to Archie Christie. Indeed, perhaps the most poignant and suggestive use of poetry in her entire canon is in the moment when she is discussing – or perhaps avoiding fully discussing – her betrayal by her first husband and her eleven-day disappearance, about which she writes, well, not very much. But what she does write is highly suggestive and powerful, and it pivots, like *Sparkling Cyanide*, upon Keats's famous lines. Christie writes of her desire not to remember highly disagreeable events, like Iris not thinking of Rosemary, the wish to 'drive away' those memories, in Keats's phrase. She wrestles with both the impossibility of driving away and the self-protective need to move on. She begins this section of the autobiography by citing two of Keats's most yearning lines: "'What shall I do to drive away / Remembrance from mine eyes?'" wrote Keats. But should one drive it away? If one is to look back over the journey that has been one's life, is one entitled to ignore those memories that one dislikes? Or is that cowardice? I think that, perhaps, one should take one brief look and say 'Yes, this is part of my life; but it's done with. It is a strand in the tapestry of my existence. I must recognise it because it is part of me. But there is no need to dwell on it'. (350)

The Keatsian question becomes her own, becomes a lens through which Christie negotiates memory and forgetting. Like Keats and Wordsworth, Christie conceives remembrance as both burden and source of creative identity. Yet where the Romantics often find redemption through recollection, Christie's tone is cooler, less restorative; this happened, and it is painful, and it will not go away. But one must not 'dwell on it', she concludes, repeating that very phrase: 'So, after illness, came sorrow, despair and heartbreak. There is no need to dwell on it. I stood out for a year, hoping he would change. But he did not. So ended my first married life' (353). The thematic arc here is the same as that of Keats in the 'Ode to Nightingale' (1819) in moving away from attraction of obliviousness – 'ceas[ing] upon the midnight with no pain' (56) to a world which confronts – or at least makes accommodation with – grim reality, whatever its pain and loss. And that Keatsian word, remembrance, appears once again, this time with reference to Christie's second 'married life' in a poem, 'Remembrance', one of the highlights of the volume, and addressed to Max Mallowan, which was published in her *Poems* (1973):

I died – but not my love for you,
That lives for aye – though dumb,
Remember this
If I should leave you in the days to come. (11)

Here the lost love – and the dead poet – is Christie herself, envisaging her husband, far from driving away remembrance, remembering her enduring love, which remains, 'lives for aye'.

Poirot and Poetry

In *Come Tell Me How You Live*, the archaeological knowledge achieved is necessarily partial: excavation leaves gaps, interpretations are provisional, and human and environmental conditions limit what can be known. Yet these very constraints open space for imagination and artistry. Perhaps in contrast, Hercule Poirot's indefatigable pursuit of knowledge yields a far more complete understanding, though this thoroughness, at least in his own opinion, leaves little room for the imaginative or artistic. In *The Hollow* (1946) Poirot discusses exactly this issue. In chapter 9 of the novel the artist Henrietta Savernake asks the detective, 'Aren't you an artist, too, M. Poirot?':

'It is a question, that. But on the whole I would say, no.

I have known crimes that were artistic – they were, you understand, supreme exercises of imagination. But the solving of them – no, it is not the creative power that is needed. What is required is a passion for the truth'. (182)

Poirot insists he is *not* an artist, inasmuch as that requires creative invention, the making of something new, while detection requires scrupulous attention to what is already true, even when hidden. So, his ‘passion for the truth’ does not create a narrative; he strips away lies, illusions, performances, and untruths to find a single, correct interpretation.

At the same time, there is something of the poet about Poirot, someone who arranges the facts – like a poet does with words – until meaning emerges. And sometimes Poirot’s meanings are achieved through poetic citation, as per a key section in chapter 26 of *The Hollow*:

[Henrietta] turned on him suddenly. ‘Must we talk about it anymore? I hate the swimming pool. I even hate The Hollow’. Poirot murmured:

I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood;
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath,
The red-ribb’d ledges drip with a silent horror of blood
And Echo there, whatever is ask’d her, answers ‘Death’.

Henrietta turned an astonished face on him.

‘Tennyson’, said Hercule Poirot, nodding his head proudly. ‘The poetry of your Lord Tennyson’. (192)

This passage highlights the interplay between Poirot’s rational detective work and what one might see as a quasi-poetic sensibility. While he insists that detection is fundamentally a pursuit of truth and analysis rather than creation, Poirot’s use of Tennyson here rather than plainer speech reveals a subtle artistry in the way he frames the facts.

This is more than Christie demonstrating how learned her detective is by his quotations from exalted sources. Such allusions are not uncommon in detective fiction, from Sherlock Holmes’s Shakespearean quotations onwards, and had become something of a cliché by the 1950s when Dorothy Parker chided Frederic Dannay and Manfred Bennington Lee for giving Ellery Queen pretensions: he ‘must watch a nasty little habit of quoting from the classics and dropping into foreign tongues’ (567). However, in Christie allusion is more than a simple signifier of erudition; rather it gives us a way to understand what is happening in her plots. By quoting poetry, Poirot draws attention to the emotional and symbolic resonance of the setting – the Hollow becomes more than a physical location; it is charged with the Gothic foreboding, death, and psychological tension, as per Tennyson’s “Maud” with its air of dread, its ominous landscape, and claustrophobic depiction of mental disorder. The poetic citation functions as a bridge between fact and perception, perhaps emphasising that truth is not only something to be deduced but also something that can be *felt* and apprehended aesthetically.

Henrietta’s astonished reaction to Poirot’s borrowed words underscores how his method is performative as well as analytical: the detective guides others toward understanding not merely by exposition but by evoking imaginative associations. The citation thus illustrates Christie’s subtle blending of genres, where the crime narrative intersects with literary allusion, revealing that detection is as much about illuminating hidden human experience as it is about assembling

empirical facts. In this way, Poirot's invocation of Tennyson suggests that the detective, while grounded in logic, sometimes relies on a poetic sensibility to bring the full significance of events into focus, merging intellectual clarity with imaginative insight.

The Hollow was not the first Christie novel to have Poirot reaching for canonical English poetry in a highly revealing way. In *Sad Cypress* (1940), Poirot is talking to the well-meaning and very English Roddy Welman about the question that drives the novel:

'Why should anyone wish to kill Mary Gerrard?'

'That', said Poirot, 'seems to be the unanswerable question in this case. No one wished to kill Mary Gerrard'. [...]

'Therefore, the next step logically would seem to be: Mary Gerrard was not killed! But that, alas is not so. She was killed!' (12)

So far so straightforward and logical. But then Poirot's tone changes:

He added, slightly melodramatically:

'But she is in her grave, and oh,
The difference to me!'

'I beg your pardon', said Roddy.

Hercule Poirot explained:

'Wordsworth. I read him much. (13)

Here again Christie plays with genre expectations: the detective story becomes a site where logic and poetic imagination coexist. And once again her strategic use of poetry enriches the narrative, hinting that detection is not merely a cognitive exercise, but also a form of interpretive artistry. Wordsworth is preoccupied in his early work with his own inner life and those of the individuals he meets, especially in a rural setting (as per *The Hollow*), what it is they do, and have done, and how they respond emotionally to events and landscapes. Poirot, while logical and methodical, pays close attention to psychological detail: he listens to characters, observes subtle gestures, and interprets emotional reactions to understand motives. Like Wordsworth, Poirot often treats human feeling as a key to truth, and he might be seen to relish the pleasure of analysing a man or woman's thoughts as one reads a poem.

Underlying Christie's deployment of poetry here is the tension between different modes of reading and cognition. Detective fiction frequently privileges rapid inference, sequential clue-processing, and the forward drive of narrative resolution, whereas poetry often demands slower, recursive attention to language, rhythm, and associative meaning. Christie's use of poetic citation within crime fiction brings these two ways of reading into productive contact: detection becomes momentarily reflective, while poetry is drawn into the logic of investigation.

II

Christie's Poetry

Critics too easily use the terms such as 'mysteriously neglected' or 'unfairly overlooked' about some of their lesser-known critical favourites, but in this particular case, Christie's poetry, both terms are accurate. Testimony to this, for instance, is the fact that the one copy of Christie's 1925 poetry collection *The Road of Dreams* in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, has many uncut leaves – just under half of its 112 pages when I inspected it in October 2025. This is not merely an archival curiosity, but a material trace of neglect: a reminder that a portion of the work of one of the most widely read writers in literary history has gone largely unread, even within institutions devoted to literary preservation and study. But it seems to me that Christie's poetic oeuvre rewards attention both in its own right and, more obliquely, as a paratext to her crime fiction and life writing. To date, however, critical discussion of Christie's poetry has often been confined to brief notices by her biographers. Janet Morgan's summary judgement of *The Road of Dreams* in the standard biography reads – in full – 'It is, apart from an occasional phrase, sentimental and derivative' (46), while all she says of *Poems* is that it 'was brought out by Collins in 1973' (371). Lucy Worsley's *Agatha Christie: A Very Elusive Woman* (2022) does not trouble to name the collection, noting merely that '[i]n 1972, [Christie] sent [Edmund] Cork a collection of poems for him to publish if he felt fit' (341), and not commenting any further. The revised edition of Charles Osborne's *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie* (1999) contains the most sustained of the biographical treatments, devoting three pages to *The Road of Dreams* and another three to *Poems*. 'The best of the [latter] poems', Osborne comments, in decidedly faint praise, is 'Dartmoor', 'unambiguous and inoffensive', yes, but 'making up in sincerity what it lacks in originality'. He quotes the opening lines:

I shall not return again the way I came.
Back to the quiet country where the hills
Are purple in the evenings, and the tors
Are grey and quiet. (1-4)

'One has occasionally been asked to admire worse poems than this', Osborne concludes. (357).

Much of the rest of *Poems* provokes less enthusiasm; the 'Things' section, for instance, is 'of little interest, unoriginal in feeling and lacking the sense of form of much of Agatha Christie's earlier verse' (356). However, Osborne says rightly that 'the most touching poem in the book, presumably addressed privately to Mallowan, is "Remembrance" in which Agatha Christie envisages dying before her husband, which in due course she was to do' (358).

This all said, Earl F. Bargainnier's 1987 essay, 'The Poems of Agatha Christie' remains the only sustained attempt to address the verse as verse, yet even here the poems are treated selectively and without extended consideration of their literary contexts or their thematic and formal interrelations with Christie's prose. However, Bargainnier's essay has real merit and is

therefore valuable as a point of departure, but its age also underscores the need, four decades on, for a fuller reassessment of Christie's poetry and of its place within her wider literary achievement.

Poetry was a lifetime love for Christie, whose first published work, 'Steam vs. Electricity', appeared in 1905, when she was fourteen, and concerned the introduction of electric railways in her London borough, Ealing. In her *Autobiography*, she quotes the opening lines of the poem:

When first the electric trams did run
In all their scarlet glory,
'Twas well, but ere the day was done,
It was another story. (127)

Christie mistakenly claims that she was eleven years of age when this drollery appeared, and Morgan republishes this stanza and adds that '[t]his poem, however, cannot be traced' (46). However, an article in *The Times* by David Sanderson, published on 27 October 2025, which demonstrates Christie's enduring newsworthiness, drew attention to research in a blog, 'Hidden in Plain Sight: Agatha Christie's Early Poetry Revealed' by Christie scholar J.C. Bernthal which has established that the poem (which actually begins in a reference to 'trains' rather than 'trams')³ was published under the title 'Steam vs. Electricity' by A. M. C. Miller (Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller) when she was in fact fourteen, (in the *Middlesex County Times and Ealing and Hanwell Post* on 8 July 1905). It was introduced, writes Bernthal, by the words: 'A juvenile contributor sends us the following rhyming comment on last Saturday's breakdown of the electric trains' (Bernthal). Christie comments in her *Autobiography* that 'I was elated at seeing myself in print, but I cannot say that it led me to contemplate a literary career' (127).

Though Christie says she never 'longed to be a writer' (127) as a girl, 'Steam vs. Electricity' was not Agatha Miller's first go at verse and by the time she was eleven she, like many other girls of her somewhat rarefied upbringing, attempted verse: 'I too wrote poetry – perhaps everyone did at my age' (190). That said, Christie declares that some of her early examples were 'unbelievably awful', singling out a poem in the manner of Mary Anne Barker's children's verse (notable in *Kate Greenaway's Birthday Book* (1880)), which was 'written when [she was] eleven [...]: "I knew a little cowslip and a pretty flower too, / Who wished she was a bluebell and had a robe of blue". [...] 'Could anything', she asks 'be more suggestive of a complete lack of literary talent?' (190). However, 'by the age of seventeen or eighteen', she concedes, she was 'doing better', writing 'a series of poems on the Harlequin legend' and sending poems to the *Poetry Review* and was 'very pleased when [she] got a guinea prize' (190). The *Review*, then as now, was a prestigious magazine, and Christie felt 'very proud of [her]self when [she] was successful': 'I wrote quite a lot of poems from time to time. A sudden excitement would come over me and I would rush off to write down what I felt gurgling round in my mind. I had no lofty ambitions' (190).

The ‘gurgling’, a watery metaphor which recall’s Wordsworth’s characterisation of poetry in the revised ‘Preface’ to the *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) as the ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion’, continued throughout Christie’s life, in occasional periodical publications, in poems embedded in prose works (such as *Star over Bethlehem*, 1965),⁴ and in writing ‘songs from time to time, mostly ballads’ (471). It is most particularly evident in her two volumes of poetry, *The Road of Dreams* (1925) and *Poems* (1973), the second of which cannibalises the first (volume 1 of *Poems* reproduces *The Road of Dreams*, mainly unaltered).⁵ And, as we have seen, *An Autobiography* contains several fascinating, if generally tantalising references to her poetry. That volume, if hardly a scrapbook for Christie’s poetry, does include reference to several of her poems with which she felt particularly pleased or displeased (as per her first and second bluebell lyrics).

The longest example is a fine ballad, imitative of the tradition of Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ (1820) and the ancient poems which inspired it, a tradition later echoed, in part, in the similarly medieval ballad-inspired diction and atmosphere of Tennyson’s ‘Maud’. This is ‘Down in the Wood’, which also appears in *The Road of Dreams*. A King has his choice of lovely maidens, such as Lily in a ‘green hood’, and Rose dressed ‘in satin’, but his taste is for the fair maiden Bluebell. However, she ‘only dances in the woods’; when brought to the palace, she is transformed and not for the better:

With silken cords they bound her,
Before the King she stood,
Bluebell, wild Bluebell, who dances in the wood.

The King, he rose to greet her, the maid he’s sworn to wed.
The King, he took his golden crown and set it on her head.
And then he paled and shivered,
The courtiers gazed in fear,
At Bluebell, grey Bluebell, so pale and ghostly there.
(*Autobiography*, 329)

This is deft pastiche, and it reveals how instinctively Christie could channel a lyrical tradition and make it answer to her own keen sense of the uncanny in nature – in both woodland and courtly settings – felt by the likes of Keats and Tennyson before her. Christie modestly says of it: ‘One poem of mine that I re-read lately [...] I think is not bad; at least it has in it something of what I wanted to express’ (190).

There are several such moments in *The Road of Dreams* which see Christie working with the medieval ballad tradition which informed Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), Keats, Tennyson, and some later Victorian poets (notably the Housman of ‘Is my Team Ploughing?’). It also, as we have seen, informs Christie’s crime fiction, tonally and in citation and allusion. The appeal of the ballad tradition for Christie, with its tropes of the damsel in distress, allied to the Gothic trope of the authoritative male (rescuer and villain), is evident in the structural plotting of some of her contemporaneous crime fiction, for instance *The Man in*

the Brown Suit (1924), where she mobilises a recognisably ballad-like structure of female endangerment and masculine authority, Anne Beddingfeld's repeated exposure to threat, the presence of a powerful male villain masquerading as protector, and the eventual restoration of order through a legitimised male rescuer. In the Poirot and Miss Marple novels, however, these structures are both displaced and complicated: authority is relocated to figures whose power derives less from gendered dominance than from interpretative intelligence, moral insight, and narrative control.

One of the most striking examples of Christie's ballad poems is 'Dark Sheila', the tale of an abandoned woman ('A lad there is who left me'...) who goes 'roaming' on the moorland with a dark 'Stranger Lad, a Shadow Lad, who would not be denied'. As Bargainnier writes, the poem is 'one of Christie's most successful ballads, presenting a brooding narrative of Dark Sheila's grief at desertion by one lad who left her for another girl and the unexplained departure of a second lad who "loved you from the very hour he met you"' (106):

Sheila, dark Sheila, will you listen to my pleading?
Will you listen to my pleading, will you recompense my pain?
For I'm the lad who loved you, the lad who so deceived you.
I left you for another girl, and oh! I fear I grieved you!
[...]
Oh! if you'll hear my pleading, I'll return to you again. (15-21)

Despite the 'pleading' for her to return, Sheila is in thrall to the shadowy presence of the 'Stranger Lad', a metaphor for death surely, but also resonant of otherworldly 'away with the fairies' narratives, which are sometimes sinister (as per Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci') and sometimes hellish (as per the grim narrative 'The Daemon Lover', perhaps the most chilling surviving medieval ballad):

But Sheila, dark Sheila, is out upon the moorland.
She's out upon the moorland where the heather meets the sky!
And the lads shall never find her, for there's one walks by her side there –
A Stranger Lad, a Shadow Lad, who would not be denied there ...
She turned her to his calling,
As the shades of night were falling,
She turned her to his calling ... and she answered to his Cry. (22-8)

The repetitions, the supernatural atmosphere, the air of fatal seduction, and the moorland setting all point very clearly to the old ballad style filtered through nineteenth century models, such as the Lady of Shalott's fatal calling. Bargainnier sees a 'Brontëesque quality' in the setting (106), presumably in the sense of liminal spaces where mortal and supernatural meet, and Christie also invokes the fate of other abandoned women in the woods, modern echoes of 'The Forsaken Maiden'-type tradition such as Wordsworth's Martha Ray, even George Eliot's

Hetty Sorrel. Keats's own 'Knight-at-Arms' is a male equivalent of enthrallment by a shadowy stranger, of course. Christie's melding of the abandoned-woman motif, the spectral call, the claiming by a supernatural youth, and the slipping-beyond-the-mortal-world theme is deeply rooted in the uncanny poetic traditions she loved.

'Dark Sheila' and 'Down in the Wood' reappear in the 1973 *Poems*, where Christie, in true Wordsworthian editorial style, groups her new(ish) poetry written in the near fifty years since *Road of Dreams*, under thematic setting headings: 'Things' (such as sculpture, water, and music), 'Places' (for instance the Middle East and south-west England), 'Love Poems and Others' (in particular for Max Mallowan), and 'Verses of Nowadays' (which are sometimes paradoxically nostalgic). In terms of the latter section, undoubtedly the most affecting is 'I Wore My New Canary Suit', a delicate and very smart poem about aging and loss:

I wore my new canary suit
To go and meet my love,
We talked and talked of everything
In earth and heaven above.

I went again to meet my love.
The years had flitted by,
I wore my old canary suit
To bid my love goodbye.

I took it to a jumble sale
But brought it back once more
And hung it on an inner peg
Within my cupboard door.

I shall not meet my love again
For he is in his grave.
So – I've an old moth-eaten suit
And he is young and brave. (Christie, *Poems* 122)

'But she is in her grave, and oh, /The difference to me!'; the echo of Wordsworth here could not be any clearer. In Christie's ballad metre meditation on separation from a loved one, despite its consciously humdrum use of a burlesque register ('jumble sale', 'cupboard door'), we are back in the world of the ballad and of nineteenth-century poetry of loss and lost women, and in a place where, as per some of Christie's fictions, comedy and dread meet. In a sense, this late poem encapsulates all that Christie most valued in poetry.

I want finally to address a poem which Agatha Christie left out of the 1973 *Poems* and to return to *Come, Tell Me How You Live*, which includes a lively poem in comic imitation of Lewis Carroll. Bernthal is right to note that Christie's first published poem from 1905 'echoes the playful metre of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, two of the young Agatha's favourite writers'

(Bernthal). Christie's love of Carroll was an affection of long duration, echoing, as we have seen, in the title of her archaeological memoir, and 'The White Knight's Song', prompted a direct imitation, 'A-Sitting on a Tell', which appears at the beginning of *Come, Tell Me How You Live*.

Like many of the later poems which *were* collected in *Poems* ('To M.E.L.M. in Absence', for instance), 'A-Sitting on a Tell' is for, and in this case about, Max Mallowan, the young archaeologist who stole Christie's heart, to risk a cliché. It is a charming and witty comic imitation of Carroll that, as well as using his cadence and rhyme scheme, borrows the earlier writer's whimsical cadence and macabre humour, with a level of comic travesty provided by the modern and situational references – to Frigidaires and the like:

I'll tell you everything I can
If you will listen well:
I met an erudite young man
A-sitting on a Tell.
'Who are you, sir?' to him I said,
'For what is it you look?'
[...]

He said: 'I look for aged pots
Of prehistoric days,
And then I measure them in lots
And lots of different ways'.
[...]

But I was thinking of a plan
To kill a millionaire
And hide the body in a van
Or some large Frigidaire.
So, having no reply to give,
And feeling rather shy,
I cried: 'Come, tell me how you live!
And when, and where, and why?' (Christie Mallowan xiii)

Archaeology meets murder plot: the humorous contrast between scholarly obsession and criminal fantasy matches the timeless absurdity of Carroll's original. The poem continues with Christie ignoring her gentleman friend's talk of 'amulets' and 'figurines', 'photographs' and 'catalogues', while she ponders the best way to keep a corpse free from dust – 'by boiling it in brine'. In the end, however, she decides that she, like him, should 'go and dig upon a tell'. Here Christie adopts the violence-with-a-smile tone so characteristic of Lear and Carroll, her earliest poetic models; it is a direct imitation of Carroll and one of her finest poetic achievements. And Wordsworth, too – as so often with Christie – is somewhere in the background. Even on a tell,

one can balance the weight of the past with the levity of black humour, find answers to conundrums, and allow the echo of great poetry to sound through.

Notes

¹ See also *The Hollow* (1946), which evokes Tennyson's 'Maud' (1855), the first line of which runs 'I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood', and the first four lines of which, as I discuss, are cited by Hercule Poirot at a key moment in the novel.

² "“But the tune *isn't* his own invention”, she said to herself: ‘it’s “I give thee all, I can no more”. She stood and listened very attentively, but no tears came into her eyes’ (219).

³ Christie's citation in *An Autobiography* (127) is otherwise entirely accurate.

⁴ 'There are six stories and five poems in the volume. The poems are not very remarkable', says Charles Osborne in *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie* (321).

⁵ *Poems* consist of 62 poems divided into two volumes (within the same book). For an analysis of the minor discrepancies between the arrangement of *The Road of Dreams* poems in 1925 and 1973, see Osborne (356-57).

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