

Chapter 2

An Age of Reflexive Modernity: Official Truth/Justice vs. Personal Truth/Justice

The detective novels in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century often end with an ultimate truth and a restoration of a social order. The absolute truth and the rational control of a social order implicate a construction of rational modernity, in which a totalistic and homogeneous process creates a rational control forming a social institution and national bureaucracy. But, the hard-boiled and metaphysical detective novels in the middle and late periods of the twentieth century demonstrate that detectives do not guarantee an ultimate truth anymore; they even question the construction of truth. This absolute and ultimate truth seems to gradually fade away and the social order and justice, endorsed by official institutions, is no more secured. Agatha Christie's detective novels, especially those written from 1940s to 1970s, the age of industrialization and of capitalism, register a state of uncertainty and a reflexive consciousness of modernity. In other words, these novels deviate from the conventions of early classical detective novels by means of presenting a personal truth that violates the normalization of an official truth. They also display a personal justice in which criminals do not receive lawful penalty and the social order is still unstable. The absolute and ultimate truth in her novels has collapsed due to the ambiguous meanings and elliptical omissions in her narratives.

Christie's dealing with the "personal truth" implicates a critical attitude toward the rational control of the law, the ultimate and official truth, fabricated by legal institutions. Social masses' rising critical attitude toward the "official truth" and lawful institution may signal a reflexive and "radicalized"¹ force that may later

¹ "The reflexive and radicalized force" is Ulrich Beck's term. To him, it is the driving force self-reflexively created in a society and leads to a social change. See Ulrich Beck's *Reflexive Modernization: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Stanford, Calif.:

threatens the stability of the official authority. This radicalized force may be embodied by some “militant particularists,”² whose reflexive and critical attitude may take the lead of changing social trend within a rational control in an industrial and disciplinary society.

The personal truth and justice exerted by some of her characters, mainly her detective/criminal, resembles Harvey’s political force of social movements led by some “militant particularists,” who create a dynamic force of social change that poses a threat to the universal mode of official truth/justice endorsed by a dominant social order. She intends to interrogate the rational control of an official truth/justice in the interwar and postwar England through her characters who seek a personal truth and exert a personal justice. The personal truth/justice Christie depicts in interwar and postwar England challenges the official truth/justice enacted by legal institutions. Most important, some social masses’ rising interrogative perspective affirms an emergent societal trend of a “risk society” because they question “the conditions of what counts as ‘truth’ and ‘justice’” (Adam and Loon 10) at that time.

In this chapter, detective’s personal truth/justice and the inefficiency of the police authority in Christie’s detective novels evidence social masses’ rising discontent of the official truth/justice and the incompetence of the rational control in her England. Put simply, Christie, unlike other classical detective novelists who

Stanford University Press, 1994.

² The term “militant particularist” is from David Harvey. In discussing social movement, Harvey regards the driving force of social change (especially in the age of capitalism and under the process of urbanization), compared with the universal acceptance of a social mode, as a particular militant. See his “City and Justice: Social Movement in the City” in *Space of Capitalism: Towards a Critical Geography*, New York: Routledge, 2001. The aim of using both Beck’s “reflexive and radicalized” modernity and Harvey’s “militant particularist” is to explore the cause of social change in postwar England. Yet, Beck puts his reflexive and radicalized modernity in the framework of an industrial society and an age of high-modernity. Harvey’s discussion of “militant particularist” is based on the social background of capitalism and urbanization. Since Christie’s postwar society in England contains the feature of high development of industrialization, capitalism, and urbanization, the thought of Beck and of Harvey are brought into the discussion of social changes in this chapter. Also, both of them examine the uncertainty and impossibility of establishing an absolute and ultimate truth, which can be applied to the discussion of the official truth in Christie’s detective novels.

usually stress rational modernity and end their novels with an official truth/justice, criticizes this rational modernity—the modernization of the official truth/justice in an industrial society.

According to Anthony Giddens, the traditional and rational *fundamentalism* of “truth” in a “tradition” of an industrial society is under questioning by a new perspective of the rationalized truth in a “post-traditional” and “post-industrial” development of a social reality—the risk society. To him, “tradition” adumbrates the repetition of past value systems and understandings in an embedding space and time (1994, 82-83); whereas, his “post-tradition” implicates that the past event becomes discontinuous and fragmentary in a “disembedding” space and time (1994, 106). The official truth and justice, henceforth, can be regarded as a rational control of a national bureaucracy, which manipulates disciplinary and functional practices of space and time that regulate social masses’ mind. Yet, in a post-industrial society, the official truth/justice is no more secured or ultimately determined; namely, the traditional and rational value system is not embedded in fixed and disciplinary spaces and times any more. With a disembedding space and time in this changing social reality, a traditional and official construction of truth/justice also loses its *raison d’etre*. In Christie’s novels, the detective’s personal way of dealing with the “truth” can correspond to the gradual shifting of a social reality from a traditional industrial society to an incoming post-industrial risk society.

The rational conclusion of an ultimate and official truth in many classical stories functions like a kind of rational modernization. This emphasis on rationality corresponds to the construction of scientific knowledge and disciplinary perceptions of spatio-temporality in an industrial society. In this sense, this rationalizing process links the detective novel to the issue of modernity especially in an age of a rational control of an industrial society.

The modernity, according to Michele Foucault and his modernist followers,³ is traditional, rational, and institutional knowledge manipulated by a powerful apparatus through a homogenizing and normalizing process. What is more, Foucault regards a homogenizing and normalizing constitution of rational modernity as the origin of truth, thinking that the truth “is centered on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it” (1980, 131). To him, the truth is akin to a system of power that produces a “regime of truth” out of “a condition of the formation and development of capitalism” (1980, 133). This prevalence of capitalism gradually formulates an official “regime” of rational control, producing an official discourse sustaining the operation of various legal institutions like the police authority, city government and nation state. George Gilligan contends that the official discourse can lead to “the systematization of modes of argument that proclaims the state’s legal and administrative rationality” (2). Likewise, this official discourse generates “the capacity of official inquiry and official presentations of the *truth* to help shape the structure and operation of criminal justice systems” (Gilligan 12). Henceforth, the official version of truth and that of justice enhance the normalization of human behaviors in a capitalistic society and provide the police and juridical authority with legality to enforce the law. The detective’s or the police’s seeking of an ultimate truth and criminal’s receiving lawful sanction in most classical detective novels elucidate the enforcement of official truth/justice and a Foucaultian homogenizing process of rational modernity.

But, the later definition of modernity by Jurgen Habermas, for instance, indicates that the impulse of modernity, the once creative avant-garde, will be “exhausted” later. Although “the avant-garde is still expanding, it is supposedly no

³ Foucault’s tracing the “genealogy” of the forming of truth, knowledge, and power institution paves the way for some modernist and even poststructuralist or postmodernist scholars to interrogate the official discourse and institutionalized rationality in a dominant society of a nation state.

longer creative” (Habermas 6). Similarly, Ulrich Beck’s notion of “reflexive modernity” echoes Habermas’s thought of a high development of modernity because his reflexive modernity also implicates a changing perspective of a traditional and disciplinary practice whose creativity is “exhausted” in an enduring modernizing process. In wake of Habermas’ and Beck’s thought, a traditional and rational modernity in an industrial society engenders a functional and normalized viewpoint of daily life. This disciplinary life experience may be later challenged by people’s new perception of “time and space compression” and rising critique attitude toward a rational control of a dominant social order. This development is affiliated with Beck’s “radicalized” modernity creating self-reflexive effect and a return of uncertainty to the rational modernity enacted by a dominant social order.

Christie also introduces the theme of modernity to her novels. To her, the domination of an industrialized and capitalistic society functions as a controlling shackle of rational modernity in her contemporary England. Her characters are often like Poe’s “man of the crowd” who is subordinated to the rational control of a dominant social order. Yet, her detectives or quasi-detective figures still maintain their “elbow room” by their scrutinizing the efficiency of an official truth/justice in order to seek a personal truth/justice. This highlight the detectives’ (or quasi-detectives’) discontent of the official truth/justice and a reflexive awareness of a modernizing process of rationality, foreshadowing an impending risk society.

Beck argues that the high development of an industrial society may synchronize a process of “reflexive modernization.” During this process, “a radicalization of modernity, which breaks up the premises and contours of industrial society as well as opens paths to another modernity (1994, 3), may result in the emergence of a *risk society* “[designating] a developmental phase of modern society in which the social, political, economic and individual risks increasingly tend to escape the institutions for

monitoring and protection in industrial society” (1994, 5). Beck later embraces a more concrete statement toward the concept of this burgeoning development of a *risk society*. He concludes that the risk society can unfold “a dynamic of cultural and political change that undermines state bureaucracies, challenges the dominance of science and redraws the boundaries and battle lines of contemporary polities” (2000, 225).

Beck regards a risk society as a radical change of society under the high development of industrialization and capitalism. Kristine A. Miller points out, the interwar detective novels respond to the “cultural anxiety of social change” (90) at that time. This society also brings about the overflow of capital and new perception of space and time, because the capitalistic overflow leads to drastic change of hierarchy of human’s social position (capitalist and laborer), and even induces the transnational capitalism that subverts the borderline and bureaucracy of a nation state.⁴ Thus, the capitalistic society lies in its “incorporation of more complexity, contingency and fragmentation” (Adam and Loon 5), and it threatens to cast the unstable “risk” onto social, political, and economic structure within an industrialized society.

Agatha Christie’s novels, especially those published in the period of postwar England, correspond to some social phenomenon in industrialization development. She actually reflects a self-critical and self-reflexive consciousness of a risk society in which one of the legal institutions, especially the police authority, exposes its inefficiency and gradually loses its legality of a dominant social order. In fact, the police authority in Christie’s England has been questioned by Royal Commission of Inquiry due to the police’s improper enforcement of law and their corruption.⁵ For

⁴ This cultural phenomenon of a risk society, including transnational capitalism and the threatened national state by modern (like biochemical and nuclear) technologies are presented in Christie’s espionage novels written in 1960s and 1970s.

⁵ The Royal Commission of Inquiry refers to a group of Lords Commissioners who hold public inquiry into some controversial and lawful issues that the government fails to solve. This public inquiry has

this reason, the official truth/justice in postwar England is not stable enough to support its legality and is threatened by personal truth/justice of the “militant particularists.” This helps understand why Christie embraces a critical and interrogative stance toward the official version of truth and of justice sustained by the police and juridical authority at that time.

Writing her novels in the age when modernity gradually turns into a high development, Agatha Christie ineluctably expresses the feature of high-modernity with a double-edged standpoint. Although a great deal of her novels end with a restoration of social order and an official truth endorsed by a rational control of police authority, several other novels are left with an open ending without an absolute and ultimate truth. Christie actually unfolds two phases of society in her novels, which corresponds to Beck’s two phases of modernity. One is with a stable and legal institution of a dominant industrial society, like that presented in most of her early novels, enacting an official truth/justice and a governance of police authority, social institution, and national bureaucracy that are inherited from a collective understanding of a historical tradition. The other is a post-industrial risk society, like that demonstrated in many of her postwar works, with radical and personal truth/justice

been held in United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. A Royal Commissioner in these countries has legislative power which is greater than a judge, but the term of this Royal Commissioner is restricted to its commission. If the police authority in United Kingdom stands for the official truth/justice and dominant control of a legal institution, then the Royal Commission of Inquiry into some cases of police’s corruption and improper enforcement of law unfold a higher official inquiry “attacking” the official version of the truth and justice. That is, the dominant and rational control of the police authority, especially in postwar England (especially from 1950s to 1970s), can not be steadily held, and is interrogated by other institutions. The police’s misconduct of improper coping with the mob’s riot near London in 1962 consequently leads to the enacting of Police Act in 1964, in which the power of the police authority is curtailed and is strictly supervised by Home Secretary. In 1976, the passing of the Police Act created the Police Complaints Board for investigating complaints against the police. This official inquiry and interrogation of a police authority of a dominant social order substantiates that the once consolidated and official police authority can no longer permanently maintain its lawful legislation and efficiently rational control—the official truth and official justice. Moreover, since most of the legislations of official law are originated from various particular judicial precedents of personal case, the distinction of official truth/justice and personal truth/justice is obscure. This is an important feature of a risk society. See Philip Norton’s *Law and Order and British Politics*, Brookfield, VT. USA: Gower P, 1984. pp.69-73.

which opens the path to social changes and challenges the continuity of this historical tradition. The social institutions and national bureaucracy in an industrial society serve as rational controls that bound people in the society to its domination of official truth and official justice. Her characters' exertion of personal truth/justice and multiple interpretations of truth, indeed, designate an escape from a rational control and exhibit a sense of uncertainty toward rational modernity. The following discussion examines how the official truth and official justice turn uncertain in Christie's novels and how the personal truth takes the place of the official position in exerting a personal justice on lawfully-untouched criminals when the official police authority exposes its incompetence and inefficiency.

Christie's characters' critique and distrust of the police authority in her novels especially published in the wartime and postwar England akin to the declining ultimate and rational control of the police authority at that time. In a similar vein, the police authority can no longer stand for the lawful legality of the official truth/justice. Like the character Inspector Maine, one of the two inspectors who deals with this mysterious case in *And Then There Were None*,⁶ recognizes a retired inspector's past notoriety, commenting that the ex-inspector "wasn't straight" and "committed black perjury" (253). Inspector Maine's words strongly imply that this former inspector might be involved in police corruption and even committed illegal deeds during his service in the police authority. More important, the police authority in Christie's England is absorbed into a crisis because its legal authority is strictly examined by the Royal Commission of Inquiry and the Home Secretary of the British government. Consequently, its legality of lawful enforcement can no longer be secured. These also endanger the efficiency of the official truth/justice.

In *Murder on the Oriental Express*, the transnational setting seems to diminish a

⁶ This novel is also known as *Ten Little Indians* and originally as *Ten Little Niggers*.

“[nation] state’s legal and administrative rationality” (Gilligan 12) and simultaneously curtail the efficiency of the police authority. These international passengers complain a lot and distrust the capability of police in those countries the train passes through. M. Bouc, who works as a manager in an international company of train, grumbles to Poirot that the police “are so slow in these countries” (256). An Italian businessman also shows distrust of police, saying “I do not trust the Ju-go-slav police. They hate Italians. They would not have given me justice” (295). The police authority is traditionally viewed as a mainstay of the law and a sustaining force of an order in a dominant society, but Christie’s writing about the possible police corruption and inefficiency of the police may manifest that the unstable nature of a dominant legal institution as well as the fading of an official control of rational modernity.

As noticed earlier, the police authority represents an official institution which enacts official criteria of truth and justice by its dealing with criminal’s non-official and illegal behaviors. Yet, Christie’s portrayal of the police’s possible corruption and the smarter detective’s triumph over the “stupid” police in her contemporary England discloses the incompetence and inefficiency of the police authority. To a larger extent, the lawful enforcement of an official discourse becomes “less formulaic and more fragmentary” (Gilligan 5). Put in another way, the official truth, like Giddens’ traditional formulaic truth, becomes less formulaic and is interrogated by some militant particularists in a later development of an industrial society. Therefore, the discourse of the official truth/justice gradually loses its legality and receives a rigid supervision from Royal Commission in postwar England.

The judge-murderer Wargrave in *And Then There Were None* demands a strict criterion toward the police, saying “[t]he police, as servants of the law, must be of a high order of integrity. For their word is perforce believed by virtue of their profession” (265). Ironically, William Henry Blore, the retired police inspector in this

novel, fails this standard. Inspector Maine even tells an Assistant Commissioner that “he [Blore] was not the man that you’d ever accuse of a desire for *abstract* justice” (258, the emphasized is mine). Judging from Main’s words, Inspector Blore is by no means the police who can perform the official justice; the essence of “official justice” has been interrogated even by a police inspector himself. More noteworthy, connecting the adjective word “abstract” with the word “justice,” Maine seemingly knows the “official justice” lies in its nature of being an abstraction constructed by a central bureaucracy of legal institutions.

In fact, the official truth/justice does not only refer to the “legal system” of the police authority in Christie’s contemporary England. The legislation of the British law, with no major codification, has its multiple origins and reveals its flexible nature, including the law enacted by the House of Parliament, various legal acts and traditional customs. In addition, many judicial precedents resulted from official inquiries held by the Courts of England and Wales as well as Royal Commission may also turn into common law. Because of these “official and authorial” origins constituting various versions of truth/justice, the official truth/justice in Christie’s England is not absolute and ultimate. Viewed in this perspective, the official truth/justice is only an abstract and arbitrary construction, or a falsified one, established by an official authority which is subjected to “the battle of truth” (Gilligan 21) among various legal institutions for “[establishing] the central bureaucratic control of the state” (Ibid.).

In Christie’s contemporary England, various legal institutions present multiple versions of truth/justice for lawful legislation. These various forms of lawful legislation are all regarded as the official truth/justice in British government; for this reason, it is difficult to say which version is the ultimate official truth/justice because the difference between the official truth/justice and personal truth/justice has been

turned blurred; the once personal truth/justice, according to the flexible constitution of the British law, may turn into a judicial precedent that forms an official truth/justice.

The ambiguity of the ultimate and official truth/justice and the triumph of personal truth/justice are demonstrated in Christie's *And Then There Were None*, *Murder on the Oriental Express*, and *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*. The lack of an ultimate truth in *And Then There Were None* actually becomes the source of key devices for *nouveau roman* and for metaphysical detective novel. Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, in discussing this kind of novel, argue that the writers of *nouveau roman* and of metaphysical detective novel prefer the setting of *And Then There Were None* "without Judge Wargrave's final confession of his crimes and his suicide" (Merivale and Sweeney 162). The final chapter of this novel, in which a manuscript document (Wargrave's letter-in-bottle) is sent to Scotland Yard by a fishing trawler (261), seems to be added arbitrarily into the end of the novel. The final chapter provides an ultimate truth for all unsolved mysteries. Without this chapter, this detective novel just becomes a metaphysical one without police's official truth to solve a murder case because the two inspectors remain befuddled by this suspense on Indian Island.

This final chapter, therefore, functions like the *deus ex machina* who appears suddenly in a fiction or drama to resolve a situation or untangle plot. If the fisherman cannot find out this letter on the sea, the police inspectors are still entangled in "a murder mystery that no one could solve" (273) and they can never conclude with an "official truth." For this reason, the letter-in-bottle (containing the answer to puzzles of mysterious murders on Indian Island) floating on the sea symbolically conveys the significance of fleeting nature and contingent revelation of the ultimate truth.

The hidden ultimate truth can be instanced as well in *Murder on the Oriental Express*. The murdered victim, Ratchett, was once a mafia mastermind involved in the

Armstrong tragedy in America several years earlier, in which the baby of this family was kidnapped and then murdered.⁷ However, Ratchett's bribing the juries into being acquitting from his crime makes him escape from the legal penalty of official justice. The corruptive judges and the incompetent jury system lead the murdered victim's family, household servants, and their friends to plan a scheme of group-murder and form a "non-official" jury for this lawfully untouchable criminal. This "personal" jury is composed of totally twelve passengers on the train several years later with a view to executing this cold-blooded murderer.

These twelve passengers on this train express their vigorous grudge against this baby killer and strong discontent of their contemporary jurical system and law. One of the suspect-passengers Mrs. Hubbard, who finally proves to be the tragic baby's grandmother, justifies her participation of the group-murder, articulating that "society had condemned him [(Rachett)]—we were only carrying out the sentence" (321). Her words seem to imply that if the contemporary law fails to provide the society with official justice, the persons in this society should have the duty to perform the legal sentence by themselves. In Rachett's case, it is the personal justice that exceeds over the official justice. This non-official jury's death sentence of a runaway criminal exhibits the superiority of personal justice over the official counterpart as well as the distrust of legal institution that enacts the common law.

But the most unusual part of this novel that accentuates its difference from classical detective novels lies in Christie's multiple endings, which absolutely lead the mysterious case on *Oriental Express* to an open ending. Near the end of this novel, Poirot purposefully hides an ultimate truth from the passengers on the train; instead,

⁷ Christie's fictitious Armstrong case is apparently inspired by the real kidnapping case of Charles Lindbergh's son. The case of the Lindbergh baby (1932) is still part of the American unsolved mystery. The kidnapping and murder of the baby boy of world-famous aviator Charles Lindbergh and the subsequential trial caused a world-wide sensation.

he places “two possible solutions of the crime” (304) before M. Bouc and Dr. Constance and asks them “to judge which solution is the right one” (Ibid.). He gives two “theories” for solving the mystery; one is that the murderer escaped the snow-entrapped train after committing the murder, and the other is that the death of Ratchett is caused by a conspiracy of gang murder. The murderers, according to Poirot’s second solution, are these twelve passengers, who take turns giving this escaping murderer one stab while he is deeply sleeping due to the overdose of medicine. Poirot is obviously partial to and sympathized with these twelve passengers who “prefer law and order to private vengeance” (159). Understanding Poirot’s intention of giving two explanations, M. Bouc and Dr. Constance also “cooperate” with Poirot and both agree that “the first theory . . . was the correct one... [T]hat is the solution [they] offer to the Jugo-Slavian police when they arrive” (322). Then, the twelve passengers are allowed to walk free and the truth is hidden from the official police.

Poirot, indeed, becomes a non-official detective who exerts a personal justice in letting these group-murderers go without receiving lawful punishment. The surprising open ending with criminal’s getting away and with the truth being deliberately withheld from the police authority, again, displays the limitation and “exhausted” development of the law as well as the inefficiency of the police authority. Moreover, the open ending with two possibilities in the end of *Murder on the Oriental Express* also highlights a sense of uncertainty toward a rational control of social institutions at that time—a very important feature in an age of reflexive modernity.

Christie’s *And Then There Were None* reveals again this personal justice and the inefficiency of the legal institutions. The story focuses on ten strangers who are all brought to an island, called Indian Island, off the coast in southern England. These strangers, each of whom hides a guilty secret “that the law couldn’t touch” (252), are

murdered by a pathologic retired judge, who is proved to be one of them. The epilogue of this novel discloses the retired judge's desire for personal and non-official justice and his delight in seeing the guilty punished. Feeling strongly that "right should prevail" (262), Mr. Justice Wargrave, the serial killer in disguise who considers himself as an "official" executioner, puts forth his own personal justice and then "executes" other nine "criminals." He actually performs "the execution of justice upon certain individual for offences which the law cannot touch" (135). In his final message, which is put in a bottle and cast into the sea, he even decides the order of his criminal's receiving their "death sentence," saying "[t]hose whose guilt was the lightest should, I decided, pass out first, and not suffer the prolonged mental strain" (268). In this regard, he creates his own personal criteria of the severity of lawful penalty.

In order to accomplish his scheme, the judge-murderer in *And Then There Were None* even pretends to be dead by a gunshot, "revealing the high bald forehead with, in the very middle, a round stained mark from which something had trickled. . . ." (202). As he writes in his letter-in-bottle, he wishes someone would realize how clever he has been; therefore he offers three clues which point to him as the killer, in case his letter is not found. He writes down in his letter:

The third is symbolical. The manner of my death marking me on the forehead. The brand of Cain. (274)

Cain, the first murderer in Bible, is inscribed an eternal mark on his forehead by God as a severe punishment for killing his brother Abel. Henceforth, Wargrave prides himself on elevating himself as a divine figure practicing a divine justice that exceeds over the secular one. Blore, the retired police inspector, has his comment on Wargrave's past life and scene of "death," remarking:

Self-righteous smug old hypocrite. Sitting up in court feeling like God

Almighty. He'd got his all right. . . . (210)

Justice Wargrave's "divine" justice implies that the official justice is doomed due to the fact that it fails to "get people who were beyond the reach of the law" (254).

Similarly, this revelation of personal truth/justice culminates in Christie's another novel—*Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*.

Curtain, a detective novel written in 1946 by Agatha Christie but posthumously published in 1976,⁸ shares some similarities with those in *Murder on the Oriental Express* and *And Then There Were None*. Yet, unlike the judge-murderer in *And Then There Were None*, the detective-murderer, Hercule Poirot, in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* commits a murder in shooting a cunning suspect called Stephen Norton, a "perfect murderer" who is legally untouchable because he does not commit murder. He actually entices others to commit it for him. For this reason, Poirot needs to find out Stephen Norton's next target victims and stop him from luring another scapegoat into committing murder.

Like Wargrave, Hercule Poirot enforces a personal unimpeachable law and divine justice to consolidate his personal justice in making those whom the law cannot touch receive their "death sentence." Saying "I am the law" (214), he surely manipulates his personal justice and cannot stand a cunning criminal who always remains untouched by the law and escapes the lawful punishment. Poirot confesses to Hasting—his friend:

I, who do not approve of murder—I, who value human life—have ended my career by committing murder. Perhaps it is because I have been too

⁸ Hercule Poirot, the detective appearing frequently in Christie's fictions, span at least 26 years before she writes *Curtain* (Poirot makes his first entrance on Christie's crime stage in 1920 with the publication of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*). According to her autobiography, Christie mentions that she get tired of writing this character she created and deliberately wants to kills off him in *Curtain*. But the fame and popularity of Poirot in worldwide readers' mind enable her to procrastinate the publication of the book in 1976, [after her passing away](#).

self-righteous, too conscious of rectitude—that this terrible dilemma had come to me. (197)

Taking Norton's life becomes Poirot's "terrible dilemma" in saving other lives. From Poirot's angle, Norton's crime is the most vicious deed that is untouched by the secular law, so the only way to restore the social justice is to use his personal law. Shooting Norton "in the exact center of his forehead" (184), Poirot, like Wargrave, purposefully marks "the brand of Cain" (215) in the center of the forehead. Both Wargrave and Poirot cannot tolerate people who were beyond the reach of the law; and the only way to deal with them is to enforce a personal justice.

Susan Rowland further affiliates Christie's Poirot with a metaphysical detective hero, arguing that Poirot "partakes of the secular form of the divinely sanctioned knight errant on a quest for metaphysical justice" (139). This metaphysical justice actually connotes the waning of the official truth/justice enacted by secular law and the rising of the personal truth/justice. The detective's personal way of investigation signifies this triumph of personal truth/justice over the official truth/justice and exemplifies a repellent uncertainty to the once consolidated rational modernity. Christie's critical attitude toward the "official construction" of rationality revealed in her novels can broadly represent some "particular" and "militant" social masses' discontent of their society and desire to quest for their own truth and justice.

In *Five Little Pigs* (1942), the official truth/justice is interrogated by a master detective's personal truth/justice again. In order to pin down the real murderer, Poirot chooses five suspects' (the five little pigs') recollection of a murder scene, rather than the files the police authority offers, to examine the case, due to the fact that he believes that these recollections may contain "certain matter which the police files could not give [him]" and "certain facts which had been deliberately withheld from the police" (200). When Poirot asks these five suspects to recollect and write down

their memories of the crime scene, their narratives present each person's account of the murder case and manifests slightly different perspective from one another. Superintendent Hale tells Poirot that it is impossible to present a coherent and consistent truth of murder from five personal narratives because "[he'll] hear five accounts of five separate murders" (50). Thus, the truth, according to Poirot, "can never be done justice to in a mere legal recital. It is the things that are left out that are the things that matter" (64). For this reason, Poirot attempts to seek a personal truth by demanding five suspects' fragmentary memories of a murder crime. Poirot's personal and fragmentary truth finally triumphs over the police's officially recorded truth.

Surprising enough, when he finds out the real murderer, he sympathizes with her and even lets her escape away, not telling the truth to the police and uttering "there is not sufficient evidence—there are only inferences, not fact" (217). Viewed in this perspective, he actually exerts a personal justice again owing to his distrust of the police authority and discontent of the juridical court. He realizes that the law court actually accuses a wrong person of committing murder. The official justice exhibits its defect in dealing with a woman's pleading guilty of a murder crime that is actually not committed by her. Ironically, it is the detective's seeking a personal justice that brings back the official justice to her. Owing to the fact that the police and juridical authority fail to provide the social public with official justice, the master detective's personal exertion of truth/justice substitutes the official manipulation of truth and justice.

In the construction of an official truth, it is an authorial voice and a dominating institution that endow the official "understanding" of the truth. It is a normalizing and modernizing process that decides and deletes some irrelevant parts in order to make the various personal narratives become coherent and consistent. But, before this process, the elliptical narrative voice and the narrator's ambiguous meaning of

language will induce multiple interpretations and challenge the authority of the one and ultimate official truth—the control of rational modernity. The criminals’ personal memoir of their crime in Christie’s other novels, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) and *Endless Night* (1967), can exemplify this multiple interpretations.

Written in 1920s, Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* established her reputation because her device of narrator-murderer flagrantly violates the expectation of her readers at that time. Dr Sheppard, the first-person narrator in this novel disguising as the assistant to Poirot the detective, turns into the murderer himself near the end of the novel. The narrative of the novel is proved to be at last Dr. Sheppard’s personal memoir narrating the murder of Roger Ackroyd. But, Poirot sees through “[his] reticence” (214) in his “untidy pile of manuscript” (Ibid). To Poirot the detective, the truth, like the one in *Five Little Pigs*, lies in the reticence part of a personal narrative. Sheppard’s “reticence” in his narrative proves to be the gap of the narrative, which, to Poirot, is the essential clue for solving the mystery. When Dr. Sheppard self-consciously and self-critically comments on his own manuscript of his memoir, he even thinks about the possibility of putting an elliptical gap in his narrative, saying:

All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that *blank* ten minutes? (240 emphasis mine)

This elliptical and reticent ten minutes, is the key moment for Poirot to discern Sheppard’s device of “lie by omission” (Bayard 40) and to unveil his hidden crime.

However, Pierre Bayard, in discussing *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, maintains that Poirot actually gets the solution wrong; he proposes an alternative ending in this novel by observing that this elliptical narrative, with ten-minute’s reticence, may produce “a kaleidoscopic image of the literary text” and “polyphony of the meanings”

(Bayard 69). Seen in his light, this elliptical narrative in the key ten minutes resembles the device of “lie by purposeful omission,” by which, the readers of Sheppard’s confessional memoir, including the police and the detective, can produce multiple and various interpretations to fill the gap while they are reading. Put simply, the seeking of an ultimate truth of Roger Ackroyd’s death in this novel seems to be impossible.

Sheppard’s “reticence” part of his personal memoir induces two critics’ different interpretations. Bayard concludes that Dr. Sheppard is an unreliable liar and consequently his confession of murder will cause multiple solutions. More important, he implies that the murderer of Roger Ackroyd, instead of Sheppard, may be someone else.⁹ Unlike Bayard, who views Dr. Sheppard as a liar, Lee Horsley defends Dr. Sheppard as a man who “manages to tell us nothing but the truth” (Horsley 45). He takes Sheppard’s “lie by omission” as a “double-edged discourse,” which “entails the use of statements that can signify two completely contrary things” (Ibid.). Though Horsley believes that Sheppard does not tell lies, he agrees with Bayard on the multiple meanings caused by Sheppard’s elliptical narratives. According to Horsley, Sheppard may tell nothing but the truth, but “he does not tell the *whole* truth” (46, emphasis mine). More precisely, in Sheppard’s perspective, he tells his own personal version of truth, but the official police demands that he should explain away his elliptical narrative and tell the “whole” perspective of truth. This official demand of an ultimate truth constitutes an official discourse of a truth and emphasizes its rational control of the criminal who tells his own version of truth.

Endless Night raises the same question in *The Murder of the Roger Ackroyd*—“does the narrator-murderer tell lies in his confessional memoir?” The answer also turns ambiguous because of the narrator’s using of a double-edged

⁹ Actually Bayard, after giving several literary evidences in discussing this novel, strongly suggests that Caroline Sheppard, Dr. Sheppard’s spinster sister, is the murderer who kills Roger Ackroyd.

discourse. To Michael, the narrator-murderer, his personal memoir reflects “nothing but the truth,” although with some elliptical omissions and double-edged meaning. However, this narrative becomes unreliable when the police authority knows that the narrator may suffer mental problem. Near the end of the novel, as Michael suggests, “all sort of people” including police, lawyer and several doctors, come to see him (271). This coming of police and doctors offers an “official” assistance to him, but it simultaneously implies that he is both a criminal and a patient because he is regarded as a psycho killer enjoying the pleasure of murder. The police, lawyer, and doctor stand for the official “normalizers” who intends to “normalize” Michael into an ordinary citizen. After this homogenizing process, Michael’s behaviors will be consistent with the normal mentality and with the law standardized by the legal institutions of a national bureaucracy.

Like Dr. Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Michael also writes down his personal version of “truth” in his memoir. Yet, the legal institutions (the doctors’ psychological discourse) and the national bureaucracy (the law and the police) still conclude that his personal statement is not “adoptable” to the ultimate and official truth. The police’s using the phrase “deminshed responsibility”¹⁰ (272) to Michael’s crime indicates that the official authority even considers him a psycho suffering mental problem. Thus, the personal truth in *Endless Night* relatively highlights the rational control of a dominant social order. To the police authority, the official truth can only be accepted as an absolute and ultimate discourse, and any personal narrative without being endorsed by official authority is regarded as a personal and non-authorized truth.

The contradiction between personal truth/justice and official truth/justice in

¹⁰ In criminal law, diminished responsibility (or diminished capacity) refers to defendants may be reduced their punishment due to their mental functions were "diminished" or impaired.

these Christie's novels may convey social masses' rising interrogative stance and their sense of uncertainty toward the dominant social order. In these novels, the personal truth/justice of the surprising judge-murderer, detective-murderer and narrator-murderer may serve as the "radical" impetus of the social change. The rising of personal truth/justice and the fading of official truth/justice in Christie's works can be viewed as Beck's shifting process between two phases of modernity. The official truth/justice, the first phase of modernity, indicates the official authority or the triumphant dominance of a powerful institution and bureaucracy. Within this framework of the first modernity, the personal truth, with the potentiality to form another radicalized modernity, can refer to a particular and centrifugal force that undermines the consolidation of the first modernity.

In novels like *Murder on the Oriental Express*, *And Then There Were None*, and *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, Christie's detective's distrust and discontent of the police and juridical authority as well as the enforcement of the personal truth/justice over a secular law signify the weakening and controlling bond of a dominant social modernity. The personal vengeance on the criminal in *Murder on the Oriental Express* especially concretizes this discontent and distrust of the official law and justice. This antithesis of personal truth/justice and official truth/justice reflects the limitation of law and a possibility of alternative justice—the personal exertion of justice, which deviates from the rational control of the secular law and reshapes a new life experience in a social reality.

The theme of runaway criminal from lawful penalty in *Murder on the Oriental Express*, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* and *Five Little Pigs* manifests that the truth is withheld from the police authority. Again, this theme denotes a discontent toward legal institutions and national bureaucracy. The detective seems to become a social outlaw because he commits perjury in hiding the truth from the police. In *Curtain*, the

detective even manipulates a personal justice in executing a lawfully untouchable criminal. This ambiguous role of detective, vacillating between the personal truth/justice of a private sleuth and the official truth/justice of a national police authority, produces a sense of ambiguity toward an official truth/justice within a dominant social order.

The criminal's or suspect's personal memoirs in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Endless Night*, and *Five Little Pigs* elaborate the multiple perspectives and differential interpretations of a crime story. But, these novels also relatively underscore the manipulation of hegemony of the official authority in turning these multiple perspectives into a coherently and consistently official perspective of an ultimate truth. Under the surface of the official and documentary truth, the multiple and fragmentary interpretations of the personal narratives are undermining the credibility of the official truth. Thus, the personal truth becomes the source of the effect of uncertainty and the impetus to the burgeoning trend of social change.

During interwar and postwar periods, social changes are also featured with new spatial and temporal perceptions caused by a high development of industrialization and dynamic capital flows. The general public's rational and functional perceptions of space and time become disciplinary practices of spatio-temporality in an industrial society. These disciplinary practices lead to a normalizing life experience, such as daily routines, which serves as a dominant and rational control exerting on a human subject's creative mind. The take-it-for-granted daily life may become "exhausted" and turn into a monotonous and boring experience, which is challenged and gradually replaced later by new perceptions of space and time, or what David Harvey calls a "time-space compression," in a high development of an industrial society. This will be the thematic issue in the following chapter.