



“NEEDY AND GREEDY AND BLACK INSIDE”

A Review of Ruth Rendell’s *Thirteen Steps Down*
and *End in Tears* and
Barbara Vine’s *The Minotaur*

by *Natalie B. Cole*

“I’m needy and greedy and black inside,” confesses the speaker of the poem “Halloween” (Professor Diane Christian, 1983). This unassuaged need and accompanying guilt aptly describes Ruth Rendell’s characters, both the innocent and the guilty. Often examining primal and poignant human needs that rend their unsatisfied possessors, Rendell excels in her portrayal of character, their English milieu, and the social and psychological unraveling of human lives. Her most recent three novels represent the three categories of genre in which she writes. *End in Tears* (2006) belongs to the detective novel genre, featuring a detective belonging to an official police force, with some elements of the police procedural, while *Thirteen Steps Down* (2005) is a crime novel, with the focus not on “whodunit” but on the psychology of the murderer (P.D. James, 1984). *The Minotaur* (2006) qualifies as a suspense novel/psychological thriller, written by Rendell under the pseudonym Barbara Vine.

End in Tears continues the series featuring Chief Inspector Detective (CID) Reginald Wexford in his twentieth appearance since 1964. One might expect that Reg would be getting

a bit creaky, along with the formula of the detective novel as described by W.H. Auden in "The Guilty Vicarage": the "peaceful state before murder" is disturbed when murder occurs, the detective investigates, the innocent are falsely suspected, the guilty party is eventually discovered and expelled from the community, and the "peaceful state" is restored. Restoring moral rule, though, has become a pretty tall order in 2006. Wexford embodies the nostalgia for a police force that still promises a measure of justice and moral order, and he serves as a *pater familias* set apart from the usual loner detective-figure, enjoying a happy domesticity with his sensible wife Dora, his worst vices the high-fat cashews he enjoys with his icy-cold Sauvignon. Wexford is no fool, however. As a detective, he is simply more disposed to dispense the milk of human kindness, than crustier series compatriots such as Colin Dexter's Detective Inspector Morse in Oxford, or Ian Rankin's Detective John Rebus, an isolated hard drinker in Glasgow. Like Morse, Wexford has a strong attachment to his right-hand man on the job, in this case, DI Mike Burden. Their relationship, and Burden's becoming a widower and remarrying, have been the subplots in several Wexford novels, and their friendship is as comfortable as an old shoe: "They got on, he and Mike. If they couldn't quite say everything that came into their heads to each other, they got as near to doing this as two people can." Rendell's ability to portray, plausibly and economically, the work relationships of Wexford and his staffers, is not the least of this series' pleasures. In one of her best, Rendell has the still-mourning Burden cook supper for Wexford, using roadside mushrooms during a case involving accidental or malicious poisoning (*Means of Evil*, 1979).

End in Tears depicts a swirl of prejudices and opportunities in an English countryside rapidly becoming more culturally diverse and in which new technologies and travel abroad make the parameters of Wexford's investigation wider. Rendell, with conscious irony, places the older Wexford at the center, often as the voice of toleration and mediation, with younger generations depicted as politically correct in speech

but biased in other, more significant ways. Wexford must solve the murder of a teen-age mother, at the same time that his own daughter Sylvia, has announced that she is the surrogate mother (and egg provider) for the baby of her divorced husband and his new wife, and will give them the baby as soon as it is born. Wexford's projected loss over his soon-to-be-born grandchild increases his distress at the orphaned toddler's negligent caregivers as he investigates the crime involving the murder of teenage mother Amber Marshalsen, discovered at the end of the lane leading to her home, with a thousand pounds sterling left in her jacket pocket. This novel, like all the Wexford novels, investigates the relationships between suspects, and between the suspects and the deceased, lifting the curtains on Amber's father and stepmother and the small community of surrounding neighbors, and outward into the circle of acquaintances and connections, until a second murder occurs. Along the way, Wexford's tact gives rise to humor, as when he interviews a snobbish former MP's wife:

He responded by asking her if he was right in thinking she was Mrs. Hilland. 'Vivien Hilland, yes' she said, her voice several degrees higher up the class scale than the home she lived in. A small manor house would have been more appropriate.

It is the astuteness of Wexford's observations of others that enables him finally to identify the criminal, in this case as in all the others. If we see "the detective story [as] a form of traditional heroic "discourse" in modern guise," and the detective as a "mythic figure in a ritual," Wexford is a figure who, despite appearing in a realistic mode in which scientific methodology is employed, participates in myth-making, in the sense that he offers a process by which "knowledge is transformed into power" and provides "a scenario or prescription for action, defining and limiting the possibilities for human response to the universe" (Nelson and Avery, 465). Wexford is aided in his detection by information from a forensic pathologist and plinthologist or brick expert, as well as from his squad of

detective constables (DCs), but he uses his understanding of human behavior to be the mythic figure in the ritual that is crime solving. Kinship ties of siblings, spouses, and parents and children prove especially baffling in *End in Tears*.

Two other aspects of this detective novel should be noted: its rendering of its English setting, and its introduction of new police detectives to assist Wexford and serve as foils for him. Rendell emphasizes the Englishness of her setting quite often, beginning with the murder occurring in “that heat which is peculiarly English, the air heavy with humidity, the sun scalding where it touched,” and in scenes of the countryside, where “everywhere huge beeches spread their green branches almost to meet above the narrow lane.” Burden and Wexford venture into an ominous rural cottage and emerge:

The air in the wood smelt wonderful. Like flowers and new-mown hay and ripe apples said Burden, uncharacteristically lyrical. They walked back along the path, inhaling the scented air with deep pleasure.

Drinking is done in pubs with names like the *The Olive and Dove* and *The Gooseberry Bush*, and Wexford eats “fry ups” of bacon, eggs, fried potatoes, fried bread, fried tomatoes, and fried mushrooms. As Wexford’s pregnant daughter Sylvia has tea after work, Rendell writes, “It is a peculiarity of the British, and probably the British alone, that to cool down on a very hot day they drink very hot tea.”

New characters, DS [Detective Sergeant] Hannah Goldsmith and DC [Detective Constable] Balbir Bhattacharya introduce a romance plot as well as race and gender issues, updating the Wexford series for a new generation of readers but not detracting from Wexford’s centrality as the series detective and its moral compass. Whether or not readers like this subplot may be a matter of taste. Rendell sketches a feminist view of the police force by creating a female DS who dates a colleague/subordinate, and by including scenes of female officers on and off the job, but her writerly heart is clearly still with Wexford. After twenty-two years, who can blame her? Readers

of *End in Tears* will enjoy Wexford and the British environs of Kingsmarkam as well.

About her most recent crime novel Rendell says, "I don't think I could have written *Thirteen Steps Down* twenty years ago" because of the novel's portrayal of the criminal's obsession with fame (NPR interview, 9 Oct. 2005). Mix Cellini, a fitness equipment repairman, makes a pilgrimage at the novel's beginning to 10 Rillington Place, the former home of the 1940's serial killer John Christie, and soon it becomes clear that Mix will emulate his idol. Not only Mix's crimes themselves, but also the locales and narrative method of Rendell, give this story its chilling effect. Mix rents a room in a moldering Victorian mansion belonging to Gwendolen Chawcer, a woman in her seventies who fantasizes about the young doctor who attended her mother's terminal illness fifty years before, and whom she hopes, improbably, will call on her again. In the meantime, she wanders around her unkempt home in search of novels to reread: favorites are George Eliot, Samuel Richardson and Thomas Mann. Miss Chawcer is a "living anachronism," whose only recreations besides reading are scanning the obituaries when she sneaks up to her lodger's room to steal a glance at his *Daily Telegraph*, and inviting her "friends" for tea, although she's hardly sentimental, "prefer[ring] her own company to that of her friends." Rendell is masterful in her crime fiction in moving into free indirect discourse, a type of voice representing a character's thoughts that is not marked by a tag clause (i.e. "she thought," "she felt,") or by quotations marks (Prince, 1987). This movement between the third person narrator and the internal thoughts and feelings of a character is seamless in Rendell's writing, and the effect is to lend some of the third-person narrator's objectivity and authority to the character. When the characters themselves are criminal, or morally skewed, the effect is seductive and compelling. The reader recognizes that the voice has changed (free indirect discourse), yet that voice still resembles the third person narrator, whom the reader trusts. In this scene, Rendell uses both voices:

Olive was wearing a trouser suit in bright emerald green and a lot of mock-gold jewelry. Kitsch, Gwendolyn called it to herself. Olive was too fat and too old to wear trousers or anything that colour. She was proud of her long fingernails and had lacquered them in the same scarlet as her lipstick. Gwendolen stared at lips and nails with the critical and mocking eye of a young girl. She often wondered why she had friends when she disliked them and didn't want their company.

Here Rendell combines objective description with Gwendolen's impressions. Free indirect discourse has a cumulative effect in *Thirteen Steps Down*, accustoming the reader to the eccentricities and mental processes of the characters into whose minds the reader is drawn. It's not a pretty sight. The lot in life for Rendell characters is seldom lucky or ascending, as the title implies, nor are characters motivated by noble feelings or exalted passions.

Rendell depicts a world of harsh, unforgiving surfaces, of photogenic beauty and littered, shabby ugliness, in the Havishamesque house of Miss Chawcer, but also in the "Fiterama" where her lodger Mix Cellini works, in the fitness clubs, and in the homes of the rich who buy fitness equipment. Mix has his nose pressed up against the glass of this lifestyle as he enters these homes only to repair equipment, and occasionally, have sex with a bored housewife. He numbs his disappointment with a drink of his own devising, a "Boot Camp," and fantasizes about a luxurious life and the steps he must take to attain it.

Rendell again shows a diverse metropolitan London, with immigrants from Tehran, Calcutta and Bosnia, and strong sense of place as characters range across the city from Notting Hill to Docklands to Acton to Campden Hill Square. Settings within settings, such as bedrooms, gardens, wells, and a stained glass depiction of "Isabella and the Pot of Basil," are rich and evocative, slyly alluding to plot elements. Memories of English food of the nineteen fifties, the lavish teas Miss Chawcer used to prepare for Dr. Reeves underscore her starved heart:

Years had passed since she had baked or cooked anything more than, say, a scrambled egg, but once every cake eaten in this house, every pie and flapjack and éclair, had been made by her. She particularly remembered a certain swiss roll, the pale creamy-yellow sponge, the raspberry jam, the subtle dusting of powdered sugar. The professor [her father] wouldn't tolerate bought cakes.

P.D. James, to whom Rendell dedicates *Thirteen Steps Down*, has noted about the crime novel: "The moral stance is much less clear and simplistic than in a detective story. In the words of Robert Browning, "Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things./The honest thief, the tender murderer,/ The superstitious atheist . . ." (James, 1984). While Gwendolen's aging gives her a vulnerability despite her selfishness, Mix's lack of class mobility and moments of terror fail to inspire as much sympathy as they might were he not a stalker. Finally, *Thirteen Steps Down* left me wanting to reread the riveting *Make Death Love Me* (1980), or on the themes of obsessive love, *The Bride-maid* (1989) or *Going Wrong* (1990)—Rendell novels with more compelling twists and protagonists, who, though not less pathological, somehow evoke more interest and empathy for their downward spirals. Ultimately, the fascination in this novel is in watching how Mix Cellini and Gwendolen Chawcer will inevitably collide within the gothic setting of St. Blaise House, and in viewing, through the twin windows of third person narration and free indirect discourse, their very different but equally out-of-touch views of "reality."

The Minotaur is the eleventh novel by "Ruth Rendell writing as Barbara Vine." Set in the late 1960s, protagonist/narrator Kerstin Kvist, a twenty-four year old Swedish woman, comes to an English country house as a nurse-companion to a thirty-nine year-old man, John Cosway, who lives with his aging mother and three sisters at Lydstep Old Hall near Colchester in southeast England. Cosway, diagnosed as a schizophrenic, is kept heavily medicated by his mother. The prescriber of this medication, her son's physician, just happens to be her old lover.

This family has “issues”: of property, medical diagnosis, the presence of an outsider witnessing the inner workings of a dysfunctional family, and vengeful sibling rivalry between the four sisters, one of whom is a rich widow in London who periodically visits the family. Rendell is well aware of the literary traditions she invokes in entering this territory, and in choosing her narrator, selects a non-English European who can observe the family with the additional distance of national “Otherness,” and who keeps a diary in Swedish that the family can’t read.

Kerstin can’t resist “reading” the Cosways through the lens of Victorian novels, and given the family’s preoccupations—power over other family members, money, madness, teatime, churchgoing, and secrets—this seems appropriate. Watching the rector and his fiancée, Winifred Cosway, discuss church parish business, she writes, “You can tell I know my Trollope.” When one sister draws her into the kitchen to reveal some personal family business, she confesses, “I felt like a character in Charlotte Bronte, curious to know.” At a church function, she realizes gossip runs rampant in their village: “It was like Jane Austen but a hundred years later.” Books and libraries loom large in this novel, and deliciously so.

The ruthlessness of the matriarch, Julia Cosway, the growing discontent of the downtrodden housekeeper daughter Ida, the late-blooming sexuality of Ella and Winifred, the suspicious treatment the “mad” John receives, gradually converge, as the economic and emotional abyss of the Cosway family is uncovered. Kerstin is a reliable narrator whose judgment is tempered with compassion in her interactions with the Cosways. She is unsparing in her simple descriptions: all the Cosway women laugh “as if laughter itself was a discreet substitute for a bitter comment.” They live with a “mean and cheeseparing indifference to comfort,” with an amethyst geode one of the only beautiful objects in their home. Lydstep Old Hall’s interior is so cold that John takes to wearing a sleeping bag and several blankets during the day, and only one room is adequately heated. Its chief decorations are steel en-

gravings of ruins of 18th century Italy, the perfect visual correlative to the outdated and dilapidated relationships of its inmates. The most beautiful room, the library, is kept mysteriously locked, its windows covered. Even Lydstep's exterior is shape-shifting:

When I first saw it in June it was entirely covered, from end to end and from foundations to the line of the roof, in intensely green Virginia creeper Windows alone peeped out of this leafy wrapping. It was rather a windy day, and, because the breeze set all the hundreds of thousands of leaves shivering, there was an illusion that the house itself moved, shrank, expanded, and subsided again.

As in her other novels, "Rendell writing as Barbara Vine" makes Americans and others eager to get back to England:

The sky [was] uniformly cloud-grey, the kind of day I have come to think of as essentially English, windless and still, the atmosphere calm and unchanging. We walked in single file three or four metres apart along the kind of wide path I believe is called a ride, between low hedges, broken here and there by gates into the meadows. Blossom was out on the brambles and the elder, it was pretty and tranquil, like a painting by Constable, who had lived not far from here. Across the little valley between shallow hills, I could see Windrose, a cluster of houses, a big house a short distance away, and the red church tower rising high above paler roofs and dark thatch.

The Minotaur is reminiscent of Rachel Cusk's farce *The Country Life*, a deliberate retelling of the governess/companion tale and English country-house exile, although Rendell/Vine's novel has different aims. It is similar only in its reminding one of the possibilities still to be exploited here, as long as the writer can create character, family relationships, social milieu and physical setting, and bring in an interloper or two to set multiple plot strands going.

When asked how she decides when to write under which

name, Rendell replied, “To me they are entirely different.” Novels by “Barbara Vine” are “almost always set entirely in the past” (NPR Interview, 9 Oct., 2005). “Barbara” is Rendell’s middle name, and “Vine” comes from her grandmother’s maiden name. Rendell in a preface for American readers in *A Dark Adapted Eye* (1986) explained this about her two names:

It has always interested me—I don’t think my parents realized this—that both my names mean or imply “a stranger in a strange land.” Ruth who was exile into an alien country, Barbara, that signifies “a foreigner.”

Growing up with two names doesn’t make you two people. It does give you two aspects of personality, and Ruth and Barbara are two aspects of me. Ruth is tougher, colder, more analytical, possibly more aggressive.

This distinction between “Ruth” and “Barbara” may have been more true twenty years ago, because *The Minotaur* is as good as either *Thirteen Steps Down* or *End in Tears*, with a more complex social milieu. For those, though, that prefer the genres of detective and crime fiction, *The Minotaur* may not cut to the chase quickly enough, as it works carefully to build suspense, unfold relationships, and reveal secrets. Bibliophiles, Anglophiles, and anyone who likes a mystery whose milieu is an English country family, should enjoy *The Minotaur*. Its characters both resist change and reach desperately for it, and for those who appreciate a simmering plot which reaches a rolling boil, but not too soon, this novel will satisfy. “Needy and greedy and black inside,” and perhaps that is just another way of saying they are fully human, Rendell’s characters in all three novels fascinate in their psychological complexity, from the top of the stairs to the bottom of the teacup.

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