

Death in Florence: Daphne du Maurier's *My Cousin Rachel* and Michael Dibdin's *A Rich Full Death*

Talk about books, 11 Jan 2023 — Art Kavanagh

In this post I want to look at two novels by English authors, written about 35 years apart, both set in or around the 1850s, and in each of which an important character dies in Florence. While it would be a bit of a stretch to describe the first, *My Cousin Rachel* (1951), as a crime novel, that label seems clearly to fit the second, *A Rich Full Death* (1986). Dibdin's plot begins with two murders that have been arranged to look like suicides, then expands into a series of grotesque and undisguised murders that reflect some of the personages in Dante's *Inferno* and their punishments. The poet Robert Browning steals items from the narrator's apartment and plants them at the scenes of the various murders, forcing the narrator to chase around attempting to recover his incriminating belongings, following clues from the poem *Sordello*. And yet, by the end of that book, it seems unlikely that any crime at all has

actually been committed. In contrast, du Maurier's novel ends with the narrator reflecting on the possibility that he might deserve hanging, though he can expect to avoid the suspicion of everyone except his godfather's daughter.

Most of the action of *My Cousin Rachel* occurs in Cornwall where the narrator, Philip Ashley, who was orphaned at a young age, lives in the grand but dilapidated home of his cousin Ambrose, a childless bachelor. Ambrose has no intention of marrying and has made a will leaving his estate to Philip. This happy state continues for several years until Ambrose is advised that, for the good of his health, he ought to be spending his winters somewhere much dryer and warmer than Cornwall. The third year, Ambrose decides that he wants to see the gardens and plants of Rome and Florence. He has been told that these cities will not be warm in winter but that they will at least be dry (p. 11). In Florence he meets and marries a cousin of his and Philip's, Rachel. His marriage is a surprise to Philip and to his friends in Cornwall.

Rachel had a Cornish father and a mother from Rome, and was brought up in Italy. Her first husband, an Italian count, was killed in a duel. From him she had inherited a villa and substantial debts. Although Ambrose had intended to return

home in the spring, after his marriage the couple remained in Italy for over a year, during which (as Philip later discovered) Rachel suffered a miscarriage. During the prolonged absence, Philip received very little correspondence from Ambrose but the two letters he did receive told him that Ambrose's health had deteriorated, that he had become deeply suspicious of his wife, and that he wondered if he was being poisoned. In late July, Philip resolved to take the three-week trip to Florence.

He arrived there in mid August, only to learn that Ambrose had died shortly after Philip's departure from Cornwall and that Rachel had gone away after the funeral, taking Ambrose's possessions with her. Her friend and business adviser, Rainaldi, claimed not to know where she had gone. Philip saw no point in staying in Florence, which he described as "that city of cold beauty and spilt blood" (p. 43). It had seemed to him on his arrival there that the climate was hostile to life and health:

... it seemed to me, in my anxiety and fear for Ambrose, that all living things were thirsty in this country, and when water was denied they fell into decay and died. (p. 30)

Parched and travel-weary, he was at once repelled by and drawn to the Arno:

... like the poor beasts upon the road I longed for water. There it was before me. Not the blue estuary of home, rippling and salty fresh, whipped with sea spray, but a slow-moving turgid stream, brown like the river bed beneath it, oozing and sucking its way under the arches of the bridge, and ever and again its flat smooth surface breaking into bubbles. Waste matter was borne away upon this river, wisps of straw, and vegetation, yet to my imagination, fevered almost with fatigue and thirst, it was something to be tasted, swallowed, poured down the throat as one might pour a draught of poison. (p. 30)

A short time afterwards, when he had spoken to Rainaldi, he saw that the river was flowing more freely than before, but it carried away the body of a dead dog (p. 50).

Philip returned to the estate, which he would now inherit. Ambrose's will provided that it be held in trust until his twenty-fifth birthday, the 1 April following. Finding himself with a wife to provide for, Ambrose had drawn up a handwritten new will,

but had held back from executing it, at first because of concern at Rachel's extravagant spending, but afterwards because of his suspicion that she was capable of much worse.

The new will would have settled his estate on Rachel for life, with remainder to Philip outright on her death. During her life, Philip would be manager of the estate. But Ambrose's original will, which, of course, made no provision for Rachel, took effect. Philip's godfather, trustee and now guardian, Nick Kendall, advised the new heir that to leave Rachel unprovided for would look unbecoming and give rise to gossip in the locality, but Philip, having decided that Rachel had tormented his cousin and been responsible for his death, at first refused to think about her wellbeing or future.

His hostility didn't long survive his first meeting with the widow and before long he had resolved that, as soon as the estate vested in him, he would settle it in accordance with the unexecuted will: a life interest to Rachel with remainder to himself. The life interest would terminate on her remarriage. Philip carried out this intention on his twenty-fifth birthday, only to find almost immediately that Rachel's apparent feelings for him had cooled appreciably.

Philip concluded that there had been a miscommunication between him and Rachel, caused by their different cultural expectations and assumptions. He had believed he was asking her to marry him, though not expressing his wishes clearly; she had thought he was asking her to have sex with him, and it was to that request, not the intended marriage proposal, that she had acceded. Louise, the daughter of Nick Kendall, and Philip's friend since childhood, had a different interpretation of Rachel's behaviour. In her view, Rachel had been willing to marry Philip until she read the new settlement and had her understanding of it confirmed by Nick Kendall: if she were to marry anybody, including Philip, she would lose her interest and the property would become his immediately.

Louise's explanation is plausible and fits the reported facts neatly, but it need not completely contradict Philip's. By including the remarriage clause, Philip had indeed given Rachel a compelling incentive against marrying him or anybody else, one that would apply whatever her previous intentions had been. At any rate, Philip's discomposure at having his proposal rejected undoubtedly contributed to the revival of his

suspicious as to Rachel's supposed role in Ambrose's death.

To poison her husband slowly over a period of months would be the action of a calculating, not an impulsive, killer; but to have killed Ambrose while his new will was still unsigned could only be an impulsive act. Rainaldi explained her departure from Florence soon after Ambrose's funeral as characteristically impulsive (p. 49), and agreed with Nick Kendall that she was extravagant in her spending (and so, by implication, lacking self-discipline), but she had shown some capacity for calculation in her conduct after Philip resettled the estate. Ultimately, the reader may not be absolutely certain that Ambrose died by "natural causes" but the evidence points that way. Louise, the most ill disposed of the other characters towards Rachel, urged Philip to acknowledge that "there is no proof" (p. 333) that Ambrose was poisoned.

It seems more likely that the Italian widow's sophistication, social confidence, dark beauty, knowledge of herbal secrets, spendthrift habits and reputation for "loose living" (p. 194) combined to excite a barely justified suspicion in the imagination of her inexperienced cousin. In the end, the unfamiliar territory of rural Cornwall

proved just as lethal to her as Florence had to her second husband. Philip failed to warn her that a partly built bridge in the garden was not safe. In keeping quiet about the danger, he foresaw that Rachel might be injured, and she was in fact killed, hence his rumination on hanging.

The two novels under discussion are set within about 15 years of each other. We can date the action of *My Cousin Rachel* because its narrator admits that the house he has inherited has not been adequately maintained:

Too little had been done about the place since the old days, two hundred years ago, when the men of Parliament had wrought such havoc, and my ancestors had been hard put to it to keep the house from falling into ruin. (p. 199)

That suggests that the novel is set in the 1840s, while the letters which make up Dibdin's book are dated 1855. In both books, people from wetter, more northerly places are living in Florence for the good of their health, not always with successful results. The city therefore has a paradoxical quality: dry, sunny and beautiful, relatively inexpensive and with a rich cultural history, and yet home to a

disproportionately high number of dying and (therefore) unhappy people.

One of the people who is living in Florence at least partly for the sake of her health is Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The narrator, a Bostonian named Robert Booth – in fact, the narrative consists of his letters to a friend named Prescott who remains in Boston – is keen to gain an entrée into Mrs Browning's circle. Booth is someone who is determined that his worth should be recognized – even though there isn't much material evidence of it. To Prescott, who has attained the "Parnassian position" of professor, and author of a standard text on ethics by the age of 40, he writes:

I was, as you see, going to do much; so much that in the end I did nothing. Not content, like you, to reach for graspable gains, I have remained empty-handed. (p. 12)

Booth doesn't say so in terms but it may be that his unwillingness "to reach for graspable gains" does not fully account for his failure to realize his (real or imagined) potential. He, too, came to Florence because he was sick, seriously so. But he insists to Prescott, implausibly, that he has completely recovered. For example, in his last letter home,

having described how Browning attempted to kill him by locking him in an enclosed garden on a cold night in early March, with his clothes soaking wet, he writes:

I spend my days peacefully planning my future. With so much time before me, and my youth and health completely restored, my only problem is *which* future to choose!
(p. 201)

A few pages earlier, he has been describing his emotions at encountering again his previously lost love (who would go on to become the first murder victim):

How my heart cried out in mingled agony and joy, like a healed lung which starts to breathe again after years of clogged suffocation! (p. 196)

Booth's talk of "reach" and "graspable gains" alerts us to a parallel with Browning's poem, "Andrea del Sarto". Indeed, "reach" is mentioned again when Booth compares himself to Browning, to the latter's detriment:

But how much more a poet, how much greater an artist, am I! The bold conception,

the reach, the range – these are mine, and mine alone. But such things count for nothing, and so he wins. (pp. 200-201)

Browning presents del Sarto as a supremely competent (“faultless”), effortless technician who, for a variety of reasons canvassed in the poem, fails to attain the heights of artistry and genius that many others, lacking his technical ability, struggle successfully to reach.

In the end, it seems that Booth’s narrative bears a similar relation to reality as Browning’s portrait of the painter does to the actual historical figure. The front matter to Dibdin’s novel quotes from a note in the Yale edition of Browning’s poetry:

... it is now known to be two portraits joined together, is no longer attributed to del Sarto, is not thought to depict the painter or his wife, and has been relegated to storage.

Andrea del Sarto is mentioned in du Maurier’s novel too, when Rainaldi asks Rachel:

“... Rachel, does not your cousin remind you very much of Del Sarto’s portrait of the Baptist? He has much the same arrogance

and innocence so charmingly blended.”
(pp. 230–31)

Arrogance and innocence are characteristics that might equally well fit Dibdin’s Robert Booth but in his case the blend isn’t nearly so charming.

Editions: *My Cousin Rachel* is quoted from the Virago Press edition, 2017; *A Rich Full Death* from the Faber paperback edition, 1988.

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