Shaped in the Image of Reason

The World According to Sherlock

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The detective fiction of the tradition initiated by Poe and Conan Doyle and continued by Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Rex Stout and others proposes the unquestioning acceptance of cognitive rationality[1] as a virtually infallible tool for problem solving and as an instrument of knowledge.[2] In the Holmes narratives, linear reasoning, based on observation grounded in the assumption that phenomena can be "read" in terms of a direct correlation between visual detail and connotative or denotative meanings, is presented as the only true path towards knowledge and understanding. Thus, the narratives implicitly discard the critical and autonomous rationality proposed by Kant.[3] Through their dogmatic insistence on a particular analytical method, they advocate a monist rationality which is repressive and alienated from the reader, in that s/he is not required to be a critical participant, but remains a passive admiring onlooker.

The 56 short stories which Conan Doyle wrote about Holmes all follow the same basic pattern: the problem to be solved is explained to the detective, usually by a client. Holmes frequently asserts his authority in the initial sequences by drawing inferences concerning either the narrator or the client, or both, which illustrate his intellectual superiority. In the course of the investigation, he identifies vital clues and constructs hypotheses concerning the solution of the problem. The other characters are almost always unable to follow his reasoning or draw the correct inferences from the data presented to them. Once the criminal has been identified, he is confronted, or Holmes explains his reasoning to an admiring audience, or both. The consistent adherence to a basic pattern in the Holmes narratives demonstrates the conventionality of tradi-

tional detective fiction. Conan Doyle's successors even proposed a codification of the subgenre,[4] which can be viewed as the extreme manifestation of an element found in all traditional detective fiction, namely, the desire to project an orderly, consistent reality through a closed, self-sufficient text.

The reader of traditional detective fiction is the passive recipient of a fictional world of which the coherence and consistence are pre-determined by literary conventions. In the Holmes narratives and elsewhere, he is merely an admiring spectator to the detective's accomplishments. This confirms Sciascia's observation that,

> il medio lettore di polizieschi, e cioè il miglior lettore di questo genere narrativo, è, insomma, colui che non si pone come antagonista dell'investigatore a risolvere in anticipo il problema, a 'indovinare' la soluzione, a indovinare il colpevole: il buon lettore sa che la soluzione c'è già, alle ultimissime pagine ... e che il divertimento, il passatempo, consiste nella condizione – di assoluto riposo intellettuale – di affidarsi all'investigatore ....[5]

The detective's unassailably superior position is often entrenched though exclusion and repression:

> Nei romanzi del genere sono impiegati senza precauzione – senza la precauzione, cioè, che è dell'arte – dei mezzi che con notevole approssimazione si possono definire di terrore: e l'effetto è fuga di pensieri. Meditazione senza distacco.[6]

Accordingly, the weaknesses and mistakes of Holmes's rivals are highlighted and their theories even ridiculed. The official police is usually presented as rather stupid and unimaginative, sometimes as guilty of smugness and careless thinking. Thus, for example, Athelney Jones, in *The Sign of Four,* premises his investigation by asserting: "Stern facts here – no room for theories."[7] He "realistically" assumes that "facts" are equivalent to what is immediately evident, yet his observations do not seem to be very accurate. Several important clues have to be pointed out to him by Holmes. Jones constructs a hypothesis before he has all the relevant data at his disposal, which is not necessarily inadmissible, provided that it is treated as a tentative hypothesis, to be tested and modified as required.[8] Jones, however, obtusely refuses to modify this initial hypothesis; he obstinately sticks to it, without being put off by data, brought to his attention by Holmes, which contradict it. Instead, he tries to make the data fit his theory. He

mistakenly wants to use a hypothesis to explain data not taken into account in its construction, and which it is not powerful enough to explain. His conclusions are based on a series of propositions, each of which, taken separately, seems plausible, but between which no compelling connection is being established. Therefore, the conclusions cannot be accepted.

The secondary characters inaccurate reasoning is further illustrated in *A Study in Scarlet*. Having found the letters "RACHE" "scrawled in blood-red letters" at the scene of the crime, the official detective, Lestrade infers that the criminal "was going to put the female name Rachel, but was disturbed before he or she had time to finish."[9] Holmes, of course, knows that the letters form the German word for "revenge." There are several reasons for Lestrade's error. Firstly, his frame of reference is too limited: he does not know any German. A second weakness is that Lestrade's inference is inconclusive and overcomplicated. Its accuracy cannot be established before further data have been collected, as it rests on a new hypothesis (the criminal was "disturbed"), which would have to be corroborated in turn. By contrast, Holmes's explanation is simple and self-sufficient. It contains fewer premisses than Lestrade's and does not introduce new elements to the case. In terms of simplicity it is therefore superior.[10] It is also more powerful in that, apart from explaining the letters, it suggests a motive for the crime.[11] Lestrade's inferences are not wholly implausible, yet the narrative presents them as obviously false, thereby affirming Holmes's superiority.

Watson, the narrator acts as a foil for Holmes's intellectual giftedness. He states in one of the later stories that his "methodical slowness" might have irritated the detective, but that it "served only to make his own flame-like intuitions and impressions flash up the more vividly and swiftly."[12] Watson's being intellectually less gifted than his friend is one of the fixed points of these narratives. Time and again, confronted by the same data as Holmes, he fails to draw the correct inferences. In some cases, this is due to his not possessing the relevant knowledge. For example, in *A Scandal in Bohemia*, he guesses that the letters woven into the paper of the letter received from Holmes's client indicate the "name of the maker." Holmes, with his superior reservoir of factual knowledge,

refutes this and provides the correct explanation. In other cases, Watson simply fails to draw any inferences whatsoever from the data he observes. He is unable to achieve the scientist's goal of finding "an explanation from the data."[13] A further problem is that he tends to ignore particulars he regards as marginal, thereby overlooking important clues, while Holmes repeatedly insists that even the most trivial detail might be vital to the investigation.

Holmes's superiority in itself does not explain his rivals' consistent incompetence. It seems implausible that both detectives from the prestigious Scotland Yard and a medical doctor – a trained scientist – would be consistently unable to solve any of the crimes narrated, or at least to draw a certain number of accurate inferences. The dual aim of such distortion is to confirm Holmes's unassailable status as supreme detective, and the repression of a dialogical search for truth. This results in the valorization of a monolithic rationalism.

No alternatives are allowed to the type of rationality propagated by Holmes. His arch enemy, Moriarty, his only equal amongst criminals, is in effect a mirror image of himself: pure intellect, but devoted to evil, not to the furtherance of justice. Holmes's brother, Mycroft, his only other equal amongst the secondary characters, is described in terms which call to mind a contemporary database:

> We will suppose that a Minister needs information as to a point which involves the Navy, India, Canada, and the bimetallic question, he could get his separate advices from various departments upon each, but only Mycroft can focus them all, and say offhand how each factor would affect the other ... In that great brain of his everything is pigeonholed, and can be handed out in an instant.[14]

Thus, the Holmes narratives present rationality exclusively as a tool for problem solving; implicitly define reason only in terms of cognitive rationality.[15] The Enlightenment idea of reason as a vehicle for emancipation[16] is not here at play. The knowledge attained by the detective does not enlighten, but confirms the privileged status of a particular type of rationality.

A characteristic of Holmes's approach is his detachment from the object of his investigation, viewed as a precondition for the emergence of truth. Towards the beginning of *A Scandal in Bohemia*, for example, Watson states: "All emotions ... were abhor-

rent to his cold, precise, but admirably balanced mind."[17] Further on, he continues:

> He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer. They were admirable things for the observer ... But for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusions into his own delicate and finely adjusted temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results.[18]

Holmes's own view is that, "detection is, or ought to be, an exact science, and should be treated in the same cold and unemotional manner."[19] He takes a completely impersonal view of his clients; each should be seen as 'a mere unit, a factor in a problem."[20] Objectivity, the scission between the knowing subject and the objects of knowledge, underpins the deterministic world view implicit in the traditional detective novel, that is, the assumption that phenomena can be explained clearly and with certainty in terms of cause and effect, of fixed laws and a stable, well-defined order.[21] It is a basic assumption of classical deterministic theories that objective reality is stable and wholly independent of the observer; it is an assumption refuted, *inter alia*, by the findings of quantum theory, which showed that the object of investigation can change according to the experimental setup and the observer's point of view.[22]

Thus, determinism by implication divides the rational subject into diametrically opposite and completely separate halves: on the one hand, detachment, objective rationality and precision; on the other, the emotions and the instincts. The passions are viewed as superfluous and irrelevant to objective knowledge; as belonging to the "lower realm." Like certain biological processes, they are relegated to the secret, unmentionable corners of the rationalist subject's existence. In terms of classical rationalism, "Ciò *che* èmeramente fisico, materiale o semplicemente individuale o specifico, costituisce la bassa empiria."[23] Classical rationalism introduces a hierarchical division between mind and body, between rationality, on the one hand, and the emotions and instincts, on the other.

Accordingly, in the Holmes narratives,

> i riferimenti a ciò che è corporeo, all'orina, agli escrementi, alla fame, ai cattivi odori, e simili rappresentano da un lato una sconvenienza e dall'altro qualcosa di irrelevante ... rappresentano ciò che è degradante, volgare nella vita degli uomini ... nulla offrono che possa contribuire alla comprensione di alcunchè pertanto sono destinati a cadere al di fuori della stessa razionalità.[24]

https://doi.org/10.1177/039219219604417410 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Indeed, Conan Doyle deals with crime without dwelling on its more disconcerting aspects. Virtually no information is supplied on the unsavory aspects of Victorian society. Even though their presence is a *sine qua non*, the criminals in these narratives remain mere pretexts. Conan Doyle's vision of society in the Holmes narratives is rather prudish and naive; crimes and criminals are viewed at a distance and appreciated for their entertainment potential.

Holmes's asexuality and misogyny tie in with this. He is not in the least influenced by the sexual, and is completely immune to the potentially disruptive charms of the feminine. Female sexuality and seduction are absent from the Holmes narratives. To some extent, this can be attributed to the prudishness of the Victorian era, but a more important motivation is the assumption that cognitive rationality should be safeguarded against the passions. The institutional and the feminine are repressed because they might theaten the harmonious wholeness of reason, which postulates clinical "objectivity," assumed to render the world transparently accessible to knowledge and understanding, as a precondition and guarantee for truthfulness.

Grounded in reason, Holmes's observations are presented as invariably accurate, thus demonstrating the certainty presumably achieved only through scientificity. The reader is confronted with a supposedly scientific, that is, clinically objective method of detection, which constitutes a closed, self-sufficient system, immune to doubt. The status of Holmes's method is such that his theories are not viewed as mere statements about the world, but as reality itself; there is no distance between the theories and the objective world, but harmonious coincidence.[25] In the Holmes narratives, no explicit distinction is made between the detective's conjectures and statements of fact. Holmes's inferences are assumed to correspond to the "true" state of affairs, to give direct access to knowledge or reality itself. Contrary to Popper,[26] Holmes presents correspondence to the facts, or objective truth as quite attainable.

Accordingly, the narrator's admiration for Holmes is wholly unconditional, almost servile: "Sufficient for me to share the sport and lend my humble help without distracting that intent brain with needless interruption."[27] Holmes's inferences are often "framed" by expressions of astonished admiration.[28] Watson and

the other secondary characters' inability to follow his reasoning provide him with opportunities to set out his theories. The few instances of skepticism on the part of his audience do not call into question the validity of Holmes's methods or the accuracy of his findings, but merely provide further opportunities for him to demonstrate his intellectual superiority and confirm the incontrovertibility of his conclusions. [29]

The authority of Holmes's inferences is grounded in premises which are never subjected to serious questioning. It also derives from the attributes of the detective himself: he is presented as being of superior, even superlative intellect: "The most perfect reasoning and observing machine;"[30] "extreme exactness and astuteness."[31] Holmes himself refers to "work" (that is, his processes of reasoning) "of the utmost finesse and delicacy."[32]

Frequently, an illustration *of* his abilities is provided in the early stages of a case. In *The Red-headed League*, for example, the narrator endeavors "after the fashion of my companion to read the indications which might be presented by" their client's "dress or appearance."[33] He concludes that the man can only be described as average, commonplace; that there is "nothing remarkable" about him "save his blazing red head, and the expression of extreme chagrin and discontent upon his features." Watson simply gives a description of external particulars.

The detective introduces his inferences in this story with a litotes, thus diminishing the difficulty of the problem "beyond the obvious facts ...."[34] According to Perelman,[35] the litotes can be defined "as a manner of expression which seems to weaken the thought." By describing the facts as "obvious," Holmes downplays his own abilities, and thus, highlights the discrepancy between his perspicacity and his rivals' lack of insight. He ironically suggests that one can assume the "facts" to be *obvious* to all the members of his audience; the incompatibility of such an assumption with the actual situation casts ridicule upon his rivals.[36]

Holmes's inferences in this story are based on abductive reasoning (big right hand – manual labour; shiny right cuff – "considerable amount of writing"), that is, conjecture indicating a possibility which can be calculated in terms of probability;[37] connotation ("arc and compass breastpin" – Freemasonry); and spe-

cialized factual knowledge (which enables him to establish the Chinese origin of the tattoo mark on his client's wrist).

The client's initial reaction to these inferences is one of astonishment. Once Holmes's reasoning has been explained to him, however, he responds with a litotes: "... I see there was nothing in it after all."[38] The client seems to be unaware that this remark reflects ironically on his own abilities: if there was "nothing in it" in the first place, then why was he so slow to understand?

Holmes's ironical reference to his "poor little reputation, such as it is,"[39] obliquely ridicules the obtuseness of his audience: it indicates an attitude of mock humility, an ironical overestimation of his audience's abilities. The whole passage in question is built upon binary oppositions, such as secondary vs. primary levels of signifiers, or implied vs. evident meanings; intelligence vs. obtuseness; penetration vs. lack of penetration. The first element in each pair is linked to Holmes, which affirms the superior vs. inferior relationship between him and the secondary characters.

The official policeman in this narrative, Athelney Jones, belittles Holmes, firstly, by implying that he is only capable of "starting a chase," and secondly, by insinuating that he is inexperienced.[40] The reader knows both suggestions to be untrue, which discredits Jones. In addition, he uses the metaphor "an old dog" in order to claim for himself the authority of extensive experience. A reader who made his acquaintance in *The Sign of Four*, however, would be aware of Jones's lack of success. The metaphor could therefore also be understood to mean: "Rich in experience of failure." It acquires ironical overtones which make Jones appear ridiculous.

Jones describes Holmes's methods as "just a little too theoretical and fantastic." In fact, as the reader knows, Holmes repeatedly cautions against theorizing on the basis of insufficient data; his own inferences are based on observation and empirical knowledge. Moreover, in *The Sign of Four*, Jones provides ample evidence of his own tendency towards drawing hasty inferences or constructing a hypothesis and then trying to adapt the data to it, instead of the other way round, like Holmes. Jones finds the superdetective's conjectures "fantastic" because he himself believes, in agreement with the commonsense theory of knowledge, that truth is self-evident and directly accessible through

observation.[41] Yet even in terms of this approach, Jones fails as his observations are often inaccurate.

In an attempt to belittle Holmes, Jones inadvertently uses litotes and euphemism, but merely succeeds in weakening his position:

> You may place confidence in Mr. Holmes, sir ...
> He has his own little methods, which are, if he won't
> mind my saying so, just a little too theoretical
> and fantastic, but he has the makings of a
> detective in him. It is not too much to say
> that once or twice ... he has been more nearly
> correct than the official force.[42]

Throughout this section, Jones is made to look ridiculous by the discrepancy between his statements and the reader's knowledge about his achievements as compared to Holmes's. The contrast is presented in an obvious and unequivocal, perhaps even crude manner. As a result, Jones's inferiority to Holmes almost seems exaggerated.

Sometimes, Holmes's authority is emphasized by the secondary characters' silence. In *The Adventure of the Naval Treaty*, for example, the detective's assertion that the letter received by the narrator was written by a woman is not questioned; although Holmes does not present any evidence for the statement, it is tacitly accepted as accurate. Thc lack of evidence is not mentioned, which reaffirms the narrator's almost servile acquiescence to Holmes's reasoning.

Elsewhere, the detective interrupts the client's narrative of the problem to indicate that an important clue has been identified. "That is of enormous importance," said Holmes.[43] No further explanation is forthcoming, though the client evidently does not understand why that particular aspect of his narrative should be viewed as significant. This again indicates that Holmes's abilities are beyond the comprehension of the other characters, and highlights the exclusiveness of his position as the "one who knows." He usually explains his reasoning, but the explanation is often deferred in order to confirm his power and authority.[44]

The Adventure of the Naval Treaty again offers a stark contrast between Holmes and the representative of the official police, who states categorically: "There was absolutely no clue of any kind;"[45] Holmes identifies seven clues.[46] Further on, he tells his client: "The

principal difficulty in your case ... lay in the fact of there being too much evidence."[47] Here, the relationship between Holmes and the official police again has the nature of a binary opposition between insight and the lack thereof. Holmes's status as the Master, as the "one who knows" is evident. It is consistent with this that he should explain his reasoning in a "didactic fashion."[48]

The binary opposition initiated/uninitiated is also implicit in the relationship between Holmes and his clients. Thus, mystified by his inferences, James M Dodd, in *The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier*, describes him as a "wizard," and states hyperbolically: "You see everything."[49] To the uninitiated Dodd, Holmes's reasoning seems an almost impenetrable mystery. The rigid line of demarcation between initiated and uninitiated in the Holmes narratives constitutes the foundation for a rigid and unshakable power structure. The secondary characters (and, with them, the reader) can surrender themselves to the reassuring knowledge that order will be restored and transgression punished by a superior authority. shaped in the image of classical reason and governed by fixed, universal laws,[50] the world presented by the traditional detective novel always returns to equilibrium.

Despite his references to a "method," Holmes is not concerned with systematic theorizing or system-building. Without exception, the problems to be solved by him are of a practical nature. His task is not to uncover universal truths or ultimate meaning, but to find *ad hoc* explanations though a "reading" of the available data; to confirm the deterministic order of the world[51] through rational analysis. Accordingly, seemingly trivial particulars are shown to be meaningful, to fit into an overall pattern.

In the Holmes narratives, the intrusion of violence and disorder into the civilized *status quo* is neutralized through rational analysis and explanation. The potentially disruptive energy of sexuality is not allowed near the surface. It does not even feature prominently as a motive for crime; the true crime of passion is alien to Holmes's world. Even though the only real challenge to his authority is posed by a woman (Irene Adler, in *A Scandal in Bohemia);* she defeats him, not by exploiting her feminine charms, but simply by outwitting him. Thus, the supremacy of pure intellect remains unscathed.

Even the detective's drugtaking is presented as the counterpart to his mental exertions. It neither results from a biological urge, nor implies a search for physical sensations, but is merely a cure for mental *ennui*. The needs and functions of the body are never allowed to influence Holmes's actions and thought processes. Thus, his position is entrenched as the representative of a "pure" rationality, aimed at problem-solving, which operates within a strict mind-body dualism.

Notes

1. See H. Spinner, "Vereinzeln, verbinden, begründen, widerlegen: Zur philosophischen Stellung von Begründungs- und Kritikoptionen im Rahmen einer Systematik der Erkenntnisstile und Typologie der Rationalitätsformen," in: Forum für Philosophie (ed.), *Philosophie und Begründung*, Frankfurt, 1987, pp. 29f.
2. See U. Eisenzweig, *Le récit impossible: forme et sens du roman policier*, Paris, 1986, p. 14; Th. Narcejo, *Une machine à lire; le roman policier*, Paris, 1975, p. 239.
3. I. Kant, "Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?" in: idem, *Schriften von 1783-1788*, Berlin, 1922, pp. 167-76.
4. See J. Symons, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, Harmondsworth, 1985, pp. 93-97.
5. L. Sciascia, *Cruciverba*, Turin, 1983, pp. 216f.
6. Ibid.
7. A. Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, London, 1974, p. 37.
8. See K.R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge*, Oxford, 1979, pp. 258-60.
9. A. Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*, Harmondsworth, 1982, p. 33.
10. See G. Chaitin, "Randomness and Mathematical Proof," in: *Scientific American*, No. 232 (1975), p. 48.
11. See K.R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (note 8 above), p. 143.
12. A. Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes. The Complete Short Stories*, London, 1985, p. 891.
13. N.R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery. An Inquiry into the Conceptual Foundations of Science*, Cambridge, 1961, p. 71.
14. A. Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes* (note 12 above), p. 703.
15. See H. Spinner, "Vereinzeln" (note 1 above), p. 29.
16. See J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, 1987, p. 31.
17. A. Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes* (note 12 above), p. 3.
18. Ibid.
19. Idem, *The Sign of Four* (note 7 above), p. 15.
20. Ibid., p. 26.
21. See E. Morin, "I linguaggi della complessità," in: G. Barbieri and P. Vidali (eds.), *Le ragione possibile: per una geografia della cultura*, Milan, 1988, p. 420.

22. H. Pagels, *The Comic Code. Quantum Physics as the Language of Nature*, London, 1983, pp. 143-45.
23. A. Gargani, "Introduction," in: *Crisi della ragione*, Turin, 1979, p. 19.
24. Ibid., pp. 19f.
25. Ibid., pp. 9f.
26. K.R. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, Oxford, 1989, p. 229.
27. A. Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes* (note 12 above), p. 38.
28. Ibid., pp. 45, 58, 253, 260, 345f., 422, 470, 602ff.; Idem, *A Study in Scarlet* (note 9 above), p. 38.
29. See idem, *The Sign of Four* (note 7 above), pp. 18-20; see also W. Hüllen, "Semiotics Narrated: Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*," in: *Semiotica*, Vol. 64, No. 1/2 (1987), p. 43.
30. A. Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes* (note 12 above), p. 3.
31. Ibid., p. 36.
32. Ibid., p. 634.
33. Ibid., p. 24.
34. Ibid., p. 25
35. Ch. Perelman, *The New Rhetoric. A Treatise on Argumentation*, Notre Dame UP, 1971, p. 291.
36. Ibid., p. 292.
37. N. Harrowitz, "Il modello del detective: Charles S. Peirce e Edgar Allan Poe," in: U. Eco and Th. Sebeok (eds.), *Il segno dei tre: Holmes, Dupin, Peirce*, Milan, 1983, p. 220.
38. A. Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes* (note 12 above), p. 25.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., p. 38.
41. See K.R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (note 8 above), p. 60.
42. A. Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes* (note 12 above), p. 38.
43. Ibid., p. 394.
44. M. Truzzi, "Sherlock Holmes: psicologo sociale applicato," in: U. Eco and Th. Sebeok, *Il segno* (note 37 above), p. 76.
45. A. Conan Doyle, *Sherlock Holmes* (note 12 above), p. 396
46. Ibid., p. 399.
47. Ibid., p. 413.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., pp. 920f.
50. E. Morin, "I linguaggi" (note 21 above), p. 420.
51. Ibid.