The Consulting Artist: Notes on the Hermeneutics of Detection in the Sherlock Holmes Canon

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Abstract

The following pages tackle the Sherlock Holmes canon (in the late Victorian period) by probing into the hermeneutical nature embedded in the system of detection it develops. After discussing the notion of "revealing," the article delves into several strategies that lead up to the construing of Sherlock Holmes not so much as a detective, but as an artist, specifically, a decadent, fin-de-siècle type of artist, in the aesthetic vein of Oscar Wilde. Furthermore, the overall re-interpretation of the character helps disclose the postmodern momentum that sits at the core of the Sherlock Holmes canon in particular and the decadent movement in general. Lastly, the article analyses the novel *The Sign of Four* (1890) in order to illustrate the general principles posited here and how they bespeak part of the attraction the character of Holmes showcases nowadays.[1]

Keywords: Sherlock Holmes, detective fiction, Oscar Wilde, Friedrich Nietzsche, postmodernism.

Resumen

El artículo aborda el canon de Sherlock Holmes indagando en la naturaleza hermenéutica del sistema de detección que lo articula. A partir de una serie de consideraciones sobre el acto de "revelar," se exploran las estrategias que conducen a interpretar el personaje de Holmes, no como un detective, sino como un artista, en concreto, un artista decadente, a la manera esteticista de Oscar Wilde. Esta redefinición global del personaje sirve, además, para descubrir el principio postmoderno que gobierna buena parte del movimiento decadentista en general, y del canon de Holmes en particular. Por último, el artículo plantea un análisis de la novela *The Sign of Four* (1890) a fin de ilustrar cómo los principios aquí analizados integran

parte del atractivo que el personaje de Holmes mantiene en la actualidad.

Palabras clave: Sherlock Holmes, ficción detectivesca, Oscar Wilde, Friedrich Nietzsche, posmodernismo.

These pages offer a critique of the phrase "detective fiction," which has of late become somewhat problematic on the grounds of its pleonastic nature. "To detect," from Latin *detego* (opposite of *tego, teges, tegere*), means *to reveal*, that is, *to uncover*, to expose a reality encoded as a mystery or a secret. "Detective fiction," traditionally, stands for a narrative, a representation of reality that *reveals* a mystery (and I mean to *reveal*, not to *solve*, an issue which creates, as these pages will show, a capital difference). This might have been true when conventional notions of fiction still applied; when, as yet, the concept of *mimesis* was the gold standard of traditional poetics and texts could be read as sheer representations of persistently stable, reliable and dependable realities. The nineteenth century helped change all that. As Suzy Anger notices,

> [i]n contemporary debate, self-reflexivity about the processes of understanding is pervasive: knowledge is historically and culturally situated […] subjectivity is involved in all representation; in short interpretation is always at work. What is not so often noticed is that Victorians were equally concerned with the general character of human knowledge, understanding, [and the making of the subject.] (Anger 2005: 1)

In the wake of Romanticism and Romantic poetics, Victorian theories about fiction gradually shifted their aims from the analysis of objective representation to the construction and critique of subjectivity, that is, to address "how literature makes subjects and, in turn, has the power to aid (and impede) civilization" (Jones 2010: 244). The idea of fiction as a means to reveal reality sits at the core of this idea, inasmuch as fiction cannot solely mean representation; it has to have a purpose, that is, it has to mean something through representation in the context of Victorian collectiveness (take for

instance how Dickens reveals "the unwholesome secrecy of the population crowded in large cities," see Ruskin 1912: 942). So, if fiction stands for revelation, the phrase "detective fiction" becomes, as has been stated earlier, pleonastic, a revelation that reveals something.

Fiction concerning detection abounds ever since the 1850s. In the wake of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), at the other side of the Atlantic detectives started to crop up, first sparsely, then profusely, but always consistently in the heyday of Victorian fiction: from the tantalizing subplot featuring Inspector Bucket in Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* (1853); Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensation mystery novel *The Trail of the Serpent* (1861),[2] arguably the first full-fledged detective novel in the Victorian canon, to Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* (1868), which somehow has managed to retain the official title of First British Detective Novel ever, detectives gradually started to take over centre-stage in the narrative canon. The reason behind this is twofold: on the one hand, the institution, late in 1842, of the "first professional detective force to facilitate a systematic method of detecting crime" (Reed 2005: 166) bespeaks a growing concern, on behalf of the middle-classes, with the spreading of crime. Safety and security were already major political issues in the mid-fifties, particularly in connection to population increase and the seemingly anarchic urban development, migration and birth control (or rather, the lack thereof) brought along (the "reckless crowding in cities," John Ruskin denounces in "Fiction, Fair and Foul, The Nineteenth Century" (1912: 944). Authors readily capitalized on the new anxieties, as the rise of sensation fiction, fraught with remarkable crimes undercutting the otherwise calm existence of high- and middle-class communities, in the eighteen-sixties and seventies surely attest. Not that there were not detectives in fiction before the fifties, for indeed there were. But the newly developed mid-century social anxieties helped reimagine the role of the detective in a broader context of growing social concerns. Detectives in these circumstances became a cultural token of Victorian middle-class desires, a signifier whereupon the bourgeois *ethos* could enact male-driven fantasies of full-scale control and moral supremacy by virtue of its being able to reveal (i.e. to detect) and fight the morbid corruption of crime.

On the other hand, the steady increase in the number of detectives and/or types of detection that mid-late Victorian narratives showcase elicits intricate questions on both the meaning of fiction and the functions it performs. Admittedly, detective fiction looked particularly appealing for authors and writers of the mid-century, in that dwelling on the nature of detection enticed them into a general scrutiny of fiction itself. The process of detecting, that is, of revealing a mystery through a story problematizes narrative in such a way that the mystery revealed by fiction comes off as the very act of detection, that is, the act of revealing itself. Thus, narratives that set out to probe into this self-questioning dynamics of revelation arguably hint at a kind of discourse that easily falls in the category of metafiction (in a broader sense of the idea, at any rate). This becomes even more apparent during the decadent movement in the fin-de-siècle, whereby thorough subjective revisions of Victorian aesthetic theories brought off by the likes of John Ruskin, Walter Pater and, most notably, Oscar Wilde take issue with normative and prescriptive theories on art and, accordingly, spawn a "rather post-modern" approach (Gagnier 18) to both poetics and fiction as a means to reveal and make-see reality.

That the Sherlock Holmes' stories constitute the pinnacle of Victorian detective fiction can hardly be contested. What might not be that obvious, at least at first glance, is that the Sherlock Holmes canon, particularly in the late Victorian period (for there are two different Sherlock Holmes, one on either side of the 1900)[3] plays upon the concept of detection in order to update the aforementioned metafictional approach in the decadent milieu of the fin-de-siècle. The ostensibly formulaic adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson draw upon decadent notions of art, fiction, science and life, which in turn coalesce into an odd discourse about narrative and revelation with a somewhat post-modern slant. I will prove this by addressing three questions: (a) what exactly is Sherlock Holmes' profession? (b) what is the actual function of what Holmes constantly refers to as "the science of detection"? And, finally, (c) how does the argument I am offering affect the way contemporary readers take on the Sherlock Holmes phenomenon? My argument applies to both novels and short stories alike, but I will focus mainly on *The Sign of Four*, published in Lippincott's Magazine in January 1891. Incidentally, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published

immediately after *The Sign of Four*, a circumstance I encourage readers to remember for reasons that will become apparent shortly. I will also refer, albeit briefly, to the other two novels published in the last two decades of the Victorian century, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), and *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901/02). And, of course, references to some of the short stories will be inevitable as well. My argument generally attempts to delve into the Wildean critical tenets embedded in Holmes' "science of detection." Issues regarding the depiction of Holmes as a Wildean type of character will arise eventually, albeit briefly for they do not constitute the core of the matter at hand.

Let me begin by addressing the first question: what exactly is Sherlock Holmes' profession? It is my contention that Sherlock Holmes is not a detective, but an artist, a full-fledged decadent artist to be precise;[4] an artist of detection at any rate, yes, but an artist nonetheless; and of course, provided that detection, as has already been argued, is a form of revealing (and so is art as fiction), it should be no wonder that the character is aptly coded as an artist.

The aesthetic trait of Holmes' personality permeates most of the novels. An avid admirer of the "modern Belgian painters" (*Hound* 286), as Dr Watson claims in *The Hound*, Sherlock Holmes' knowledge of art might elicit the "crudest ideas" (*Hound* 287), but serves him nonetheless to uncover the key secret in the novel (Stapleton's relation to the Baskervilles). Holmes' violin playing agrees superbly with the "bleak autumnal evenings" (*Five Oranges* 213) of the decadent milieu; it is sometimes depicted as "dreamy and melodious" (*Sign* 196), other times as downright melancholic (*Study* 48), oftentimes, both (*Five Oranges* 217). Last, but foremost perhaps, is Holmes' drive to exercise his profession as "consulting detective" (*Study* 26). Even though early twentieth-century interpretations of the character have depicted Holmes as a champion of law-enforcement and justice, most notably in the film series featuring Basil Rathbone (1939-1946) in the title-role, the truth is Holmes cares very little about justice and the law. Victorian heroes traditionally performed the Carlylean tenet of heroism to the letter, that is, they enacted "the submergence of humanity in the Law" of Divinity, "to which the privileged," the great men, "have access" (Auerbach 1982: 200). Now, since the bond that ties Carlyle's heroes with Truth, Divinity and the Law is so

inextricable, the individual hero cannot turn his back on these ideas without querying and undermining his own identity. The existing bond between heroism and the Law effectively sets limits to both the will and subjectivity of the hero, insofar as he (i.e., the traditional Victorian hero) feels essentially linked to a certain duty, a duty to Divinity, the Law and the community it articulates.[5]

Holmes, in turn, does not feel attached to any particular dogma or creed about heroism, let alone any ideal conception of the Law. Angela Kingston foregrounds this ironic trend in Holmes when asserting that "Victorian readers" perceived Holmes "as a reassuring, heroic figure restorer of order" even though he had "so many attributes borrowed from one of the most mocked, maligned, and in many ways subversive figure of the late nineteenth century" (Kingston 2007: 84). That figure is, of course, Oscar Wilde.[6] Like Wilde, Holmes' motives are far removed from "the indissoluble bond" (Auerbach 1982: 200) of collective willpower Carlyle upheld. Like Wilde, Holmes' main drive to put his brain to work is to escape from commonness (Kingston 2007: 84), from the dull, dun-coloured, weary existence of middle-class industrial milieu:

> "May I ask whether you have any professional inquiry on foot at present."
> "None. Hence the cocaine. I cannot live without brain-work. What else is there to live for? Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun-coloured houses. What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? What is the use of having powers, doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them? Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth." (*Sign Four* 140)

Holmes' aversion to commonness bespeaks a self-conscious drive aimed solely at itself, as if a Byronic personality had been secluded from reality by virtue of a coarse but staunch middle-class Victorian discourse and could not find pleasure anywhere but within himself.

The extreme individuality expounded by Holmes' remarks sits at the core of his motivation, so much so that even crime, the traditional concern of literary detectives in mid-Victorian fiction (and beyond) proves hopeless to exact pleasure out of Holmes' practice.

Now, pleasure, or rather, the lack thereof: herein lies the key. The performative nature of Holmes' identity, that is, the iterative re-enactment of the narrative that, as Judith Butler would say, "[enables] and [restricts] the intelligible assertion" of his identity (2006: 198), or in other words, that which makes Holmes to be what he is in so doing, does not lie solely in the display of his "brain-work," but rather in his experiencing the pleasure exacted by and in his own subjectivity. This experience, of course, is aesthetic in nature and befits the decadent, Wildean aesthetic and individualistic trait the character displays. The hedonistic, albeit solipsistic, drive of Holmes' personality is obliquely evinced in the former passage by way of the reference to cocaine. The drug infamously serves Holmes as a substitute for work, or rather as a surrogate conduit for desire. Shortly before the former passage, Holmes states:

> "My mind," he said, "rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. (*Sign Four* 134)

Not even artificial stimulants seem to dispel "the dull routine of existence," the stagnation, the ennui and spleen commonness entails. Only through art, through the aesthetic conception of life, subjectivity manages to rise from the low ends of commonness. "As an aesthetic phenomenon," claims Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, "existence is still bearable to us, and art furnishes us with the eye and hand and above all the good conscience to be able to make such a phenomenon of ourselves" (2001, 104). Or, in the words of Oscar Wilde:

> I can fancy a man who had led a perfectly commonplace life, hearing by chance some curious piece of music, and suddenly discovering that his soul, without his being

conscious of it, had passed through terrible experiences,
and known fearful joys, or wild romantic loves, or great
renunciations. (Wilde 2000a: 243)

For Holmes, the experience of pleasure is enacted through work,
that is, through the process that leads to the work of art, but not
necessarily by the achievement of the work itself, no matter whether
it is a *Study in Scarlet*, in blue, or in green, a *Sign* (*of Four*) to be duly
decoded, or uncanny *Hounds* of hell lurking behind Gothic legends
that need to be hunted down promptly. (Incidentally, Holmes'
disregard for the result of the process, that is, for the work of art as a
dialectically-closed object is embedded in the narrative structure of
the stories, insofar as the work of art, the actual object, the closed
narrative of individual cases, is effectively allotted to Dr Watson). By
focusing on the process of desire (on his drive to work), Holmes aligns
himself with the likes of Rider Haggard's Queen Ayesha, Oscar
Wilde's Lord Henry Wotton, Arthur Machen's Helen Vaughan, and
many other decadent personalities somewhat haunted by the
weariness and commonness of existence. Holmes' motivation is in
keeping with the aesthetic nature of these characters, which famously
conceive life as a process (an aesthetic process to be precise), much
like Holmes himself, who, ostensibly *à la* Wilde, aptly focuses on the
experience of his aesthetic drive in order to dispel any hint of ennui
and spleen.

But what kind of work of art in progress allows Holmes to dispel
ennui and spleen so thoroughly? Since "deep-rooted desire is
persistently articulated in the idea of seeing things" (Donohue 2000:
130), it is only fitting that Holmes devotes his efforts to the art of
detection, or rather "fiction" as a process of revealing.

There is a common misconception regarding Sherlock Holmes'
"science of detection," ostensibly brought about by Holmes' himself,
by the way. Several critics have already pointed out that the "Science
of Deduction" (*Sign Four* 130), as the consulting detective likes to call
it, is a misnomer. "Deduction" constitutes a kind of reasoning
whereby a general hypothesis leads to specific conclusions.
"Induction", conversely, aims at stating a general hypothesis derived
from the facts under scrutiny. "The type of reasoning Holmes uses is

of another, more conjectural kind," more often than not called "abductive reasoning" (Dowd 2011: 100). "Abductive reasoning cannot offer certainty or any precise assessment of probability, only the best account of events. Incidentally, this kind of reasoning cannot be practised simply by following rules" (Gray), it requires large quantities of imagination, as "imagination" is the only way "to rise to the greatest heights" in Sherlock Holmes' "profession" (*Silver Blaze* 199), according to Holmes himself. Imagination, yes, for ultimately "abduction" is a course of analysis that inevitably coheres into a narrative. "Eliminate all the other factors" within all possible narratives (factors which readers have to imagine first), Holmes posits in *The Sign of Four*, "and the one which remains must be the truth" (*Sign Four* 137). The stories frequently underlie the nature of Sherlock Holmes as both reader and narrator, a slightly uncanny blend of critic, raconteur and performer specifically trained to elicit narratives (that is, "stories") from objects as well as individuals, (for indeed, both objects and individuals *tell* stories). He is particularly keen on using individuals as objects of scrutiny, as Holmes himself brags about in *A Study in Scarlet*: "Let [the detective], on meeting a fellow mortal, learn at a glance to distinguish the history of the man, and the trade or profession to which he belongs" (*Study* 20). Likewise, in *The Sign of Four*, Dr Watson recalls Holmes saying "it is difficult for a man to have any object in daily use without leaving the impress of his individuality upon it in such a way that a trained observer might read it" (*Sign Four* 137). Yes, Holmes reads the age, trade, physical constitution, social class and avenging drive of Jefferson Hope in *A Study in Scarlet*, Jonathan Small in *The Sign of Four* and Stapleton in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, among many others. He reads them all right, and in so doing, he builds up a narrative that helps construe reality.

This idea is crucial to understand that Sherlock Holmes arguably enacts some of the fundamental tenets of Oscar Wilde's critical theory. In view of the former explanation some may argue that Sherlock Holmes is a reader rather than a narrator, and they are right (up to a point, for Oscar Wilde had already solved the problem of reading, of construing the cultural object, as a form of art).

> But, surely, Criticism is itself an art. And just as artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty, and,

indeed, without it cannot be said to exist at all, so Criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word. Criticism is, in fact, both creative and independent. Yes, independent. Criticism is no more to be judged by any low standard of imitation or resemblance than is the work of a poet or sculptor. The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought. (Wilde 2000a: 260)

The aesthetic nature of criticism Wilde posits sheds light on the artistic milieu exacted by Holmes' abductive, i.e. narrative, method. Yes, "The critic occupies the same relation to the work of art that he criticizes as the artist does" to the (pending the term "objective correlative") world he sees, much like Holmes' readings (his so-called "deductions") set forth the specific case of reality even as he produces a piece of fine narrative, a work of art.

This leads to the second issue I wanted to address: What is the actual function of what Holmes constantly refers to as "the science of detection," that is, his narratives, most notably in the context of the decadent movement? I have already argued that fiction and detection are one and the same thing in that they are both processes of revelation. It is high time to explore the idea a bit further.

While discussing the issue of art as revelation, Nietzsche claims in *The Gay Science*, "[u]ltimately, [Art] is just a magnifying glass that [the Artist] offers everyone who looks his way" (2001: 147): "a magnifying glass," indeed (very aptly put, considering; were he pondering on the character of Sherlock Holmes, the metaphor would have been quite compelling). Similarly, Oscar Wilde takes issue with normative theories on art, fiction and literature and contends "[b]eauty reveals everything because it expresses nothing" (2000a: 264). Both Nietzsche's (and Holmes') "magnifying glass," on the one hand, and Wilde's "Beauty," on the other, suggest that the process of revealing comprises the main objective artists set out to achieve. It is worth noticing neither author contends that "revealing" is the use, or the utility of art, but rather the implicit dynamics of its mechanism as

semiotic systems. Art and fiction are quite paradoxical in that they "reveal to us a secret of which, in truth, [they know] nothing," (2000a: 263) but it is through art and fiction that we get to know the secret they set out to reveal, for "[t]o look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one *sees* its beauty" (Wilde 2000b: 79). So, art and fiction do reveal reality and do make you see the thing, but they do not understand anything about the thing. Both Nietzsche and Wilde hereby refer to art as a self-referential, self-conscious system. They both seem to understand that fiction is an autonomous self-contained structure "which expresses nothing but itself" even as it reveals everything without/outside itself. Indeed, one cannot see a thing until one sees its beauty, and, for Wilde at least, beauty provides the meaning within and through artistic representation. This somewhat Derridean take on art and fiction justifies, for instance, Wilde's famous quip in the sense that "[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written or badly written. That is all" (2006: 3).

Sherlock Holmes may lend a hand to clarify this riddle. The Sherlock Holmes' stories are all about the account of events, the exacting of meaning through a self-contained system (which is the narrative) that helps reveal a specific reality that has hitherto remained a mystery. Sherlock Holmes' reading of reality is presented as a narrative that aims not so much at explaining the facts as at construing them in order "to protect us from semiotic chaos" (Kayman 2003: 48). In so doing, narrative, that is, fiction, constitutes a pattern that imbues reality with meaning.

Holmes' flair for "reading" people might serve to illustrate the idea of revelation through interpretation. Sherlock Holmes agrees with Charles Dickens in that "every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other" (Dickens 2008: 9). Of course, "[y]ou can, for example, never foretell what any one man will do" (*Sign Four* 211), says Holmes in *The Sign of Four*, "but you can say with precision what an average number will be up to. Individuals vary, but percentages remain constant" (*Sign Four* 211). Statistics, probability, "balance of probability" to be precise: These elements uphold Holmes' ability to read the stories that "average individuals" inadvertently tell. Now, it can be argued that Holmes here draws upon

science, not art or fiction, in order to ellicit meaning out of reality. Nietzsche and Wilde had already solved that problem too:

> Let us introduce the subtlety and rigour of mathematics into all sciences to the extent to which that is at all possible; not in the belief that we will come to know things this way, but in order to ascertain our human relation to things. Mathematics is only the means to general and final knowledge of humanity. (Nietzsche 2001: 148)

The wonder of mathematics, logic and any other formal science lies in the fact that they help "ascertain our human relation to things. […] Man's ideas must be as broad as Nature if they are to interpret Nature" (*Study* 44), as Holmes puts it, but they are not, nor they can ever be Nature. Science is a means to retrieve and articulate information, a way to navigate interpretation and conceptualization. It helps conceive the world, but it is not the world itself. It is a form of representation, a means to build fiction, therefore, a way to exact meaning, inasmuch as fiction stands for a pattern that imbues the world with, exactly, meaning. And meaning, of course, arises by virtue of the pattern itself. Following Oscar Wilde's decadent critical theory, or Nietzsche's epistemological tenets, Holmes' method rejects "transcendent, objective truth, whether it goes by the name of 'history', 'culture' or 'nature'" (Danson 2000: 81), for the truth (i.e. meaning) arises from the narrative, that is, the artificial work of art itself (Spackman 37-40).

Science becomes problematic when it grows into a belief, an end on itself or an ideal, which the decadent milieu thoroughly rejects, rather than a process, which the decadent milieu thoroughly promotes (Denisoff 2007: 32). The former case turns science into an ideological device. Science must not, and cannot lead to an "ethos," but to "passion" (Nietzsche 2001: 148). When it becomes passion it builds a productive association with art (Nietzsche 2001: 148). The upshot of science turning into "ethos," conversely, sets off a deceitful misconception of the world. In point of fact, the problem arises the moment in which science is conceived as an "ethos" purportedly leading to truth, for truth is

> [a] movable host of metaphors, metonymies, and
> anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations
> which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified,
> transferred, and embellished, and which, after long
> usage, seem, to a people, to be fixed, canonical, and
> binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten
> are illusions; they are metaphors that have become worn
> out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins
> which have lost their embossing and are now considered
> as metal and no longer as coins. (Nietzsche 1979: 12)

Truth is just a semiotic construct of meaning that ruling classes
have privileged over other types of meaning. And yet, truths are not
facts. Nietzsche passionately warns against truth mistaken for fact,
culture mistaken for reality, for therein starts the ideological
contraption middle-class culture deploys in order to contain individual
will. Holmes' bombastic assessments of individuals effectively play
upon this contraption. Holmes can "learn at a glance to distinguish
the history of a man, and the trade or profession to which he belongs"
provided "the man" complies with the commodified narrative
structure designed by middle-class culture. Holmes does not read
individuals (so he claims, as I showed earlier), he can only read those
men and women who have submerged in the bourgeois mind-set;
those men and women who comply with the foreseeable demands of
Victorian culture; those men and women who, wittingly or unwittingly,
have forfeited their psychological depth, their emotional complexity
or the unpredictable trait of their behaviour; those men and women
who navigate the now decadent Victorian milieu in a ghostly
atmosphere of nondescript commonness. Thus, in *The Sign of Four*:

> There was, to my mind, something eerie and ghost-like
> in the endless procession of faces which flitted across
> these narrow bars of light, sad faces and glad, haggard
> and merry. Like all human kind, they flitted from the
> gloom into the light, and so back into the gloom once
> more. (*Sign Four* 149)

Not to wander too much off-topic here, suffice it to say that
science combined with passion rather than ethos helps Holmes

fictionalize reality, it is his way to instil meaning into reality. Sherlock Holmes' stories are not science as an end in itself; "[t]he stories' relation to the details of contemporary science is tenuous" (Ousby 1976: 153); "[Holmes' Method]" can be (and actually has been) labelled as "a counterfeit, a simulacrum of the real thing" (Shepherd 1985: 20). The stories are "not concerned with scientific accuracy or actuality, but with "the aura of science" (Knight 1980: 79), they are concerned with exacting meaning out of reality.

Now, I mentioned earlier Sherlock Holmes' adventures are all about the account of events, the elliciting of meaning through and in a self-contained system (which is the narrative) that helps reveal a specific reality that has hitherto remained a mystery. The stories are at their best when Holmes performs his narrative antics. "Holmes convinces and amuses with his identification and articulation of clues [as well as] his felicitous erudition; the reader accedes with the same satisfied wonder as Watson to his claims for [Holmes'] powers of observation and reasoning" (Kayman 2003: 49). The amusement is exacted through the narrative process Holmes conspicuously displays, which, in turn, raises insightful questions about the dynamics of narrative as art. Holmes ostensibly embodies fiction not so much as a means to solve reality, but as a conduit that channels reality as problematic. "The crimes," Martin Kayman contends, "are [not] excessively troubling (and, although we do find murders, on the other hand in many stories there is virtually "no crime at all") (2003: 46). This makes Jean Jacques LeCercle claim: "as we all know, what is interesting in a Sherlock Holmes story is not the solution (which is always a disappointment and announces the death of the text), it is the problem" (2002: 38). LeCercle is right: the stories usually start with seemingly trivial matters. In *The Sign of Four*, for instance, Mary Morstan visits 221b Baker Street to relate that an acquaintance of her father once denied having known of his comeback to England from India (not a big issue, at any rate). Also, Mrs Morstan informs she has received some pearls from an anonymous benefactor (arguably, less big an issue). The search for the benefactor leads to a treasure hunt (a treasure stolen from Agra, in India) through the streets of south London that ends up with two dead bodies and the conviction of a self-confessed murderer. Holmes' detection unfolds an immaterial episode, hardly worth noticing, which turns into a story that involves the reality of poverty in London, anxieties about "otherness," dubious

political discourses, deep-rooted in the imperial ethos and, last but not least, the very idea of problematizing.

Indeed, fiction means to problematize. Fiction problematizes reality, but cannot solve it (for the problem only takes place in fiction). Granted, solutions belong to the structure of problems insofar as they are implicit in the very act of problematizing: "the existence of the problem," notes Jean Jacques LeCercle, "is dependent on the search for solutions, as the adventures of Sherlock Holmes clearly show" (2002: 39). The solution sits at the core of the problem inasmuch as "solutions are particular propositions," but "the problem is ideal, it's an Idea, which no solution can ever exhaust or solve away" (39). In other words, the solution might help close the problem dialectically, but it can never solve it, for the problem, as Jean Jacques LeCercle, after Deleuze, puts it, "transcends the solution it generates; it remains immanent in the solutions that eventually come to replace or conceal it — which means that a problem does not disappear when a solution is produced" (38-39). No, it does not. Solutions do not exhaust problems, for problematizing, i.e., narrating, precludes endless interpretations.

> It is a characteristic of a text […] that it both transcends the interpretations to which it gives rise (and which purports to 'solve' its meaning), and it is immanent in them (in that there is no text without a reader and a reading — and any reading is an interpretation, or a solution). But no interpretation, or solution, is true […]. No interpretation is so good as to preclude the emergence of an endless series of other interpretations — even if the text is a detective story, and the interpretation is given within the text by the author in the form of the solution to the mystery. Even if Agatha Christie authoritatively answers the question: 'Who killed Roger Ackroyd?', nothing will prevent an astute and complicated reader from claiming her solution was a decoy and suggesting another. (LeCercle 2002: 39).

That is, in a nutshell, how Holmes' stories work as problems. Sherlock Holmes' detective method purportedly exhausts the cases.

By analysing the cases backwards from "consequences to causes" (*Study* 44), Holmes effectively marks the limits to those cases (a case being, of course, "an occurrence of reality"). And yet, since Holmes' "art of deduction" or "abductive reasoning" queries for causes, readers are perfectly entitled to keep on querying beyond particular cases in order to address reality beyond the boundaries of this particular occurrence. For interpretation does not depend on solutions, but rather on problems, on problematizing the text. Indeed, Sherlock Holmes' stories lead readers up to the boundaries beyond which the case, allegedly, can no longer be explored. But then again, the art of detection, the art of construing life calls for an ongoing, everlasting process of interpretation and problematizing. Why stop then at a specific case?

For instance, at the end of *The Sign of Four*, readers know that Jonathan Small inadvertently killed Major Sholto; readers also learn that Small and three accomplices had stolen a treasure at Agra during the 1857 Indian Rebellion, and that Major Sholto betrayed Small and his partners while keeping the treasure to himself.[7] At the end of the novel, it is also perfectly clear that Small escaped his prison aided by a mysterious individual named Tonga, a native of Ceylon, who actually killed Major Sholto's son, Bartholomew. Yes, the problem meets a solution, a dialectical closure that purportedly exhausts the case (again, "a case is an occurrence of reality"). But it so happens that this particular solution has, in turn, brought readers up to a point beyond which reality still remains an unfathomable mystery. That is, the very solution has, yet again, revealed another mystery. For what is it that actually led up to the facts in this case? What is the ultimate cause underlying the facts problematized in this occurrence? Isn't it, for instance, the deceitful rationality of the imperial ethos? The enterprise of the Empire is laden with ideas of civilisation, rationality, middle-class welfare and, most notably, work ethics and progress. Yet the *Sign of Four* focuses on the cesspool of the Empire, which paradoxically sits at its very core (i.e. London) and feeds on its very rationality (Arata 2010: 139-140). How come the Empire not only allows but also actually encourages common theft, treason and murder? Or, even more to the point, how come the Empire openly embraces and celebrates this as the cornerstone of its ideology (141)? (Not only the Sholtos get away with looting, stealing and betrayal, they even come

off as humane, charitable people, most notably Thaddeus, who sends Mary Morstan six pearls out of a treasure worth one million pounds). However, even though the Sholtos get away with looting, what are they but common thieves?

The Sign of Four arguably epitomizes Doyle's critique on the Empire ethos, since "[t]he crimes" the characters "commit […] constitute implicit indictments of imperial practices" (Arata 140). Imperial, middle-class, male-driven stable identities and law-enforcement are hereby surreptitiously revealed as decoys for vengeance, ambition, power, colonisation and chauvinism by virtue of Holmes' detection.

> In Doyle's empire, everyone is a thief and no one can easily be blamed. The novel in fact fails to accomplish one of detective fiction's prime functions: affixing ultimate guilt. Tonga is demonized and shot, and Small is incarcerated, but these men are, it is clear, thoroughly victimized as well. (Arata 2010: 141)

Arata rightly claims the novel hereby boasts an unavoidable degree of indeterminacy, which "can make for discomfort" (141) in a middle-class milieu. Hence, the novel effectively enacts the "logic of diversity" (Spackman 1999: 41, Denisoff 2007: 32) decadent critical theory posits. In other words, the uncomfortable issues regarding the Empire the novel suggests are embedded in the alleged solution to the case. All these issues constitute other mysteries sitting at the core of the very mystery the narrative sets out to solve. Why should readers stop here? Why shouldn't they go much further to query and probe into those mysteries?

A quick digression is in order here before continuing with the argument: it is at this point that Dr Watson enters my argument. Ultimately, the narrative object these pages deal with is Dr Watson's narrative and not Holmes'. Surely, Holmes construes and problematizes the cases by building comprehensive narratives of the facts involved in the stories. But it is Dr Watson's account of the cases that informs the stories we read. "The good doctor," Martin Kayman contends, "strikes us as an eminently reliable narrator" because he

"[embodies] the sturdy middle-class virtues that Holmes affects to despise" (2003: 48). He might strike us as reliable, but precisely because of his biased standpoint (due to the middle-class virtues he embodies), a Holmesian reading of the character should make Dr Watson eventually come off as very, very unreliable. Holmes himself points it out in several occasions, usually denouncing Watson's flair for romanticism (*Sign Four* 141). Since Watson is in charge of enforcing the actual limits of the narrative, it is no wonder that the stories stop at problems and mysteries like the ones that have already been mentioned, to wit, the Empire, middle-class values, morality, civilization and the like. Probing further into these questions implies querying and destabilizing the very cultural meanings and ethos whereupon Watson's identity is founded; it implies revealing their true nature as ambition, vengeance and resentment against "the other," notions that remain duly concealed under a thick varnish of civilization.

Watson's middle-class qualms notwithstanding, the fact that these issues remain unquestioned leaves no other choice for the narrative but to encode them as mystery. Sherlock Holmes, the detective, the artist of narrative, sets out to reveal a mystery and solves it accordingly; but, in so doing, takes the reader to a point whence reality cannot be explained, where indeterminacy and "the logic of diversity" (Spackman 1999: 41, Denisoff 2007: 32) take over. Thus, Holmes opens up yet another mystery, the mystery of Empire, of Victorian civilization itself, a mystery that the narrative, of course, leaves artificially unsolved. Fiction has uncovered a new secret, a riddle, an enigma, a persistent residue left over by the ongoing structure of revelation, art and fiction: "We rightly reproach," Nietzsche complained, "a dramatic poet if he does not transform everything into reason and words but always retains in his hand a residue of silence" (Nietzsche 2001: 80).

That is how fiction underscores its hermeneutical nature. If narratives are deployed to reveal the mysteries of life, to unravel the secrets embedded in it, whenever fiction reveals yet another mystery as part of unfolding the riddle it set out to reveal, then the new mystery must be addressed accordingly, perhaps only to bring home that it will lead to yet another mystery, another secret, another riddle,

and this, in turn, to yet another one, and so on and so forth. Holmes' art of detection thus points to a space whereupon fiction queries itself, a spot whereupon "representation discovers the infinite within itself," as Deleuze (2004: 52) puts it; an area whereupon texts and discourses unfold in an ongoing, self-referential, everlasting structure of interpretation and self-consciousness. Let this metafictional take on detection help answer the last issue I would like to address in this article: how does the argument I am offering affect the way contemporary readers approach Sherlock Holmes nowadays? Indeed, the post-modern slant, rooted in the hermeneutic conception of art and life Holmes' system of detection boasts, should not go overlooked for the contemporary reader, since the founding elements of Holmes' art of detection reside at the core of a great deal of present-day literary theory.

At the end of *The Sign of Four*, Dr Watson assesses the aftermath of their adventure.

> "By the way, a propos of this Norwood business, you see that they had, as I surmised, a confederate in the house, who could be none other than Lal Rao, the butler: so Jones actually has the undivided honour of having caught one fish in his great haul."
> "The division seems rather unfair," I remarked. "You have done all the work in this business. I get a wife out of it, Jones gets the credit, pray what remains for you?"
> "For me," said Sherlock Holmes, "there still remains the cocaine-bottle." And he stretched his long white hand up for it. (*Sign Four* 243)

Therein lies the ultimate enigma *The Sign of Four* unfolds. At the end of the novel, Sherlock Holmes stands out as the utmost mystery of the story. The novel ends up facing the enigma of the artist, the mystery of the aesthetic conception of life in the context of a middle-class culture that disturbingly enough both embraces and rejects the art of the detective. Admittedly, the Victorian ethos draws on Sherlock Holmes' art of detection to restore its values, to exact meaning out of the convoluted process of construing, even as Victorian ideology proves to be too weak to stand the ultimate consequences of Holmes'

art. However, Holmes' art of detection, much like Wilde's critical theory, is persistent in that it calls for unbroken, perpetual, self-questioning. And no Victorian mind-set can discharge fiction of its force as an everlasting process of revelation, problematizing and interpretation. That might easily be the ultimate pleasure sitting at the core of Holmes' aesthetic conception of life.

NOTES

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[2] *The Moonstone* (1868) has been popularly considered the first detective novel in Britain. However, Braddon's novel, much less popular nowadays, fits the requirements of the genre and precedes Collins' novel by seven years.

[3] Arguably, there is a *Victorian* Holmes (pre-1893) and an *Edwardian* Holmes (post-1901), the former understandably being much more ingrained with decadent aesthetic values than the latter.

[4] Authors have already, albeit timidly, pointed out the artistic nature of Holmes' profession (e.g., Demeter 2011: 197, Dowd 2011: 93-95), but always taken as a subsidiary trait of the detective's scientific approach, not as a full-fledged characterization of his activities.

[5] Indeed, it could be argued that characters such as Auguste Dupin, Hercules Poirot, Sam Spade and/or Phillip Marlowe share this trait with Holmes. And yet, they are not die-hard aesthetes. Granted, the actual (but relative) disinterest of these characters (Holmes included) in justice and the law does not automatically qualify them as decadent artists; but it certainly leaves them out of the normative ideological milieu that governs the community they explore, thus effectively encoding them as transgressive, defiant characters. All these characters arguably share this transgressive element with Holmes. Whether they articulate it in the light of decadent, aestheticist discourses (Holmes), the defiant morals of the anti-hero (hard-boiled detectives), or over-rational mechanistic methods (arguably Dupin and Poirot) is quite another matter.

⁶ Among the chief characteristics the character of Holmes borrows from Oscar Wilde, other than the rejection of commonness, Angela Kingston highlights the "aesthetic propensities," Holmes' sexual isolation, and the way Holmes' didactic explanations somehow recall those of an "annoyed artist to blind people" (2007: 84). More significantly perhaps, particularly in the context of *The Sign of Four*, is the characterization of Thaddeus Sholto, an overtly caricaturesque subject that Kingston views as a straightforward portrait of Oscar Wilde. Holmes' sympathies to Sholto in the novel help imbue even more Wildean overtones in Holmes.

⁷ The treasure, by the way, belonged to a Rajah who sided with the British, thus probing into the shady relationship governing the political dynamics of the Empire.

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