

Five Sherlock Holmes Adventures

A. Conan Doyle

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Desperate for some literature in English, I look at the shelf of English books in the Cultura bookstore in Beziers. Nothing that appeals to me at all, except possibly some literature published in bilingual editions. That can be of some interest as practice in French. I first pick up three adventures of Sherlock Holmes, and at a subsequent visit, an additional two. Reading in French is easier than I had imagined. And in fact the French appears more fluent and elegant than the English, although this is probably an illusion brought about by unfamiliarity. The editions address the French reader, hence English expressions are explained. It is striking that so many idiomatic expressions, and manners of speaking, have no counterpart in French, but have to be written in so many words and so literally. But of course this is the essence of an idiomatic expression, namely its uniqueness and lack of correspondence, and thus needs to be translated, thereby proving its untranslatability. Collingwood includes idiomatic expressions in the vocabulary of a language, and thus an expression should be considered as a single word. One shows one's command of a foreign language by mastering the majority of its idiomacy. If not, you will find yourself speaking perfectly but yet being singled out. In the seventies William Saphire used to write columns in the New York Times on the command of English among the KGB people sent out to spy. They had taken great care to collect a lot of idiomatic expressions, yet for some reasons, they tended to get them slightly wrong, often in very subtle ways. Of course the purpose of those columns was one of self-congratulation, to show that the skill of a Native speaker, acquired during a life time, was indeed a match to impostors. In a way it mirrors the concern for the intrusion of artificial intelligence, and the need to be reassured that robots will never be able to fully simulate the responses of a human. Typically, in those days Soviet citizens, or at least the KGB-variety, were seen as robots, merely pretending to be people. But now the digression has been carried too far.

Why are the Sherlock Holmes stories so popular? Why is Sherlock Holmes the quintessential fictional figure which aspires to reality? Conan Doyle must have hit a nerve. None of his other fiction has had any impact close to that of his Sherlock Holmes. Initially he got tired of his hero and killed him off. There was a public outcry. Conan Doyle relented, maybe less out of concern for the sensibilities of his readers than the commercial potential it revealed¹. From then on he continued writing, sure of a steady committed readership, until almost to the very end. One assumes that the last decades of writing was mere hackwork. Obviously he must have been inspired initially, but then inspiration was no longer was. One suspects that the classical stories were written early on, during the 19th century, and what was produced in the 1920's were mere pastiches of what had been going on before. In fact a large part of the charm of the stories consists in evoking

¹ In fact he had tired of him earlier, and raised the fees in order to discourage publishers. It did not work, they were eager for more, and Doyle became one of the highest paid authors in England

the London times at the end of the 19th century (the 'fin de siecle' period), by the 1920's much had changed, but I guess he had all the stories taking place during that charmed period.

The flaws of the stories are obvious, but so are the merits. They have clearly captured the imagination of many, and as a young boy I read them in Swedish translation and was transfixed. Orwell classified them as 'good bad' stories, supposedly meaning of no literary merit, but nevertheless not unworthy. So what is the fascination? The fascination of the classical detective story (and mind you, Holmes was not the first) lies in the unravelling of a mystery. To be able to deduce from traces, accessible to everyone as long as they have the wits to look for them, the solution to what baffles you. It does not have to be a murder, as it later became almost obligatory, but as it often is not in the Holmes oeuvre. And a very important thing, which comes through in the stories, is that it is not enough to observe, there are simply too many things to observe, the crucial thing is to have a hunch, a hypothesis, or if you prefer the abuse of language, a theory, to guide your observations. In one of the stories, concerning a suspected vampire (a late and not very good one), the Popperian criterion, is even made explicit before Popper (Popper was unknown in the 20's). Namely you need to form some preconceived notion of what it is all about before you can look for ways of testing, and possibly falsifying it.

I like to think of this as forensic investigations, be it interpreting the past, be it as a historian, archeologist or paleontologist. And of course detective work lies at the heart of any scientific investigation, and what really is exciting is not so much the results themselves as the way one gets to it. Thus much of popular writing on science becomes dreary, as the reader is only told that and that, without the underlying explanations, it threatens to become merely a dry catalogue of facts. Thus what popular science fails to deliver, the detective novel supplies. Conan Doyle, as his alter ego Dr. Watson, was medically trained, but not a scientist by temperament, talent or indeed training. As a teenager I read a biography on him and was disappointed by his outspoken disgust of mathematics, taking as an example the binomial theorem. Where did he get his inspiration from? True, the inspiration for Sherlock Holmes was taken from his medical days in Edinburgh, taken aback as he was of the observing and reasoning performance of one of his teachers - Joseph Bell². What fascinated Conan Doyle, surely would fascinate a wider public, but it remains a mystery that the author could simulate such a performance without having the gifts of performing them himself. You need to fake it, and it is here that his cleverness lies. To be able to appear clever without being it. The secret of course is to know the answer and work backwards, it takes skill and imagination, but of course not as much skill and imagination as to start from first principles and have no clues. What it requires is the ability to spin a good plot, which is essential for authors who want to live by their craft. Many writers dispense with plots and take them wholesale and modifying them to their hearts contents as they go along, Shakespear being the most illustrious example. There is more to literature than mere plot, in fact plots may be quite defective, as long as they give the impression of being not. And if the plots of Holmes would be scrutinized

² (1837-11) A Scottish surgeon, and a pioneer in forensic pathology. Among his quirks was the close observation of strangers, and from that deduce their occupations and recent activities, something Holmes is made to do all the time, to the continued amazement of Dr. Watson.

they would no doubt exhibit glaring gaps and deficiencies, but the real skill is to make the reader satisfied with the surface, not provoked to probe the depths. One is reminded of Cicero who famously claimed that presenting a case in court is meant to convince for the moment, not to survive the scrutiny of the next morning. You need to dazzle, and so Conan Doyle was able to do. First with the evocation of the character of Holmes, and then with the charms of the ambiance and the fin-du-siecle period, with London fog and cabs. The period charm was of course not obvious in the beginning, but acquired its patina with the passing of time, which has made later-day pastiches so attractive (and as noted one may think of the latter-day Doyle as copying his own work). Like so many successful novels of the 19th century, it was essentially a very good soap-opera, hence the remarks by Orwell. Once a soap acquires a critical mass it can in principle go on for ever. It no longer matters who writes it, the staff can change over the years with large overlaps from year to year to ensure continuity.

Of the five stories perused, the first one of a suspected vampire is rather weak, and its most notable feature is its crypto-popperian remark, to which I have already alluded. The second rings a faint bell, in which Holmes pretends to be seriously sick in order to lure a suspected murderer to his den. The stratagem seems faintly familiar, not unlikely Doyle may have used it twice. The third story, also rings a bell, with its painting of a wall to hide a compromising smell. It is rather morbid, maybe too morbid for the world of the Holmes stories. The speckled band I recall from a Swedish translation back in my childhood, although the details have all evaded me. The final story about the three students at Oxbridge has its charms, not last because of the idyllic academic setting, and is clinically free of murder and blood, the crime in this case to be prevented, being cheating in a Greek exam. How far from the ordinary mill of crime stories where a body (even better two) is indispensable.

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