



Citation: A. Barale (2017) Baroque *Sherlock*: Benjamin's friendship between «criminal and detective» in its fore- and afterlife. *Aisthesis* 10(2): 163-169. doi: 10.13128/Aisthesis-22417

Received: July, 2017

Accepted: October, 2017

Published: December, 2017

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Baroque *Sherlock*: Benjamin's friendship between «criminal and detective» in its fore- and afterlife

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Abstract. The starting point of this paper is a statement that Benjamin makes in a group of notes he writes for his project of a detective novel (1933). Benjamin writes here that «criminal and detective could be so friends [so befreundet sein] as Sherlock Holmes and Watson». We'll try to understand the meaning of this statement through the investigation of the detective topic in two moments of its fore and afterlife: its fore life in Benjamin's meditation on the baroque (why it is so will be apparent shortly) and its after life in Sherlock Holmes's most recent apparition, in the BBC series *Sherlock*. One of the most interesting elements of this series is in fact the relationship – which is barely sketched in Conan Doyle's stories – between Sherlock Holmes and his antagonist, the maths professor Jim Moriarty. We'll see that in Benjamin's notes for a detective novel the criminal is not a maths professor but a psychoanalyst. What is the difference, anyway, between professor Moriarty's knowledge and Sherlock's knowledge? In fact, we will find out that criminal and detective are closer to one other (more «befreundet») than what we may be induced to think – close but not coincident.

Key words. Sherlock Holmes, Walter Benjamin, web, baroque.

1. IN THE NET

The starting point of this paper¹ is a statement that Benjamin makes in a group of notes he writes for his project of a detective novel (we know that Benjamin was very fond of detective novels, and these notes prove he even planned to write one on his own)². He writes here that «criminal and detective could be so friends [so

¹ The text was written for the international workshop “Scenari del contemporaneo: esperienze estetiche, pratiche artistiche e forme di vita/ Cenários do contemporâneo: experiências estéticas, práticas artísticas e formas de vida”, which was held in Firenze on 25-26 May 2016 under the direction of Fabrizio Desideri and Maria Filomena Molder.

² See Frisby (1994) and Salzani (2007).

befreundet sein] as Sherlock Holmes and Watson» (Benjamin [1933]: 846). We'll try to understand the meaning of this statement through the investigation of the detective topic in two moments of its fore and afterlife: its fore life in Benjamin's meditation on the baroque (why it is so will be apparent shortly) and its after life in Sherlock Holmes's most recent apparition, in the BBC series *Sherlock* (fig. 1)³.

One of the most interesting elements of this series is in fact the relationship – which is barely sketched in Conan Doyle's stories – between Sherlock Holmes and his antagonist, Jim Moriarty. In Doyle's original version Moriarty appears only after a few novels and he has nothing to do with the murders that Sherlock has investigated on until then. In the series, on the contrary, Moriarty is responsible for all crimes Sherlock has dealt with until then.

But who is Jim Moriarty? In Conan Doyle's novels Moriarty is a maths professor. In the new series he is a technology expert. Sherlock is not bad, either, from this point of view. In Doyle's novels he has a great interest in science. This is why Steven Moffat, the creator of the BBC tv series, thought that the modern Sherlock had to feel at his ease in the digital society. Sherlock runs a website, solves his cases with the aid of a blackberry and, most importantly, his way of proceeding is compared continuously to that of a computer. But Moriarty is a real wizard of the net. In Doyle's books he was described as a spider at the center of a net of invisible crimes (Doyle [1894]: 415). In the recent version this net becomes a real net of digital threads reaching everywhere. Moriarty can open, as he says, «any door anywhere with a tiny line of computer codes». He reaches his greatest transgression when he introduces himself at the same time into the Bank of England, the Prison of Pentonville and the Tower of London, where he breaks the glass case preserving the crown jewels and disguises himself as the queen (fig. 2).

³ Among the multitude of titles published on this movie, see at least Stein, Busse (2014).



fig. 1



fig. 2

Many historical figures have been suggested to explain the creation of professor Moriarty in Conan Doyle, including real criminals and famous scientists, such as the astronomer Simon Newcomb (see Schaefer [1993]: 31-32) (fig. 3). He was a great scientist shortly before Doyle started to write his novels but he became famous chiefly because he tried to ruin his colleagues' careers.

Genius and evil then. We'll see that in Benjamin's notes for a detective novel the criminal is not a maths professor but a psychoanalyst (Benjamin [1933]: 846). This figure of wicked scientist, anyway, is quite interesting because a discourse on knowledge runs all through Doyle's novels. In the very first novel Watson discovers that Sherlock Holmes has an incredible knowledge on some topics and a complete ignorance of some others. He knows, for example, everything about the different

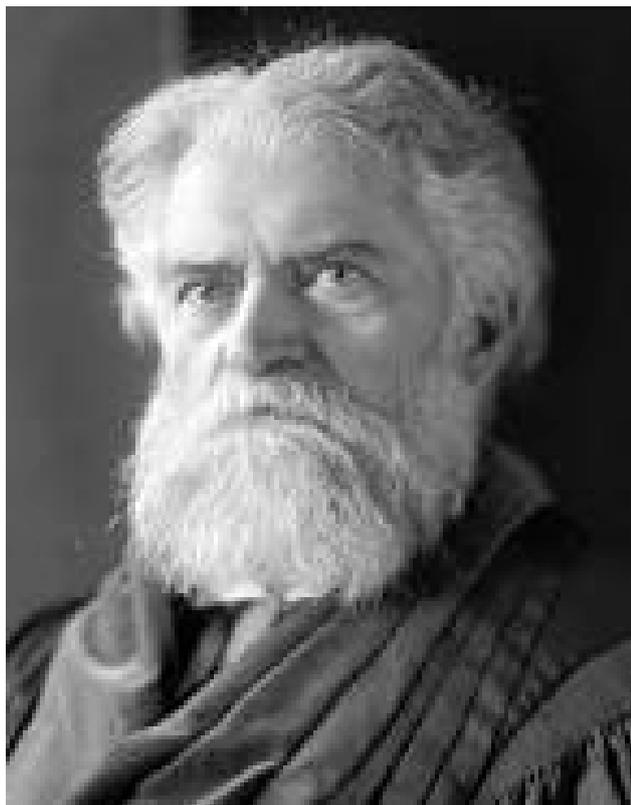


fig. 3

types of pipe tobacco but he does not know that the earth rotates around the sun. Sherlock Holmes gives a curious explanation for this ignorance. He says he does not want to occupy too much room in his brain-attic, otherwise he will not be able to find what he needs quickly enough. In the most recent BBC televised version, the attic becomes of course the memory of a computer. Yet something else and much more important changes in the BBC version.

Let's go back for the moment to Benjamin's notes for a detective novel. The title he thinks of is «la chasse aux mensonges», or «the hunt for lies» (Benjamin [1933]: 846), in French perhaps also to honour the French crime stories he was reading at the time, above all Simenon. It is not by accident if one of the first figures we find in these notes is a man who was blind for a long time and thinks, upon being able to see again after surgery, that people are made-up [*geschminkt*]. This was

an experience that was described to Benjamin by his friend Felix Nöggerath, at whose house he was staying in Ibiza when he wrote these notes. The «hunt for lies» then: hunt for appearance. In fact this man who struggles to get used to seeing again makes us think immediately of the prisoner of Plato's cave, when he manages to escape and at first he cannot bear the light of the sun. This theme of the cave is also present in the notes that Benjamin writes in the same period for his work on the *Arcades Project*. Here the cave is compared, not by coincidence, to a spider web. There are a number of similarities between the web Benjamin describes in this passage and that of Moriarty. Benjamin here considers the spaces in which men live at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the dawn of modernity, and he describes them as disguised spaces, where things play at taking a shape that is actually the other side of nothing (Benjamin [1928-40]: I 2, 6). To live in these spaces means, Benjamin writes, «to have secluded oneself within a spider's web, in whose toils world events hang loosely suspended like so many insect bodies sucked dry. From this cavern, one does not like to stir» (Benjamin [1928-40]: I 2, 6).

The image may be a little terrorising but it can make us understand something more about the detective. In his «hunt for lies», the detective tries to get out of the cave, out of the web, but he does that by adopting some aspects of it. What is particularly striking in Benjamin's notes for a crime story is the confidence the detective has with death, which characterizes everything that is imprisoned within the web (inevitably the etymology of Moriarty's name is evocative). There are many elements in Benjamin's notes that can be referred to this concept. In an episode, for example, the detective lies down on a morgue carrier and pretends to be a corpse under the sheet so as to enter into the laboratory. The BBC tv series, too, plays with the detective's confidence with death. This relationship of the scientist to technique and to the unanimated world is a theme that runs also through the essay on the *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, on

which Benjamin will work a few years later⁴. Also the apathy of the detective falls within the same context. Already in Doyle's novels Sherlock passes from a state of extraordinary intensity while investigating to a state of complete and desperate inertia when he has no crimes to solve. In a letter to Kracauer, Benjamin will talk about the «phlegmatic temperament» of the detective (Benjamin [1925-1930]: 147). But what's the difference then between the science of the detective and that of the criminal, or, in other words, between the science of Sherlock and that of Moriarty?

A first answer that, however, will not be the definitive one, takes us back to the passage of the *Arcades Project* we just referred to. Here Benjamin writes that the love for the dimension of the web or cave involves «an aversion to the open-air, the (so to speak) Uranian atmosphere» (Benjamin [1928-40]: I 2, 6). This brings to mind the conclusion of Benjamin's book on the German baroque drama, which he wrote much earlier but is strictly connected to the *Arcades Project*. In fact the meditation on the death character of knowledge, or at least of a certain kind of knowledge and of a certain kind of images, arises for Benjamin precisely with the art and the thought universe of the baroque. At the end of the book on the baroque, nevertheless, the subject who lives immersed into this world of isolated images, or allegories, rediscovers himself «left entirely to» his «own devices»: not any more «playfully in an earthly world of things», but «seriously under the sky» (Benjamin [1928]: 232).

This exit from the web of images, from their «play», helps us to explain a few but not all things. It clarifies why in Benjamin's notes for a detective novel the criminal is a psychoanalyst. The psychoanalyst still moves completely inside the dream or play, in a world of things, of images. Here Benjamin seems to be thinking most of all of Jung⁵, but also of Freud. Freud has the great merit of showing the infinite nuances between sleep and wakefulness, but he still conceives of

the dream as a «natural phenomenon» (Benjamin [1928-40]: No. 9).

Yet something is not quite right. If the detective is simply someone who jumps out of the web of images, how can we explain his friendship with the criminal?

In order to answer, we have to establish a link between the pre-history and post-history of the detective novel. Thus we will find out that criminal and detective are in fact closer to one other (more «befreundet») than what we may be induced to think – close but not coincident.

2. THE «DAMNED LETTER»

Let's start from one of the most important elements in Benjamin's notes and in detective stories in general: the theme of the letter. The anonymous letter, the letter left before dying, the falsified letter (of course the purloined letter by Poe)... Also one of Benjamin's favourite novels, *Les Pitard* by Georges Simenon (see Benjamin [1935-37]: n. 273), starts with the finding on a ship of an anonymous letter that marks the beginning of a series of catastrophes. This topic of the ship is quite important: we find it also in Benjamin's notes for a detective novel and it is connected, as will be showed shortly, to that of the train. In his notes for a detective novel, Benjamin refers to the letter of Don Carlos: the letter the terrible princess Eboli sends to Carlos pretending to be his lover Elisabetha, eventually causing his ruin. To come back to the point, the first letter Benjamin considers in this sense, in its character of trace but also of trigger of a catastrophe, can be found in an essay that prepares for many aspects *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which Benjamin dedicates to Herod's drama in Calderon and Hebbel: *Calderon's El mayor monstruo, los celos and Hebbel's Herodes und Mariamne*.

Herod, the king of Judea, is imprisoned by the roman emperor Augustus. He then orders to kill his wife, so that she can not marry his enemy. Mariamne learns of this decision through a letter that she finds by chance. What is peculiar in Cal-

⁴ See on that Desideri (2012).

⁵ See Benjamin (1928-40): N8, 2; N8a1; N11, 1; N18,4.

deron's drama, anyway, is that this letter has been ripped and Mariamne has to put together the fragments so she could read it:

*What do these bits of paper say?
 "Death" is the very first word
 That I find; here is "honour",
 And there I read "Mariamne".
 What is this? Heavens, save me!
 For much is said in three words,
 "Mariamne", "death" and "honour".
 Here is "in silence", here
 "Dignity"; here "commands" and here "ambition";
 And here it continues: "if I die..."
 What doubt can there be? I am already informed
 by the folds of the paper
 that link to one another
 and so unfold this outrage.
 Entryway, on your green carpet
 let me piece them together!⁶*

«Even in their isolation» Benjamin observes, these words «reveal themselves as fateful. Indeed, one is tempted to say that the very fact that they still have a meaning in their isolation lends a threatening quality to this remnant of meaning they have kept» (Benjamin [1928]: 208). They are words reduced to things, to fragments we can not control. Actually, everything in this Herod's drama is reduced to things, unanimated objects: even human characters, carried along as they are by the law of destiny (Benjamin [1923]: 376 ss.). And also their passions: Mariamne is not killed by jealousy but by chance: by a dagger that missed its mark (it was meant for Octavian). Jealousy is a dagger in this drama, as Benjamin writes (Benjamin [1928]:

133). In fact the dagger remains in the foreground for the entire duration of the drama.

Yet there is something that does not fall within this framework. That's a very interesting aspect of the essay on Calderon and Hebbel: what distinguishes Calderon's Herod from the other versions that depict him usually as a bloodthirsty monster is his love for Mariamne. Jealousy in Calderon's Herod is always linked to «the most intense love» (Benjamin [1923]: 376). This of course does not undermine destiny, but is in some ways in contrast to it. Let us note for the moment that, in one of the schemes for *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin writes that in the baroque universe, that is, in a universe of things and isolated images, there can not be love but only lust (Benjamin [1928b]: 917).

Let's consider now the post-history of the detective. What happens in BBC *Sherlock* to these threatening words that contain a destiny? The master of this type of messages in the tv series is naturally Moriarty, who avoids every kind of contact, by only communicating via text messages. The demonic character that digital messages, SMS or emails, can acquire is a common experience. After his death, anyway, Moriarty texts the whole town with his picture and a question reading: "Did you miss me?" (fig. 4), to pretend that he's back. Sherlock's task will be not to believe this message: to affirm that «Moriarty is dead». Opposite to this, however, is the use of messages and letters that Sherlock makes.



fig. 4

⁶ «Dice, a partes, desta suerte:/ "Muerte" es la primer razón/ que he topado. "Honor" contiene/ésta. "Mariene" aquí/ /se escribe. Cielos, valedme!/ que dicen mucho en tres voces/ "Mariene, honor, muerte"./"Secreto" aquí, aquí "respeto",/ "servicio" aquí, aquí "conviene",/ y aquí, "muerto yo", prosigue./Más qué dudo, si me advierten/ los dobleces del papel/ adonde están los dobleces,/llamándose unos a otros?/ Sé, oh prado, lámina verde/ en que, ajustándolos, lea...». Calderon (1637): II, 2276-2296, as quoted in Benjamin (1923): 375 and Benjamin (1928): 207-8.

3. ON TRAVEL

We mentioned that Doyle's Sherlock doesn't want to store too much information into his brain attic, so that he can move more freely in it. The BBC Sherlock is not so dichotomous, there is not such a drastic alternative for him between knowing and not knowing. In a crucial episode Moriarty gives him a series of riddles that he must solve very quickly in order to prevent some murders from happening. He does not know enough, therefore he connects to the Internet. Thus he is able to get the information he needs, including some notions of astronomy. Sherlock's method consists then of on-site observation and online connection at the same time (fig. 1). The two things are connected together and they interrupt each other: «under the sky» and in the net at the same time, then, to go back to the passage of the *Arcades Project* we just mentioned.

Yet there's another interesting aspect of Sherlock's relationship to written messages that overturns Moriarty's threatening messages. When Sherlock is focused on a case and starts investigating, his thoughts appear as on-screen text. This use of overlaying texts in the series is not new, but what's interesting here is the frantic rhythm with which these texts appear and disappear. To read them it is often necessary to pause and look at a still frame. What we find here then is a kind of writing in the making, a writing that is still rhythm. One of the most difficult but also most important parts of Benjamin's book on the baroque in fact has to do exactly with this: with the possibility for writing to start again as rhythm, as a «figure» that is capable of having the same vibration as sound (cfr. Benjamin [1928]: 213-214).

To conclude, we have to go back to the question from which we have started about professor Moriarty's knowledge and Sherlock's knowledge. What kind of knowledge is implied in the type of writing we have just seen? In a note on the *Ways of knowledge*, Benjamin refers to «something that in the field of knowledge is similar to the present in the field of time...» (Benjamin [1927]: 49):

*Knowledge coming from insight (Einsicht) [...]:
This is a very enigmatic knowledge. It is something that in the field of knowledge is similar to the present in the field of time....*

If we refer to our psychoanalyst, that would be the point, then, in which his narration (and that of his patient) is interrupted. There are two psychoanalysts in BBC *Sherlock*: a real psychoanalyst, at the beginning of the first episode, who advises Watson to narrate what happens to him in a blog. «Nothing happens to me» says Watson, and here his adventures start. The knowledge we are talking about is then the knowledge that precedes the writing of the blog, it's something that permits to dilate this moment.

There's then a second psychoanalyst, in the last few episodes, who tells Watson who has just lost his wife that all he says is «understandable». «No, it's not, at all» Watson answers. Not by accident, the viewers will find out that this is not a real psychoanalyst, but Sherlock's schizophrenic sister, who sides with Moriarty.

The knowledge that corresponds «to the present in the field of time» has to do, then, with the possibility to reconnect to a reality that escapes us, as Sherlock does when he gets out of his apathy crises. This helps us to understand also something more about Herod's love for Mariamne. If lust, as Benjamin shows us in his book on the baroque, can be conceived as an attempt to take possession of things by killing them, on the contrary, love would be the capability of going back to them: to what in them exceeds our knowledge and sets it in motion again.

It is no accident that according to Benjamin detective novels are linked to travelling. Why do we read so much while travelling, for example on the train, and why crime stories in particular? That's what Benjamin asks himself in an article he writes on travel literature (Benjamin [1930]). Because, naturally, the jolts of travels correspond to the jolts of narrated events – which are not, however, something that we suffer passively, but something that we rather act upon with the whole body. Our body, «in keeping with the rhythm of

the wheels», turns into the «shuttle» (a shuttle to sew, but also a real shuttle: here is the theme of the boat again) that «pierces the warp» of the characters's destiny and of ourselves.

Not a passage from «seriously» to «playfully» then, to go back to the conclusion of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, but the possibility of putting oneself seriously into play. «The game is on», as Sherlock says.

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