



## Sherlock Holmes and Father Brown: FROM LOGIC TO METAPHYSICS

### T. S. Eliot and detective stories

In addition to the authors of undeniable quality that readers of detective novels can enjoy, the genre's library also contains literary critics of great stature, including, perhaps surprisingly to some, a poet and critic of the caliber of Thomas Stearns Eliot. He not only dedicated numerous reviews to mystery novels but also added valuable pages of literary analysis as well as a set of five rules that would allow the conception and writing of quality detective stories. For now, I leave the rules to the writers of such stories. What interests me here, however, are his main ideas regarding the crime fiction genre.

In an article entitled "Wilkie Collins and Dickens" published in 1927, Eliot describes Collins' novel *The Moonstone* as "the first and greatest of English detective novels", contrasting it with the crime fiction of Edgar Allan Poe: "The detective story, as created by Poe, is something as specialized and as intellectual as a chess problem; whereas the best English detective fiction has relied less on the beauty of the mathematical problem and much more on the intangible human element."

If in Poe's detective fiction the emphasis is decisively on the logical component, challenging the readers' *intellect* to follow the resolution of the mystery, in the case of Collins and other English authors, the emphasis falls on the *mysterious, unpredictable* dimension of the characters. In a simple but not necessarily simplistic formulation, we can say that while Poe's reading predominantly engages the mind, Collins's reading touches the hearts of the readers. In the context of English literature, Sherlock Holmes is an exception because



he, though (almost) pure intellect, is, according to Eliot's interpretation, a character whose humor balances the scale: "Sherlock Holmes, not altogether a typical English sleuth, is a partial exception; but even Holmes exists, not solely because of his prowess, but largely because he is, in the Jonsonian sense, a humorous character, with his needle, his boxing, and his violin."

This nuanced approach to the issue

reminds me of the brilliant explanation from "The Frontiers of Criticism" (1956) that Eliot proposed in order to establish the guiding principle in poetry criticism. The role of the critic, in a sense similar to that of the poet, is "to help his readers to understand and enjoy". Thus, it's not just *the mind and understanding*, but also *the heart and feelings*. And, vice versa, not only the emotions and affections,

but also the intellect. According to this fully justified vision, the characters in detective novels must embody not only logic and deduction but also metaphysics and intuition. With such support as that offered by Eliot, I can now confidently proceed to my own summary analysis of two of the most successful characters in the entire history not only of detective fiction but of English literature as a whole.

### **Sherlock, the dialectician**

Sherlock Holmes embodies, probably involuntarily, a brilliant form of popularizing Aristotelian-Scholastic logic. Indeed, Holmes is a perfect dialectician. He never misses an opportunity to express not only his aversion to superstitions and, eventually, the religious perspective on things, but also his reservation towards any form of knowledge that does not involve deduction. For him, induction and intuition are out of bounds. The ability to establish the connections of detective syllogisms that lead from premises to conclusions represents the supreme form of knowledge. In a certain sense, he is a perfect embodiment of the positivistic, rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment age.

Very interestingly, this primacy of reason is accompanied by traits that imply the Jonsonian humor noted by Eliot. Alongside this dimension, which endears him to readers, there are behaviors that seem to suggest the dark secrets of his geometric soul. I'm not sure if I can say that Sherlock would be an "ego-maniac", but a certain kind of egocentrism animates his actions. This is not new in Doyle's characters. The notorious Professor Challenger from *The Lost World* is also extremely concerned with asserting the infallibility of his intelligence. In the name of a higher understanding, he never misses an opportunity to underline the quality of his theories. This wouldn't necessarily be reprehensible if it weren't accompanied by a hint of contempt for other members of the scientific community or for the poor journalists fond of sensational interviews.

On the other hand, in the case of Sherlock Holmes, the profound motivation behind his actions, which indeed manifest remarkable courage and tenacity, is not necessarily altruistic. If in the detective novels of Poe, as Eliot

says, we see similarities to chess problems, Holmes seems to be primarily animated by the ambition to solve new puzzles just to prove—to himself and to others—his abilities.

As time passes and the opportunity for a new display of his intellectual qualities does not arise, Holmes falls into a state of torpor, bordering on depression. The atonal violin music he invents ad hoc, the gruffness of his displayed appearance without gentleness, the lack of communicability, and sometimes even the intoxication with fashionable drugs of his time, turn him into an "anti-hero" who vaguely resembles Raymond Chandler's almost-alcoholic detective Philip Marlowe. Of course, we cannot expect a modern author to propose to readers a detective with the traits of a saint. Indeed, is such a thing possible?

### **Father Brown, the metaphysical hunter of souls**

Gilbert Keith Chesterton believes so and proves it with the creation of his priest detective, Father Brown, a rare achievement which earned the praise of Eliot:

When I am considering Religion and Literature, I speak of these things only to make clear that I am not concerned primarily with Religious Literature. I am concerned with what should be the relation between Religion and all Literature. Therefore the third type of "religious literature" may be more quickly passed over. I mean the literary works of men who are sincerely desirous of forwarding the cause of religion: that which may come under the heading of Propaganda. I am thinking, of course, of such delightful fiction as Mr. Chesterton's *Man Who Was Thursday*, or his Father Brown. No one admires and enjoys these things more than I do; I would only remark that when the same effect is aimed at by zealous persons of less talent than Mr. Chesterton the effect is negative.

Eliot does not hesitate to discuss Chesterton's apologetic intention, his intention to "forward the cause of religion". However, he does this without becoming moralistic or, even worse, a "propagandist" of the religious cause. Eliot acknowledges the difficulty of

striking such a balance. Without immense talent and literary experience, any writer who dares to tread this narrow path is doomed to failure. Chesterton succeeded because he was an authentic master not only of paradox, which is often remarked upon, but also of "incarnate" metaphor. He has a profound understanding of how the virtues of humility, courage, counsel, and ultimately wisdom can be expressed through poetic and literary images and symbols. The balance of shadows and lights in Father Brown's personality seems to resemble that of an anonymous, unnoticeable parish priest who, in moments of grace, behaves like Saint Philip Neri: joyful without being frivolous, optimistic without being superficial, attentive to detail without being scrupulous, and above all, motivated by a profound charity towards others. If the thirst of Christ on the cross can be understood as representing, with dramatic intensity, God's thirst to save souls, we can say that Father Brown is animated, like his author, by the same thirst. He not only wants to catch criminals but also to gather the scattered and lost sheep. This is the main motivation of the Chestertonian hero.

Unlike Sherlock Holmes, the unbeatable logician, Father Brown does not seek to prove anything. He has no need for applause or for the self-satisfaction of an ego eager to reveal its excellence. Discreet and unassuming, he shows understated heroism in his exposing of a crime and his leading of a lost soul out of the labyrinth of sin. Although in most cases he appears, like Sherlock Holmes, to rely solely on deductions, he is always following the lost sheep, the culprit. Skeptics, agnostics, and unbelievers may see Father Brown as a skilled deductive sleuth, while Christians may find in him a true metaphysical shepherd. This fortunate ambiguity offers very different readers the chance to come into contact with the demands of Christian holiness, conveyed through the mediation of a literary character who can delight even such a demanding critic as T. S. Eliot.

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