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SHERLOCK HOLMES AND PHILOSOPHY. THE FOOTPRINTS OF A
GIGANTIC MIND

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Review of Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy. The Footprints of a Gigantic Mind* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2011), 376 pages

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“What is the object of this circle of misery and violence and fear?” (He means life itself.) “It must have a purpose, or else our universe has no meaning and that is unthinkable. But what purpose? That is humanity’s great problem to which Reason, so far, has no answer.”

The very phrasing of the sentiment betrays Holmes’s sharing of the fearful suspicion that had begun to creep into the collective conscience ever since Friedrich Nietzsche [...] had spoken so unflinchingly about the impact that rapid secularization [...] would have on humanity’s capacity to find meaning in the Cosmos. Victoria was not only the English queen, she was the head of the Church of England. In a society so explicitly intertwining Religion and Civics, how could one help but feel a certain fear when staring into the unknown of a society constructed on secular philosophies?¹

The 61st volume of the series *Popular Culture and Philosophy* entitled *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy* continues the series of books that scholarly mixes philosophical essays with popular cultural constructs. George A. Reisch’s volumes published by Open Court are undoubtedly the result of consistent interdiscursivity and interdisciplinarity, a postmodern creation that captivatingly intertwines erudition and products of mass consumption. This ‘postmodern condition’ of the book, evidently following Lyotard’s explanation of the terms, makes each essayist address and answer puzzling questions in relation to *his/her reality*, where the pop icon is the object of analysis, and the result is a book like an experiment with two actors: the transmitter-philosopher-encoder and the receiver-reader-decoder. Whose role is dominating in this equation of discourses, in the Foucault-ian understanding of power relations, the question is, since both of them might have constructed the very subjects of which they speak? Roland Barthes (*The Death of the Author*) would have answered: the reader – on the one hand, the readers of Doyle’s literature, i.e. the scholars themselves, and, on the other hand, the readers of *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*. What is known is that the popular object of the experiment is appealing to both.

This volume does not focus on Philosophy and Seinfeld/ Star Wars/ The Beatles/ iPod or Transformers but on one of the most popular literary figures of the 19th century: Sherlock Holmes. The subtitle of the book, *The Footprints of a Gigantic Mind*, is suggestive for the entire corpus edited by

Joseph Steiff who compiles a text that resembles Conan Doyle's writings in composition, structure, style, form, wit and humor.

The Contents, sub-titled "Things Must Be Done Decently and in Order", explicitly points out the fact that the book is orthodoxly elaborate and dignified, with a clear purpose, suitable to its importance, thus 'infallible' in intention and composition. The *1 Corinthians 14:40* line seems to have fascinated Sherlock Holmes and Doyle who inserted it in one of the stories published in 1927, *The Adventure of the Retired Colourman*².

The volume has seven parts, all consisting in a set of chapters grouped around a title, meta-representationally concentrated in a famous saying, phrase or quote from the Sherlock Holmes stories, most of which preserved in the mind of avid readers and fans. The emblematic title epitomizes something of the Sherlockholmesian mind, reality and experience and it makes the reader feel entrapped in the process of en&decoding the texts of the studies to follow, all with 'hidden' meanings, due to the para-, meta-, intra- and inter-texts generated by the main corpus. The reader is thus puzzled and eager to decrypt, not to mention the fact that, as if he were "a" Sherlock Holmes, he is presented an apparently insignificant detail on the verso of each chapter title page: a drawing, like a piece of "evidence" - a handprint, dog footprints, then the footprints of a woman, a moustache, a single fingerprint, some bows for string instruments, the footprints of a man, and some fingerprints again. Even in form, this book combines popular elements with some more sophisticated arrangement.

The first part, "An Extraordinary Genius for Minutiae"³, focusing on Holmes's *special* character, begins with Kate Rufa's study titled "A Sherlockian Scandal in Philosophy", which explains the intriguing association of detection with philosophy. K. Rufa discovers and brings solid argument for the presence of Spinoza's theory in Holmes. Sherlock seems to be "Spinoza's concept of the 'just man'", an "automaton", "a calculating machine", possessing "something inhuman", to quote Watson, making Reason to "turn our passive human emotions into active emotions by allowing us to understand them"⁴. Timothy Sexton's essay, "Calculating Humanity", focuses on Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the overhuman - human, inhuman, underhuman - which, surprisingly, is to be traced in Holmes with the help of actor Jeremy Brett's brilliant performance. The reader is invited to pay "close attention to the clues" after the author daringly declares: "Equality be damned; it's all about the will to power and Holmes has the will lacking in the street urchins, bobbies, and assorted rabble below". Moreover, under the statement "This Fellow Rings True Every Time", Timothy Sexton associates Sherlock's overhuman posture with Nietzsche's nihilism and existentialism launched by 'God is dead'; after synthesizing Nietzsche's pronouncement and theory, explaining how the moral codes of the Judeo-Christian society have come to become the work of man, meaning that there is no absolute morality, no reward and

punishment, and that this results in a “sense of fear, confusion, nausea”, Sexton pictures the humans who populate our contemporary world, touched by this Nietzschean predicament: “[...] those who respond to the nausea and despair by tying their self-esteem to a sports team, and those who define their falsely rebellious non-conformity to the social norm by painting their skin and piercing selected body parts, and those who put their faith in any organized religion, and those who respond to the lack of any absolute morality by declaring that there is no morality at all as ‘the herd’. Sticks and stones may break Holmes’s bones, but words will never herd him”⁵. Of the supernatural air of the famous detective also speak Sami Paavola and Lauri Järvillehto. They prove that the power of the master detective “lies in his methodology”, i.e. his faculties of deduction, induction, abduction (in Charles Pierce’s understanding of the terms), of observation, analytic reasoning, logical synthesis, his “skillful use of the old Socratic method”, his knowledge of the definitional rules of logic, as well as another “Pierce-an idea”, which illuminates Sherlock Holmes’s methods, his “Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness”. The reader is even given a toolkit of Holme’s methods “for those interested in effective methods”⁶.

“A Dog Reflects the Family Life” is the second part of the book. Chapter 7, with Rafe McGregor’s study, “The Mystery of the Horrible Hound”, starts with a contradictory statement: “May 1902 *Publisher’s Weekly* printed two statements about Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles*: that it was the finest detective story ever written, and that no one would be reading it in 2002”. In the opinion of the essayist, it has endured for longer than 100 years and it is not a detective story at all. Curiously enough, and yet knowing that he might address a reader less familiar with deconstructivism and the postmodern condition, Rafe McGregor provides a deconstructive reading of *The Hound* in identifying some opposing elements in the text that re-conceptualizes the distinction, thus showing “how the language of the text undermines the selected priority”. Concretely, he speaks of Derrida’s aporia, which he identifies in Doyle’s text, where the narrative “undermines the apparent dominance of mystery in mystery-horror”. McGregor sees horror (*The Hound’s* horror included) as “the popular expression of the postmodern condition”, for it expresses, in Noël Carroll’s understanding, “the symptom of the late twentieth-century concern for meaning, value”, relativity, when concepts are created by humans and they are not “reflections of things-in-the-world” and when monsters “defy cultural categories, and our fear and revulsion of the unknown”. This has become possible because of the disappearance of certainty, which began with Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872, when the philosopher prophesized about “the end of the dominance of Christian values, values which had been exported to the world through the empires of Western Europe and the United States”, when everything started to be doubted and the constant change initiated

with it would result in complete ontological insecurity and utter anxiety. Consequently, McGregor concludes, *anxiety* is “the essential clue to the solution of the real mystery of *The Hound*, the secret of its remarkable success”⁷. Mihaela Frunză and Anatolia Bessemer’s “I suppose I Shall Have to Compound a Felony as Usual” discusses about Holmes’s feeling at ease with going against the law, when “the cause is excellent”, often in contrast with the police who always respect the law. The issue here is *justice*, one’s sense of justice and the law, and the scholars bring forward Alasdair’s MacIntyre’s belief in the diversity of the perspectives on justice as a “normal way of being”. Holme’s “transgressions of the law”, state M. Frunză and A. Bessemer, happen with the approval of Watson, of Conan Doyle, of the reader, of Lestrade, Gregson, Athelney Jones, of Hopkins and of all the rest, simply because what he does is meant to comfort the reader while he, just like some of the criminals, does the work of a judge, a jury and an executioner⁸. The subject of Ivan Wolfe’s “The Curious Case of the Controversial Canon” is the official/canonical and unofficial/apocryphal set of the Sherlock Holmes texts, starting from the fact that the French edition contains fifty-eight short stories instead of fifty-six. The reader is warned that the study is to elaborate on “terms like ‘canon’ and ‘apocrypha’”. Wolfe addresses the biblical meaning [“‘The Apocrypha’ [...] refers to several books in the Old Testament that were rejected by Protestants, but are still in use (to various extents) by Catholic and Orthodox churches”] in order to write a study on what “version of Holmes fits with the original”⁹.

The third part of the book, “I Think You Might Want a Little Unofficial Help” undoubtedly deals with gender issues, the clue being the footprints on page 116. One of the most interesting chapters of this part is Ruth Tallman’s “A Study in Friendship”. It debates on the concept of *true* friendship, in the Aristotelian understanding of the term. Intriguingly, this theory seems to reveal that “Holmes and Watson are not friends at all” because “true friends want what is good for their friends, even when that good comes at the expense of their own good (*Rhetoric*, lines 1380b35–1381a)”¹⁰. Ruth Tallman brings forward another argument of Aristotle, which explains why Watson and Holmes are not good friends indeed: the fact that they are not equally good and because one is morally better than the other, the goodness of the superior is diminished by the inferior. Julia Round discusses on the masculinity of the character in the background of the Victorian Age, a period of full industrialization and of strict gender and social classification, and she completes her demonstration as regards the contemporariness of the character by comparing Holmes with a popular film figure, David Shore’s Dr. House, evidently based on Doyle’s character. If Sherlock was a new man during Victorian times, House is “the new man” who appeared as a response to the “new woman” of our times, states J. Round¹¹.

The fourth part of the book debates on deception, lie, induction, art, philistinism, aestheticism, and narrative imagination, under the title “There Are Unexplored Possibilities in You”, which is mentioned by Sherlock to Watson when the former is surprised to discover something new in his friend, in “The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire”¹². Tamas Demeter’s “A Touch of the Dramatic” speaks about Holmes’s notable capability of *creating stories*, thanks to his “intuition, imagination, inspired guesswork, or artistic flair”. This turns Holmes into a writer, which would not be possible if Holmes did not possess artistic/narrative imagination that eventually is “his official ideology, which represents his actual practice in a distorted way”¹³.

“Holmes is a Little Scientific for My Tastes” is the fifth part of the book, and, one would say, the most consistent one. The title comes from Stamford’s characterization of Holmes, made when Stamford meets Watson, as two old friends, in order to introduce Watson to Sherlock, in *A Study in Scarlet*. In “Resisting the Siren Song of Rationalism”, Jim John Marks admits that Holmes taught him “that critical thinking could benefit society, if properly applied”. The appearance of Sherlock as a literary character in 1887 is associated with Nietzsche’s “Gott ist tot”. Moreover, the readers are reminded, just some decades before, Karl Marx saw religion as the opium of the people and Darwin displaced religion when introducing evolutionism. In the view of J. J. Marks, Holmes did not see society as collapsing (as reflected in the theories of his contemporaries) but rather Reason as beginning to fail to be able to explain the purpose or meaning of life in the nineteenth century. Additionally, today’s society has not yet come to admit that reason does not have all the answers, and rationalist thinkers should admit that even the worst products of the 20th century, Communism and national Socialism, were the “direct products of radical secularization, not of misguided religious zeal”. These perspectives construct two opposite roles for Holmes: the icon of rationalism, on the one hand, and the “harbinger of the inevitable doom”, on the other hand; the “last man of the Age of Reason, or the paranoid crank, begrudgingly among the first of the Postmodernists”¹⁴. Brian Domino’s study, “The Thing the Lion Left”, offers a rational basis for hope and the death of God as it appears in “The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger”, a story about love affairs and terrible mistakes, mixing it with Leibnitz’s theory on hope conditioned by the existence of a God in the world to generate justice.

The first chapter of part six titled “Music at Strange Hours” refers to Sherlock Holmes’s phenomenology, Edmund Husserl and drug addiction in a study signed by Kevin Kilroy: “Why Sherlock Holmes Is My Favorite Drug User”. The text begins descriptively, with a narration about a character named Holmes who, in a sort of an experiencing process, tries to make body and mind communicate in symbiosis, putting himself into a trance with the help of drugs. He thus forgets about reason and allows himself to enjoy the violin, to read, to be spontaneous and imaginative. Then the

reader is explained: “Sherlock Holmes uses drugs with the intention to explore the intricacies of consciousness, to purposefully sculpt his collection of knowledge, and to grow more attune with the event of being”¹⁵, in the phenomenological understanding of the study of consciousness. The rest of the text is a demonstration of the statement.

“The Tracing of Footsteps”, the seventh part of Joseph Steiff’s book, begins with an unbelievably unreliable comparison: “Why Sherlock is like a Good Hip-Hop Song”, signed by Rachel Michaels. The first lines of the study, like a motto, gives the reader a ‘21st-century virtual Sherlock Holmes’, who, on *his* website, and we are given the URL, introduces himself and presents his ‘business offer’. The next lines, however, immediately clarify the analogy and the reader finds out that the means by which he can get to Holmes in this century are diverse and that the material that comes out of the never-ending blending of representations and references is the postmodern pastiche. R. Michaels mentions Frederic Jameson’s *The Cultural Turn*, with his theory on the disappearance on the distinction between high culture and mass culture due to the incorporation of texts into texts, due to inter-, cross- and meta-references, a phenomenon that has come along with the democratization of art and culture. The connection with Sherlock Holmes is the fact that he unawarely creates pastiches when he more consciously than unconsciously combines “ingredients of prior works with new elements to create a unique work”¹⁶. What could be Sherlock Holmes’s connection with Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, since Jef Burnham’s study is such an approach, constructed brilliantly under the form of a detective story, a simulation of Doyle’s writings, where *simulacra* is “scrawled on the pavement” of the murder scene? The French philosopher is imagined to be expert enough in the term *simulacra* to be able to help a DI from Scotland Yard to solve a case in order “to determine the reality’s identity”. Here Sherlock and Watson, as well as all their stories, are not real because they are not even in books but in films and television, in media, which has terrible destructive power. Consequently, our character, the DI, despite the fact that he manages to solve the case by means of a key statement, “Elementary, my dear Watson” (which is known to have been falsely attributed to Doyle and Sherlock by media), gets to be “driven mad by what I can only describe as a paradox of perception” because the murderer seems to be Sherlock Holmes himself, “having transcended his fictional limitations through the process of hyperrealization”¹⁷. The last study of the book is signed by Magali Rennes and focuses on giving an answer to “why is Holmes the greatest detective of all times”, directly addressing the Reader, as Sherlock addresses Watson, with *dear Watson/Reader*. The answer is the entire study: his greatness relies in his ability to *play*, “claiming the timeless, universal, unofficial spirit of the folk”, which is Mikhail Bakhtin’s *carnavalesque*. Just like Bakhtin, M. Rennes identifies two bodies in Holmes’s world: his London and England, with a sun that

“never sets”, i.e. the body politic, with the institutions of the Queen, on the one hand, and the corseted classes longing for “liberation, humorous relief, and cosmic expansiveness”. In other words, there is progress, expansion, industrialization – the body politic, but also Holmes’s criminals, villains, rogues, murderers – all constructing a grotesque reality, in which the reader co-participates because: “It’s all just a game”¹⁸.

The last part of the book, entitled “He is a Man of Habits and I Am One of Them” actually paraphrases another saying, Watson’s characterization of Sherlock Holmes, as it appears in *The Adventure of the Creeping Man*: “He was a man of habits, narrow and concentrated habits, and I had become one of them”¹⁹. Here the intention is that of gathering the necessary ending sections that books usually contain. Thus, the List of Contributors is understood as “The Very Smartest of Our Detective Officers for Whose Future Holmes Had High Hopes”, and each contributor is portrayed in the ‘Holmesian style’. Here are some fragments from it: “Anatolia Bessemer has been spotted in Chicago despite being equally at home in London [...] Though for her, it’s less about catching criminals and more about never quite being pinned down in terms of her analysis of religious, cognitive, Marxist or philosophical evidence”; “Jef Burnham denies this reality. Only that which appears on television seems real to him [...]”; “Miriam Franchella is Associate Professor of Logic and Philosophy of Science at the State University of Milan. She feels that her washing machine has a deep empathy with her: they work in the same way [...]”; “Mihaela Frunza teaches Ethics at Babes-Bolyai University from Cluj, Romania. She holds a PhD in Philosophy and has recently published in applied ethics and bioethics. When not investigating Holmes’s mysteries, she is involved in research in medical ethics and moral philosophy”; “Joseph Steiff always felt like he saw more than he was supposed to and longed for his own Watson to chide [...] Now as a doddering professor, he walks into rooms and can’t remember why, he tries to figure out where his reading glasses are, and he wonders what he had started to say as he loses his train of thought – that is his scale of the mysteries he tries to solve these days”; “Ivan Wolfe splits his time between Arizona and Alaska, alternatively teaching English at Arizona State University and mowing lawns in the small town of Homer [...] He also considers anyone else with the same name to be apocryphal”²⁰ etc. Furthermore, the bibliographical list entitled “His Ignorance Was as Remarkable as His Knowledge” actually uses a famous statement from *A Study in Scarlet*²¹ used by Watson when portraying Sherlock Holmes. The same goes with “Hullo! Hullo! Good Old Index” which rephrases Sherlock’s words of enthusiasm when discovering a clue in his dialogue with Von Bork in *His Last Bow*²².

The greatest contribution of Joseph Steiff’s book is that it brings together philosophy and culture/cultural theories, plus literature/literary theories, which is not necessarily new, one would say. However, the

special merit comes from the fact a past cultural construct is brought into the present and made contemporary, scientifically appealing, and consistent through its very practical nature. This is not only due to the public and the popular icon, but rather due to those ‘minds’ that are scientific and reasoning enough to explain ‘human and active emotion’/preference, and, through it, to give meanings to 21st century knowledge, life and reality.²³

Notes:

¹ Jim John Marks, “Resisting the Siren Song of Rationalism”, in *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy. The Footprints of a Gigantic Mind* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2011), 211-212.

² Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Retired Colourman”, in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Volume II, New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003, 659.

³ Watson’s characterization of Holmes in Conan Doyle’s “The Sign of Four” (in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Volume I, (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), 101.

⁴ Kate Rufa, “A Sherlockian Scandal in Philosophy”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 5

⁵ Timothy Sexton, “Calculating Humanity”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 15, 21

⁶ Sami Paavola and Lauri Järvillehto, “Action Man or Dreamy Detective”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 45, 46, 47, 50-51, 53

⁷ Rafe McGregor, “The Mystery of the Horrible Hound”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 67, 68-69, 74-76

⁸ Mihaela Frunză and Anatolia Bessemer, “I suppose I Shall Have to Compound a Felony as Usual”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 88, 91, 92

⁹ Ivan Wolfe, “The Curious Case of the Controversial Canon”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 104, 105, 107

¹⁰ Ruth Tallman, “A Study in Friendship”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 127-128

¹¹ Julia Round, “Out of House and Holmes”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 141

¹² Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire”, in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Volume II, New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003, 560

¹³ Tamas Demeter, “A Touch of the Dramatic”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 197-198, 206

¹⁴ Jim John Marks, “Resisting the Siren Song of Rationalism”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 211, 212, 215, 219

¹⁵ Kevin Kilroy, “Why Sherlock Holmes Is My Favorite Drug User”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 249

¹⁶ Racheal Michaels, “Why Sherlock Is Like a Good Hip-Hop Song”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 289

¹⁷ Jef Burnham, “A Study in Simulacra”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 317-318

¹⁸ Magali Rennes, “The Final Final Problem”, in Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 337-338, 339, 349, 348

¹⁹ Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Adventure of the Creeping Man”, in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Volume II, (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), 601

²⁰ Joseph Steiff (ed.), *Sherlock Holmes and Philosophy*, 353, 355, 359, 360

²¹ Arthur Conan Doyle, “A Study in Scarlet”, in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Volume I (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), 14

²² Arthur Conan Doyle, “His Last Bow”, in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, Volume II, (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003), 489

²³ This paper is a result of the project “Transnational Network for Integrated Management of Postdoctoral Research in Communicating Sciences. Institutional building (postdoctoral school) and fellowships program (CommScie)” - POSDRU/89/1.5/S/63663, financed under the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013