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DETECTING THE ART OF A *STUDY IN SCARLET*

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. . . a study in scarlet, eh? Why shouldn't we use a little art jargon. There's the scarlet thread of murder running through the colourless skein of life, and our duty is to unravel it, and isolate it, and expose every inch of it.

A Study in Scarlet (1887)

"Art jargon" and the Aesthetic Movement had an impact upon the Victorian period which extended far beyond narrowly defined schools of painting or "fringe" artists and literary figures. In part a reaction to the serious-minded artists and writers demanding a "moral" art and architects of a strict Gothic persuasion, the Movement—whether in graphic design, arts, or literature—asserted that art, in all its manifestations, should be enjoyed for its own sake. The literary document most frequently cited, the preface of Theophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), where the central tenet of Aestheticism, that art has no utility, is defined,¹ cannot begin to indicate the extent to which Aestheticism informed the tastes and fanned the debates of Victorian society. As Robin Spencer points out, even "art" originally intended to critique the Movement, like Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience* (1881), became part of the "cult."² And the Movement's persecutors changed as often as did their heroes.

As an index of the cross-over between the arts, the language and imagery of art provided more and more writers with striking metaphors for their literature. Like canvases of their time, fiction, too, was moving beyond realistic representation toward a search for the irreducible, monochromatic evocation of atmosphere, the production of an "effect." Allusions to conventional art as texts for explicating character or crisis are not uncommon in the Victorian novel, of course. James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*, to name only a few, make careful use of works of art to reveal certain qualities of their heroines.³ Allusions to art, however, are a surprising inclusion in Arthur Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*. Doyle's use of the art metaphor to describe his detective's crime-solving methods provides an essential gloss on the 1880's, a culmination of the Aesthetic argument.

First appearing in *Beeton's Christmas Annual* in December of 1887, Doyle's *Study* was published separately in July, 1888, its paper

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covers bordered in pink mosaic design and titled in red, oriental-styled letters.⁴ Though the cover may have suggested an art theme to readers familiar with these “trademarks” of Aestheticism, Doyle’s private consulting detective-hero must have been a puzzling contradiction. Sherlock Holmes’s precise “science of deduction” and his careful weighing of evidence jar sharply with his clearly “aesthetic” nature—amateur musician, opera-lover, cocaine-user.⁵ Not only are Holmes’s personal habits wildly eccentric, his characterization of his professional duties is also paradoxical. While at one moment Holmes sees himself challenging the forces of evil (embodied in his nemesis, Professor Moriarty), at another he will coolly deny any altruistic motive, saying that his detection of crime is merely a mental exercise, a way to keep himself entertained.⁶

The “morality” so common to the Victorian hero is deliberately smudged in Doyle’s depiction of Holmes, whom critics have identified as the very embodiment of Victorian propriety, social responsibility, morality, and patriotism (we recall his ornamenting the walls of his room with “VR” in honor of the Queen). Doyle’s use of “art jargon,” however, and particularly in the beginning of the first Holmes story, suggests that Sherlock Holmes’s ambiguity was central to Doyle’s original conception of the character.

I

Like most of his contemporaries, Doyle possessed a passing acquaintance with the issues of the art world of his day. And like most Victorians, who had a casual knowledge of botany or geology, Doyle was a typical Victorian in regard to art. Doyle’s family, although not wealthy, did have some connection with the fine arts. His father, a civil servant, painted in his spare time. Among his uncles, Doyle numbered a scholar-writer, a well-known illustrator and cartoonist for *Punch*, and a painter-art critic who served as director of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1869 until his retirement.⁷ Doyle, however, demonstrated no great attraction to art while pursuing his medical studies. But even as an occasional visitor to London in 1886, during the writing of *A Study*, Doyle could scarcely have been unaware of the “art news” of the day: regular exhibitions of Whistler’s and other non-conformists’ paintings at the Grosvenor Gallery, the “Ten O’Clock” lecture of Whistler’s, delivered in February, 1885, and repeated four times in 1886, and persistent ripples from the Ruskin-Whistler libel case a few years before.⁸ In short, the key elements that will find their way into the “art jargon” of Sherlock Holmes are well-defined by 1885: Gautier’s doctrine of “Art for Art’s Sake,” Whistler’s dismissal of

nature as the artist's highest aim or appropriate guide, and a general debunking of the Ruskin's insistence that good art demonstrates moral principles.

Rex Stout defines the quintessence of Holmes as the embodiment of a deeply held conceit that man is a reasoning animal,⁹ an image very much at odds with the portrait presented in *A Study*. Posing as a defender of law, Holmes claims to enlist science and mental discipline to solve crimes; yet the title of this first work suggests the paintings of Whistler and his followers, artists whose objectives defied the conventional "order." In fact, the art jargon that opens *A Study in Scarlet* defines a role for the dilettante detective that relieves him of the burden of defending "right" and "law"; rather, it suggests an artistic or musical composition, not a case to be cracked or even an "adventure," a word employed frequently for the tales that follow. The choice may echo Whistler's attraction to the nomenclature of music—"nocturnes," "studies," "notes," and "symphonies"—to indicate an art prompted by aesthetic motives rather than anecdotal or imitative priorities, an art evocative of no social purpose or message save self-expression.¹⁰

By changing his working title from "A Tangled Skein" to *A Study in Scarlet*, Doyle further enhanced his artistic motif. The images of murder, bloody traces, and a "scarlet thread" are neatly prefigured in the first meeting between Holmes and Watson. In his laboratory, Holmes is perfecting a test to detect the presence of hemoglobin in a clear liquid solution. In the "study" that Holmes will undertake to solve, a cardiac aneurism and various bloody deeds and murderers present a challenging "scarlet thread" for Holmes to track through the "colourless skein of life." The language subtly suggests the new artistic technique, popularized first by Whistler in England but borrowed from Velasquez and others, of a neutral background, devoid of detail and spatially ambiguous.¹¹

Further, the manner in which Doyle frames this "study" is far more deliberate and elaborate than any of his other stories, save perhaps *The Sign of the Four*. The central study is, of course, the double murders of Strangerson and Drebber. The unexplained presence of blood in a room where the dead man has been poisoned and the word "RACHE" written in blood on the wall provide the scarlet traces that require Holmes' solution. But within this story of murder and revenge is the love story of Jefferson Hope and Lucy Ferrier. The London murders, then, become the end trace of an older story of tragic injustice, of passions of the heart denied, of brutalities and murder sanctioned under the heartless "letter" of Mormon law. The aneurism that the murderer, Hope, suffers becomes a telling psychological gloss for the mental and physical torment he has undergone.

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Less obvious, against this backdrop of murders, is the "study" that Watson undertakes of Holmes, his future flat-mate. Ironically, Watson's methodical, even scientific, list of Holmes's areas of knowledge is, Watson himself realizes, a failure. And though Watson blunders toward a better understanding of Holmes as the story progresses, there is always a mysterious air which is allowed to envelope the detective, a mystery even Watson is unwilling to penetrate. Yet it left to Watson to describe the "scientific" procedures of the master sleuth to readers of the detective stories. In *Study*, the first-person narrative of "Dr. Watson" alternates with the omniscient narrator, who tells the Mormon portion of the story. But such a division is unnecessary in later stories, for Watson becomes Holmes's historian and biographer, a willing Boswell to Holmes's Johnson.

II

Doyle's *Study* raises interesting issues about the intended characterization of Sherlock Holmes. In a nicely self-reflexive technique, literary models for Doyle's detective become a topic of conversation between Watson and Holmes. While Holmes repudiates the comparison between his methods and those of Emile Gaboriau's detective, M. Lecoq, and Poe's M. Dupin, Holmes's creator is less dismissive of his indebtedness, particularly to Poe. Unlike Lecoq, an agent of the Surete, Poe's Dupin is a poet and an amateur fancier of the arts. Much later in his career, Doyle pointedly praised Poe as "the supreme original short story writer," describing Poe's tales as "wonderful in their dramatic force, their reticence, their quick dramatic point."¹²

While praising Poe for precisely the excitement of the moment and the avoidance of "the didactic," cornerstones of the aesthetic doctrine, Doyle deliberately downplays the "didactic" nature of fiction, prizing aesthetic effect. Yet critics and readers of the Holmes stories frequently emphasize the "didacticism" of Holmes in explaining his "methods" and procedures to Watson. This represents, I would argue, a misreading of Holmes, and a deliberate recasting of the character. Explanations that don't "explain" characterized much of the Whistler-Ruskin libel trial, and the technique becomes almost a tableau of the artist questioned by a blinkered society, skeptically querying the artist, who answers in conundrums. It is this model, rather than a serious definition of scientific methods, that Holmes's "post-mortem" on his solution to a case accomplishes.

Arguing against such an explanation, however, would be Doyle's own admission (supported by many of his biographers) that the "real life" model for Sherlock Holmes was Dr. Joseph Bell of Edinburgh.

Though Trevor Hall and others dismiss this argument as an oversimplification of the issue,¹³ the notion of a "man of science" serving as the model for the detective supports a prizing of Holmes's science over his "art." But this image of Holmes as the "man of science," enhanced by Holmes'—technically suspect—reliance on chemistry to aid his science of deduction, is called into question by at least one critic. Charles O. Ellison suggests that Holmes' chemical experiments served chiefly to mystify Watson and to impress clients. The "facade of chemical research," Ellison argues, "never very strong, became less and less well-maintained as time went on, until it collapsed entirely."¹⁴

The image of Sherlock Holmes that survives may be one that served the needs of Victorian readers far more than it expressed that actual (or early) intent of Holmes' creator. Holmes was "a great comfort," Ronald Pearsall suggests, "to readers who were dimly aware that the old order was coming apart Anarchy, chaos, the possibility of war with America, the immorality of the decadents—Holmes was an antidote to all these . . ." Add to this the detective's cold precision and his resistance to strong emotion, and the familiar image of Holmes emerges.¹⁵

III

To include the tales of Sherlock Holmes within the Aesthetic Movement may seem to expand the canon to the breaking point. In fact, the use to which Doyle puts his detective reveals clearly the tensions and attraction of this sensibility in the 1880s. Spokesmen most associated with the Movement—Whistler, Wilde, and Swinburne—reject the artistic theory of mimesis and Nature's role as animating power of art. Whistler specifically attacks Ruskin's theories of art, asserting that art and Nature are profoundly different. Whistler's demand for aesthetic independence—from nature and from value systems imposed by society—led to his defense of Japanese art's imbalance and "impressionism."¹⁶

In response to Whistler, Swinburne defines Whistler's challenge to organic, mimetic aesthetics as returns to an Oriental model: "Japanese art is not merely the incomparable achievement of certain harmonies in colour: it is the negation, the immolation, the annihilation of everything else."¹⁷ This impulse on the part of the Aesthetes to make their art "more beautiful and less real," to some extent, to "annihilate" the real world in the service of art, led them from realistic detail and toward decoration, psychological experimentation, fantasy. Theirs was a philosophical flight from crude materialism and a privileging of the phenomenological world over the constraints of reason and order. The

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resulting celebration of opulence created art that Wilde describes as “superbly sterile.”

Art is useless because its aim is simply to create a mood. It is not meant to instruct, or to influence action in any way. It is superbly sterile, and the note of its pleasure is its sterility.¹⁸

The image of “negation,” “immolation,” or “sterility” strikes an obvious adversary posture with images of “organic unity” and the “generative center” of a work of art that Coleridge defines. But this dependence on organic wholeness, whether Coleridge’s image of the snake with its tail in its mouth or the well-wrought urn of New Criticism, is rejected by the Aesthetes of the 1880s. Wilde’s insistence on art’s “sterility” declares the artist’s right to produce art that serves no purpose other than its self-expression. It is a theory that admits no generating force from outside itself and which, therefore, admits no responsibility to a society falsely claiming to have engendered it.

Perhaps the most challenging feature of the Aesthetic Movement is its insistence on its intellectual life, not its organic nature—its “sterility” rather than its living function in society. The cool, dispassionate detective that Conan Doyle created displays the same contemptuous distancing from the “requirements” that society might foist upon him. Like Whistler and Wilde, Holmes creates a dispassionate art—disembodied, unwilling to admit claims of flesh and blood *or* utilitarian, moral, or social claims. The “art” of Sherlock Holmes demonstrates, moreover, a fascination with unique, surreal features of human nature, hothoused in exotic and unfamiliar forms, shrouded in mystery. As Holmes will insist in several tales, he plays the “game” of detection “for the game’s own sake”; “the work itself,” he tells Watson on another occasion, “the pleasure of finding a field for my peculiar powers, is my highest reward.” “It’s Art for Art’s Sake,” Holmes announces in “The Adventure of the Red Circle,” and Watson will concede, in “The Adventure of Black Peter,” that Holmes, “like all great artists, lived for his art’s sake.”¹⁹ Such explicit statements seem to carry more weight than the pseudo-science of his method that critics and readers have clung to since Doyle’s tales became popular.

Conan Doyle’s use of art jargon in *A Study in Scarlet* reflects a conscious effort on Doyle’s part to break with a Victorian ethos of morality and purposefulness. Holmes continues to display “quirks” that he insists are part of the “art” of his profession; but his crime-solving techniques demonstrate more self-gratification than a defense of Victorian hearth and home, law and morality. Clearly, in the course of the Holmes canon, the “adventures” become tighter structurally and

more formulaic. Perhaps the ultimate compromise that Doyle strikes with his readers is attributing to Dr. Joseph Bell his original inspiration for Holmes. By emphasizing the scientific origins of the Holmes original, Doyle deliberately blurs the aesthetic.

But the Holmes of the later stories was not the same eccentric that his author first envisioned in 1886. The "Holmes" of such a compromise may have been born over lunch, in 1889, with Oscar Wilde. Lunching across from the quintessential "Aesthete," Doyle may have resisted such a designation for his detective. Though he would later correspond with Wilde, politely praising Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, there is no evidence that the two were ever friends. And to Wilde's answering letter, eloquently attacking the critics of his *Picture* for missing the "artistic and dramatic effect" in their hunt for the story's moral,²⁰ Doyle never replied.

NOTES

¹For another source, see Edgar Allan Poe's "The Poetic Principle," originally published in *Sartain's Union Magazine*, October 1850. Poe deplors "the heresy of *The Didactic*" that has "accomplished more in the corruption of our poetical literature than all its other enemies combined" [in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (New York, 1902) 14: 275].

²*The Aesthetic Movement* (London, 1972), pp. 10ff.

³James uses a "portrait" image to demonstrate the various ways characters in the novel evaluate the "art" of his heroine's life. In *Middlemarch* (Bk. II, Ch. 19), Dorothea is observed by Ladislaw and Naumann as she views "the reclining Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra." Naumann, who recalls the "Nazarene" painters of the 1820-30s, contrasts Dorothea's Christian purity with the sculpture's pagan display. The scene recalls Bronte's heroine, who critiques the fleshy "Cleopatra" in the gallery of Villette, revealing her own discomfort with sexuality.

⁴There is an illustration of the cover in *The Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, ed. William S. Baring-Gould (New York, 1967) 1: 12. The print of Doyle's title recalls the title banner of *Beeton's*, possibly because Doyle used the same publishers (Ward & Lock) to republish his *Study*, and the publishers felt the similarity of print might remind readers of the connection. The print has a distinctly oriental or "foreign-face" cast to it and was probably a hand-cut title page, though it resembles the "Tokio Series" of H. C. Hansen Type Foundry.

⁵Gordon L. Iseminger, in "Sherlock Holmes: Victorian Archetype," *Baker Street Journal* n.s. 29 (1979), 156-166, notes

that Holmes advises his client to lie, steal, and perjure himself to protect his interests in "A Scandal in Bohemia" (162). He concludes that Holmes' taste for music, his pipe, and his cocaine, since they enhance his introspection, are all "utilitarian" (165). S. B. Liljegren points out Doyle's debt to Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* for the plot and character of *The Sign of the Four* and Holmes himself (see "The Parentage of Sherlock Holmes," *Irish Essays and Studies*, Stockholm, 1971).

⁶Holmes' exclamation, "The game's afoot!" represents a frequent image of tracking or hunting the criminal—a sporting interest rather than moral motives.

⁷See Ronald Pearson, *Conan Doyle: A Biographical Solution* (New York, 1977), pp. 2-3.

⁸Grosvenor Gallery, exhibiting paintings refused (or likely to be refused) by the Royal Academy, opened in 1877. Almost immediately, the Gallery hung Whistler's "Nocturne: Falling Rocket," prompting Ruskin's attack in *Fors Clavigera* on 2 July 1877, and occasioning Whistler's libel suit against Ruskin. Whistler's lecture attacking art critics and criticism was delivered at 10 P.M., 29 February 1885, at St. James's Hall, Picadilly. It was repeated at Oxford and Cambridge, and four times the following year. Whistler published the address in 1888.

⁹Quoted in Pearsall, p. 194.

¹⁰John Rothenstein, *An Introduction to English Painting* (New York, 1965), p. 128.

¹¹See the discussion in the Philadelphia Museum of Art's *From Realism to Symbolism: Whistler and His World* (Philadelphia, 1971), pp. 15-16. In *The Eighteen-Nineties: A Review of Arts and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1927), Holbrook Jackson notes the decade's "intense preoccupation" with colors, and credits Whistler with this interest, as well as increased attention to decorative elements in interior design and art exhibition.

¹²*Through the Magic Door*, Doyle's autobiography, cited in Pierre Nordon, *Conan Doyle*, trans. Frances Partridge (London, 1966; New York, 1967), p. 225.

¹³Trevor H. Hall provides a thorough discussion of the prototype of Holmes in *Sherlock Holmes and His Creator* (New York, 1977), pp. 78-90. Hall refutes Michael Harrison's theory that the character and story were based on a murder reported in the London papers as "The St. Luke's Mystery." [See "A Study in Surmise," *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* 57.2 (Feb. 1971), pp. 58-79.] Hall and Nordon argue that the "model" of Dr. Joseph Bell for Doyle's detective was more compliment to Dr. Bell than fact.

¹⁴See Ellison chapter, "The Chemical Corner," in Hall, p. 26.

¹⁵Pearsall, p. 58.

¹⁶"The 10 O'Clock," reprinted in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (1892; rpt. New York, 1967), pp. 135-159.

¹⁷Algernon Swinburne, "Mr. Whistler's Lecture on Art," *Fortnightly Review* 43 (1888), 745-751. I quote from the reprint in Whistler's *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*, p. 251.

¹⁸The phrase appears in Wilde's letter to Walford Graham Robertson in 1888 (Huntington Library Manuscript, WR 667): "Someday you must do a design of the sonnet: a young man looking into a strange crystal that mirrors all the world; poetry should be like a crystal, it should make life more beautiful and less real." The longer quotation is from Wilde's letter to R. Clegg (? April 1891) printed in *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (New York, 1962), p. 292.

¹⁹For a listing and discussion of Holmes's and Watson's variations on the slogan "art for art's sake," see Ian McQueen, *Sherlock Holmes Detected: The Problems of the Long Stories* (London, 1974), p. 40ff.

²⁰*Letters of Oscar Wilde* (? April 1891), pp. 291-292.