**G.K. Chesterton’s Father Brown Stories: the Debt to Sherlock Holmes.**

No fictional detective provides a more obvious contrast to the figure of Sherlock Holmes than G. K. Chesterton’s Father Brown. Where Holmes is keen-eyed, sharp-featured and manifestly shrewd, Father Brown is described as having “a face as round and dull as a Norfolk dumpling” and “eyes as empty as the North Sea” (*Innocence*, 9). However, one could say these outward differences are so strongly marked that they actually constitute a kind of deliberate homage to the earlier writer. Indeed, I think there is no doubt that Chesterton owed a great deal to Conan Doyle and we don’t have to look far in his critical writings to see that he acknowledged as much.

Let’s start by collocating the stories historically. The first Father Brown story, “The Blue Cross”, appeared in 1910 and the last, “The Vampire of the Village”, in 1936, the year of Chesterton’s death. That is to say, the earliest came out around the time Sherlock Holmes was making his “Last Bow”[[1]](#footnote-1) while the last one came out when such writers as Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and John Dickson Carr were at the height of their powers. But although Chesterton was the first president of the Detection Club, whose founding members included Christie, Sayers, Freeman Wills Croft and Anthony Berkeley, his Father Brown stories are far closer in spirit to the Holmes stories than to the more elaborately and artificially plotted novels of the Golden Age writers.

For a start, it is important that they are stories and not novels, like the bulk of the Sherlock Holmes adventures. Chesterton had a clear sense of one of the possible limitations of the detective novel and stated it in an essay on the subject: “The chief difficult is that the detective-story is, after all, a drama of masks and not of faces”[[2]](#footnote-2) (“On Detective Novels”, 6). While accepting that there have been exceptions – among others he mentions Wilkie Collins’ novel *The Moonstone* and *Trent’s Last Case* by his old schoolfriend E. C. Bentley – he sees this as an obstacle to the development of a satisfactory full-length novel:

The author cannot tell us until the last chapter any of the most interesting things about the most interesting people. […] Therefore, I think it is best of all when the first chapter is also the last chapter. (“On Detective Novels”, 6)

Chesterton’s appreciation of Conan Doyle’s creation can be seen in essays and articles scattered throughout his career, and also in stray remarks made in the Father Brown stories themselves. He puts the case for Conan Doyle’s supremacy in this field most acutely in an essay he wrote in 1925, which was not published in book-form until 1964. The essay has the self-explanatory title, “How to Write a Detective Story”.

The remarks he makes in this essay are extremely illuminating with regard to his own practice and intentions in his detective stories, as well as providing one of the best defences for the genre as an art-form. He takes as his model what he refers to as “the best of the Sherlock Holmes stories”, “Silver Blaze”. This is the story, of course, that contains perhaps the most famous piece of Holmesian dialogue, which has provided the title for a very popular recent novel[[3]](#footnote-3). The title itself is seen by Chesterton as literally illuminating, since it connects very neatly with what he sees as being the “first and fundamental principle” of detective stories:

[T]he aim of a mystery story, as of every other story and every other mystery, is not darkness but light. The story is written for the moment when the reader does understand, not merely for the many preliminary moments when he does not understand. (“How to Write”, 8)

The second great principle, he goes on to say, “is that the soul of detective fiction is not complexity but simplicity” (ibid., 8). Here he can be presumed to be taking issue with some of the more cumbersome productions of the “Golden Age”, by such authors as John Dickson Carr,[[4]](#footnote-4) whose final explanations frequently required up to twenty pages of careful argument and exposition, together with footnotes and references back to earlier moments in the story. According to Chesterton:

The explanation should explain itself; it should be something that can be hissed (by the villain, of course) in a few whispered words or shrieked preferably by the heroine before she swoons under the shock of the belated realization that two and two make four. (ibid., 8)

The corollary is that the explanation must refer to something the reader knew already: “the fact or figure explaining everything should be a familiar fact or figure. The criminal should be in the foreground, not in the capacity of criminal, but in some other capacity which nevertheless gives him a natural right to be in the foreground.” There can be no clearer example of this principle than the story “Silver Blaze”, in which the murderer is to the fore right from the beginning of the story – indeed, right from the very title. As Chesterton puts it: “It is a story of theft in which the horse plays the part of the jewel until we forget that the jewel can also play the part of the weapon” (ibid., 9).

This essay gives us a fascinating insight into Chesterton’s approach to the detective story and it is not difficult to provide examples of his own tales that illustrate his adhesion to these principles. Just to take the first volume of Father Brown stories, one can quote some of the lines of explanation, illustrating the principole of illumination through simplicity:

‘No,’ said Father Brown huskily, and looking at his boots; ‘there is only one place where [heads] grow. They grow in the basket of the guillotine, beside which the Chief of Police, Aristide Valentin, was standing not an hour before the murder.’ (*Innocence*, 51-2)

‘Yes,’ he went on, seeing the colonel look up in some wonder, ‘the whole of this tale turns on a black coat.’ (*ibid.*, 72)

‘You are not mad,’ said Brown, ‘only a little unobservant. You have not noticed such a man as this for example.’

He took three quick strides forward, and put his hand on the shoulder of an ordinary passing postman… (*ibid.*, 111)

‘The truth is in one word, and a short one,’ said Father Brown. ‘Pauline Stacey was blind.’ (*ibid.*, 209)

Chesterton referred to “Silver Blaze”, though without naming it specifically, in a slightly earlier essay on the genre, “The Domesticity of Detectives” (1920). In this case he is distinguishing between “two types of sensational romances”; for the sake of a convenient symbol, he calls them “respectively the romance of the Yellow Room and the romance of the Yellow Peril” (27), with clear reference to Gaston Leroux’s famous locked-room detective-story, *Le Mystère de la Chambre Jaune* (1907) and Sax Rohmer’s series of shockers about the Chinese master-villain, Fu Manchu. As he puts it:

We might say that the great detective story deals with small things; while the small or silly detective story deals with great things. It deals with diabolical diplomatists darting about Vienna and Paris and Petrograd; with vast cosmopolitan conspiracies […] On the other hand, the good detective story is in its nature a good domestic story. It is steeped in the sentiment that an Englishman's house is his castle; even if, like other castles, it is the scene of a few quiet tortures or assassinations. (27)

“Silver Blaze” provides a clear example of this “domesticity”[[5]](#footnote-5): “One of the best of the Sherlock Holmes stories turns entirely on a trivial point of housekeeping: the provision of curry for the domestic dinner.” As he says, curry “could have been made the excuse for infinities of sham occultism and Oriental torments” but Conan Doyle wisely limited his field, not allowing “infinity” to “invade the quiet seclusion of the British criminal’s home” (28).

The importance of boundaries is a theme constantly referred to in Chesterton’s critical and speculative writings, and there is no doubt that he had what can sometimes seem a kind of irrational fear of the amorphous or unbounded. This lay behind his clear preference for Stevenson over Poe, as he wrote in a chapter of his book on the former author:

The word infinite is not itself used indefinitely. The point of Poe is that we feel that *everything* is decaying, including ourselves; faces are already growing featureless like those of lepers; roof-trees are rotting from root to roof; one great grey fungus as vast as a forest is sucking up life rather than giving it forth… (40-1)

By contrast, Stevenson’s “images stand out in very sharp outline; and are, as it were, all edges. It is something in him that afterwards attracted him to the abrupt and angular black and white of woodcuts” (42). It may be partly for this reason that, in his writings on the detective story, he says little on the figure of Dupin, even on a story that might be expected to have appealed to him, like “The Purloined Letter.”[[6]](#footnote-6) While admitting that Poe’s was a “bolder and more brilliant brain” (“Sherlock Holmes”, 182) than Doyle’s – in particular, he acknowledges Poe’s greater wisdom in allowing his detective to be interested in poetry and philosophy as well as the sciences – he clearly feels less affinity with the Dupin stories.

There is probably another, and perhaps more important, reason for his favouring Holmes over Dupin. The fact is that Conan Doyle’s detective is far more memorable a character. When trying to assess the potency of this figure, Chesterton can only compare him with the creations of Dickens – almost certainly Chesterton’s favourite writer from the Victorian age.

Conan Doyle’s hero is probably the only literary creation since the creations of Dickens which has really passed into the life and language of the people, and become a being like John Bull or Frather Christmas. (“Sherlock Holmes”, 178)

Of course, as he writes in his book on Dickens, it is only Holmes himself in the stories who possesses this mythical quality, while in Dickens almost every character, however minor, is endowed with something of the same memorability.[[7]](#footnote-7) Nonetheless, it is this quality that gives the Sherlock Holmes stories their special power. Holmes in a way rises above the stories, becoming one of those great literary or artistic figures that transcend the works that contain them, like Falstaff, Pickwick, Tarzan, James Bond – or, in other media, Charlie Chaplin’s tramp, Indiana Jones and Homer Simpson. In the case of Holmes, Chesterton sees the mythical quality as lying in the sheer originality of the conception of the figure:

The notion of the greatness of an intellect, proved by its occupation with small things instead of with great, is an original departure; it constitutes a kind of wild poetry of the commonplace. (“Sherlock Holmes”, 179)

This last phrase is crucial to our understanding of Chesterton’s attitude towards the detective story – and towards much else in life. It could almost be said that his whole philosophy was based on the notion of seeing the romance of the ordinary. This helps to explain his extraordinary novels, like *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* or *Manalive*; it lies behind his religious works as well, in which he endeavours to show that Orthodoxy is far more exciting and romantic than Heresy. It can be seen in an early essay, like “A Defence of Nonsense”, in which he declares that

Nonsense will, in a very unexpected way, come to the aid of the spiritual view of things. Religion has for centuries been trying to make men exult in the “wonders” of creation, but it has forgotten that a thing cannot be completely wonderful so long as it remains sensible. So long as we regard a tree as an obvious thing, naturally and reasonably created for a giraffe to eat, we cannot properly wonder at it. It is when we consider it as a prodigious wave of the living soil sprawling up to the skies for no reason in particular that we take off our hats, to the astonishment of the park-keeper. (69)

In the same early collection of essays he has his earliest piece of critical writing on the genre, entitled “A Defence of Detective Stories”. In this essay he speaks in general terms of this kind of fiction, declaring that the detective story’s greatest virtue is the fact that it has bestowed a sense of imaginative wonder on the city:

Of this realisation of a great city itself as something wild and obvious the detective story is certainly the *Iliad*. No one can have failed to notice that in these stories the hero or the investigator crosses London with something of the loneliness and liberty of a prince in a tale of elfland… (158)

This sense of the “romantic possibilities of the modern city”, he states, is “as rough and refreshing as the ballads of Robin Hood” (159). He only mentions Sherlock Holmes once in this essay, towards the very end, but it is the only name he mentions at all, and, as we can see from his later writings on the same subject, it is clear that Conan Doyle’s stories are at the very heart of this argument in defence of the genre. In the essay entitled after the hero, in *A Handful of Authors*, he states: “Above all, he surrounded his detective with a genuine atmosphere of the poetry of London. He called up before the imagination a new and visionary city” (“Sherlock Holmes”, 184).

This, of course, is what Chesterton himself did in the fantastic fictions of *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *The Man Who Was Thursday*, in which not only central London but its suburbs become the settings for wild and romantic adventures. But the same is true of the apparently more realistic Father Brown stories as well. The very first story, “The Blue Cross”, in particular, has at its heart a journey across London from Victoria to Hampstead Heath, in which we are given the sensation of an epic trek across a wild and unknown city of the imagination. Partly it is because we see everything through the foreign eyes of the French detective Valentin, but mainly it is due to Chesterton’s superb gift for atmospheric writing. It has been pointed out that there is something unreal about a journey from central London to Hampstead that takes us from dawn to sunset, but we are so involved in the brilliant scene-painting that we do not notice such chronological anomalies:

The street they threaded was so narrow and shut in by shadows that when they came out unexpectedly into the void common and vast sky they were startled to find the evening still so light and clear. A perfect dome of peacock-green sank into gold amid the blackening trees and the dark violet distances. The glowing green tint was just deep enough to pick out in points of crystal one or two stars. All that was left of the daylight lay in a golden glitter across the edge of Hampstead and that popular hollow which is called the Vale of Health. (21)

Amid this apparently fantastic setting, the flat voice of the little Essex priest states his – and Chesterton’s – central philosophy:

Reason and justice grip the remotest and the loneliest star. Look at those stars. Don’t they look as if they were single diamonds and sapphires? Well, you can imagine any mad botany or geology you please. Think of forests of adamant with leaves of brilliants. Think the moon is a blue moon, a single elephantine sapphire. But don’t fancy that all that frantic astronomy would make the smallest difference to the reason and justice of conduct. On plains of opal, under cliffs cut out of pearl, you would still find a notice-board, “Thou shalt not steal.”’ (24-5)

Of course, the Father Brown stories are not confined to the city. The settings range over the whole of the British Isles, and take in France, Italy, the United States and Central America as well. At the heart of all the stories, however, is always that fresh perception of reality, which seems to be Father Brown’s prerogative. His special skill is not a scientific one but his ability to ask the questions that others fail to conceive of. In particular, he always succeeds in seeing through supernatural explanations of mysteries, basing his interpretations on reason (“You attacked reason,” he says to Flambeau in the first story, “it’s bad theology” [29]). But more than anything else – and it is here that the stories go far beyond the Sherlock Holmes stories in their ability to illuminate man’s potential for evil – Father Brown shows an ability to understand the criminal.

In the story enticingly entitled “The Secret of Father Brown”, which opens the volume of the same name, the priest makes this confession to a journalist:

"The secret is," he said; and then stopped as if unable to go on. Then he began again and said: "You see, it was I killed all those people." (11)

In the story that concludes the same volume, entitled “The Secret of Flambeau”, the priest explains himself further, explaining his ability to imagine himself in the murderer’s place, and stating with a certain degree of impatience:

"You may think a crime horrible because you could never commit it. I think it horrible because I could commit it. You think of it as something like an eruption of Vesuvius; but that would not really be as terrible as this house catching fire." (174)

It is here that we see how Chesterton’s insistence on the “domestic” rather than the exotic – something that he sees as inherent to the success of good detective stories – takes on a moral significance. While there is a strong element of play in his attitude to the genre (“the detective story is only a game; and in that game the reader is not really wrestling with the criminal but with the author” [“How to Write”, 9]), there is no doubt that a profound sense of morality underlies the rules of this game. Those qualities that he sees as contributing to the success of the Sherlock Holmes stories – the great brain devoted to tiny things, the capacity to see the wonderful in the mundane, the exotic in the urban – become in Chesterton’s hands the means to profound moral insights: Father Brown’s gift as a detective is quite simply the fact that he does not look upon the criminal as “a distant prehistoric monster” (*The Secret*, 12), however terrible his crime. Naturally enough, there is a religious dimension to this, and it is perhaps suitable to finish with a telling quotation from one of the stories:

‘There is a limit to human charity,’ said Lady Outram, trembling all over.

‘There is,’ said Father Brown drily, ‘and that is the real difference between human charity and Christian charity.’ (*The Secret*, 168)

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1. His second attempt to do so, of course; and he would be revived for a final collection of stories in the 1920s, significantly weaker than the early ones. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Of course, there are four Sherlock Holmes novels, but of these four only one – *The Hound of the Baskervilles* – can be said to adhere to the traditional detective-story convention of the surprise ending; in two cases, *A Study in Scarlet* and *The Valley of Fear*, the murderer is discovered halfway through the novel and the second half of each novel is devoted to a long flashback in quite a different style and tone; the third case, *The Sign of the Four*, has many elements of the detective story but is essentially a rather improbable melodrama, with clear links to *The Moonstone*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Despite the best-seller status of Mark Haddon’s novel, a webpage devoted to the “Ten Most Famous Quotations from the Holmes Stories” places this snatch of dialogue only at number nine in the ratings.. <http://www.bestofsherlock.com/top-10-sherlock-quotes.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Carr, himself, was a great fan of Chesterton, to the extent of basing his most famous detective, Dr. Fell, on the earlier writer. I do not know whether Chesterton ever commented on this act of homage (Dr. Fell first appeared in the novel *Hag’s Nook*, 1933, three years before Chesterton’s death). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In another essay, entitled “A Defence of Dramatic Unities”, he refers to the “fine domesticity of a good murder” (95), declaring that “the good mystery story should narrow its circles like an eagle about to swoop. The spiral should curve inwards and not outwards” (96). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The critic W. W. Robson has even said that all of Chesterton’s detective stories are “ingenious variations on the theme of ‘The Purloined Letter’” (60), with the detective seeing what others don’t see, because they are blinded by their theories, short-sighted philosophies and prejudices. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “If Dickens had written the Sherlock Holmes stories, every character in them would have been equally arresting and memorable. A Sherlock Holmes would have cooked the dinner for Sherlock Holmes; a Sherlock Holmes would have driven his cab” (*Charles Dickens,* 81). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)