The Age of the Vicarious Detective

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Dr Watson remarked to Sherlock Holmes:

> The thing always appears to me to be so ridiculously simple that I could easily do it myself, though at each successive instance of your reasoning I am baffled until you explain your process. And yet I believe that my eyes are as good as yours. (Klinger P. 10)

This passage from A Scandal in Bohemia captures the reaction that was felt by the readers of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales as the detective used his powers of observation and reason to solve the most complex crimes. Born in the late 19th century from the imagination of Doyle, the detective who resided at 221 Baker street would become legendary. Nick Rennison in his work Sherlock Holmes, The Unauthorized Biography describes the world wide impact of the work.

> Accounts have been translated into dozens of languages…Dramatized versions of Holme's life began to appear in the 1890's and have continued to be performed to the present day. On any given day…an amateur dramatic society somewhere in England or America will be staging a play in which Sherlock Holmes makes an appearance. He has been the subject of hundreds of films from the early silent era to the present day…Although Holmes has been dead for more than seventy years, people still write from around the world to ask for his help. Until recently Abbey House, the headquarters of the Abbey National Building Society, which stands on the site of his one-time lodgings in Baker Street, employed a secretary to answer the letters that were delivered to the address. Since his death in 1929, a growing army of Holmes scholars has produced a library of theses and dissertations on his life and work. In half the countries of the world there are Sherlock Holmes societies, their members dedicated to the minute examination of his life and work…Like other emblematic figures from the nation's past…he has been seized upon by the heritage industry. (Rennison P. XII-XIII)

It is clear that the character of Sherlock Holmes in some way resonated with a significant portion of European culture at the end of the 19th century and we might entertain the possibility that the appeal can be explained as a Zeitgeist or spirit that pervaded the time

and compelled individuals to engage in vicarious forms of criminology. To this end it is necessary to consider several significant developments in art, technology and philosophy that were occurring at this time and which are evidenced in the Holmes short stories. This analysis will include the philosophical shift in Europe from a Classical view of criminology developed in the late 18th century by Cesare Beccaria to a Positivist view of criminology in the late 19th century led by Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, the advancement of scientific observation as a methodology and the infusion of science to improve artistic forms.

From Classical to Positivist Thinking

In order to appropriately assess the philosophical influences in late 19th century Europe, it is necessary to consider both the general philosophical movement from Classicism to Positivism and by extension the two schools of Criminology, Classical and Positivist that derived from them. During the late eighteenth century a school of thought regarding criminology emerged through the work of Cesare Beccaria and Jeremy Bentham. Their core ideas were best classified as Classical thinking and derived from John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Louis Montesquieu and Thomas Hobbes. The Classical position as it related to crime was that there was an unwritten social contract the position of which was that human beings originally lived in a state of nature, grace or innocence and their escape from this state resulted from the application of reason. From this, humans possessed free will and were theoretically unlimited in what they could accomplish, however, the driving force of humanity was Hedonism. More succinctly, it was the Classical position that humans, by their nature, freely choose actions that

maximize pleasure and minimize pain thus making the main instrument necessary to control human behavior fear, especially fear of pain.

Cesare Beccaria who is considered to be the pioneer of Classical criminological thought outlined his positions regarding the necessities of a modern system of criminal justice which he detailed in On Crimes and Punishment published in 1764. Central to his theory was the belief that the criminal justice system must prevent crime through pain and the deterrent effect. The key element in classical thinking and that which provides the first link to our understanding of the Holmes movement is the position that all men are evil or prone to criminality and that societal control rests on the infliction of punishment to deter the hedonistic tendencies. In this line of thinking it is not the force of good against that of evil, as is the case with Sherlock Holmes, but rather evil attempting to control its own inclinations to a degree that civilization can occur. By this school of thought one envisions a State controlling all its citizens through systems rather than heroes representative of good battling those who represent evil.

As a refutation of the Classical school of thought a Positivist movement came to fruition primarily through the work of August Comte (1798-1857). Central to Comte's theory was the belief that knowledge passes through three stages: theological, metaphysical and positive or scientific; the positivistic being the highest or final stage of knowledge through which human beings are able to discover characteristics of social phenomena thus creating predictability and control. As such, Positivism represented a method of inquiry that attempted to answer questions by way of scientific processes. From this

general movement as well as the Scientific Revolution and the discoveries of Darwin, detailed in his 1859 book On the Origin of Species, the philosophy of Positivist Criminology emerged. Darwin's theory that conduct was influenced by biological and cultural antecedents rather than being exclusively self determining was in stark contrast to classical thinking and critical to Positivist Criminology.

The earliest evidence of this Positivist Criminology came about in the 1840's and 50's through the work of Adolfe Quetelet, a Belgium mathematician and several English writers including Henry Mayhew. Mayhew was a London lawyer and journalist who in 1845 concentrated on writing articles related to social issues including investigations on how unemployment, starvation and disease were impacting the poor. Mayhew carried out a similar investigation into prison life and in 1862 published The Criminal Prisons of London.

Adolfe Quetelet made significant strides in the study of statistical crime rate analysis. He was able to identify a correlation between crime and the ability to read and write, finding that as reading and writing proficiency increased, the frequency of criminal acts decreased. In his later work he focused on the propensities for crime, and found correlations between crime and independent variables such as age, sex, climate and socio-economic status of offenders. Quetelet concurred with the Classical theorists that all people had the capacity to commit crime but he contended that the average person rarely transferred that option into action thus refuting the earlier positions that significant deterrence was a criminal justice necessity. Quetelet went on to advance his positions by

positing a correlation between crime and morality suggesting that certain types of people were more prone to criminal behavior than others thus reestablishing the good versus evil paradigm.

The work of Quetelet, Mayhew and their colleagues formed the foundation for the largest thrust of Positivist criminology which was provided by the Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso. Described by some as the father of modern criminology, a strong argument can be made that Lombroso's work had both a significant impact in Europe during the 1890's and served as the impetus for modern criminological thought around the world. In his early years, Lombroso studied medicine at the universities of Pavia, Padua, Vienna and Genoa. His interests included psychology, psychiatry, physiology and the anatomy of the brain. Between 1863 and 1872 he worked with the insane at hospitals in Pavia, Pesaro and Reggio Emilia which sparked his interest in physiognomical characteristics of the mentally disturbed. In 1876 Lombroso was appointed professor of legal medicine and public hygiene at the University of Turin where he wrote his most influential work L'uomo delinquente which went through five editions and was published in several European languages. Lombroso's central theory was that of Atavism or that there was a biological disposition towards criminality. His primary theory was that of the born criminal which he described as an individual marked by anomalies (physical and psychological abnormalities). Lombroso believed these anomalies resembled the traits of primitive peoples, animals and plants demonstrating that criminals were atavistic throwbacks on the evolutionary scale. Because the anomalies lent themselves to examination and classification, Lombroso sought to turn the study of criminality into an

empirical science. He came to classify this new field as criminal anthropology which was representative of his desire to move the debate from a philosophical one about the nature of crime to an analysis of the characteristics of criminals. Although much of Lombroso's work was ultimately proven false, his theory of the "born criminal" dominated European and American thinking for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Lombroso's primary work, Criminal Man, was translated into French (1887), German (1887-90), Russian (1889), and Spanish (1899) and his general theories became the center of debate at the first International Congress of Criminal Anthropology held in Geneva. During his lifetime he produced over thirty books and one thousand articles. He was respected as a leading intellectual in Italy and was invited to write for popular newspapers and magazines on topics both related and unrelated to crime. He inspired several generations of disciples and students many of whom implemented his theories as ranking members within the criminal justice system. Lombroso was fluent in a number of languages and, as such, was able to follow cultural currents and engage in intellectual debates throughout Europe and North America. By way of Quetelet, Mayhew, Lombroso and their colleagues, the philosophy of Positivist Criminology was firmly established in Europe by the late 19th century.

The Advent of Criminological Art

William Fleming in his work Fleming's Arts & Ideas indicates that one of the prominent "ideas" of the latter part of the nineteenth century was the use of scientific method to enhance the arts. He explains:

> Many of the scientific discoveries opened up new vistas in the arts. Experiments in optical physics revealed secrets of light and color that painters could explore. New chemical syntheses provided brighter pigments. Increased knowledge of the physiology of the eye and of perception led to a reexamination of how observers look at a picture and what they perceive. Rodin took Darwin's theory of evolution and transformed it into a poetic understanding of how form emerges from matter and how the inanimate becomes animate. (Fleming P. 543)

Lombroso, although a criminologist/scientist by trade, was also an artist and contributed significantly to the technique of infusing the science of criminology with art. Gibson explains how Lombroso contributed to criminal literature:

> He himself employed narrative and literary evidence to supplement his measurements and statistics in creating his portrait of the born criminal. To the modern reader, passages of Criminal Man that cite Dostoyevsky or Italian proverbs as support for criminological claims seems inappropriate. Yet Lombroso's leavening of statistics with stories made his theory accessible to an audience that went beyond the academic and medical communities. (Gibson P. 24)

Lombroso also offered a significant contribution to what we might term visual crime art through his attempts to influence those who studied his work.

> To each successive edition of Criminal Man Lombroso brought not only previously unpublished images but also new types of images (handwriting samples in the second edition, for example, and before-and-after photographs of reformed criminals in the fifth) and innovative methods of representation (heredity charts in the second edition, bar graphs in the third, crime maps in the fourth). The first edition of Criminal Man (1876) begins simply enough, with four illustrations: two of criminals' faces, one of tattoos, and one of prisoner art. The second edition (1878) includes the same four illustrations and adds ten new ones. The third edition (1884) has twenty five illustrations, and the fourth edition (1889), a two volume work, has sixty five. The fifth and final edition (1896-97) dedicates its entire final volume, the Atlas, to visual evidence for criminal anthropology. Considered by Lombroso to be "the most important" part of Criminal Man, the Atlas has 121 illustrations. (Gibson P. 21-22)

Stemming from his Positivist mind set, Lombroso advocated for a more humanistic approach to the treatment of criminals which may help explain his affinity for art. He

engaged in significant efforts to improve the plight of the poor and reform many of the rudimentary criminal justice practices. Throughout the duration of his work and studies he amassed a significant collection of criminal art which was showcased at the National Exposition in Turin and eventually housed in what would come to be known as the Cesare Lombroso Museum. Mary Gibson, in her introduction to the translation of Cesare Lombroso's Criminal Man elaborates:

> While Lombroso's reputation rests on his scientific work, he had a humanistic side as well, one that was fascinated by criminals' arts and crafts, their handwriting, tattoos, and graffiti, their jargon, songs, sculpture, poetry and folklore. Lombroso went to great lengths to collect, preserve, and interpret the creative work of offenders; he seems to have been the first person to value such material and collect it systematically. Closely related were his efforts to represent his own criminological theory visually – in charts, drawings, graphs, maps, photographs and the museum of criminal anthropology that he founded in Turin. In addition, Lombroso produced images of criminal life and culture through the narratives of his texts, one of them a grand master narrative (the story of evolution itself, in which born criminals form an instructive, if gloomy, chapter), others short anecdotes (his myriad brief tales of individual crimes and criminals). Criminal anthropology's success owed a great deal to Lombroso's ability to embody his theory visually and embed it narratively. (Gibson P. 21)

Lombroso's Museum of Criminal Anthropology was also a testament to his unique approach to criminological study and it is clear from the diversity and uniqueness of his collection why it drew such significant public interest.

> It offered exhibits on a wide range of degenerates – epileptics, freaks, lunatics, prostitutes, and street children, as well as lawbreakers. An incredible array of bizarre displays, many of them contributed by Lombroso's admirers in other parts of Italy and foreign countries, jammed the six rooms of the museum, floor to ceiling: wax death masks and pickled brains; obsessive drawings by the criminally insane; bits of tattooed skin; weapons, manacles, and leg irons; overscale models of carnivorous plants; a mummy; more than three hundred skulls – Abysinian, Chinese, Indian, and Patagonian, as well as Italian; a huge model of the Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia, illustrating its system of solitary confinement; a lithograph of a Prussian cannibal; remains stolen from ancient Sardinian tombs; bodies of murdered infants ; prisoners' water jugs

> incised with sexual fantasies; and, after Lombroso's death in 1909, not only his entire office but also his own face, dozing through eternity in a jar of preservative." (Gibson P. 26)

Historians looking back on the importance of the museum focus on its primary premise inherent in all of Lombroso's work which was that careful observation will necessarily reveal truth. Gibson sums up the lasting contribution of the museum.

> The museum's establishment marked the triumph of criminal anthropology, with its assumption that knowledge somehow inheres in crime-related objects. According to the museum's unspoken premise criminologists and police officials could derive lessons in crime prevention from the study of these artifacts. For turn-of-the-century visitors to this museum and to its imitators in other European cities, the historian Susanne Regener explains "an aura of knowledge surrounded the collection of artifacts of deviants, establishing as it were a metaphysics of evil: the object's essence could be grasped merely by gazing at it. The items on view…were therefore…important because knowledge would manifest itself in them. (Gibson 27)

In order to understand fully the attraction of criminal art like Lombroso's it is important to place it in the context of the late 19th century large city. In London, representative of many European cities, industrialization expanded the city's physical size monumentally between 1810 and 1900 with a population increase from 850,000 citizens in 1810 to 5 million by the turn of the century. With the growth of the city came not only an increase in museums, theatres, parks, colleges, grand hotels and stores but also disease and poverty. The air, water, and ground became fouled from the soot of soft coal burned for heat as well as from the excrement of humans and horses. The urban sprawl of London inevitably spread crime with the Metropolitan Police District experiencing 23,920 felonies in 1880. To address this level of crime, in 1878 the detective and constable departments were separated in order to generate a more focused effort on criminal investigation. By the end of the nineteenth century, the English were very familiar with

the concept of police forces but for the most part regarded them as ineffective based upon the continued high incidence of crime. This feeling of helplessness and victimization was manifested in the public reaction to the now infamous "Jack the Ripper" murder cases which, unsolved, created an aura of vulnerability. One could argue that criminological art work like Doyle's Holmes and Lombroso's macabre exhibits allowed the public to confront their fears and in so doing seek a degree of control.

The Technology of Observation, Inference and Deduction

Inherent in the work of Darwin, Lombroso, Quetelet, Mayhew as well as more broadly the Scientific Revolution and Positivism is the technology of Scientific Observation. Although the process of observing objects and phenomenon dates back to the earliest times it is at the end of the nineteenth century that it becomes the dominant methodology. The most significant example of this was in the field of medicine. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the primary mode of medicine was Heroic which included bloodletting, intestinal purging, vomiting, profuse sweating and blistering. During the mid to late 19th century, however, there was a significant shift to medical observation of the differences between healthy and unhealthy specimens in order to identify potential cures. Lombroso describes the importance of observation and inference:

> Criminals, compared to "healthy" individuals, have smaller and more deformed skulls, greater height and weight, and lighter beards. They are more likely to have crooked noses, sloping foreheads, large ears, protruding jaws, and dark skin, eyes and hair…the scientist must be alert to any and all clues to atavism, even when those clues are more social than biological in nature. The criminal is a diseased person, and the criminologist has to be creative in locating and reading the symptoms. (Gibson P. 10)

By the late 19th century the technology of scientific observation was beginning to penetrate the literary field.

> The literary realists cultivated a scientific detachment in their writing and developed a technique that would enable them to record the details of their observations of everyday life with accuracy and precision. Zola, by means of his experimental novel, introduced a modified social-scientific observation to fiction. In addition to his poetic dramas, Maeterlinck wrote popular nature studies such as The Life of the Bee and The Magic of the Stars. For his part, Debussy spoke of some of his compositions as his "latest discoveries in musical chemistry." (Fleming P. 543)

This same technology was in wide use at the time of Arthur Conan Doyle's training as a medical doctor and he refers to the impact this technique had on him and how he applied it to his writing. In his autobiography, Memories and Adventures, he writes:

> I felt now that I was capable of something fresher and crisper and more workmanlike. Gaboriau had rather attracted me by a neat dovetailing of his plots, and Poe's masterful detective, M. Dupin, had from boyhood been one of my heroes. But could I bring an addition of my own? I thought of my old teacher Joe Bell, of his eagle face, of his curious ways, and his eerie trick of spotting details. If he were a detective he would surely reduce this fascinating but unorganized business to something nearer an exact science. I would try if I could get this effect. It was surely possible in real life, so why should I not make it plausible in fiction? It is all very well to say that a man is clever, but the reader wants to see examples of it-such examples as Bell gave us every day in the wards. (Klinger P. XXIV)

Dr. Joseph Bell reflected on his time with Doyle and discusses the processes of medical observation being advocated in the late 19th century:

> In teaching the treatment of disease and accident, all careful teachers have first to show the student how to recognize accurately the case. The recognition depends in great measure on the accurate and rapid appreciation of small points in which the diseased differs from the healthy state. In fact, the student must be taught to observe carefully. To interest him in this kind of work we teachers find it useful to show the student how much a trained use of the observation can discover in

> ordinary matters such as the previous history, nationality and occupation of a patient. (Klinger P. XXIV)

Enter Sherlock Holmes

It was on this late nineteenth century stage of Positivism, science infused art and scientific observation that the little known author, Arthur Conan Doyle entered. Doyle was born in Edinburgh on May 22, 1859 and in his early years (1876-1881) studied medicine under the tutelage of Dr. Joseph Bell. During his medical term he took various jobs to supplement his finances including service as a ship's doctor aboard a Greenland whaler and upon graduation in 1881 appointment as a ship's doctor on a voyage to the West African coast. By way of his association with Bell and subsequent medical assignments, Doyle became adept at the scientific observation methodologies burgeoning at this time.

Doyle continued his involvement in medicine as well as writing short stories one of which was titled A Study In Scarlet which was selected for print in Beeton's Christmas Annual in 1887. Following the introduction of the Sherlock Holmes character in Beeton's, Doyle published The Sign of Four which was America's introduction to the detective. In January of 1891, a publisher named George Newnes developed the concept for what would become known as The Strand Magazine. The design of the magazine was such that it would feature short stories and the first issue included a story by Doyle titled The Voice of Science. Doyle became a significant contributor to the magazine and he was paired with an illustrator named Sidney Paget who had an excellence for artistic detail. The combination of writer, subject and artist was a great success and A Scandal in Bohemia created a significant public reaction when it appeared in England in July 1891.

Each subsequent Holmes adventure resulted in an increase in sales of the magazine such that Conan Doyle's name on the cover of the magazine added 100,000 copies to its circulation.

Twelve Holmes stories appeared between July 1891 and June 1892 and were compiled in book form under the title The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. Doyle went on to produce another 12 Holmes stories later collected as The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes which began appearing in December of 1892. Ultimately over fifty short stories related to Sherlock Holmes were produced. Klinger describes the public intoxication with the Holmes stories:

> In December 1893, upon publication of The Final Problem, the last story of the second series, the public was shocked to learn that Conan Doyle and Watson had for over two years kept secret a fatal struggle between Sherlock Holmes and Professor Moriarty, which had occurred in May 1891. The revelation of Holme's death horrified the nation, and young City men that month put mourning crepe on their silk hats or wore black armbands. One anguished correspondent wrote to Conan Doyle: "You brute!" "I was amazed," Conan Doyle admitted, "at the concern expressed by the public," The publisher of the Strand Magazine described Holme's death to his shareholders as the "dreadful event, " and twenty thousand people reportedly cancelled their subscriptions. (Klinger XXXII)

The public demand for Holmes short stories was so significant that it exacted a psychological toll on Doyle. He explains:

> I have had such an overdose of him that I feel towards him as I do towards pate de foie gras, of which I once ate too much, so that the name of it gives me a sickly feeling to this day…I have been much blamed for doing that gentleman to death, but I hold that it was not murder, but justifiable homicide in self – defence, since, if I had not killed him, he would certainly have killed me. (Klinger P. XXXIII)

Although Doyle attempted to end his attachment to the character of Holmes, at several points in his career, he fell on hard economic times and turned to the production of additional Holmes stories to generate needed revenue. Critics argued that the later stories of the great detective lacked the quality of earlier efforts but the public never tired of the character or his exploits.

Vicarious Criminology of the Late 19th Century

It is clear that there was a public attraction to crime art and science in the late 19th century. This is evidenced by the popularity that both Lombroso and Doyle enjoyed but to understand the spirit of the age or Zeitgeist, it is necessary to focus on the vicarious element within the public intoxication. As has been argued, there was serious debate and uncertainty regarding the true nature of criminal activity, specifically, whether it was the result of biological disposition, a moral failing or an inherent potentiality within all human beings. This uncertainty combined with the high incidence of crime, ineffectiveness of early police efforts and powerlessness of the lower classes would certainly incline individuals to pursuits that might alleviate their distress. On the surface it is difficult to imagine how a short story about a fictitious detective might offer any real hope for the masses but we might entertain that at its basest level, the attraction was simply the ability of this medium to engage the average person with the promise and problems of the late 19th century. At a deeper level we might consider the possibility that the Holmes Literary series allowed individuals to transcend. Henri Louis Bergson, a French Philosopher of the late 19th and early 20th century believed art to be:

> A force that frees the soul, and one through which one can grasp "certain rhythms of life and breath" that compel the individual "to fall in with it, like passersby who join in a dance." Thus they compel us to set in motion, in the depth of our being, some secret chord which was only waiting to thrill…to grasp the future in the present. (Fleming P. 545)

And, as Edgar Smith, one time leader of The Baker Street Irregulars and editor of the Baker Street Journal commented, perhaps:

> Emblematic of the times, Holmes stands before us as a symbol…of all that we are not but ever would be. …We see him as the fine expression of our urge to trample evil and to set aright the wrongs with which the world is plagued. (Klinger P. XVIII)

We might then consider that vicarious participation with Sherlock Holmes through the reading of his stories allowed those of the 19th century to join in the dance of Positivist Criminology and scientific method as it sought to better understand the evil inherent in this world.

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