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Richard Somerset

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Holmes Where the Heart is:

Sherlock's feeling rationality

Dr. Watson was bored. The morning papers had contained nothing to amuse him, and now his mind was wandering. The reverie lasted a few minutes until it was interrupted by the incisive voice of his old friend and habitual breakfast companion, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, the scientific detective.

'You are right, Watson,' said he. 'It does seem a most preposterous way of settling a dispute.'

Watson is duly amazed.

'Most preposterous!' I exclaimed and then suddenly realizing how he had echoed the inmost thought of my soul, I sat up in my chair and stared at him in blank amazement.

'What is this Holmes?' I cried. 'This is beyond anything which I could have imagined.'¹

The scene is familiar. So familiar, in fact, that in J. M. Barrie's parodies the famous lodgings situated at 221b Baker Street has dents in the plaster from the numerous occasions when the detective's companion 'leapt to the ceiling' in amazement.² Normally, the leaps come in response to the staggering inferences Sherlock Holmes is able to make regarding the motley collection of individuals who pass through his portals, merely on the basis of careful observation of their

¹ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *His Last Bow. Some Reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes*, Penguin (1981), 40.

² 'The Adventure of the Two Collaborators' and 'The Late Sherlock Holmes' in Richard Lancelyn Green (ed.) *The Uncollected Sherlock Holmes*, Penguin (1983), 369-378.

physical appearance. A callused thumb, a worn patch at the elbow or knee, a military gait; such apparently minor external signs allow the archetypal ‘scientific detective’ to reach extraordinarily detailed and extraordinarily accurate conclusions about the private lives of perfect strangers. No Sherlock Holmes tale would be complete without a scene in which Holmes amazes his client – and the endlessly impressionable Watson – with his perspicacity.

Reading Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories as a child, I was rather perplexed by the fact that Holmes was never wrong. Surely all those inferences could not always be safe? Surely even the most careful observer might make the wrong inference? Holmes himself is usually careful to express his conclusion in probabilistic terms, so how does it happen that he never turns out to have been mistaken?³ Doyle seems to have recognised this potential weakness in his character’s allegedly unassailable working technique, since he directly addresses the point in a parody of his own entitled ‘How Watson Learned the Trick’ (1924). In this spoof, Doyle has Watson attempt to apply Holmes’ method. As a ‘scientific’ method, it is of course meant to be thoroughly transferable, and any individual with the necessary observational and rational faculties should be able to accomplish Holmes’ little party trick with comparable ease. Watson says as much in this sketch: “Yes, Holmes, I was thinking how superficial are those tricks of yours, and how wonderful it is that the public should continue to show interest in them. [...] Your methods, said Watson severely, are really easily acquired.”⁴ Watson then proceeds to show off the same skills by turning them on Holmes himself: he surmises that Holmes woke up perplexed that morning (he is normally neat but today unshaved), that he has a client named Barlow whose case he has failed to solve (he thrust a letter with the man’s name on it into his pocket with a frown), that he is expecting an important visitor (he has put on a black coat instead of the usual dressing gown) and that he has

³ Holmes follows the wrong scent in ‘The Speckled Band’, when he interprets the word ‘band’ as referring to gypsies rather than to a snake, but this is not quite the same thing.

⁴ Green (ed.), 155.

Sherlock Holmes' feeling rationality

taken to financial speculation (he gave an exclamation of interest when examining the financial page in the morning paper). Holmes is politely impressed, but informs his hapless colleague with a little more relish than is strictly compatible with amicable relations that he has got it all hopelessly wrong. Holmes, it turns out, is unshaved because he had sent his razor away to be sharpened; he put his coat on because he has an appointment with his dentist whose name is Barlow (the letter confirmed the appointment); and finally, the financial page being alongside the cricket page, his exclamation of interest was due to the discovery that Surrey was holding its own against Kent. For the final flourish, Holmes gaily twists the knife: "But go on, Watson, go on! It is a very superficial trick, and you will no doubt soon learn it."⁵

But Watson is right really, isn't he? That morning's inferences were every bit as credible as those usually performed by Holmes. Or rather, Holmes' inferences are every bit as wobbly as Watson's. The callused patterns of workmen's hands are surely not quite as systematic as Holmes would have us believe; worn patches on clothes more subject to contingent causes than he will admit; and military gaits not always impeccably preserved by soldiers out of uniform. Holmes certainly could fall on his face as spectacularly as Watson does here – but of course he never does. And why not? In narratological terms, the reason is simply that Holmes is the superhuman hero and Watson the bungling counterfoil. It is the hero's job always to hit the nail on the head, and the bungling counterfoil's to be permanently out of his depth. So even when, as in this parody, Doyle gamefully points out the most obvious weakness of his hero's system, it is Watson rather than Holmes who falls victim to it. The hero is ostensibly allowed to save face, and his system redeemed. If Watson fails miserably in his attempt to apply the supposedly 'scientific' method it is not because the method is defective, nor even because he has misunderstood or misapplied the theory, but simply because he does not have the flair to make it work. Holmes makes inferential leaps and they work; Watson does the same, and lands in

⁵ Green (ed.), 157.

the mire. What's the difference between them? Not knowledge but skill; not theory but intuition.

In theory, Holmes' working method is strictly inductive; strictly Baconian. First collect all the facts, and then, without allowing any preconceptions to colour your views, proceed to the elimination of the impossible explanations. Holmes repeatedly informs Watson, in one form of words or another, that once all the impossible explanations have been eliminated, what remains, however improbable, must be the true explanation. The intuitive dimension – if it is one – relates more to attitude than to method. It is the faculty which enables Holmes so unerringly to spot the salient fact, and to evaluate so accurately the merely probabilistic inferences which flow from it. We have already seen Watson, with all the method and none of the knack, fall humiliatingly on his face.

Occasionally, however, Holmes pushes his inferential methods to the limit where it might appear that intuition has slipped out of its proper place as adjunct to the rational faculties, and seems to be taking on the leading role. Such may be the case of the scene quoted at the beginning of this essay. The episode occurs in a tale called 'The Adventure of the Cardboard Box', included in the last Sherlock Holmes book, *His Last Bow* (1917). By this stage in his life, Doyle had become actively involved in Spiritualism, and it may be that the old Holmes figure had been somewhat softened as a result – but in theory at least, he was still the same rationalistic cold fish. 'The Cardboard Box' begins with Holmes displaying a new refinement of his old tricks; not this time an interpretation of a missing coat button, but something more 'human'. The interruption we have already quoted was possible because Holmes had followed Watson's unspoken train of thought. Holmes had observed Watson looking at two portraits that hang in their sitting room, one of General Gordon and the other of Henry Ward Beecher, the American Civil War hero; remembering that Watson had expressed disgust at the latter's reception by the populace, Holmes surmises that he is recalling the particulars of that man's career.

When a moment later I saw your eyes wander away from the picture, I suspected that your mind had now turned to the Civil War, and when I

Sherlock Holmes' feeling rationality

observed that your lips set, your eyes sparkled, and your hands clenched, I was positive that you were indeed thinking of the gallantry which was shown by both sides in that desperate struggle. But then, again, your face grew sadder; you shook your head. You were dwelling upon the sadness and horror and useless waste of life. Your hand stole towards your old war wound and a smile quivered upon your lips, which showed me that the ridiculous side of this method of settling international questions had forced itself upon your mind. At this point I agreed with you that it was preposterous, and was glad to find that all my deductions had been correct.⁶

Holmes' method here resembles his habitual one only insofar as it is based upon the reading of superficial details as revealing deeper hidden patterns. But his conjectures are of a rather different character. It is one thing to read nicks on the side of one's boots as implying a recent walk in the mud⁷ and quite another to see in a shake of the head the sign that the subject is thinking about war. It is clear that Holmes's inferences here depend more upon a familiarity with the character of his house-mate than they do upon merely empirical observation and logical inference. Here more than anywhere else Holmes seems to be skating on thin ice, and for all his undoubted skill and intuitive flair, it is at least theoretically possible – isn't it? – that Watson was altogether elsewhere. He certainly *could* have been thinking about how disagreeably that portrait reminded him of his maiden aunt Gertrude, to whose house he had been invited for tea that very afternoon, and whose stiff upright chairs always made his old war wounds ache.

But of course he wasn't. What's more, Holmes insists that in following Watson's train of thought, he was in fact doing no more than applying the good old inductive principles of observation. This is possible because "the features are given to man as the means by which he shall express his emotions, and yours are faithful servants."⁸ In other words, the emotions are readable from one's gestures and facial expressions in much the same way as one's career and recent

⁶ *His Last Bow*, 41-42.

⁷ 'A Scandal in Bohemia'.

⁸ *His Last Bow*, 40.

occupations are plain from the state of one's hands and one's clothing. The emotional world is just as rigidly determined as the physical, and can effectively be subsumed within it.

One relatively recent commentator, Jonathan Smith, devoting a chapter of his book *Fact and Feeling*, to the Baconian underpinnings of Sherlock Holmes' methods of detection accords intuition a significant role, but warns that what is required is 'masculine' rather than 'feminine' intuition. As he puts it, "Intuition and emotion, though at some level essential to Holmes's method, must be vigorously circumscribed and controlled."⁹ It is this subordination of feeling or intuition to rationality which makes the intuitive so problematic in Holmes. On the one hand, he is set apart from all other men by what seems to be an intuitive capacity to read the signs aright. Holmes is patently a genius, which means precisely that other men are unable to produce the same results, no matter how assiduously they seek to apply the appropriate method. This suggests that the essence of that method is instinctual, and that it cannot ultimately be taught. On the other hand, Holmes as a man is perfectly incapable of emotion or emotiveness.¹⁰ This denial extends to and includes his account of his methods of detection, since Holmes – in the face of all evidence! – habitually denies his own genius and insists on the workmanlike basis of his deductions, even in the extreme case we have just considered. In

⁹ Jonathan Smith, *Fact and Feeling. Baconian Science and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, University of Wisconsin Press (1994), 222.

¹⁰ "All emotions, and that one particularly [love], were abhorrent to his cold, precise but admirably balanced mind. He was, I take it, the most perfect reasoning and observing machine that the world has seen, but as a lover he would have placed himself in a false position. He never spoke of the softer passions, save with a gibe and a sneer. They were admirable things for the observer – excellent for drawing the veil from men's motives and actions. But for the trained reasoner to admit such intrusions into his own delicate and finely adjusted temperament was to introduce a distracting factor which might throw a doubt upon all his mental results. Grit in a sensitive instrument, or a crack in one of his own high-power lenses, would not be more disturbing than a strong emotion in a nature such as his." ('A Scandal in Bohemia')

Sherlock Holmes' feeling rationality

a sense, Holmes is defined by the pervasive Victorian quandary about the pre-rational faculties, which are at once admirable and fearful. The emotive drive is that which disaggregates men into individuals; it is that which saves us from being mere rational machines. At the same time, that emotive drive comes to us 'from below'; from the domain of the instinctive; from the animal inside; and so must be carefully directed. The habitual compromise recommendation was that the well-rounded individual be constituted by an emotive or sensitive psychological foundation directed by the rational faculties towards noble moral ends. Thomas Carlyle was largely responsible for popularising this ideal amongst Victorians, and novelists from Austen to Conrad explored the attempts – and usually the failures – of individual men and women to live up to some version of it. But unlike the fallible characters of more serious literature, Holmes, though defined by the quandary, is no victim to it. This is because he is not really a character at all, but a caricature. As a caricature he does not – cannot – enact the normal human struggle to get the balance right, but merely represents some normative idea of one possible solution.

Affect, if we can use that term to refer to instinctual feeling or emotiveness, had always been at least potentially problematic, but not in such a threatening way. The eighteenth century had had plenty of sentimentality, and plenty of criticism of sentimentality, but the stakes in the debate were lower. We can take as an example Henry Mackenzie's short novel, *The Man of Feeling* (1771). This novel takes the form of a series of fragmentary sketches in which we are shown the hero, Harley, in a variety of affecting poses which usually entail hearing the life-story of some unfortunate individual – a woman fallen into prostitution or a sailor who has lost everything – and then doing all within his power to set things to rights. Along the way, a prodigious quantity of tears are shed, sighs sighed, and nerves thrilled. As Brian Vickers has pointed out, the etymological meaning of 'sentimental' is "thinking through feeling", and accordingly in the eighteenth century novel, it is habitual for the emotions to be manifested in a physical way: by tears, swooning, speechlessness, and

so on.¹¹ The ‘tasteful’ Victorian novel – though capable of moments of quite unbearable cloyingness – was not generally sentimental in this frank and unabashed way. It seems that Victorian readers found Mackenzie’s book (which had been an enormous popular success on first publication) faintly ludicrous because of the excess of sentimental behaviour on display there. For example, upon republication in 1886, the editor appended an “Index to tears (Choking, &c., not counted)” cataloguing all the passages in which characters weep. The index was clearly intended, as Vickers notes “as a kind of *index prohibitorum* of excessively sentimental effects.”¹²

But although Mackenzie’s novel was so tear-stained as to seem faintly ludicrous even to late Victorians, it seems that his intention had actually been to define and to restrict the proper place of sentiment in the novel. Thus in an article written for his own journal, *The Lounger*, we find him inveighing not for sentiment, but against it.

In the enthusiasm of sentiment there is much the same danger as in the enthusiasm of religion, of substituting certain impulses and feelings of what may be called a visionary kind, in the place of real practical duties, which in morals, as in theology, we might not improperly denominate good works. In morals, as in religion, there are not wanting instances of refined sentimentalists, who are contented with talking of virtues which they never practise, who pay in words what they owe in actions; or, perhaps, what is fully as dangerous, who open their minds to impressions which never have any effect upon their conduct, but are considered as something foreign to and distinct from it. *This separation of conscience from feeling* is a depravity of the most pernicious sort; it eludes the strongest obligation to rectitude, it blunts the strongest incitement to virtue; when the ties of the first bind the sentiment and not the will, and the rewards of the latter crown not the heart but the imagination.¹³

Of course it is not really a question of being ‘for’ or ‘against’ sentiment; what matters is how sentiment is used. For Mackenzie, sentiment in the novel becomes vicious as soon as it is divorced from

¹¹ Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers, Oxford World’s Classics (2001), xii.

¹² Mackenzie, 110.

¹³ Mackenzie, 102. Emphasis added.

Sherlock Holmes' feeling rationality

“conscience”; in other words, when it becomes a value in its own right rather than one subordinated to the proper moral end. Novels are inevitably attracted to the showy virtues of love, generosity, benevolence and compassion; and to neglect the less attractive but more fundamental values of duty to parents, justice, prudence and economy. But in so doing, they tend to lead the reader to admire the feeling for its own sake rather than for the good moral principle which should underlie it. So Mackenzie’s programme is a kind of responsabilisation of sentiment which consists of harnessing it to the appropriate pragmatic moral value.

It is striking that in Mackenzie sentiment is in no way opposed to rationality. Good sentimentality is rationally separated from bad sentimentality according to a moral yardstick. Sentiment is little more than a tool which may – or may not – be used rationally for moral purposes. No ontological issues are directly implicated, and the intimate nature of Man is not at stake.

The ‘Romantic crisis’ changed all that, and by mid-Victorian times, the relative places of reason and sentiment had become a key ontological issue in the debate around the notion of ‘human nature’. Reason and sentiment were opposing principles which pulled man in opposite directions: the former ‘upwards’ and away from animal nature, but also away from the ‘instinctive virtues’ such as love and sympathy; and the latter ‘downwards’ towards those simple virtues, but also, potentially, towards criminality and even bestiality, which are characterised by gratuitously vicious and bloodthirsty behaviour.

In this context, the ‘scientist’ becomes an emblematic but also a problematic figure. Science, as an institution, is responsible for humanity’s advances, and individual scientists admired or even revered for their contributions. But at the same time, the individual scientist is often seen – as is evident from the literature of the period – as something of a failure as a human being. The high development of his faculties of reason seems necessarily to imply a corresponding impoverishment of his sentimental faculties; a state of affairs which tends to lead to some degree of moral perversity, from the merely eccentric (such as Doyle’s Professor Challenger) to the misguided

(such as Shelley's Victor Frankenstein) to the downright criminal (such as Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll).

But it is not only scientists, or scientific figures, who are implicated. In nineteenth-century and early twentieth century literature in general, sentiment is often depicted as difficult ground for people of all kinds; a domain from which they feel the need to protect themselves, whether it be by over-developed rationality, exaggerated puritanism, cynicism, hedonism, or whatever. Each of these may be and often are treated as devices which permit the subject to avoid direct sentimental involvement. The potential examples are legion. Somewhat arbitrarily, we might take James Hogg's Robert Wringham as an example of the puritanical device, Austen's Emma Woodouse of the cynical, and Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby of the hedonistic. And why not add, to show how deeply hidden the tendency may be, Henry James' Isabel Archer, whose sexual anxiety leads her to want "to see but not to feel".¹⁴ In some more or less muted sense, all of these characters find themselves on the same slippery slope as Dr. Jekyll, each struggling in their own way and with varying degrees of success to ignore the abominably sensual Mr. Hyde catching at their heels.

Sherlock Holmes is remarkably free of all such temptation. He may be a divided character in the sense that he has both a rational and a sensual side to his personality, but, although this marriage seems perplexing to the spectator such as Watson, to Holmes himself there seems to be no sense of crisis, however deeply buried, nor even any awareness of any fundamental cleavage or contradiction. He is as much at home in listening to a concerto as he is in puzzling out a mystery.

My friend was an enthusiastic musician, being himself not only a very capable performer but a composer of no ordinary merit. All the afternoon he sat in the stalls wrapped in the most perfect happiness, gently waving his long, thin fingers in time to the music, while his gently smiling face and his languid, dreamy eyes were as unlike those of Holmes the sleuth-hound, Holmes the relentless, keen-witted,

¹⁴ *Portrait of a Lady* [1881], Penguin Modern Classics (1966), 150.

Sherlock Holmes' feeling rationality

ready-handed criminal agent, as it was possible to conceive. In his singular character the dual nature alternately asserted itself, and his extreme exactness and astuteness represented, as I have often thought, the reaction against the poetic and contemplative mood which occasionally predominated in him. The swing of his nature took him from extreme languor to devouring energy; and, as I knew well, he was never so truly formidable as when, for days on end, he had been lounging in his armchair amid his improvisations and his black-letter editions. Then it was that the lust of the chase would suddenly come upon him, and that his brilliant reasoning power would rise to the level of intuition, until those who were unacquainted with his methods would look askance at him as on a man whose knowledge was not that of other mortals.¹⁵

This famous passage is the canonical reference for those who see Holmes as a bundle of opposites. But we must remember that this report comes to us through the filter of Watson's consciousness, which is perhaps not the most reliable of sources. I mean not so much that Watson is dull or unintelligent (though he often makes such self-depreciatory remarks when comparing himself to his colleague), but simply that he looks upon Holmes with all too human eyes – that is, with eyes attuned to the habitual reason-sentiment divide. Watson sees his friend's character as sharply divided into two opposite compartments, the almost inert music-lover as against the razor-sharp solver of mysteries. He also remarks on a sort of negative complementarity between the two portions, since the scent of the "sleuth-hound" is actually sharper than usual when Holmes has just emerged from a period of temporary torpor. This observation suggests the fact that Watson has no reason explicitly to remark upon, but which is of central importance to us: the fact that the 'instinct-reason' divide in Holmes does not provoke even the slightest hint of existential crisis in Doyle's hero. In marked contrast to his contemporary Dr. Jekyll, Holmes' rationalism is no threat to his humanity; and what's more, his sentimentality – I mean his occasional lapses into the purely sensual – poses no threat, not even a pragmatic one, to his vocation of scientific detective.

¹⁵ 'The Red-headed League.'

Holmes' lapses into the sensual are not like those of other men. His notorious use of cocaine to tide him over the boredom of inactivity between cases seems distinctly 'human' in the puritanical sense, but he is in fact no vulgar addict. Cocaine, like music, seems to be a way to keep his mind engaged. The one thing that is intolerable to Holmes is mental inactivity. The pleasure he derives from listening to music is of an intensely engaged kind, despite his languid demeanour; it is not the polite social distraction that it is for everyone else. In the concert hall, Holmes is "wrapped in the most perfect happiness, gently waving his long, thin fingers in time to the music" with "gently smiling face" and "languid, dreamy eyes". He is almost 'not there'; transported by his pleasure entirely 'into' the music; carried away on its waves. Apart from being characterised by an intense sympathy, Holmes' reaction to music is, in social terms, decidedly eccentric. Watson does not describe the rest of the crowd at the concert hall, but it is a safe bet that Holmes cut a rather solitary figure sitting there in the stalls blissfully waving his elegant fingers in time to the music. It's hardly surprising that he does not seem to have had any friends!

Holmes' sentiment, then, is not harnessed to social ends. Frankenstein or Jekyll are men who 'fall' for their incapacity to 'connect' with the world of 'natural sentiment' and the social bonds they imply. Holmes is equally out of touch with the world of social bonds, but he is not without a sentimental, or a sensuous, dimension to his character. This is perhaps why there is no 'fall' for Holmes. He is an asocial beast, for sure, and ill-adapted to the normal conditions of life in his world, but he is not a denatured, unbalanced super-rationalist. He looks that way to the rest of us, but only because his sensual side is more refined than ours: we seek pleasure as a way of existing in society; he seeks pleasure as a way of existing *tout court*.

Whether he is at work or at play, Holmes always goes for the full sensual experience. Unlike Isabel Archer, he looks and feels at the same time. Only he does not call it 'feeling'; he calls it "observation". The faculty of observation, as opposed to mere seeing, is sadly underdeveloped in the majority of people, including Watson.

Sherlock Holmes' feeling rationality

"You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room."

"Frequently."

"How often?"

"Well, some hundreds of times."

"Then how many are there?"

"How many? I don't know."

"Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen. That is just my point. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed."¹⁶

It is not exactly a moment of sentimental effusion, but sentiment – or at least sentience – *is* involved. It is the particularity of Holmes that he is extraordinarily sensitive to the appearances of things. He *feels* his way through the world – peering through his magnifying glass, sniffing unidentified substances, and counting steps – far more than the ordinary run of men. Of course, it is a sentience guided purely by rational considerations: the goal of solving the mystery, and unearthing the criminal. In Holmes' glorification of observation as a higher form of seeing we glimpse a virile way of taming the messiness of sentiment. By turning sentiment into sentience, and using it rationally to a pragmatic end, Holmes' intuitiveness eschews the feminine and anxious aspect of 'feeling', and sets itself up instead as masculine and aspirant.

Doyle was not as much of a Holmes fan as his readers were. It was in response to popular pressure that he resurrected his hero from an apparently fatal accident at the Reichenbach falls. In his autobiography, Doyle explained that the problem with Holmes was that he was not very human; that there was only one angle from which he could be approached. It was impossible, for example, to introduce a love affair, since to do so would be to destroy the character. Holmes, Doyle complains, is no more than "a calculating machine" who "admits of no light or shade";¹⁷ he somehow seems to fall short of the

¹⁶ 'A Scandal in Bohemia'.

¹⁷ *Memories and Adventures* (1923), in Green (ed.), 314.

fully human. He also complained that Holmes got in the way of his more serious writing. In his other publications we find him trying to get around these problems, either by using a more conventional scientific hero, as in the Professor Challenger series, or by abandoning scientific pretensions altogether, as in the Gerard stories or his historical novels such as *The White Company* (1891). In turning to non-scientific grounds, Doyle gave himself the chance to deal with fuller, more complex human types, but unfortunately this 'more serious writing' cannot be described as a success. Frankly, the people were quite right to demand the return of Holmes: Doyle was better off dealing with frank caricatures than with alleged human beings.

But let us return to Doyle's complaint that Holmes fell short of the fully human. While this is of course true in that the character is two-dimensional, it would nevertheless be judicious to say that his two-dimensionality comes more from an excess than a short-coming of humanity, conventionally understood. In an age when progressivist evolutionary thought was common, Holmes perhaps represents a future 'purified' man; a man for whom sentiment and sensuality are purified of their base, corporeal origins, and have been brought completely into the service of the rational being. Holmes is not a divided being but a complete one; and his completion is strong, not weak. It comes from having attained a higher state. He has effectively expunged the old Romantic crisis of the divided man, not by cutting away the sensual dimension, as Jekyll attempted, but by drawing it up into the chastely cleansing embrace of rationality.

This sort of solution to the 'Romantic crisis' resembles the approach that certain scientists were pursuing in the early twentieth century in response to the question of the future of mankind. Just before Arthur Conan Doyle died, for example, J. D. Bernal, a physicist who was to have an influential career in the scientific establishment, published his first book, entitled *The World, the Flesh and the Devil: an inquiry into the future of the three enemies of the rational soul* (1929). Bernal saw the future of mankind as threatened by the sentimental attachment to his animal past. As a rational being, man has the capacity and indeed the duty to direct his evolutionary path, and Bernal envisaged such a path as taking the human race towards a

Sherlock Holmes' feeling rationality

kind of disembodied super-being constituted of neural connections between individual 'beings'. This organic agglomeration of beings is guaranteed continued survival since local 'deaths' do not harm the super-being. The super-being will gradually colonise space, thus investing the inert wastes of the cosmos with rational life in its purest form, and using the cosmos in the most effective way possible in order to ensure the continued survival of the 'species'. The main impediment to this plan, Bernal contends, lies in our sentimental attachment to the World and to the Flesh; that is, to our familiar terrestrial environment and to our bodies. This sentimental attachment is the Devil, completing the unholy triumvirate of the title, and the deepest-rooted source of resistance to his plan. Unlike the World and the Flesh, the Devil resides in our own minds, and is therefore most difficult to overcome. And yet, Bernal argues, as rational beings, we should be capable of making the break. It is worth noticing that Bernal's project does not properly entail the final victory of reason over sentiment or sensation; after all, even in his title, he claims to be seeking to protect the future of "the rational *soul*." In other words, of the soul embodied, so to speak, in the mind rather than in the body.

This is a far cry from the very much embodied existence of the inhabitants of 221b Baker Street, and I am obviously not suggesting that there is any direct link or influence between the two writers. I mention Bernal not to suggest that he is a disciple of Doyle or of Holmes, but because his vision of the future of mankind strikes me as the logical extreme to which the Sherlock mentality may be pushed. Holmes and Bernal, each in their own way and to their own degree, appeal to 'Science' in the name of an improved marriage between sentiment and reason; a future being for whom the soul exists as an adjunct to, and not an enemy of, the rational faculty of mind. Practising scientists tended to limit themselves cautiously to a pragmatic separation of the goals of science and those of ethics or theology. But most people had some more positive theory to hand, especially visionaries like Bernal or dabblers like Doyle. We have already outlined their position which was, arguably, the orthodox late-Victorian way to attempt to deal with that period's defining paranoia:

how to promote technological progress without thereby mechanising Man himself.

In its extreme version, as represented by Bernal's proposals, the theory is repellent, as the author himself concedes. In all probability, even he would have hesitated actually to put it into practice – especially after the events of the fifteen years following the publication of his book. In its weaker version, as represented by Holmes, the author is soon frustrated by the limited human possibilities presented by a character who embodies that theory, and chafes for new and less perfect heroes. In a sense these reactions are derived from the same source; from the sense that even if the theory is admirable in the abstract, and even if one adheres to it in all rationality, the obstinate feeling remains that it won't quite do. Doyle was a believer, but as an author he got bored; Bernal was a believer, but had he been asked to become the genuine author of such a scheme, he probably would have got scared. It seems that in human affairs in general, the sentimentalism of the author tends to win out over the purity of the intellectual. This tendency is the boon of civilisation – and the downfall of popular literature.