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Pseudo-Sciences and the Occult

In the course of the nineteenth century the increasing importance of science changed the role that 'mystery' played in the collective imagination. Even before Queen Victoria's reign Thomas Carlyle had reassessed common religious and popular beliefs in a chapter of *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34) entitled 'Natural Supernaturalism'. While acknowledging the value of science, Carlyle questioned its mechanical view of the universe, refusing to renounce either faith or 'mystery', and relocating the supernatural in the inner dimension of the human being:

> Witchcraft, and all manner of Spectre-work, and Demonology, we have now named Madness, and Diseases of the Nerves. Seldom reflecting that still the new question comes upon us: What is Madness, what are Nerves? Ever, as before, does Madness remain a mysterious-terrific, altogether *infernal* boiling up of the Nether Chaotic Deep ...[1]

Victorians were attracted both to the aberrant side and to the 'superhuman' powers of the mind. While the ancient abyss of hell seemed to close its doors, previously unfathomed inner abysses opened up their depths in a world whose coordinates of time and space were being traced with increasing exactitude.

We tend to think of positivism as the triumph of the scientific method and a materialist approach to reality, but this cultural phase was ambivalent, involving an interest in the spiritual and in the occult. Victorian culture engaged in a vast debate concerning the supernatural, as is shown by J.N. Radcliffe's *Fiends, Ghosts and Sprites, Including an Account of the Origin and Nature of Belief in the Supernatural* (1854), William Howitt's *The History of the Supernatural* (1863), A.R. Wallace's *The Scientific Aspect of the Supernatural* (1866) and several other works.[2] While some scholars

historicised the cultural approach to the supernatural in order to fight against superstition, others had a sympathetic attitude to tradition and hoped that a rational investigation of that domain would ultimately lead to bewildering advances in our knowledge of the universe and the human.

Old beliefs were reassessed in the light of recent discoveries and were often subsumed into the discourses of what today we regard as pseudo-sciences rather than sciences. Mesmerism, for instance, was refashioned as hypnotism by James Braid (*Neurhypnology*, 1843) and William Carpenter, setting the ground for the late nineteenth-century development of psychology and psychoanalysis. We should remember that Jean-Martin Charcot used this technique to treat hysteria at the Paris hospital of La Salpêtrière, where Sigmund Freud came to study in 1885, and that before developing the 'free association' method Freud used hypnotism to explore his patients' unconscious, as is shown by *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). In the meantime, spiritualism was provided with a philosophical basis thanks to Andrew Jackson Davies, while Mme Blavatsky and H.S. Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875.

Towards the end of the century, disciplines that we now regard as the foundations of twentieth-century sciences intertwined with theories that were subsequently largely discredited. Sir Oliver Lodge, for instance, is known both as a physicist who developed wireless telegraphy and for his interest in psychical research – a passion he shared with his friend Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The discovery of radio waves and the increasing ability to communicate at a distance provided a powerful paradigm for the investigation of the occult. The Society for Psychical Research was founded in London in 1882 by eminent scholars in order to study phenomena such as clairvoyance, telepathy and precognition. Six years later an American branch was created, thanks to the efforts of William James, the father of modern psychology. James's comprehensive theory of mind entailed an interest in what he called 'abnormal mental states', including trance. James's involvement with mediums such as Leonora Piper and Helen Berry is well known and in a series of talks he gave in Boston in 1896 – 'The Exceptional Mental Phenomena' – the philosopher dealt with subjects such as dreams and hypnotism, automatism, hysteria, multiple personality, demonic possession, witchcraft and degeneration.[3]

The Italian Cesare Lombroso, who is mainly remembered as the founder of criminal anthropology, also studied hypnotism and – after meeting the Italian medium Eusapia Paladino in 1891 – converted to spiritualism.[4] Applying a positivist method to the study of the occult, Lombroso argued that certain apparently 'spiritual phenomena' actually pertained to the realm of matter: 'as the laws concerning Hertz's waves largely explain

telepathy, so the new discoveries concerning the radioactive properties of certain metals, notably *radium* … dispel the greatest objection a scientist had to oppose to the mysterious manifestations of spiritualism'.[5]

The development of photography contributed to this renewed interest in the connection between body and soul, which was conceptualised in pseudo-scientific terms. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) ghosts, dreams and mesmerism are evoked together with the daguerrotype, and the daguerrotypist Holgrave describes his art as follows:

> I make pictures out of sunshine … There is a wonderful insight in heaven's broad and simple sunshine. While we give it credit only for depicting the merest surface, it actually brings out the secret character with a truth that no painter would ever venture upon, even could he detect it.[6]

As the photographer Félix Nadar wrote in his memoirs, Honoré de Balzac was afraid of being photographed lest one of the infinitesimal layers constituting his soul might be stripped away each time his image was captured by the camera. In the nineteenth century the soul was increasingly 'materialised' and photography contributed to this new approach, as is shown by *L'Âme humaine: ses mouvements, ses lumières et l'iconographie de l'invisible* (*The Human Soul: its movements, its lights and the iconography of the invisible*, 1896), where Hippolyte Baraduc claimed that photography could capture the luminous vibrations of the soul. Photography actually enlarged the domain of the visible, showing distant planets, minute things and even the inside of the human body, for W.C. Röntgen developed 'radiography' in the 1890s.

The study of electricity also seemed to deconstruct the opposition between antithetical terms like natural and supernatural or matter and spirit, as is shown by Poe's works. Suffice it to think of the philosophical essay *Eureka* (1848), where Poe wrote:

> To electricity – so, for the present, continuing to call it – we *may* not be wrong in referring the various physical appearances of light, heat and magnetism; but far less shall we be liable to err in attributing to this strictly spiritual principle the more important phenomena of vitality, consciousness and *Thought*.[7]

A few decades later, the mysterious powers of electricity were fictionalised by the French writer Villiers de l'Isle Adam in *L'Ève future*

(*Tomorrow's Eve*, 1886), whose main character is a delicate creature, half android and half spirit. The 'Frankenstein' who brings Hadaly to life is no less than a historical figure, the scientist Edison. Thanks to electricity, this modern wizard has fashioned an underground fairy kingdom whose beauty rivals oriental fantasies: ' "The *Arabian Nights* pale beside your kind of positivism!" exclaimed Lord Ewald. "But indeed, what Scheherazade is electricity!" answered Edison.'[8] Poe himself had already written 'The Thousand-and-Second Tale of Scheherazade' (1845), where he jokingly presented the achievements of science as so many prodigies of magic. Science became a source of wonder and opened up new vistas to the imagination, creating a pattern of expectation.

Satirists, however, were ready to stigmatise any excess. Ambrose Bierce, for instance, ironically defined electricity as 'The power that causes all natural phenomena not known to be caused by something else.'[9] Bierce repeatedly ridiculed pseudo-science in his writings, and in *The Parenticide Club* (1911) he told the grotesque story of a hypnotist whose criminal career starts as a child, when he deprives a schoolmate of her lunch, and reaches its climax when he has his parents kill one another.

Mesmerism, murder and mystery

As we can see, sharing the public interest in the connections between traditional beliefs and the recent advances in science, writers eagerly embraced the fictional opportunities this intellectual climate offered. As Max Nordau – the arch-critic of nineteenth-century culture – claimed in *Entartung* (*Degeneration*, 1892), 'Ghost-stories are very popular, but they must come on in scientific disguise, as hypnotism, telepathy, somnambulism.'[10] This sensational literary field, however, was not universally regarded as acceptable, as is proved by the fact that George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* – a gruesome tale combining detection, pseudo-science and the supernatural – was published anonymously in *Blackwood's* in July 1859 so as not to impinge on the reputation of the author.[11]

Drawing on the lure of phrenology, mesmerism and clairvoyance, Eliot created a character who is endowed with a preternatural faculty that enables him both to read the soul of his fellow human beings and to foresee his own future. These premises set the ground for a lurid story of crime and detection, since the hero falls in love with the only girl whose heart escapes his scrutiny (or perhaps his vision is hindered by his passion…). As time passes and love fades, the protagonist acquires the power to see into his wife's heart, only to discover that she finds him hateful and repugnant, until at a later stage he is completely freed from

the poisonous gift of insight. Events are precipitated when his wife's maid dies and a family friend, a famous physician, manages to revive her, albeit for a short time. As a result, the maid reveals that her mistress intends to kill her husband: ' "You mean to poison your husband … the poison is in the black cabinet … I got it for you…" '[12] Since we are led to believe that the lady herself had poisoned her maid to seal her lips, this posthumous revelation can be regarded as a pseudo-scientific variation on the theme of the return of the victim as ghost.

A synergy between the supernatural, mesmerism and detection also marks a ghost story by Charles Dickens – 'The Trial for Murder' (1865) – describing the trial in which the narrator has been called to take part as a juror. Although paranormal phenomena play a major role in this plot, I will focus my attention on a single episode. The narrator is in his bedroom with his valet when a man enters through a door that was nailed up years before, beckons to him and then withdraws. The valet has no inkling of what has happened because he has been standing with his back to the wall, but when the narrator touches him a contact is established and he shares his vision:

> Conscious that my servant stood amazed, I turned round to him, and said, 'Derrick, could you believe that in my cool senses I fancied I saw a…'
>
> As I there laid my hand upon his breast, with a sudden start he trembled violently, and said, 'Oh, Lord, yes, sir! A dead man beckoning!'[13]

Within the context of Dickens's interest in mesmerism, this scene implies the passage of an invisible fluid. Thanks to the techniques Dickens had learnt from John Elliotson – who used mesmerism to treat patients with nervous diseases and on account of this had been forced to resign from the University College Hospital in 1838 – Dickens himself treated a woman who was troubled by spectral illusions. It is in a letter to this woman that Dickens described mesmerism as 'a philosophical explanation of many Ghost Stories. Though it is hardly less chilling than a ghost story itself.'[14] Like other Victorians, Dickens regarded mesmerism as a means to incorporate the supernatural into the natural, thus distinguishing it from superstition.

Unsurprisingly, William Wilkie Collins shared his friend's interest in pseudo-science and combined it with detection in a classic of sensation, *The Moonstone* (1868). The story pivots on the theft of a diamond, but the criminal act has been committed by a person who at the time was not in full possession of his mental faculties, as he was in a state of trance

induced by opium. Due to the 'irrational' character of the mystery to be solved, the police enquiries of Superintendent Seegrave and Sergeant Cuff result in a partial failure, but the case is eventually solved by Ezra Jennings, a physician who has studied the brain and who is able to penetrate those regions of the psyche which are not controlled by 'reason' – what we would now term as the unconscious.

In order to make Jennings's investigation more credible, Collins has him quote as scientific referees two physiologists, the above-mentioned Carpenter and Elliotson, who were both actively interested in phrenology, mesmerism and spiritualism. In *The Moonstone* Collins also exploited the exotic aura that mesmerism/hypnotism had acquired thanks to works such as James Esdaile's *Mesmerism in India* (1866), relating criminal cases connected to an unlawful use of mental suggestion.[15] At the beginning of Collins's novel, three Indian jugglers and an English child are seen in the vicinity of Lady Verinder's country house. Their presence is immediately perceived as dangerous because of the strange ritual they perform:

> Upon that, the Indian took a bottle from his bosom, and poured out of it some black stuff, like ink, into the palm of the boy's hand. The Indian – first touching the boy's head, and making signs over it in the air – then said, 'Look.' The boy became quite stiff, and stood like a statue, looking into the ink in the hollow of his hand.[16]

The Indians ask the boy various questions about the man who is bringing the diamond to Lady Verinder's house and in a trance he answers like a clairvoyant. The Moonstone is subsequently stolen from Rachel Verinder's boudoir, and the theft triggers a complex investigation.

Although at first the Brahmins are depicted as a possible threat, it is Britons – rather than colonials – who are guilty of crime in this novel. As the Prologue makes clear, the gem is in Britain because Colonel John Hearncastle stole it during the storming of Seringapatam, after killing three Indians, whose last words were: ' "The Moonstone will have its vengeance yet on you and yours!" '[17] The Moonstone, however, had been repeatedly stolen before and readers are taken back through the centuries to the time of its primal theft from the Indian temple where it was worshipped as a sacred stone. Since that time, a group of three Brahmins has always followed the diamond, waiting for the right moment to restore it to their god. Legend has it that Vishnu appeared to the first three Brahmins in a dream, ordering them to devote their lives to a mission that involves investigation, even murder if necessary, to recover the gem, and eventually self-sacrifice.

At the end of *The Moonstone*, the Brahmins kill the man who has the diamond, thus ensuring the triumph of divine (and poetical) justice. By accomplishing their mission, however, they have 'forfeited their caste in the service of the god'[18] and are condemned to part, spending the rest of their lives on a penitential pilgrimage – an epilogue which might be read as an exotic variation on the tragic theme of the revenger. In the eyes of a contemporary reviewer, it was precisely this pathetic ending that redeemed 'the somewhat sordid detective element'[19] of the novel!

In this text, then, Collins clearly refused to attribute an absolute value to rational detection, whose agents are policemen and detectives, and he devised two alternative forms of enquiry. Jennings's investigation, on the one hand, is based on disciplines whose scientific status is ambiguous, while on the other, 'divine detection' resurfaces within the context of an extra-European society, where religious beliefs still prevail over scientific modes of knowledge.

Yet another variation on the theme of supernatural detection is provided by Collins's short novel *The Haunted Hotel* (1879), where the final mystery revolves around a case of identity. Indeed, what makes the heroine doubt the revelations she has received by means of a night vision is not their surprising character, but the fact that she had apparently been unacquainted with the victim:

> I can understand the apparition making itself visible to *me*, to claim the mercy of Christian burial, and the vengeance due to a crime. I can even perceive some faint possibility of truth in the explanation which you described as the mesmeric theory … But what I do *not* understand is, that I should have passed through that dreadful ordeal; having no knowledge of the murdered man in his lifetime…[20]

Needless to say, what further enquiries prove is that a connection between victim and 'witness' actually existed, thus validating the supernatural explanation.

Mesmeric villains

Far from being conceived simply as an instrument at the service of detection and justice, mesmerism was also regarded as a dark power, as is seen in Charles Felix's *The Notting Hill Mystery* (which was serialised in 1862–63), where the villain can poison a woman indirectly by giving antimony to her twin sister, thanks to the mesmeric connection between them. A homicidal technique such as this could only be accepted by the

public as long as mesmerism was the object of a collective suspension of disbelief, but as soon as their curiosity waned and incredulity prevailed, stories like *The Notting Hill Mystery* – or like Metta Fuller's *The Dead Letter* (1867), where the detective relies on clairvoyance to further his investigation – became unacceptable.

At the end of the century, however, writers still eagerly embraced the connections between pseudo-science and the occult, which enabled them to experiment with the paradigms of crime and detection along new lines. The best-known 'mesmeric villain' is Svengali, who haunts the pages of George Du Maurier's best-selling *Trilby* (1894). Du Maurier – who had already illustrated *The Notting Hill Mystery* – managed to exploit the sensational appeal of a theme that had enjoyed a certain popularity since the eighteenth century. The power of mesmerism, which promised the complete control of one mind over another, had in fact been repeatedly fictionalised all over Europe, giving writers the opportunity to explore the dreams and fears of sexual dominance it implied.

In his novel Du Maurier combined this sexual subtext with the aesthetic concerns with which he was familiar as an artist, and also with the anti-Semitic undercurrent that marks so much Victorian literature. Thus Du Maurier created Svengali, a Jew who is endowed with extraordinary musical talent and willpower. Thanks to his mesmeric influence, this malignant and repulsive character gains complete control of tone-deaf, simple-minded Trilby, turning her into La Svengali, an accomplished opera singer who enthrals the public of all Europe. Yet Svengali considers Trilby only as a musical instrument in his hands, precipitating her fate. As Daniel Pick claims, the heartless Svengali soon came to embody the prejudices that surrounded the Jews at the end of the century, when they 'were often depicted as contaminating the mind and body of gentiles, as well as controlling everything from the stock market to public taste in art'.[21]

The 1890s also witnessed the publication of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), yet another gothic fantasy where the superhuman willpower of an 'alien' threatens the stability of human society by attacking the heart of Western civilisation, London. The novel has been repeatedly read as an 'invasion story', but what is less often underlined is the nature of the forces brought to bear by the vampire masters – an array of weapons that reconcile arcane beliefs with modern pseudo-science, as is shown by this dialogue between Professor Van Helsing and Jonathan Harker:

> 'I suppose now you do not believe in corporeal transference. No? Nor in materialization. No? Nor in astral bodies. No? Nor in the reading of thought. No? Nor in hypnotism –'

> 'Yes,' I said. 'Charcot has proved that pretty well.' He smiled as he went on: …
>
> 'Then tell me – for I am a student of the brain – how you accept the hypnotism and reject the thought-reading. Let me tell you, my friend, that there are things done today in electrical science which would have been deemed unholy by the very men who discovered electricity – who would themselves not so long before have been burned as wizards.'[22]

Drawing on his contemporaries' faith in the power of science to explain what was once perceived as supernatural, Stoker presented Dracula as a freak of nature and as a criminal rather than as a devil to be 'exorcised'. Like Frankenstein, Dracula is potentially 'the father or furtherer of a new order of Beings', although in his case a reverse evolutionary process (that is, a degenerative path) 'must lead through Death, not Life'.[23]

Not only did Stoker choose to explain Dracula's 'superpowers' (corporeal transference, mind-reading, hypnotism) in pseudo-scientific terms, but he also grounded Van Helsing's process of detection in similar techniques, for it is by hypnotising Mina Harker that the professor manages to discover the whereabouts of Dracula while he is preparing his escape from London.[24] A 'philosopher and a metaphysician' as well as 'one of the most advanced scientists of his day',[25] Professor Van Helsing is an iron-willed and supple-minded detective of the occult who is able to match his opponent's superior strength, foiling his ascent to power in the course of a breathtaking duel.

The extraordinary success of Dracula was due to Stoker's ability to conflate icons of modernity, such as technology and science, with the gothic trappings of distant castles and sinister chapels. Stoker's characters use typewriters and keep their journals in shorthand, they record their thoughts on the phonograph, send telegrams and take trains, but they also have to deal with a danger surfacing from the abyss of time. Interestingly, far from simply belonging to a gothic tradition of vampire stories,[26] *Dracula* was strongly influenced by the sensation school. It is from Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) that Stoker apparently borrowed the technique of multiple narration he used in his novel,[27] as well as the sensational setting of the asylum. Even minor details seem to betray an influence, for Mina Harker shares the initials and the strong personality of Marian Halcombe, while Lucy Westenra reminds one of Laura Fairlie.

This brings us back to Collins's novel itself. In the course of his long and flamboyant confession, Count Fosco launches into a cynical apotheosis of the immense power of chemistry, which he presents as a tool capable of utterly subjugating his fellow human beings: 'Mind, they say,

rules the world. But what rules the mind? The body. The body (follow me closely here) lies at the mercy of the most omnipotent of all potentates – the Chemist.'[28] Chemistry, however, is not the only weapon on which Fosco relies in his quest for absolute power. Indeed, when Fosco is first presented in the novel through Marian's diary we are told that his peculiarity lies entirely 'in the extraordinary expression and extraordinary power of his eyes'.[29] A little later, Marian's first impression is confirmed when Fosco confronts a vicious dog, turning him into a meek puppy thanks to his mental strength, which he exerts through his eyes.[30] Although no direct reference to mesmerism is made, we can regard Fosco as an antecedent of those *fin-de-siècle* villains – from Svengali to Dracula – who use their superior faculties to further their criminal schemes.

The 'other' Doyle

Another story critics often mention as an antecedent of *Dracula* is Doyle's 'The Parasite' (1890). Rather than for its influence on Stoker, however, 'The Parasite' deserves a place in this chapter for the light it sheds on the author's own bewilderment and fascination in the face of the preternatural. Doyle's main character – whose autobiographical dimension is apparent – is Professor Gilroy, who teaches medicine at the university. As a physiologist, he is aware of operating within the safe boundaries of 'a recognized science',[31] 'something positive and objective',[32] but he is both intrigued and irritated by the indefatigable activity of a colleague named Wilson who has enthusiastically thrown himself into psychology. Although Gilroy regards this debatable discipline as unsafe ground, he labels it as 'a science of the future'.[33] Two modes of approach to reality are contrasted at the beginning of the story. Gilroy is a materialist who is interested only in facts and proofs, while Wilson is trying to draw him into a twilight-zone of knowledge where one can meet eerie creatures such as 'some new mesmerist or clairvoyant or medium or trickster'.[34] To make Gilroy's predicament more complex, he is aware of the fact that in spite of his positivist beliefs he is 'a highly psychic man', who in his youth was 'a dreamer, a somnambulist, full of impressions and intuitions'.[35]

It is Wilson who introduces Gilroy to the mysteries of mesmerism, which threaten to wreak havoc in his life. In spite of the 'exact knowledge'[36] Gilroy masters, his sensitive inner nature makes him vulnerable to the power of Miss Penclosa, a mesmerist who agrees to 'convert' the cynical doctor, practising hypnotic suggestion both on him and on his fiancée. Gilroy's devotion to science and his desire to analyse those unseen forces whose very existence he doubted as a physiologist expose him to

the influence of the redoubtable mesmerist, who is able to impose her will on him, entering his body like a parasite. When Gilroy discovers he has become dependent on the limping crone, who has fallen in love with him and is slowly teaching him to return her feelings, he gives vent to all his anger and repugnance, turning the woman's attachment into hatred and triggering her terrible revenge, which entails making a criminal of him.

Like much Victorian fiction, this text is far from innocent of racial implications. Not only does the evil Miss Penclosa come from Trinidad (like the wife of Wilson, who is therefore shown as 'tainted'), but the narrator's vulnerability to her pernicious influence is explained by referring to his Celtic origin, while people of 'Saxon temperament'[37] are less liable to be subjugated.

The story of Gilroy's divided self reflects Doyle's own contradictory attitude towards those beliefs that would later play such an important role in his life. While in the Holmes saga any supernatural frisson had simply been aimed at achieving a powerful hold over the readers, from his 'conversion' in 1916 to his death in 1930 Doyle was a fervent advocate of spiritualism, as is shown by *The Land of Mist* (1926), a propaganda text that exploited the appeal of Professor G.E. Challenger, the serial hero Doyle had created to probe into pseudo-scientific matters and whose adventures – such as those of *The Lost World* (1912) and 'The Poison Belt' (1913) – often border on science fiction.

Far from being restricted to 'supernatural' phenomena such as spiritualism and clairvoyance, Doyle's curiosity also embraced 'subhuman forms of life',[38] whose existence he averred in *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922). In 1917, two Yorkshire girls – Elsie Wright (who was 16 at the time) and Frances Griffiths (who was 10) – claimed to have photographed some fairies. Impressed by this evidence, Doyle first published an account of the matter in the 1920 Christmas number of the *Strand* and later collected various writings relating to the case in a volume. To Doyle the progress of technology offered new means to record and understand phenomena that were previously considered as supernatural. Photography, in particular, provided a way in which to catch frequencies of light that cannot be perceived by the naked eye:

> We see objects within the limits which make up our colour spectrum, with infinite vibrations, unused by us, on either side of them. If we could conceive a race of beings which were constructed in material which threw out shorter or longer vibrations, they would be invisible unless we could tune ourselves up or tone them down. It is exactly

> that power of tuning up and adapting itself to other vibrations which constitutes a clairvoyant and there is nothing scientifically impossible, so far as I can see, in some people seeing that which is invisible to others.[39]

Doyle even anticipated the invention of 'some sort of psychic spectacles',[40] enabling future generations to perceive those aspects of 'nature' that were still veiled in his time, since 'If high-tension electricity can be converted by a mechanical contrivance into a lower tension, keyed to other uses, then it is hard to see why something analogous might not occur with the vibrations of ether and the waves of light.'[41] As we can see, Doyle regarded clairvoyance and fairies as belonging to the same order of phenomena, considering energy – both in the form of light and electricity – as the principle that unites the solidity of matter to the ethereal quality of spirits:

> First, it must be clearly understood that all that can be photographed must of necessity be physical. Nothing of a subtler order could in the nature of things affect the sensitive plate. So-called spirit photographs, for instance, imply necessarily a certain degree of materialization before the 'form' could come within the range even of the most sensitive of films.[42]

What most commentators underline when they deal with this text is the gullibility of Doyle, a true gentleman whose ethics prevented him from believing that the whole affair might be a hoax, but the case of the Cottingley fairies also shows how strongly the development of science and technology helped foster the resurgence of popular beliefs. Discarded traditions were reassessed within a new system of knowledge that promised surprising revelations. Science would provide society with the means to confront what had previously been deemed as unattainable or doubtful. People felt they were at the dawn of a new era. Therefore it does not come as a surprise that crime, detection and the supernatural coalesced in the *fin-de-siècle* climate of syncretism to form a new variety of detective adventures.

Towards psychic detection

Le Fanu's *In a Glass Darkly* (1872) is a prototypical example of the late nineteenth-century tendency to conflate a mystery involving the occult with an investigating agent and the serial structure of the 'professional

case'. To connect the ghost stories he had previously published in magazines, Le Fanu utilised the figure of Dr Martin Hesselius as a framing device, presenting each narrative – by means of a prologue written by Hesselius's secretary – as a case he had collected in his files. As a medical man who is also endowed with metaphysical knowledge, Hesselius anticipated another detective of the occult, Bram Stoker's Van Helsing, and we should not forget that Le Fanu's *Carmilla* – featuring a redoubtable female vampire – was reprinted in this collection.

Yet no real detection occurs in these texts, whose pseudo-scientific pretences are usually restricted to the prologue, hinting at Dr Hesselius's learned essays on arcane subjects and the complex classification of his works ('This reference is to Vol. I. Section 317, Note Z[a]').[43] In his medical practice, Hesselius repeatedly deals with people who are haunted by unexplainable presences and these supernatural encounters are presented in a detached register and an analytical mode that mimic the discourse of science:

> In a rough way, we may reduce all similar cases to three distinct classes. They are founded on the primary distinction between the subjective and the objective. Of those whose senses are alleged to be subject to supernatural impressions – some are simply visionaries, and propagate the illusions of which they complain, from diseased brain or nerves. Others are, unquestionably, infested by, as we term them, spiritual agencies, exterior to themselves. Others, again, owe their sufferings to a mixed condition. The interior sense, it is true, is opened; but it has been and continues open by the action of disease.[44]

To understand this classification we must remember that Le Fanu's depiction of the world of spirits is closely linked to his interest in the doctrines of Swedenborg, who theorised not only a correspondence between the world of humans and that of spirits, but also the possibility of perceiving the latter dimension by means of a special faculty, the inner eye.

While in the well-known 'Green Tea' Reverend Jennings is haunted by a monkey that can be regarded as a metaphor for the man's repressed sexual desire, in other stories the apparitions deal explicitly with crime. In 'The Familiar' Captain Barton is haunted by the sight of a man he brought to death, while in 'Mr Justice Harbottle' a higher tribunal judges a corrupt representative of the law. These stories reassert the existence of a superior justice that works autonomously, without requiring any assistance from human agents.

At the end of the century, detection and the supernatural combined to form what Cox and Gilbert called 'the story of psychic detection', with atypical sleuths such as Flaxman Low, John Silence and Carnacki 'pitting their wits against a variety of supernatural opponents'.[45] Because of the mysteries they tackle, these three figures can be regarded as the heirs of Martin Hesselius, but other aspects of their personality point towards another predecessor, Sherlock Holmes. Indeed, not only do they show a dashing indifference to danger, and in some cases enjoy the help of an assistant, but many of their adventures also reveal an underlying imperialist subtext. Moreover, they all show a marked indifference to the paradigm of divine justice and seem to rely on the belief that every aspect of reality would soon be explained thanks to the development of science.

In this respect their closest antecedent is Edward Bulwer-Lytton's enthralling 'The Haunted and the Haunters' (1859), which deserves to be looked into, notably because its hero and narrator enunciates the theoretical premises of 'psychical detection': 'Now, my theory is that the Supernatural is the Impossible, and that what is called supernatural is only a something in the laws of nature of which we have been hitherto ignorant.' To prove his theory, Bulwer's character mentions a whole set of phenomena, including 'the tales of Spirit Manifestation in America'[46] and 'mesmerism or electro-biology'.[47] As a result of this pseudo-scientific creed, the protagonist decides to enquire into the mystery of a haunted house, with the help of his servant and a dog. The night the three spend in the house results in disaster, for the neck of the dog is broken by an obscure entity, and the terrified servant subsequently emigrates to Australia. But what becomes clear is that the supposed haunting is linked to a crime that took place in the building. However, the hero refuses to believe in 'the popular superstition that a person who had been either the perpetrator or the victim of dark crimes in life could revisit, as a restless spirit, the scene in which those crimes had been committed' and thinks instead that at the bottom of the mystery there must be 'a living human agency'.[48] By this, however, the hero does not intend to imply an imposture, but rather 'a power akin to mesmerism, and superior to it – the power that in the old days was called Magic'.[49]

We thus discover that the old house conceals two different layers of mystery – one concerns a murder that was committed about 35 years before, while the other involves magic and takes us back to the eighteenth century. An inquiry into the past enables the hero to understand the nature of the evil that lurks in the house, while the demolition of a room where a horrific event took place suffices to 'cut off the telegraph wires'[50] that link past and present. Although the fate of Bulwer's murderers – in

the criminal subplot of the story – still evokes the presence of divine justice, the final section of the tale rests on a different system of beliefs, involving arcane knowledge rather than science or religion. This esoteric plot is clearly linked to Bulwer's lifelong interest in Rosicrucianism and immortality. As Marie Roberts claims, 'Bulwer endorsed a synthetic approach to knowledge', rejecting 'a strict demarcation between magic and science'.[51] This may help us understand the ambivalent conceptual framework of the story, where the events which the hero confronts are the result neither of imposture nor of truly supernatural agencies, but rather of unknown human powers:

> 'These phenomena belong to neither class; my persuasion is, that they originate in some brain now far distant; that that brain had no distinct volition in anything that occurred; that what does occur reflects but its devious, motley, ever-shifting, half-formed thoughts; in short, that it has been but the dreams of such a brain put into action and invested with a semi-substance.'[52]

By extending the realm of the natural so as to include a whole range of phenomena whose causes were unknown and whose actual existence was disputed Bulwer provided a firm basis for the subsequent tales of 'psychic detection'.

Doyle himself responded to this intellectual climate with a number of creepy stories he first published in the *Strand* and then collected in two volumes – *Round the Red Lamp, Being Facts and Fancies of Medical Life* (1894) and *Round the Fire Stories* (1908). As Doyle explained in his preface to the 1894 collection, the red lamp was the sign of a general practitioner and these stories of medical life confront us with a variety of predicaments, mostly of a mundane character, although the subtitle of the book – mingling 'facts' with 'fancies' – should alert us to its hybrid nature. Thus in 'Lot No. 249' a natural and a supernatural interpretation of events coexist until the very end of the tale. Although the whole story rests on the account of a single witness and it is possible to believe that his intellect may have 'some strange flaw in its workings', an alternative view is offered:

> Yet when we think how narrow and how devious this path of Nature is, how dimly we can trace it, for all our lamps of science, and how from the darkness which girds it round great and terrible possibilities loom ever shadowly upwards, it is a bold and confident man who will put a limit to the strange by-paths into which the human spirit may wander.[53]

The three main characters, who study at Oxford and live in the same house, embody the racial and cultural prejudices of the time. The villainous Edward Bellingham is described as 'a man of wide reading, with catholic tastes',[54] while Monkhouse Lee, who seems to be under the influence of Bellingham, is 'olive-skinned and dark-eyed, of a Spanish rather than of an English type, with a Celtic intensity of manner'. These traits contrast with 'the Saxon phlegm'[55] of Abercrombie Smith, the man of action.

Bellingham – who is an expert in Eastern languages and arcane lore – has apparently managed to revive an ancient mummy and is willing to use it against whoever stands in his way. According to Smith, whose reliability is never seriously questioned, Bellingham 'was a murderer at heart, and ... he wielded a weapon such as no man had ever used in all the grim history of crime'.[56] Although Smith has uncovered 'a striking chain of events',[57] he is aware that a police magistrate would simply laugh in his face and decides to prevent further mischief by confronting Bellingham with a gun. While Lee and Smith correspond to the prescribed male identity, which was based on a healthy mixture of athleticism, rationality and Anglicanism, Bellingham has crossed the border between 'us and them' and is condemned to exile, since at the end of the story we are told that this modern enchanter 'was last heard of in the Soudan'.[58]

Although in 'Lot No. 249' the supernatural is associated with crime rather than detection, this text provides us with a useful paradigm through which to interpret the stories of 'psychic detection' that were written in the following years. Let us remember that the setting of Doyle's story is 'so famed a centre of learning and light as the University of Oxford',[59] while the evil forces that are lurking in the Oxford nights are linked to a distant past and distant places. As we know, after Jean-François Champollion had deciphered the hieroglyphs in 1822, Egypt played an increasingly central role in nineteenth-century culture, and even came to occupy the space that Greece had previously held in the collective imagination as the cradle of European civilisation. On the other hand, extra-European societies were regarded by many as a mirror of Europe in the early stages of its development. It is my contention that this story – where modernity fights 'uncanny' forces that it perceives as 'other' although they belong to its own past – exorcised the anxiety that had been engendered by the cultural encounters brought about by the imperial experience.

As we shall see, the interplay between British identity and others, as a result of what today we call 'globalisation', is a recurring subtext in stories of the occult. By specialising in supernatural mysteries, the detective – who

had already acquired the status of an 'epistemological superman' – came to grips with a different kind of menace, embodying the collective desire of control not only over crime and the urban space, but also over the exotic, the primitive and, ultimately, the unconscious.

Professionals of the occult

Flaxman Low is the hero of twelve stories that appeared in *Pearson's Monthly Magazine* between 1898 and 1899 and were published in book form later in 1899. The stories, published under the pen names of 'E. and H. Heron', were actually authored by Hesketh Prichard and his mother Katherine. In the first episode, Low is presented as an alias under which 'many are sure to recognise one of the leading scientists of the day, with whose works on Psychology and kindred subjects they are familiar'. He is described as the 'first' researcher who, breaking free from conventional methods, approached 'the elucidation of so-called supernatural problems on the lines of natural law'.[60] Low's adventures rest on the belief that the advancement of rational knowledge will dispel the supernatural aura of many events. To explain ghostly apparitions and related phenomena Low relies on 'psychology', which is defined as 'a lost science of the ancients'.[61] Having thus provided psychology with a suitable pedigree, the author introduces Low's first case as an abstract from a paper he gave at the Psychical Research Society as a contribution to the development of science in the exploration of the unknown.

Low's adventures are often concerned with murder. 'The Story of the Spaniards, Hammersmith', where the hero makes his appearance, pivots on a grotesque supernatural criminal – the ghost of a leper who was originally guilty of killing his own wife and who now haunts a certain room, ready to replicate his evil deed. The entities which Low confronts are usually associated with interiors, and their annihilation is often possible only at the expense of the mansion they haunt.

In a way all these stories capitalise on the latent anxiety that the imperial experience evoked in the Victorian public, on fears of the possible forms of contamination that accompanied the early stages of globalisation. Travelling and living in foreign lands, as well as importing goods or receiving people from non-European territories, were perceived as potentially dangerous. Victorians felt that the national identity of Britain was somehow endangered by the empire. In the 'Story of the Spaniards', the man who built the haunted house also owned sugar plantations in Trinidad. Travelling for leisure can likewise result in dangerous encounters, as in 'The Story of Baelbrow', where the proprietor of a Scottish mansion

brings home a bulky souvenir from Egypt for his private museum, precipitating the death of a maid and endangering his own son. Interestingly, however, in this story the nefariousness of an 'illegal immigrant' is the result of local agency, since the house stands 'on a barrow or burying place'.[62]

In 'The Story of Konnor Old House', Low is invited to investigate the mystery of another Scottish house whose last inhabitant – Sir James Mackian – 'had been a merchant of sorts in Sierra Leone'.[63] Was Sir James involved in the slave trade or in other shady business? No answer is provided in the text, but Sir James's daughter apparently killed herself by taking an overdose of sleeping draught, to escape from the persecution of Jake, the black servant Sir James brought with him to England, claiming that he had saved his life. In all these stories the evil that ripens on British soil is rooted in the uncanny practices, rituals or beliefs of faraway lands. Even in 'The Story of Yand Manor House', where no travelling is mentioned, other forms of cultural exchange contribute to the supernatural mystery, for in the past one of the owners of the house 'was deeply read in ancient necromancy, Eastern magic, mesmerism, and subjects of a kindred nature'.[64]

As in mainstream detective fiction, in these stories past events must be reconstructed in order to solve a present mystery, which can be either a murder or a minor disturbance. Unknown agencies are involved in these 'crimes' and the only way to penetrate their misdeeds is through an investigation into the past of the victim(s) and/or the place.

A similar pattern recurs in the collection of stories Algernon Blackwood published in 1908, *John Silence – Physician Extraordinary*.[65] Once again the structure of the professional case is combined with occult phenomena, and Silence, in his role as 'Psychic Doctor', tackles investigations that 'no ordinary professional could deal with'.[66] A Watson-like figure – Mr Hubbard – assists Silence in some of the stories and also narrates them. Thus, as in Holmes's stories, readers cannot enter the doctor's mind, which remains enveloped in a superior aura of mystery. Indeed, Silence is closer to Holmes than either Low or Carnacki, and Julia Briggs rightly claims that 'the shadow of Baker Street seems to fall heavily' over some of his stories.[67]

The mysteries that Silence investigates often concern an individual and a place that are haunted by evil entities. Danger usually resurfaces from the past, but it can also be associated with foreign lands, as in 'The Nemesis of Fire', where ancient Egypt is the source of the malediction that threatens to annihilate Colonel Wragge's manor house and family. Readers are told that the colonel's elder brother, who died mysteriously in the grounds of

the house twenty years before, 'was a great traveller, and filled the house with stuff he brought home from all over the world'.[68] Blackwood skilfully refrains from offering us any further explanation concerning the dead man's collections, but we are led to believe that danger may lurk in the house due to the cultural exchanges that travelling unwittingly triggered. The empire also plays an interesting role in this story, for the colonel served as a soldier in exotic lands and the unsystematic knowledge he acquired while he was in touch with 'other' cultures helps him bridge the gap between the rational and the irrational.[69]

Silence's stories often rely on the paradigm of supernatural invasion, which needs to be fought by using the right kind of weapons and knowledge. The colonel's house is described as being 'in a state of siege; as though a concealed enemy were encamped about us'.[70] Red herrings are used to mislead the readers: the little wood where strange events take place conceals 'a sort of mound where there is a circle of large boulders – old Druid stones',[71] but local magic here is not disruptive, while danger comes from abroad.

In 'A Psychical Invasion', on the other hand, the forces that haunt the house of Felix Pender have a more local origin. After taking stock of the powerful and dark entities that roam the place at night, Silence makes the following discovery:

> I have been able to check certain information obtained in the hypnotic trance by a 'sensitive' who helps me in such cases. The former occupant who haunted you appears to have been a woman of singularly atrocious life and character who finally suffered death by hanging, after a series of crimes that appalled the whole of England and only came to light by the merest chance. She came to her end in the year 1798.[72]

The ending of the story reveals its close ties to crime fiction. As if by 'magic', Silence is able to show Pender a pencil drawing of the female figure who haunted him, but there is nothing hocus-pocus about this revelation:

> Dr. Silence then produced from his pocket-book an old-fashioned woodcut of the same person which his secretary had unearthed from the records of the Newgate Calendar. The woodcut and the pencil drawing were two different aspects of the same dreadful visage.[73]

Other aspects of Silence's investigations link him to nineteenth-century detectives. Like Holmes, Silence occasionally alludes to previous cases[74]

and also indulges in spectacular demonstrations of mind-reading, although his technique differs from those of his predecessors, ' "It's only that you are thinking very vividly," the doctor said quietly, "and your thoughts form pictures in my mind before you utter them. It's merely a little elementary thought-reading." '[75] Clues are often discussed and the element of adventure is also strong, for Silence is often involved in risky operations whose aim is firstly to reconnoitre the ground and then to face the usually invisible enemies that are preying on their victims. Last but not least, like his two *confrères*, Silence is not moved by money, but by the desire to help people in distress and by his erudite curiosity concerning weird phenomena. In this respect, Silence mirrors Blackwood's genuine interest in the occult, which led him not only to take part in séances and to study Oriental religions, but also to join the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1900.

Carnacki's six adventures were originally published by W.H. Hodgson in *The Idler* and *The New Magazine* between 1910 and 1912, and were collected in *Carnacki: the Ghost Finder* in 1913. Unlike the two previous 'psychic detectives' Carnacki does not emphasise the dangers of foreign travel and the imperial adventure. Most of the stories are set in peripheral areas of the British Isles, such as Ireland, where old superstitions are evoked and occasionally a touch of local colour is added, thanks to the language of certain characters.

These formulaic stories are presented within a framing narrative: a group of friends assemble for dinner at Carnacki's and after a good meal he recounts his latest adventure. Most of the mysteries that this 'psychic detective' tackles prove not to be genuinely supernatural, but curiously those cases where a 'ghost play'[76] is staged by human agents – or where natural and supernatural plots intertwine – are the least convincing. Hodgson spends too much energy on evoking an uncanny atmosphere of terror simply to dissipate his spell by referring to a few mechanical tricks or by declaring that certain occurrences remain shrouded in mystery. After grotesque masques of evil have been staged against the sinister backdrop of remote manor houses and castles – or even of ordinary terraced houses – a series of contrived and totally unconvincing rational explanations tend to result in a disappointing anticlimax.

As regards Carnacki's strategies of detection, sources of esoteric knowledge – such as the Sigsand MS. and the Saamaaa Ritual – are often mentioned or employed. Moreover, to ward off evil entities, Carnacki repeatedly draws chalk circles, spreads or wears garlic, or makes use of lighted candles and human hair. Modern technology also plays a major role in his investigations as he avails himself of an 'Electric Pentacle' as a ' "Defence"

against certain manifestations'.[77] The neon light of the pentacle feebly illuminates with a blue glare the scene of many a frightful apparition. A camera and a flashlight also prove helpful in detecting a supernatural presence, since 'Sometimes the camera sees things that would seem very strange to normal human eyesight.'[78] In 'The Whistling Room' Carnacki even tries 'to get a phonographic record' of the mysterious whistling that haunts Iastrae Castle, 'but it simply produced no impression on the wax at all'.[79] Magnifying glasses and other instruments are used by Carnacki to inspect the scene of a crime in order to detect any possible clues pointing to a natural or supernatural explanation of the events. Moreover, like John Silence – whose 'A Psychical Invasion' is a masterpiece in this respect – Carnacki occasionally avails himself of animals to detect supernatural agencies, for their sensitivity to these entities far exceeds that of humans. Finally, he is sometimes assisted in his investigation by bewildered representatives of the local police, who act as a foil to the superior knowledge of the 'psychic detective'.

Other stories of supernatural detection were published in the following years, such as those written by Sax Rohmer (the pseudonym of A.H.S. Ward) for *The New Magazine* in 1913–14 and collected in *The Dream-Detective* in 1920. The protagonist of this saga is Moris Klaw, who is assisted by a Watson figure – Mr Searles – and also boasts a beautiful daughter, Isis. Although most of the mysteries Klaw investigates actually reveal a human agent, Klaw's techniques of investigation include uncanny tools, such as an 'odically sterilised'[80] cushion that enables him to intercept the thoughts of criminals or to picture the scene of a crime in the form of dreams.

To understand this prodigy of pseudo-science one should remember that the German chemist Karl Ludwig von Reichenbach (1788–1869), who discovered paraffin and phenol, also developed an interest in 'sensitives' and sleepwalkers. Drawing on (pseudo)-scientific discoveries in the fields of magnetism and electricity, von Reichenbach tried to explain these phenomena in physical terms and claimed to have identified an energy he called 'od' (from the Northern god Odin), which acted as an irritant on particularly sensitive people. Von Reichenbach believed that the 'odic' force could be absorbed by metals and that it could enable certain individuals to perceive other people's thoughts. The scientist created special darkrooms which enabled him to experiment with 'sensitives', who were asked to describe the luminous quality of objects and people, that is, their aura. This luminosity could even be photographed and the resulting image was called an 'odograph'.[81]

These pseudo-scientific theories underlie Rohmer's eccentric stories. In Klaw's first adventure – 'The Case of the Tragedies in the Greek

Room' – the dream-detective asks to be allowed to sleep at the scene of a murder, in order to be permeated by the odic force of the place, so as to imprint it on his mind. Klaw's ultimate objective is that of reproducing a 'psychic photograph'[82] of the criminal, who is – characteristically – a somnambulist. Time after time, Klaw's pseudo-scientific investigations reveal the human agency behind incomprehensible crimes, often pivoting on Egyptian and Indian artefacts, while the last episode of the series – 'The Case of the Veil of Isis' – confronts us with genuinely supernatural events.

These borderline texts, which combine detection with pseudo-science and the occult agencies which are typical of weird tales, defied classification either under the label of gothic or of detective fiction. H.P. Lovecraft included both Carnacki and Silence in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), but he regarded their adventures as 'marred by traces of the popular and conventional detective-story atmosphere…'[83] On the other hand, the uncomfortable proximity between these stories of 'impossible crime'[84] and mainstream stories of detection was perceived as a danger by those practitioners and critics of detective fiction who placed increasing emphasis on the strictly rational basis of this genre so as to 'detach' it from the neighbouring forms of sensation fiction and the ghost story. At the end of the 1920s theoreticians of detective fiction such as S.S. Van Dine and Ronald Knox made great efforts to define the conventions of the genre, and Knox's 'Detective Story Decalogue' (1929) includes this literary precept: 'All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.'[85] The 'golden age' of detective fiction saw the triumph of fair play, where readers should be able to solve the crime themselves, thanks to the clues they have been offered by the text.

Fabricated apparitions

As we have seen, the 'psychic detectives' dealt not only with authentic ghosts, but also with fake ones. We should remember that false apparitions 'legitimately' played a large role in sensation and detective fiction, representing attempts at concealing crime by clothing it with ghostly attributes. Thus even the most rational nineteenth-century detectives – Holmes comes to mind – repeatedly face mysteries of purportedly supernatural import. The extent to which Doyle relied on irrational ingredients to concoct his narrative recipes is demonstrated by *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), where the tension between natural and supernatural is exploited in order to enmesh the readers in mystery, rousing their emotions and setting the ground for a final explanation. In this novel

the criminal acts like a sinister conjuror, performing deadly tricks that satisfy the public's aesthetics of evil.

Interestingly, in late nineteenth-century stories fake apparitions are often presented as the result of extreme ingenuity and the deviant use of technology. A case in point is a story from the popular series by L.T. Meade and Clifford Halifax published in the *Strand* – 'Stories from the Diary of a Doctor'. In 'The Horror of Studley Grange' (1894) Lady Studley implores the doctor to pay a visit to the country house where she lives with her husband in order to enquire into the causes of his shattered nerves, but when the physician is introduced to Sir Henry he realises that the man is in turn worried about the health of his wife, who is consumptive. Sir Henry is also troubled by the nightly appearance of a ghost in the bedroom where he sleeps alone, due to his wife's condition:

> In a certain spot of the room, always in the same spot, a bright light suddenly flashes; out of its midst there gleams a preternaturally large eye, which looks fixedly at me with a diabolical expression. As time goes, it does not remain long; but as agony counts, it seems to take years of my life away with it.[86]

Without telling the other inmates of the house, the doctor takes the place of Sir Henry and has the opportunity to witness the apparition, which occurs just in front of the blue glass doors of a large wardrobe. The next day, the doctor takes a closer look at the quaint piece of furniture – which is inset in a mullion – and realises that it harbours a secret passage, leading to Lady Studley's adjoining room. Setting a trap, the doctor is able to frame the culprit, the dying Lady Studley, whose motive is jealousy. Fearing that her husband might remarry after her death, she has tried to disrupt his health in the hope that he may follow or even anticipate her destiny. The technological innovation on which this plan is based is explained as follows:

> I attached the mirror of a laryngoscope to my forehead in such a manner as to enable it to throw a strong reflection into one of my eyes. In the centre of the bright side of the laryngoscope a small electric lamp was fitted. This was connected with a battery which I carried in my hand. The battery was similar to those used by the ballet girls in Drury Lane Theatre, and could be brought into force by a touch and extinguished by the removal of the pressure. The eye which was then brilliantly illumined looked through a lens of some power. All the rest of the face and figure was completely covered by the black cloak.

> Thus the brightest possible light was thrown on the magnified eye, while there was corresponding increased gloom around.[87]

It is technology – coupled with ingenuity – that makes it possible to stage this sinister show, which also relies on the symbolic power the eye of God has within Western culture, as discussed in the previous chapters. Moreover, in spite of the rational framework of the story and the presence of a medical man as the torch-bearer of science, the events retain their preternatural aura in the eyes of Sir Henry, for the compassionate doctor fulfils the Lady's dying wish that her husband might not know of her design. Thus after his wife's death Sir Henry still believes that the apparition was a message sent from heaven to announce his imminent bereavement.

To conclude, in the Victorian period religion lost part of its power to shape collective expectations concerning justice and the afterlife. This ideological gap was replaced not only by a positivist approach that denied the supernatural in favour of a materialistic view of the world, but also by pseudo-scientific paradigms that combined with past beliefs. Nineteenth-century literature mirrors this complex cultural phase, revealing a wide spectrum of interactions between crime, detection and the supernatural. While in Dickens's 'The Trial for Murder' and in Collins's 'The Haunted Hotel' mesmerism is still functional to a providential narrative, in most of the cases that Low, Silence and Carnacki investigate both the mystery and the inquiry rest on pseudo-scientific and/or esoteric conceptual frameworks.

I regard it as no coincidence that at the turn of the century the outdated belief in dreams as supernatural messages was supplanted by two diverging paradigms. On the one hand, in 1900 Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* related dreams to the waking life of the subject, describing them as wish-fulfilment mechanisms. On the other, writers revived pseudo-scientific theories of dreams, as is shown both by Rohmer's 'dream detective' and by 'The Leather Funnel' (*Round the Fire Stories*, 1908), a sensational story where Doyle capitalised on the idea that sleep may be influenced by the proximity of objects that are charged with particular energies, taking us back to the seventeenth-century trial of a notorious poisoner, the Marquise de Brinvilliers.

Finally, we should not underestimate the role of the imperial adventure in this significant change; as U.P. Mukherjee reminds us, the discourses of crime and those of the empire often intertwined in Victorian fiction.[88] This is shown not only by *The Moonstone*, where the supernatural is associated with a basically open attitude towards 'other' cultures and identities,

but also by Doyle's minor works and by the above-mentioned stories of 'psychic detection', which often became the vehicle of racial fears and prejudices. As Steven Connor claims, 'the Other Worlds of Victorian speculation were no mere fantasy retreats',[89] but they reflect the tensions and aspirations of their time and therefore offer a privileged viewpoint from which to study the Victorian age itself.