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The Hidden Spiritualist of 221B Baker Street

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Sherlock Holmes and *Vijnana Vedanta*: The Hidden Spiritualist of 221B Baker Street

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Abstract: Critics of Victorian detective fiction have hinted at alternate careers for Sherlock Holmes—that is, scientist and lawyer—almost entirely overlooking the spiritual side to the detective. Working within the hermeneutics of nondual Vedanta and the Indian monk Sri Ramakrishna’s philosophy, this article reexamines Holmes as a calm and unfettered yogi who descends from the roof of the Pondicherry Lodge to solve the case of the Great Agra Treasure and is later resurrected from his supposed death at Reichenbach Falls to become the Man on the Tor, overlooking the ancient mysteries of Dartmoor. The Holmesian world is scattered with disguised Vedantic variables. Drawing a scope of compatibility between Holmes (and the science of deduction) and Sri Ramakrishna (and Vijnana Vedanta), this article argues that Holmesian methods reflect yogic strategies that make his science amenable to a spiritual hermeneutics without religion.

Keywords: Vijnana Vedanta, Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes, Ramakrishna, Sankaracharya

Introduction

In Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), the otherworldly beast haunting the “paralyzed” mind is not a diabolical agent but “the delirious dream of a disordered brain” (Doyle 1996, 540). Besides being a foursquare mystery set in Dartmoor, the novel is an allegory of imperial anxieties and fragmented empires of the Victorian mind, which Sherlock Holmes is supposedly out to save. The archetypal imperial subjects—Doctor Mortimer, Sir Charles, Henry Baskerville, and Doctor Watson—are infinitely capable of creating bestialized forms of their own anxieties and fears. Taking the make-believe hound, “that ever mortal eye has rested upon” (1996, 173), as a literal devil, one forgets that its hellish arrival in the foggy moorland, was already encountered in Doyle’s previous novel, *The Sign of the Four* (1890), where Tonga, the Andamanese, is projected as “that little hell-hound” (1890, 100). On myriad occasions, the word “hound” is used to describe Sherlock Holmes himself. Holmes reminds Watson “of a pure-blooded well-trained foxhound as ... it comes across the lost scent” (22). Holmes remarks, “I am one of the hounds and not the wolf” (25). Taking the cue, Watson calls Holmes an “amateur bloodhound” (26). Jefferson Hope, the criminal, is also called “a human bloodhound” (55). If there is any doubt about the drift of these correlations, Watson clears it in *The Sign of the Four*. Watching Holmes’s “swift, silent, and furtive” sleuthing movements at the Pondicherry Lodge, Watson compares him to “a trained bloodhound picking out a scent.” Watson recognizes what he always knew: “[W]hat a terrible criminal he would have made had he turned his energy and sagacity against the law, instead of exerting them in its defense” (80). These associations in the canon—of the criminal as the Holmesian shadow, and Holmes as the hound—lead us to our first premise, the Vedantic keystone “*tat tvam asi*” (that thou art).

Scholarship in Victorian detective fiction has hinted at alternate careers for Sherlock Holmes—that is, forensic scientist (O’Brien 2013) and lawyer (Blaustein 1948)—almost entirely overlooking the spiritual side to the detective. While the leap from the secular science of deduction to a spiritual paradigm may be jarring, the leap from Victorian England to colonial India is not. Victorian detective fiction exposed Victorian anxieties over socioeconomic transformations that imperialism brought on its erstwhile pastoralism and aristocracy, along with the anxiety of having

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to patrol the empire for threats from immigrants and visitors of foreign ethnicities (Siddiqi 2008; Kestner 2000; Chatterjee 2021). The Orient lurks in the margins of the canon. Besides Watson's battle-wound from Afghanistan, the Great Rebellion of 1857, and the Agra Treasure, the Holmesian world appears to represent India in terms of Oriental congeries and stereotypes (Thompson 1993). Postcolonial thought, in general, has exposed Orientalism as schizoid conceptions of the East—contradictory and repressed desires luxuriating with exotic commodities, furnishings, purloined artifacts, chinaware, jewelry, and collectively fantasized archetypes of a mysterious, eccentric, and inscrutable landscape that belonged more in a disoriented empire of the Victorian mind (Kiernan 1969; Said 1979; Nandy 1983; McClintock 1995; Arnold 2011; Thomas 1990). This article argues that Sherlock Holmes stories are designed with hermeneutical clues that make them compatible with the values of nondual (*Advaita*) Vedantic wisdom and *Vijnana Vedanta* (a new paradigm of Sri Ramakrishna's approach). The absence of a geographical or material India in Holmes's life cannot be taken as an absence of Vedantic values—values that constituted and complete India. In Holmes's own cautionary note, "You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear" (Doyle 1996, 118).

Victorian detective fiction, pioneered by Wilkie Collins in *The Moonstone* (1868), encoded hidden Vedantic variables in terms of correlations between Victorian notions of dreaming and those propounded by the eighth-century Indian philosopher Adi Sankaracharya in the *Mandukya Karika* (Chatterjee 2020). Arthur Conan Doyle's Holmesian canon—with its innate meditative strategies of overcoming imperial traumas, camouflaged as sleuthing work—marks a critical threshold in the spiritual decolonization of the Victorian mind. Holmes's work is as much about apprehending criminals as sensitizing readers to the natural laws of harmony, primacy of supreme consciousness (*Turiya* or *Brahman*), and nonsectarian attitudes toward other races. Seen from the hermeneutics of nondual Vedanta, Holmes appears as a *shritapragna* (calm and unfettered yogi); his methods reflect yogic strategies that make his science amenable to a spiritual hermeneutics without religion. His nondualist, intuitive approach to detection, where intellectual (cognitive) truths work in tandem with experiential (felt) truths, is implicitly encrypted with the mantra *tat tvam asi* and the promise of salvation for the Victorian psyche besieged by the *chittavrittis* (traumas) of imperialism.

What Is *Vijnana Vedanta*?

Ramakrishna's key distinction between *jnana* (spiritual knowledge) and *vijnana* (spiritual phenomenology) comes into play in Ayon Maharaj's concept of *Vijnana Vedanta* (Maharaj 2018). *Vijnana Vedanta* differs from the classical *Advaita Vedanta* spearheaded by Sankaracharya. The latter considers the phenomenal world to be *leela* (mortal play) and *Brahman*, or supreme consciousness, alone to be *nitya* (permanent). Ramakrishna saw the *jnani* as someone experienced in spiritual wisdom, but without the flexibility to enjoy and experience spiritual realities in the phenomenal world, or the this-worldly existence, classically relegated as *leela* or *maya*. The *vijnani*, on the other hand, as perceived by Ramakrishna, acquires spiritual profundity only to return to the phenomenal domain to enjoy a this-worldly existential spirituality, in addition to spiritual transcendence. Thus, the *vijnani* stays in a threshold between immanence and transcendence. *Advaita Vedanta* claims that *Brahman* alone is real; the world is *maya*. *Vijnana Vedanta* (the nomenclature that Maharaj gives to Ramakrishna's philosophy), on the other hand, celebrates the bliss of teleporting between various planes of consciousness without a hierarchy between the transcendental and phenomenal realms. For Ramakrishna, all levels of reality—dreaming, waking, sleeping, and *Turiya*—are potentially windows to spiritual bliss for the *vijnani*. In Ramakrishna's words:

The *jnani* gives up his identification with worldly things, discriminating, "Not this, not this" [*neti neti*]. Only then can he realize *Brahman*. It is like reaching the roof of

a house by leaving the steps behind, one by one. But the *vijnani*, who is more intimately acquainted with Brahman, realizes something more. He realizes that the steps are made of the same materials as the roof: bricks, lime, and brick-dust. That which is realized intuitively as *Brahman*, through the eliminating process of “Not this, not this,” is then found to have become the universe and all its living beings. The *vijnani* sees that the Reality which is *nirguna*, without attributes, is also *saguna*, with attributes. (Gupta 1942, 103)

The words “*jnana*” and “*vijnana*” translate, in ordinary Hindi parlance, as “knowledge” and “science.” In the latter sense, *Vijnana Vedanta* shares semantic resonance with the science of deduction. Even in the spiritual sense that Ramakrishna (and Ayon Maharaj) deploys *vijnana*, it represents unique logical and phenomenological facilities that spiritual giants like Swami Vivekananda and intellectual doyens like Holmes share while oscillating between the hierarchies of psychological realities and powerful insights into the human psyche. Although the sleuth in Holmes may seem emotionless, he is deeply engaged with the motions of the phenomenal world. Like Ramakrishna, he has access to supra-sensual truths and experiences—naked aspects of reality detached from the embellishments of theorists and reporters, as Holmes would say—that are recognized by transcending arbitrary binaries between logic and phenomenology. Many critics will be astonished at any correlation between Holmes and the supra-rational. In Holmes’s own admission, “If the art of the detective began and ended in reasoning from an armchair, my brother would be the greatest criminal agent that ever lived” (Doyle 1996, 399). Since Mycroft Holmes is *not* the greatest detective, evidently the ultimate art of detection transcends pure reason. Seen through the lens of *Vijnana Vedanta*, Holmes’s science of deduction becomes a spiritual process, while spirituality itself appears as a scientific journey into the psyche of the phenomenal world.

As we proceed into the canon, Watson’s phrases “art of detection” and “art for art’s sake” begin synonymizing the “science of deduction” (Doyle 1996, 373, 631, 713, 804, 1096). This testifies against calling the Holmesian method purely laboratory science. For Holmes, criminological manifestations were dramatic extensions of an infinite self—the unconscious empire of the Victorian mind—which had to be experienced in an unmediated way, without flashy adjectives, meddling theories, intellectual digressions, false scents, and arbitrary suspicions. In the Vedantic paradigm, Sankaracharya called this kind of experience “*aparokshanubhuti*” (unmediated experience). Sankaracharya’s commentaries on the *Upanishads* were known in post-Enlightenment Europe; eighteenth-century German philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer were amenable to Upanishadic thought. The Kantian notion of “*noumena*” (existence independent of human senses) comes exceedingly close to that of *Brahman*. Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea* (1883) critiques the Enlightenment’s emphasis on “*principium individuationis*” (the origin of the individualistic and egotistical conceptions of the phenomenal world) as follows:

He sees the ills and he sees the wickedness in the world, but far from knowing that both these are but different sides of the manifestation of the one will to live, he regards them as very different, and indeed quite opposed, and often seeks to escape by wickedness, *i.e.*, by causing the suffering of another, from ills, from the suffering of his own individuality, for he is involved in the *principium individuationis*, deluded by the veil of Maya. (Schopenhauer 1883, 455)

Schopenhauer advocated for empathetic reflection on the infinitude of creation and its impressions on human consciousness—for an infinite reality principle that was antithetical to *principium individuationis*. The infinite reality principle accords pure acceptance and greatness to the autonomous and incorporeal self, notwithstanding its infinitesimal material presence before

nature's sublimity—snowy mountain peaks sublimating as mist—or the mind's recesses shrouded by dreams and nightmares. The infinite reality principle, therefore, is a relentless pursuit of nondual intellectual (cognitive) and experiential (affective) truths. This was expressed by Schopenhauer in his reference to the *mahavakya* (great aphorism) from *Chandogya Upanishad*, “*tat tvam asi*.” It means that the seat of the human ego is made of the very elements that constitute the agents of *samsara* (suffering) and *moksha* (salvation). More generally, this elementary Vedantic consciousness in European philosophy meant experiencing the immanence of perceived alien energies as equally legitimate manifestations of the will to live as the wonders of *maya* reflected in human consciousness. Translated roughly as “divine play,” “undecidable,” “illusory,” “phenomenal,” or the “incarcerating force,” *maya* manifests its designs in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* and *The Sign of the Four* by injecting *samsara* into the polite walks of English society. It exposes Victorian England as one of the most unenlightened spaces. *Samsara*, or the duality perceived between the colonized subject (racial other) and the colonizing self (falsely perceived as racially superior), creates an arbitrary hierarchical binary in the imperial psyche: the *maya* of the superiority of Western intellect over the seemingly uncivilized Oriental mind. Restoring Victorian England's moral agency is a precursor to restoring the sanity of the empire of the Victorian mind. The figure of the sleuth is conjured by way of that restoration.

Holmes is a nonmoralist. He does not hold a grudge against his adversaries—some of the biggest criminal minds in Europe—including Professor Moriarty, whom he describes using words such as “genius,” “wonder,” “perva[sive],” and “extraordinary”; he even mythicizes his adversaries' criminality as talents (Doyle 1996, 436). To Holmes, criminalities rival artworks, if only less powerfully than his science of deduction. To understand the Holmesian mind better, we need to take stock of some key fundamental differences between Western theology and Vedantic philosophy. Abrahamic traditions deploy moralist categories such as conscience and jurisprudential binaries such as moral/immoral or good/evil; *Advaita Vedanta* is founded on the experiential category of consciousness and phenomenological binaries like real/ unreal or permanent/illusory. “Morality is an expression of what is already intrinsic to the one reality within us,” writes Swami Sarvapriyananda; “immorality is caused by ignorance of our own true nature. Ethics are, thus, grounded in the ontology of the self” (Sarvapriyananda 2014, 210). While Western theology and jurisprudence deem individuals/acts to be (im)moral, Vedanta sees (im)moralities as expressions of the will to live. While Western theology may consider an act to be good, Vedanta may still hold it as illusory; what may be a sin in Abrahamic jurisprudence may, in Vedantic wisdom, be considered as a sign of the human consciousness reflecting the infinite reality principle. An illustration of the infinite reality principle comes in Ramakrishna's parable of the chameleon. While classical *Advaita Vedanta* considers “God” to be only without forms (formless, impersonal, *nirguna Brahman*), Ramakrishna often conflated the formless with earthly forms (formal, personal, *saguna Brahman*), as an aspect of godly play. A chameleon's changing colors lead various observers (*jnanis*) to think that it is red or green or blue or gray, at different times. It is only the *vijnani*, living in close confines with the chameleon, who knows that all colors are formal (*saguna*) manifestations of a formless (*nirguna*) entity; both the formal and the formless are godly manifestations.

Like the chameleon which appears in various colours and sometimes has no colour at all, God assumes various forms for different types of spiritual aspirants. While most people make the mistake of thinking that the chameleon only has the colour which they see it as having, the man always sitting under the tree sees that the chameleon has various colours and, hence, that everyone is partially correct. The colourless chameleon corresponds to *nirguna Brahman*, while the chameleon with various colours corresponds to *saguna Sakti* [formal power or potential], and it is clear that Sri Ramakrishna does not privilege *nirguna Brahman* in any way. (Maharaj 2018, 91)

Like the chameleon in Ramakrishna's parable, Holmes has multiple facets. Take a scene at the Pondicherry Lodge in *The Sign of the Four*, for instance. Just after Watson describes him as a "hound," he has this to say of the detective: "Sherlock Holmes was on the roof, and I could see him like an enormous glow-worm crawling very slowly along the ridge" (Doyle 1996, 85). The description reflects Watson's vision of mankind's evolutionary stages in Holmes's intellectual and physical movements. Parallel to Ramakrishna's harmonization of *saguna* and *nirguna*, the Holmesian *Brahman* manifests in the detective's penchant for observing microscopic "trifles." They are his most revealing sources of deduction, as opposed to the macroscopic evidence that Scotland Yard officials obsess on. The Holmesian method is emphatically "founded upon the observance of trifles" (Doyle 1996, 171). As the detective tells the doctor: "[T]here is nothing so important as trifles" (Doyle 1996, 195). Elsewhere, he adds, "[I]t is frequently in its least important and lowliest manifestations that the keenest pleasure is to be derived" (Doyle 1996, 272). Holmes calls himself "an omnivorous reader with a strangely retentive memory for trifles" (Doyle 1996, 1095), which heightens his powers of observation and the relentless carpentry in the attic of his mind. Observing trifles is no less important than a mystic's chant, a lifelong meditation upon *Brahman*, in its *saguna* or *nirguna* aspects. In Western sensibility, Holmes is seen not necessarily as an anti-religionist but as a liberal deist (Pearson 1976). The skeptical G. K. Chesterton believed that Holmes saw only material or external aspects of reality (Isley, Jr. 1993). To counter Chesterton, "the miraculous findings of deductive reasoning seem sometimes the work of ratiocination blur[red] with mysticism; Holmes may be a genius, but he also has a divinatory gift." His dreamy-eyed "mystical states of mind enhance empirical observation and rational deduction" (Neill 2009, 612–13). In line with this, quite a few parallels exist between the Holmesian science of deduction and Ramakrishna's *Vijnana Vedanta*, demonstrating how the detective's methods come close to Eastern nondualism and can, therefore, operate as spiritual paths without organized religion.

The Man on the Tor as *Shhitaprajna*

En passant, Holmes has been compared to Shiva from the Hindu trinity, who is believed to live in the Himalayas (Bailey 2019). Holmes's relentless composure in the face of London's criminal outbursts makes such interpretations rooted in textual evidence. A lot that constitutes evidence of Holmes's spiritual compass appears quickly, even deliberately, overshadowed by fast-paced plotlines and our secular bias, especially when faced with chains of deductive reasoning. Chesterton, who spotted that bias, remarked that it was an error to think that "philosophy and poetry would not be good for a detective" (Chesterton 1953, 172). It would be a similar error to dismiss out of hand the spiritual possibilities in Holmes' nature. Some evidence of this appears in Holmes's own cryptic statement on religion, in *The Naval Treaty*.

"There is nothing in which deduction is so necessary as in religion," said he, leaning with his back against the shutters. "It can be built up as an exact science by the reasoner. Our highest assurance of the goodness of Providence seems to me to rest in the flowers. All other things, our powers our desires, our food, are all really necessary for our existence in the first instance. But this rose is an extra. Its smell and its colour are an embellishment of life, not a condition of it. It is only goodness which gives extras, and so I say again that we have much to hope from the flowers." (Doyle 1996, 419)

Compare this with Holmes's self-assessment: "I am a brain, Watson. The rest of me is a mere appendix" (Doyle 1996, 970). What binds "Providence," "flowers," "goodness," and "extras" to the Holmesian intellect is, seemingly, an inverse relationship. The rose is not dispensable—unlike Watson's florid prose that Holmes ridicules—but an unconditional embellishment. Holmes's brainwork, on the other hand, is the supreme evidence of his existence—in which

bodily needs are dispensable. Holmes does not operate in a simplistic Cartesian mind/body duality; he is a sensualist: “I have a trade of my own ... a kind of intuition,” he reminds (Doyle 1996, 17). Even without leaving 221B Baker Street, he unravels knots “which other men can make nothing of, although they have seen every detail for themselves” (1996, 970). His “train of thoughts” is so swift that he draws precise conclusions “without being conscious of intermediate steps” (Doyle 1996, 17). While most critics would read *The Hound of the Baskervilles* as Holmes’s vociferous rejection of the supernatural, it is, rather, a reaffirmation of the spiritual world within the collective unconscious of Victorian materialism. The symbolic significance of the moor is lost on us without the Holmesian aphorism from *A Study in Scarlet*: “There are vague memories in our souls of those misty centuries when the world was in its childhood...One’s ideas must be as broad as Nature if they are to interpret Nature” (Doyle 1996, 27). The Holmesian spiritual compass indeed defies institutionalized religiosity, but not animism and panpsychism.

Devonshire’s moorlands represent an unconscious retributive principle. The hound is an inflated figment of the paralyzed Victorian mind; however, the moor and its effects are very real. Why else would Holmes—who attributes Sir Charles’s death to *no* supernatural agency—warn Sir Henry at the Charing Cross station to “avoid the moor in those hours of darkness when the powers of evil are exalted” (Doyle 1996, 470)? Considering the omnipresence of Victorian Orientalist fantasies, “moor” has polyphonic possibilities that include a barren, gloomy Dartmoor; the idiomatic heart of darkness; an anchorage for seaborne vessels; and Moor for Moroccan! All these semantic associations of “moor” were bound to haunt the Victorian mind with Europe’s bloody imperial history of Oriental plunder, in its every invocation. As if to anticipate the question of why even Holmes was wary of stepping into the moorland in the dark, he says in *A Study in Scarlet*, “[W]here there is no imagination there is no horror” (Doyle 1996, 27); thus, the guilty Victorian imagination horrifies itself with fears of retribution. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, in the reincarnation of the “Man on the Tor,” Holmes revisits the map of mankind’s evolution, scrutinizing the atlas of the anxious empire of the Victorian mind from his hilltop vantage. His science does not descend into sectarian scientism—racial, materialistic, or anti-spiritual—but reaffirms the possibility of the human mind as the source of its own traumas and recoveries. He affirms the prehistory and the continuity of the human soul and memories, taking imagination as a precursor to horror. Sir Henry, the heir of a Victorian estate maintained on assets drawn from the Commonwealth, shares with his generation the collective unconscious that contains memories of the screams and traumas from a bloody century between the Battle of Plassey and the Great Rebellion of 1857 that marked Britain’s expansion in four continents. The unconscious is, therefore, capable of imagining the worst excesses of retribution, with all attendant horrors.

Holmes consciously harnesses the powers of that unconscious, making it act in his favor. His first visit to Dartmoor is not in person, but in spirit: “I have been to Devonshire,” he tells Watson. “*In spirit?*” asks the latter. “Exactly,” returns Holmes. His “body” stays in the armchair, consuming “two large pots of coffee and an incredible amount of tobacco,” while he orders Stamford’s store for Dartmoor’s Ordnance map. “My *spirit* has hovered over it all day” (Doyle 1996, 464). 221B Baker Street becomes mystically entangled with the moorland, through “the noxious environment created by Holmes’s tobacco smoke in his rooms and the gloomy fog and cloud cover of the moor” (Scarborough 2013, 53). It underscores the dialectic between Holmesian mystique and Devonshire’s superstitions; the detective rejects the latter, but not the former by any means. A large-scale map of Devonshire shows him the Victorian mind’s fear of hellhounds. The fear is infinitely more real, more material, more the locus of his investigations than the hound itself. The Holmesian prognosis is simple. If the hound leaves material traces, then, whether or not a diabolical force is at hand, it manifests through material agents. For it to have sprung from beyond nature, or beyond human nature, would require supernatural observers to study its effects (Blanchette 2012); however, if the footprints can be

traced back to the inscrutable moor of the human mind—of the Baskervilles or Stapleton—Holmes can offer a less metaphysical explanation. Holmes does not reject the phantom; he only refocuses attention on the processes that constitute it. Cannot a hound invoke a lethal fear that seems to break barriers between real and unreal? Why are the footprints, uncannily, that of a “gigantic hound”? And, why does “gigantic” make only one appearance in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, despite having so much bearing on the mystery and its solution? One answer clears all doubt in Holmes’s mind. He asks Mortimer if the creature whose footprints the latter had seen near the moor-gate, by Sir Charles Baskerville’s corpse, had approached the body. “No,” says the doctor (Doyle 1996, 459–60). Holmes abandons the adjective “gigantic” following that conversation because he is able to visualize the past, present, and future of the scene without the service of the word. The footprints are *not* gigantic. They are infinite—infinitely real, although emanating from what is, almost, a phantom hound, a hound that does not work diabolically, but feeds off the spiritual malaise of the Victorian mind.

Holmes’s astonishing emergence in Dartmoor may appear as Doyle’s trick to establish the detective’s omnipresence. It is, however, the omniscience of Holmes’s intellect, which is only localized as the Man on the Tor who Watson witnesses and writes about to Holmes, himself, who in turn hovers like a Gothic specter overlooking a spectral landscape, like the very “spirit” of the moor.

The moon was low upon the right, and the jagged pinnacle of a granite tor stood up against the lower curve of its silver disc. There, outlined as black as an ebony statue on that shining back-ground, I saw the figure of a man upon the tor. Do not think that it was a delusion, Holmes. I assure you that I have never in my life seen anything more clearly. As far as I could judge, the figure was that of a tall, thin man. He stood with his legs a little separated, his arms folded, his head bowed, as if he were brooding over that enormous wilderness of peat and granite which lay before him. He might have been the very spirit of that terrible place. (Doyle 1996, 506)

The Man on the Tor is a fleeting glimpse into an archeological excavation of the mind that the devilish landscape of Dartmoor—the Great Grimpen Mire and the craggy summits—imposes on human consciousness. Dressed as the moorland spirit, Holmes observes mortals like Franklin, Stapleton, and Selden; prehistoric cottages; and the ephemeral turrets of Baskerville Hall while brooding over the past, present, and future of the evolution of the “inscrutable” landscape, as if reconjuring the vast expanses of the human mind that he had laid out on his knees in the large-scale map of Devon, back at 221B Baker Street. If the hound personifies the *pravrittis* (anxieties) of the Victorian mind, the Man on the Tor is *Brahman* personified. As London gazes on Britain’s Easterly and Westerly imports—as in the Colonial and Indian Exhibition of 1886—Holmes broods upon the legend of the spectral hound, as well as the evolution and extinction of the human race upon the moor. Seen psychoanalytically, the melancholy moaning, which locals report as the voice of the hound, camouflages the echoes of the screams from the “Mutiny” that so haunted the Victorians. Holmes, who is the only one not haunted by the hound, has turned himself into a *sthitaprajna*. The concept of the *sthitaprajna* is defined in the *Bhagwad Gita*, and is used to describe Ramakrishna and his disciples, including Swami Saradananda, as “a disinterested witness of the entire scene, like a true *Sthitaprajna*, one whose consciousness is anchored in the higher Self” (Saradananda 1963, 1041). Without rejecting or believing the legend of the Baskervilles, Holmes restores the nontheistic mysteries of the moor that pure biological evolutionary determinism would have otherwise denounced (Frank 1999). The *sthitaprajna* nature of Holmes also manifests in his supraconscious dreamy states, which find mention throughout the canon. While to most readers “Holmes represents the supreme rationalist, his appearance suggests that of the medium, clairvoyant, or mystic” (Jones 1989, 66). Ramakrishna often told his disciples to meditate in solitude. “Seclusion and solitude,” says

Watson, “were very necessary for my friend in those hours of intense mental concentration during which he weighed every particle of evidence, constructed alternative theories, balanced one against the other, and made up his mind as to which points were essential and which immaterial” (Doyle 1996, 463). Watson, the confidante to the yogic detective, is a belated witness to Holmes’s demystification of the material manifestations of the infinite reality, which we later encounter as the hound in the haunted moorland.

Seeing the Man on the Tor along the lines of *Vijnana Vedanta* reveals Vedantic compatibility with a Darwinist nontheistic universe (Darwin 1874). Thomas Henry Huxley, Charles Darwin’s contemporary, wrote in *Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature* (1863), that the spirit of man was a transfiguration of his lowlier nature that, at the dawn of evolutionary culmination, perches on a mountain peak, “reflecting, here and there, a ray from the infinite source of truth” (Huxley 1863, 132). Huxley’s vision of mankind’s organic summits offers a prototype of the scene that Watson sees across the russet-faced “melancholy downs” of the moor (Doyle 1996, 511). The scene also inadvertently recalls passages from Kant’s *The Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant was captivated by “the holy awe which seizes the observer at the sight of mountain peaks rearing themselves to heaven, deep chasms and streams ranging therein, deep-shadowed solitudes that dispose one to melancholy meditations.” He believed that only in such sublimity do we realize that we are circled by “not actual fear, but only an attempt to feel fear by the aid of the Imagination” (Kant 1914, 132). Schopenhauer, one of Germany’s leading philosophers after Kant, saw imagination and fear as linguistic appendages, whose absence gave the wilderness—whether “in water, in marshes, on mountain, or on moorland”—its innate glory and unutterable innocence (Schopenhauer 1883, 204). Like Kant, Schopenhauer, too, was influenced by mountains and Eastern wisdom. For him, history was to mankind as mountain peaks were to man’s insights into nature: “We see much at a time, wide stretches, great masses, but nothing is distinct nor recognizable in all the details of its own peculiar nature” (Schopenhauer 1883, 320).

Mountain imagery abounds in Vedanta, as well. Sankaracharya’s commentary on the *Mandukya Upanishads* sees mountains as perceived objects that seem to enter the human nervous system and brain, to be cognized within our tiny existence. The *Aitareya Aranyaka Upanishad* calls water the source of all existence, and mountains, the sources of water; in that cosmic scheme, human senses are “mountains” of supreme consciousness—*Brahman*. The *Chandogya Upanishad* reaffirms the infinite reality of mountain waters, asking us to meditate on aqueous forms, as if recalling Friedrich’s wanderer gazing upon the sea of fog. Sea and fog are manifestations of a cosmic force commanding our empathy for the mountains and the man standing before them. In Vedantic imagination, mountains are sources of metacognition and divination. Shiva’s abode is believed to be Kailasa in the Himalayas, where he meditates with a snake coiled around his neck, against the snowy backdrop, while. Sankara is said to have acquired enlightenment at the Kudajadri mountain, where a temple in his name stands today. Indian wisdom traditions were inspired by Himalayan grandeur. Fragments of these traditions traveled to Europe through Kant, Schopenhauer, Friedrich, Huxley, and others. That is how the Man on the Tor is atavistically linked to the *sthitaprajna*—the calm, unfettered yogic consciousness. Holmes knows it intuitively, as much as he knows that the hound is not an alien threat but very much a nondual constituent of Victorian *samsara*—a morphed representation of imperial traumas caused by colonial conflicts. Resurrected from his supposed death at the Reichenbach Falls in *The Final Problem*, Holmes leads a reconnaissance into Stapleton’s past and the past life of the moor. “A study of family portraits is enough to convert a man to the doctrine of reincarnation,” he mutters, after uncovering Stapleton’s ancestral link to the Baskerville family (Doyle 1996, 533). The moorland supplies the missing links of Hugo Baskerville, who started the legend of the hound and to whom Stapleton’s atavism dates back: “[P]rim, hard, and stern, with a firm-set, thin-lipped mouth, and a coldly intolerant eye” (Doyle 1996, 532). With the wisdom Holmes gathers from the primitive huts on the moor, he is able to

comprehend the illegible language of the place; to us, his consciousness appears as the “tranquil, breathless, bodiless, endless, imperishable...independent one...in his own greatness,” like a yogi from the *Maitrayana-Brahmana Upanishad* (Muller 1884, 291).

Brahman as Architectural Metaphor

The Holmesian world of chiaroscuro, interplays between light and shadows, is inevitably a world of hidden spiritual visions. Sri Ramakrishna is generally described as *anantabhavamay* (man of infinite moods); Holmes is not too far from this. Intermittently, we catch glimpses of Holmes’s manifold moods: the lazy smoker, devourer of periodicals and encyclopedias, lover of cryptograms, the violinist, and so on. His multifaceted moods and famous disguises echo the musical waves emanating from his instrument.

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, 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. (Doyle 1996, 141)

Doyle, a well-known spiritualist in later life, gave Holmes an Easterly itinerary in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (1905), where the sleuth provides the sequence of events after his presumed death at Reichenbach Falls: “I travelled for two years in Tibet and amused myself by visiting Lhasa, spending some days with the head Llama” (Doyle 1996, 559). Holmes’s Buddhist detour subtly reinforces the Vedantic discourse. In the tenets of Tibetan (Mahayana) Buddhism, the self is a *bodhisattva*, a vehicle of Buddha’s grace to sentient creatures. Its morality is not subservient to theological or jurisprudential judgment but manifests as pure consciousness. The *bodhisattva* is accompanied and matured by “afflictions” in the same way that urban “filth” manures sugarcane fields, according to Mahayana Buddhism (Duckworth 2018, 279). The Dalai Lama says that enemies, without physical limbs, “reside in our minds and afflict us from within” (Dalai Lama 1995, 67). Perceiving ourselves as bodies, and not emergent locales of wisdom, we are trapped in material *samsara*, which we mistake as more real than our own existence. Importantly, the original texts of Tibetan Buddhism (works of the philosopher Nagarjuna) and those of *Advaita Vedanta* (spearheaded by Gaudapacharya, Sankaracharya’s predecessor) share definitional principles of *Brahman*. Given the “dynamic interplay” of interrelated faiths in the Indian subcontinent, Gaudapadacharya is seen as a “proto-Buddhist and a philosopher quite clearly steeped in Mahayana arguments” (King 1995, 2, 89). Holmes’s *vijnani* spirit (whether seen as Vedantic or Buddhist) revolves around his absent bodily ego. Being little more than a “brain,” he accords almost no value to his bodily or egotistical form. What is mistaken by Watson as his “egotism” is his single-minded pursuit of the truth, without hankering for rewards, except “the intellectual joy of the problem” (Doyle 1996, 848). Holmes’s brainwork is a vehicular task, an art for art’s sake, if also for the redemption of the Victorian mind. As such a vehicle, Holmesian values come practically very close to Vivekananda, who was, in fact, in London in 1894, during Holmes’s missing years. Vivekananda loved paraphrasing from the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*: “[V]edahametam purusham mahantam, aditya varanam tamasah parastat” (qtd. in Majumdar 1963, 296) (I have seen the great soul that transcends ignorance and dazzles like the sun, knowing which one surpasses death, translation mine). To Vivekananda, nothing was permanent except existence—

consciousness-bliss itself. He had warned, “England will be conquered in her turn. Today she has the sword, but it is worse than useless in the world of ideas” (Vivekananda 1963, 190). Adapting William Wordsworth’s *Ode on Immortality*, Vivekananda metaphorically prophesied the arrival of the *hound*: “Not all of us come as trailing clouds of glory. Some of us come as trailing black fogs” (Wordsworth 1884, 24; Vivekananda 1963a, 118). Vivekananda taught Londoners to see cycles of arrivals and departures like ripples in the gigantic pool of *Brahman*. A cycle of light and shadows also overhangs Baskerville Hall, as expressed in Watson’s description of the morning the day after his arrival.

The fresh beauty of the following morning did something to efface from our minds the grim and gray impression which had been left upon both of us by our first experience of Baskerville Hall. As Sir Henry and I sat at breakfast the sunlight flooded in through the high mullioned windows, throwing watery patches of colour from the coats of arms which covered them. The dark panelling glowed like bronze in the golden rays, and it was hard to realize that this was indeed the chamber which had struck such a gloom into our souls upon the evening before. (Doyle 1996, 484)

The alternating sunlight and deathly fogs are manifestations of mental proclivities—the mind chooses to report on the basis of unconscious memories of previous experiences. If it were a Vedantic parable, the *saguna* hound (a symbol of *Sakti*) and the *nirguna* sunshine (a metaphor for *Brahman*) would both be godly manifestations. In *Vijnana Vedanta*, “everything is possible for God” (Gupta 1942, 920). This is paralleled in Stapleton’s remark to Watson, upon hearing the booming of extinct bitterns, “[A]ll things are possible upon the moor” (Doyle 1996, 210). “Brahman alone is real and this world of names and forms illusory,” was Ramakrishna’s mantra (Gupta 1942, 149–50). For Holmes, when all that is impossible is eliminated, “whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth” (Doyle 1996, 80). This unchanging truth for truth’s sake—a deification of truth—binds Ramakrishna and Homes. For both, truth is a surgical instrument to demystify the mysteries of the mind. In *The Sign of the Four*, truth about Tonga is not found in the histories of Hindostan, family legends of the Sholtos, or in the *Imperial Gazetteer*; it is born of dialectical exchanges between these and Tonga’s tiny footmarks that Holmes traces. English xenophobia of the racial other—Tonga, the Andamanese, and Jonathan Small, a disfigured Englishman—stems from the repression of imperial sins in Victorian memory. It makes of London’s suburbs a “semi-detached empire” (Kuchta 2010, 14–15). Holmes’s keen knowledge of London’s geography allegorizes his knowledge of the human mind. Penetrating Greater London and Pondicherry Lodge, he exposes the *pravrittis* (anxieties) of the Victorian mind and the *nivrittis* (implosions) of imperialism’s smuggled artifacts, symbolized as the Great Agra Treasure. Pondicherry Lodge is psychogeographically detached from the British Isles, albeit geographically inside it, where the Anglo-Indian retiree is constantly haunted by the *chittavrittis* of imperial sins.

While confessing to his sons about the share of the Agra Treasure that he had denied the deceased Captain Morstan, Major Sholto witnesses a ghastly visage at the window, and consequently, succumbs to a heart attack similar to the one Sir Charles suffers in the Yew Alley. The face Major Sholto sees is that of Jonathan Small, one of the collaborators in the treasure loot at Agra. Small was a reluctant thief, who unlike the major stays true to the signed part of the four collaborators. Whether on account of imperial anxiety or heredity, the major’s son Thaddeus Sholto contracts a weakness of nerves. The invocation of “Pondicherry” exacerbates his “anxiety at being besieged by dangerous forces” (Kuchta 2010, 72). Given to the *chittavrittis* that ailed his father, Thaddeus Sholto has taken to smoking an Oriental hookah to sedate his nerves. “Seen against the backdrop of the fictional Great Agra Treasure and a colonial mystery unfolding in the aftermath of the historic ‘Mutiny,’ the tranquilizing hookah represses imperial fantasies of Eastern innocence” (Chatterjee 2022, 311–312). Shot by Tonga,

the thorn that kills Thaddeus Sholto's brother, Bartholomew Sholto, is as metaphorical as real: an Oriental thorn in the English flesh, taken proverbially in the biblical sense,² that has continued to trouble London's sanity with Eastern poisons. As a poison, an Indian trace laces the thorn that kills Bartholomew. Elsewhere, the trace gets morphed as the opium in Thaddeus Sholto's hookah. The same narcotics, whose cultivation intensified poverty in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, would be used therapeutically for cough remedies, bronchial cure, insomnia, or analgesia in Western medicine. This adds a whole new dimension of *tat tvam asi*, or the infinite reality principle: Imperial poisons were ever at risk of being used to plot counter-invasions of the empire of the Victorian mind, if not the empire itself.

Holmes's *sthithaprajna* avatar consumes such a poison in the 7 percent cocaine solution that he injects from a syringe, tucked away in his Morocco case, to psychically enter criminal psychology. Here, Holmes's hypodermic needle symbolically recalls Shiva's serpent. After the mystery of the Agra Treasure is solved, Watson gets a wife in Miss Morstan, Athelney Jones of Scotland Yard gets the official credit, and Sholto, his sanity. Watson asks Holmes what he has to gain from it. " 'For me,' said Sherlock Holmes, 'there still remains the cocaine-bottle.' And he stretched his long white hand up for it" (Doyle 1996, 113). The whiteness of Holmes's hand is a reverse transferred epithet for the darkness of the life he leads in order to enlighten English milieus. While investigating the case of *The Speckled Band*, involving Doctor Grimesby Roylott, the Calcutta doctor retired to Stoke Moran, Holmes exclaims, "Ah, me! It's a wicked world, and when a clever man turns his brains to crime it is the worst of all" (Doyle 1996, 224). This too revolves around poison: a deadly swamp adder that the doctor brings from India, as a residue of his imperial stint. He puts it to use to kill his foster daughters, owing to his growing insecurity over the share of the estate entrusted to his care by his late wife. The Holmesian architectural metaphor "[A] man's brain originally is like a little empty attic" (Doyle 1996, 15) is indispensable here. The haunted or criminally tinted estates in the canon metaphorize the Victorian mind, which is struggling to reconcile the contrary impulses and neuroses brought about by imperialism: the kind of panic issuing typically from the division of property and wealth or stolen treasures with explicit or implicit links to imperial trade and traffic. The science of deduction and *Vijnana Vedanta* seek to enlighten those darkened crannies of the mind. As Holmes's investigation at the Pondicherry Lodge takes him to the roof of the house, where the treasure is hidden, he comes exceedingly close to Ramakrishna's architectural metaphor of *Brahman* in the life of a *vijnani*: "One attains the Absolute by the method of "*neti, neti*," (not this, not this), denying the relative world, and then realizes that the Absolute and the relative manifestation are one and the same" (Sarvapriyananda 2014, 208). In Ramakrishna words, the metaphor clearly distinguishes between the *jnani* and *vijnani*.

A man cannot live on the roof a long time. He comes down again. Those who realize Brahman in *samadhi* come down also and find that it is Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings ... The man coming down from *samadhi* perceives that it is Brahman that has become the universe, and all its living beings. This is known as *vijnana*. (Gupta 1942, 103–104)

At the roof of Pondicherry Lodge, Holmes gains practically nothing but the exaltation of his unchanging consciousness, the everlasting *Brahman*. While Christian deities do not appear in the Holmesian world, criminology itself is deified. "Vedanta does not in reality denounce the world," as Vivekananda said. "The ideal of renunciation...really means deification of the

² In a sermon preached at the Trinity Church in Southport, in 1861, Rev. J. G. Darling, a rector from Suffolk, explained the apostle St. Paul's biblical thorn in the flesh as partial blindness. The idiom "thorn in the flesh" here comes from the *Second Epistle to the Corinthians* in the *New Testament*, where the apostle prays to the Lord "thrice, it might depart from me." In his reading of the epistle, Darling offers a new hermeneutic to the biblical metaphor of the "thorn" (3–10). This Victorian interpretation leads to a reading of the thorn in Bartholomew Sholto's flesh as the moral myopia or partial blindness of Major Sholto and his son, or that of Britain's own imperial project.

world—giving up the world as we think of it, as we know it, as it appears to us—and to know what it really is. Deify it” (Vivekananda 1902, 144). Holmes does precisely so, not with Vedantic theory but practical Vedantic wisdom, or *vijnana*. His subliminal intuition is a precursor to his more perceptible rationality. This reflects in his remark on Tonga: “The chief proof of man’s real greatness lies in his perception of his own smallness. It argues, you see, a power of comparison and of appreciation which is in itself a proof of nobility” (Doyle 1996, 87). Holmes acknowledges the infinite potential in his small existence, in acknowledging Tonga’s greatness. The accumulation of evolutionary human girth, spoils of siege, enviable intellects, is in the end nothing but a source of experience reflected in the consciousness. It is not Sholto (the possessor of the Great Agra Treasure), but Tonga (who steals it from Pondicherry Lodge), whom Holmes deems noble. The Baker Street Irregulars, comprising Holmes’s force of beggars and urchins, and the mongrel Toby, hot on the scent of criminals, echo Vedantic values from the *Maitrayana-Brahmana Upanishad*: “[O]ne who is worthy of heaven lives with those who are not [deemed] worthy of heaven”; also, from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, which makes no distinction between good and evil—*devas* and *asuras*—for he who has transcended these moral and material distinctions is not touched by the “fetters of the fruits of good and evil” but by tranquility (Muller 1884, 299, 341). The same Vedantic notion operates in the late-Victorian New Thinker, William Walker Atkinson’s gleanings from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*:

The knower knows this very truth. Knowing this, he is not affected by any *Karma* whatever, all being as sin to him...All kind of latent attachment leaves him; No conditions disturb him; Ecstasy environs him—who knowing thus sees Self in Self, sees the All as Self. No good or evil touches him; he transcends all good and evil...He is beyond all form; beyond all desire; beyond all doubt. This is the real Spiritual Consciousness, this is the real condition of Spirit. (Atkinson and Ramacharaka 2007, 31)

Brahman as Architectural Metaphor

This article has attempted to delineate some striking parallels and correlations between Ramakrishna’s *Vijnana Vedanta* and what Watson witnessed as the Holmesian science of deduction. Passing parallels between Holmes and Upanishadic thought, in general, strengthen the aforementioned correlations. This counterintuitive reading of the Holmesian canon for Vedantic clues does not, in any way, make Holmes himself a Vedantin or give him a sectarian spiritual identity; however, it emphasizes the lacunae that purely secularist and materialist readings of his cases and adventures have left behind—that of the spiritual and mystical areas of Holmes’s persona.

Jamyang Norbu’s novel *The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes* (1999) has paved the way for alternate spiritualist and mystical interpretations of Holmes, and his proximity to the East. *Vijnana Vedanta* is capable of breaking fresh ground in the canon, toward redefining how the science of deduction and art of detection really operate within the mind attic of the detective. The textual clues provided here are bolstered by the historical overlaps between the early career of Sherlock Holmes and the final years of Ramakrishna, who died in 1886. It was during Holmes’s time that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi would discover the theosophy of Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant, and also rediscover the *Bhagwad Gita*, in London, which for him was an alternate West of humanism (Visvanathan 1997). With or without the influx of Indian commodities and settlers, seeds of Vedantic consciousness had been sown in England by Brahma visitors like Raja Rammohun Roy, in the 1830s, and Keshub Chunder Sen, in the 1870s. These were early stages in the decolonization of India, yet a time when a spiritual decolonization began both in the colony and in London, if not also within the Holmesian canon. Covering a vast canvas between Small’s trail from the Andaman Islands to Pondicherry Lodge and the map of melancholy moorings from Baker Street to Dartmoor, the Victorian science of

deduction was a meditative strategy to rid imperial England of collective phantasmagorias emanating from its own memories of manifesting the hound within. It is hoped that, with this article, *Vijnana Vedanta* will be seen as having played a more prominent role in that decolonization, which is yet to be wholly actuated.

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