

Collaboration between “Memoirs” and “Adventures” in the Sherlock Holmes stories: Doyle’s oxymoronic literary agenda

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“Écrire n’a rien à voir avec raconter ses souvenirs, imposer une forme (d’expression) à une matière vécue. La littérature est toujours du côté de l’informe ou de l’inachèvement.”¹
(Gilles Deleuze)

Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, published between *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and *The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place* (1927), stage one of the most iconic and enduring literary duos: Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. Across four decades of struggles and strife, their partnership has come to embody a lasting myth of friendship and success. I would like to argue, however, that the legendary triumph of the happy couple relies on another pair, less immediately visible, perhaps, but equally instrumental to the success of the literary formula: memory and adventure.

The centrality of memory in the Sherlock Holmes canon is unmistakable. It underpins Holmes’s investigative method and success, structures Watson’s retrospective narratives, and fuels the reader’s addictive pleasure, by triggering anticipation and recognition—each new story actually functions like a madeleine and summons the entire Holmes fictional universe. This emphasis is inscribed in the titles of the collections themselves, which highlight the different regimes of memory that are at work in the texts. The second collection, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (1894), explicitly invokes remembrance while the penultimate one, *His Last Bow* (1917), carries with it a subtitle that renews and rephrases the debt to memory, *Some reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes*.

¹ “Writing has nothing to do with recounting one’s memories or imposing a form (of expression) on lived matter. Literature always lies on the side of formlessness and incompleteness.” (All translations, unless specified otherwise, are my own)

But it is interesting to notice that memory is consistently paired with another key concept: adventure. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892) precedes *The Memoirs* and Doyle's own autobiography, *Memories and Adventures* (1924) actually coordinates the two notions. It is my intention to show that Doyle deliberately pairs memory and adventure in order to generate a productive textual conflict. While memory promises unfailing and nearly automatic access to truth, closure and resolution, it is first destabilized by its declension, from "memory" to "memoirs" to "reminiscences", and second challenged by the disruptive force of adventure, which inverts the movement, opposes "advent" to retrospection, and introduces novelty, unpredictability and incident in the narrative form.

In the Sherlock stories, memory and adventure thus collaborate for Doyle to come up with a fundamentally ambivalent text, that both reassuringly satisfies the readers' desire for resolution, and generates its own contradiction by creating the possibility for chance and random incidents. A similar interplay can be observed in *Kidnapped* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson—who called Doyle his "frolic fellow spookist"¹ in the first letter he addressed to him in 1893. The subversive subtitle of *Kidnapped* indeed interlocks the same two concepts, "Memoirs of the Adventures".

Kidnapped: Being Memoirs of the Adventures of David Balfour in the Year 1751: How he was Kidnapped and Cast away; his Sufferings in a Desert Isle; His Journey in the Wild Highlands; his acquaintance with Alan Breck Stewart and other notorious Highland Jacobites; with all that he suffered at the hands of his Uncle, Ebenezer Balfour of Shaws, falsely so-called: Written by Himself and now set forth by Robert Louis Stevenson.

An opening spoiler, the subtitle kills suspense from the outset by rashly summarising the story in advance, and thus displaces the interest from the plot to the narration—and it does it through the oxymoronic dual patronage of memory and adventure.

The paper ultimately contends that, at the turn of the century and like some of his contemporaries, Doyle questions the omnipotence of memory he also celebrates, and gives it the differing jolt of adventure to produce a narrative form that is less secure and bolted than it initially appears.

¹ Letter to Conan Doyle, April 5th, 1893, in *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson*. Chapter XII: Life in Samoa, January 1893-December 1894.

Memory, memoirs and reminiscences: a ubiquitous polyptoton

Before it is complexified by “memoirs” and “reminiscences”, memory is treated as a very dependable and efficient tool by Sherlock Holmes: among the striking and most consistent textual data, is the conviction that his success depends entirely upon his memorizing reality. The task may seem inaccessible, but it is made possible by two elements. Firstly, Holmes is convinced that reality is bounded and consists in a limited set of types that one must train to memorize, so that apparently original events may easily be recognized as duplicates of previous remembered cases. Secondly, forgetting is instrumental to memory—one must select what is needed and deliberately forget useless material.

Holmes is thus convinced that reality is limited to a finite number of possibilities, and that things and events keep repeating themselves, as he establishes from the very first story, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887):

“It reminds me of the circumstances attendant on the death of Van Jansen, in Utrecht, in the year ‘34. Do you remember the case, Gregson?”

“No, sir.”

“Read it up—you really should. There is nothing new under the sun. It has all been done before.” (Study 29)

Holmes is thus persuaded that the memory he has of reality, if methodically practised, exceeds the apparent variety of reality itself, and thus that success in detection amounts to reality being “read up”, “indexed” and “studied” (*Hound* 761)—to facts being “remembered and docketed”:

“Well, Mr. Holmes, what are we to do with that fact?”

“To remember it—to docket it.” (*Napoleons* 587)

Such systematic memorizing is seen as a deliberate action and trained habit by Sherlock Holmes, who radicalises the process: he explains that it is “a hobby” of his to “practice his London”, to play scales on reality, and literally to learn the city by rote:

“Let me see,” said Holmes, standing at the corner and glancing along the line, “I should like just to remember the order of the houses here. It is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London. There is Mortimer’s, the tobacconist, the little newspaper shop, the Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank, the Vegetarian Restaurant, and McFarlane’s carriage-building depot. That carries us right on to the other block.” (*Red-headed* 185)

Holmes’s use of memory corresponds to Bergson’s second type of memory, “habit memory” (Bergson 82), “the one that repeats” i.e. “a habit acquired by the repetition of the same effort” (Bergson 80). It is not so much a representation as a deliberate action, it is accessible and serviceable, and all of it is mobilized for present use: in this respect, it is lived in the present as it was acquired in the past with the explicit intention of future use—or as Bergson puts it: “The lesson once learned is part of my present, exactly like my habit of walking and writing; it is lived and acted, rather than represented. [...] It is always bent upon action, seated in the

present and looking only to the future.” (Bergson 80-81) Bergson further insists that “the memories which we acquire voluntarily by repetition are rare and exceptional” (Bergson 83) and just like Sherlock Holmes, who is precisely remarkable for his exceptional diligence at forcibly acquiring and remembering useful data, he notices that “habit reinterpreted by memory” is only possible because “our whole life is passed among a limited number of objects, which pass more or less often before our eyes. (Their) movements, as they recur, contrive a mechanism for themselves, grow into a habit, and determine in us attitudes which automatically follow our perception of things”. (Bergson 84)

Such automatic access is exactly how Holmes describes his mobilisation of the memories he has stored: memory simply “occurs” to him, and he is typically able to routinely recognize new case as copies of recorded data: “As a rule, when I have heard some slight indication of the course of events, I am able to guide myself by the thousands of other similar cases which occur to my memory. In the present instance I am forced to admit that the facts are, to the best of my belief, unique.” (*Red-headed* 176) Those rare cases he agrees to take on are indeed those which do not ring an immediate bell in his own remembered “annals of crime” (*Sign* 111), in the “portable Newgate calendar of crime” (*Garridebs* 1051) he carries in his memory. Standard blasé yawns thus give way to elation when the database yields no answer—or rather no immediate answer, as in *The Sign of Four*: “He lifts the case from the regions of the commonplace. I fancy that this ally breaks fresh ground in the annals of crime in this country—though parallel cases suggest themselves from India, and, if my memory serves me, from Senegambia.” (*Sign* 111) In criminology, the scientific co-dependency between memory and practise is unflinchingly established by the detective: “Students of criminology will remember the analogous incidents in Godno, in Little Russia, in the year ’66, and of course there are the Anderson murders in North Carolina, but this case possesses some features which are entirely its own.” (*Hound* 753-754)

There is one condition though for the method to be successful, as he makes it clear from *A Study in Scarlet*: through his theory of the brain as an attic, and thus as a limited space, Holmes insists that one must radically exclude from memory all that is not going to be useful to his science, and thus links memory to selection—to remember successfully one must also train to drastically forget:

“I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things, so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skillful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order. It is a mistake to think that that little room has elastic walls and can distend to any extent.” (*Study* 21)

Holmes' conception of what is not useful is rather extreme, and to be able to hoard the most minute details ("I am an omnivorous reader with a strangely retentive memory for trifles." (*Lion* 1094)) he also trains to forget the most basic generalities, be they personal like eating ("Starving. It had escaped my memory. I have had nothing since breakfast." (*Orange* 228)) or cosmic like the functioning of the solar system: "His ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. [...] My surprise reached a climax, however, when I found incidentally that he was ignorant of the Copernican Theory and of the composition of the Solar System" (*Study* 21). Sherlock's answer sums it all up: "Now that I do know it I shall do my best to forget it." (*Study* 21)

Sherlock's memory is thus hyper-functional and extremely reliable—there is only one notable exception, "The Yellow face", where he too hurriedly recognizes the memorized pattern of the love triangle behind an original unrecorded event. This short story records an anomaly in the system, and signals the brain's inability to cut across memory's well-accessed paths to treat an unprecedented incident—and it certainly bugs Holmes: "Watson," said he, 'if it should ever strike you that I am getting a little over-confident in my powers, or giving less pains to a case than it deserves, kindly whisper 'Norbury' in my ear, and I shall be infinitely obliged to you.'" (*Yellow* 362)

Indeed, the case for memory is a little too good to be true, or rather too simple, and Doyle needs the intervention of Watson to make a fuller case: as the narrator of the stories, he makes it explicit that though memory is instrumental to solving the plot, it serves an altogether different role in the narration and actually questions the sense of resolution. Memory is rephrased as "memoirs" in the second collection, and as "reminiscences" in the fourth one, and the polyptoton is a clue to the gaps and hesitations that unhinge Holmes' self-assured method.

Watson actually plays it both ways.

On the one hand, he certainly goes along with Holme's theory of memory as an epistemological tool and makes his own ample use of it in order to validate Holmes' success. He writes retrospective narrations, and uses memory to authenticate them: "It was upon the 4th of March, as I have good reason to remember" (*Study* 22) or "I remember the date very well, for it was in the same month that Holmes refused a knighthood." (*Garridebs* 1044). He also follows in Holmes's tracks, and like him, frequently appeals to the memory of his readers, in order to produce several effects, all of which serve to validate the solution and to certify the text.

Firstly, memory is thus invariably rallied to summon relevant details that had gone unnoticed and the dots are then connected to corroborate Holmes's version: in "The Adventure of the Devil's foot" for example, the fact that the lodger should be remembered as *strangely* reticent,

along with the return from memory of the apparently negligible watering-pot, permit to retrospectively elevate these facts to the status of clues, and thus to stabilize Holme's version of the story: "I remember that during our short visit we found the vicar garrulous, but his lodger strangely reticent. [...] So absorbed was he in his thoughts, I remember, that he stumbled over the watering-pot" (*Devil* 956). In these cases, memory is of a different kind than Sherlock's learned memory of habit. It is Bergson's first type of memory, which, "regardless of utility or of practical application, stores up the past by the mere necessity of its own nature" (Bergson 81). In these instances, then, there is a form of collaboration between the two memories: "the one that imagines" (Bergson 82) supports "the other one that repeats": "the images stored up in the spontaneous memory can render services by associating with the present perception, and throw light upon and complete habit memory in a useful way" (Bergson 84): readers are indeed asked to "re-read" the past, to "represent" it "subsisting exactly as it occurred" (Bergson 80), as "memory-images that neglect no detail, that leave to each fact, to each gesture, its place and date" (Bergson 81). Their spontaneous memory thus authenticates the deductions of Holmes's memory of habit.

Secondly, Watson, once more like Sherlock, solicits the reader's memory of other cases in order to reinforce the consistency and interconnectedness of the fictional universe, and to increase the pleasure of identification, or as Eco put it, "the joy of recognizing what is already known, [...] the regressive pleasure of the return of what is expected"¹. In "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches", Watson thus calls for the reader's memory of "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle": "You remember that the affair of the blue carbuncle, which appeared to be a mere whim at first, developed into a serious investigation. It may be so in this case, also." (*Copper* 318) This constant textual process of self-remembering starts from the second story, "A Scandal in Bohemia":

One night—it was on the twentieth of March, 1888—I was returning from a journey to a patient (for I had now returned to civil practice), when my way led me through Baker Street. As I passed the well-remembered door, which must always be associated in my mind with my wooing, and with the dark incidents of the Study in Scarlet, I was seized with a keen desire to see Holmes again, and to know how he was employing his extraordinary powers. (*Scandal* 161)

Memory stabilizes identity, each new text is different but it is also the same as it is remembered, and as Ricœur develops, *idem*, or sameness, reinforces *ipse*, or selfhood: memory creates

¹ My translation from Umberto Eco, *De Superman au surhomme*. Paris : Grasset, 1993, p. 21: "Le style usera de solutions préconstituées, offrant au lecteur les joies de la reconnaissance du déjà connu. Puis il jouera d'itérations continues afin de procurer au public le plaisir régressif du retour à l'attendu [...]."

identity, in the narration just as in the plot, it fortifies the solution just as it stabilizes the text (Ricoeur 32).

On the other hand, Watson also complicates the issue of memory, starting with faking the whole process. Indeed, as a narrator, he is not content with mentioning striking past cases that still remain to be told, like a fabulous textual reservoir: he actually asks the readers to remember ghost cases that never were, and that haunt textual memory, like the “Camberwell poisoning case” mentioned as belonging to the canon in the introduction to “The Five Orange Pips”: “In the latter, as may be remembered, Sherlock Holmes was able, by winding up the dead man’s watch, to prove that it had been wound up two hours before, and that therefore the deceased had gone to bed within that time—a deduction which was of the greatest importance in clearing up the case.” (*Orange* 218) In fact, it *cannot* be remembered at all, and indeed memory is here fundamentally modalised, as there exists no such thing as the Camberwell poisoning case in the Holmesian canon, no more than there is trace of a presumed-to-be-dead “Mlle. Carère, the young lady who, as it will be remembered, was found six months later alive and married in New York” (*Hound* 761), that Watson mentions as one of the previous cases of the detective. The readers who are thus well-acquainted with the Canon immediately expose these fake memories, and sense that memory, as Bergson clearly demonstrates, also has got something to do with imagination and fabulation.

This is reinforced by Watson’s explicit disclaimers as regards the integrity and the reliability of his own memory—in case readers might not have spotted the memory lapses. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, he chooses to resort to his own letters to corroborate his imperfect memories: “From this point onward I will follow the course of events by transcribing my own letters to Mr. Sherlock Holmes which lie before me on the table. One page is missing, but otherwise they are exactly as written and show my feelings and suspicions of the moment more accurately than my memory, clear as it is upon these tragic events, can possibly do.” (*Hound* 712) Not only is memory described as not fully accurate, by nature (“can *possibly* do”), but one page is actually missing from the letters, and the text is curtailed, thus revealing its blanks and memory lapses. More evidence yet to the unreliability of memory is the fact that those blanks may well be deliberately produced, as memory forgets, but also selects, for its own ulterior motives. As Watson puts it, “the problem has always been not to find, but to choose. [...] The discretion and high sense of professional honour which have always distinguished my friend are still at work in the choice of these memoirs, and no confidence will be abused.” (*Veiled* 1095)

Watson further dramatizes the instability and thus the unreliability of memory through the lexical variations we have already noted, ‘memory’ being rephrased as ‘memoirs’ and ‘reminiscences’: the vocabulary thus signals a switch in focus from the story to the narration. The interest shifts from Sherlock’s memory to Watson’s memoirs, and Doyle’s text appears as

“the adventure of writing” just as much as “the writing of an adventure”¹. Watson’s memoirs indeed prove to be much less consistent than Sherlock’s unfailing memory, and leave room for incidents, inaccuracies and oversights. The title of the second collection, “*Memoirs*” is often echoed in the stories, and it is usually defined with a derogatory adjective, the most frequent one being “incoherent”. The adjective returns throughout the *Memoirs*: “as I have mentioned somewhere in these incoherent memoirs” (*Musgrave* 386), which is elaborated in “The Resident Patient”: “In glancing over the somewhat incoherent series of memoirs with which I have endeavoured to illustrate a few of the mental peculiarities of my friend Mr. Sherlock Holmes, I have been struck by the difficulty which I have experienced in picking out examples which shall in every way answer my purpose.” (*Resident* 422) It is quite clear in Watson’s opening of this case that for him, his memoirs are selective and strategic: examples are “picked out” to “answer a purpose”, and the neutrality and objectivity of memory are thus framed by a memoir that confesses to its own manipulations and its own subjectivity. Watson’s main purpose is to glorify his hero and his “memoirs” are thus built as a *memorial* to a great man, as a tribute to the monumental detective and the narrator’s best friend.

But the tribute is also meant as tragically final since *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* are openly written *in memoriam*: they end with “The Final Problem”, the short-story where Doyle eventually precipitates Holmes down the Reichenbach Falls, locked in Moriarty’s arms as Sydney Paget’s famous illustration is meant to visually validate—but also as Watson remembers². Sherlock’s prediction comes true: the memoirs “draw an end”, at least for ten years, during the “great hiatus” as Holmesians call the ten-year gap between “The Final Problem” (1893) and “The Adventure of the Empty House” (1903) when Holmes is believed to be dead: “Your memoirs will draw to an end, Watson, upon the day that I crown my career by the capture or extinction of the most dangerous and capable criminal in Europe.” (*Final* 477) The thing is that the memorial was premature, and that Holmes’s choice of words “drawing to an end” was a very accurate clue: the -ING form, the active verb and the indefinite article, *an* end, all point towards the same open-endedness, towards the fact that endings in the Sherlock Holmes stories are always indeed *possible* endings—the ending as Watson remembers it, always leaving room for a further “reminiscence”. And for his final collection, Doyle chooses a title that acknowledges that the end is always temporary, and thus bows to the conflict that is inherent to the literary DNA of his serial. As he, once more, closes his serial, he still makes

¹ « Le récit n’est plus l’écriture d’une aventure, mais l’aventure d’une écriture », in Jean Ricardou, *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman*, Paris : Seuil, 1971.

² Whereas he chose “memoirs” for the detective, Conan Doyle opted for the more casual, more random, more lively term “memories” for his own autobiography, *Memories and Adventures* (New York: Little, Brown & Co, 1924), thus orienting his own life towards the future, while inversely embalming the cumbersome detective in Watson’s memoirs.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/66991/pg66991-images.html> [accessed April 10th, 2026]

room for more: “His last bow” similarly points towards finality, but it is unwritten and challenged by the subtitle “—some later reminiscences of Sherlock Holmes”, to signal the irresistible return of the text.

Two elements need commenting upon, that highlight Doyle’s extreme formal accuracy. Firstly, “reminiscence” is the final rewording of “memory”, and it adequately marks the impossibility to escape its return, no matter how repressed, no matter how nearly erased, how uncertain it might be. The sense of the exhaustion of the subject, the indefiniteness of “some”, the differing process of “later” are not sufficient to stabilize the ending: the final problem is always the final problem “minus one” as Deleuze puts it, “the last bow” is always the last bow *but one*, and the stories, just like Platonic reminiscences, are dimmed reflections of previous ones and memories of those to come. Secondly, the subtitle comes with a dash, and thus inscribes a divergence between the two sides of the title: to the left, “his last bow”, the side of memory, of retrospection and closure, and to the right the adventure, of yet another story, of a text in a perpetual moment of “becoming”.

Memoirs of an adventure: retrospection vs. advent

Though the second collection was titled *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* and emphasised the desire to achieve an ending, failure to do so—an organic flamboyant failure obviously—resulted in a return to the generic marker that had characterized the first collection: adventure. Indeed, the sequel, and radical revision, of “The final Problem” was “The *Adventure* of the empty house”, thus yielding to the call of adventure, and rerouting the narration onto an adventurous path. Holmes’s spectacular return indeed makes the text highly incidental and unstable: the irruption of his unauthorized version opens lines of escape in a text that proves to be less bolted than it proclaimed to be. It rectifies and unfastens Watson’s memoir whose embalming mission obviously fails, and settles literature on the side of adventure.

I have developed elsewhere that adventure was a collective new literary horizon at the end of the nineteenth century¹, among such canonical writers as Stevenson, Conrad, and Doyle. Linking Conan Doyle to these two celebrated stylists might seem far-fetched, but he explicitly shared their intention to invest the genre of adventure in order to find a literary alternative to Realism, to elaborate a new literary agenda. Their enterprise was celebrated by the literary

¹ See Nathalie Jaëck, “Stevenson’s—& Co’s—literary utopia.” *Journal of Stevenson Studies*. Vol. 8, 2011, 182-196.

enemies, the powerful French critics of the NRF who saw across the Channel the promise of literary renewal, as Henri Ghéon put it:

“Sous prétexte de réalisme et de logique humaine, les écrivains français ont exilé du roman l'imprévu, l'imprévu qui est presque toute la vie, et qui est tout au moins la saveur de la vie et la raison même de notre élan dans la vie. [...] Un Dickens, un Stevenson ont la passion de l'aventure : ils y baignent leurs personnages, comme dans un réactif vivement coloré. ” (Ghéon 126)

Jacques Rivière confirmed that British writers had displaced Realism by disrupting its retrospective, linear and causal order, and by creating a text that was “adventurous”: “Adventure is the form of the text rather than its contents” [L'aventure, c'est la forme de l'œuvre plutôt que sa matière] (Rivière 69). Jankélévitch then theorized the movement of adventure, by returning to the etymology of the word: *advent*—forward. “Infinitesimal adventure is linked to the advent of the event. [...] Adventure is the moment in the making, the present about to come.” [L'aventure infinitésimale est liée à l'avènement de l'événement. [...] L'aventure est l'instant en instance, l'actualité sur le point de se faire.”] (Jankélévitch 828)

Reading the Sherlock Holmes stories thus makes it possible to detect how much the explicit major mode of memory and retrospection, both tending towards resolution and closure, is opposed to the surreptitious minor mode of adventure in the text. In Watson's *Memoirs*, adventure inverts and subverts memory: as the resolution is doubly certified through Sherlock's memory and Watson's retrospective cases, the intervention of adventure acts as a ferment of textual insecurity and destabilizes the ending.

The 1913 Webster dictionary defines “memoirs” as “a biography written without special regard to method and completeness”, and indeed, method and completeness are not Watson's forte. But lack of completeness is in fact a narrative method, and even a generic requirement of the detective novel: if the readers were told everything, there would obviously be no mystery, and Doyle is thus careful to endow Watson-the-character with only limited knowledge of the events at the time of the story, counting on Holmes's many disappearances and silences, and to have Watson-the-narrator retain information at the time of the narration, or rather “remember” exactly as he lived the facts, renouncing the hindsight of retrospection. But there is more than those typical and contractual memory lapses, and the ending of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is in this respect quite telling.

Holmes's retrospective restatement of the case, secure as it proclaims to be, reveals in fact many possible lines of escape. Firstly, just as in “The Final Problem”, there is no body to stabilize the case, Stapleton has vanished just as surely as Holmes did, and there are no eye-witnesses either, save the woman who, as Pierre Bayard developed in *L'affaire du Chien des*

Baskervilles, could very well be the culprit herself. Secondly, the same way as the *Memoirs* “draw to an end” with “The Final problem”, the concluding chapter of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is titled through an indefinite article: “A retrospection”, hinting at the possibility for more than one. Thirdly, memory is summoned in this final chapter, but immediately denounced as lacunary. Watson wants to induce his friend “to discuss the details of the Baskerville mystery” (*Hound* 761), though Sherlock makes it plain that “his clear and logical mind would not be drawn from its present work to dwell upon memories of the past” (*Hound* 761). As Watson thus asks: “Perhaps you would kindly give me a sketch of the course of events from memory” (*Hound* 761), Holmes answers: “Certainly, though I cannot guarantee that I carry all the facts in my mind. Intense mental concentration has a curious way of blotting out what has passed. [...] So far as the case of the hound goes, however, I will give you the course of events as nearly as I can, and you will suggest anything which I may have forgotten.” (*Hound* 761) Facts are “blotted out”, the account will not quite coincide with the actual events, and the space of indecision is opened wider with the modal “may”. Now all three objections could after all be deemed to be only honest disclaimers, meticulous comments on the imperfect nature of Bergson’s second type of memory, indissociable from forgetting.

But this is the moment when adventure takes over, and when the phrase “the course of events” is to be taken at face-value. It is fair to say that Sherlock Holmes never made a mystery of his ability to imagine reality, to create several probable, or plausible, or possible ways across the facts, as is made clear in “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches”: “I have devised seven separate explanations, each of which would cover the facts as far as we know them.” (*Copper* 323) The uncertain and random logic of advent is encapsulated in the conditional form: many lines of escape *would* cover the facts, and still many more would cover them *as they are so far known*, opening the way for yet more facts to come, and yet more explanations. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, one realizes that events are potentially always unfolding, in a state of *advent* to use Jankélévitch’s vocabulary, or in a state of *becoming* to use Deleuze’s. Despite the impeccable stabilization spectacularly declared by the detective, there seems to be always the possibility for a textual remainder and for a further textual proliferation. The end of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* is a case in point, and Watson’s final words in the novel illustrate the double movement of the text—both a desire for stabilization through impeccable anamnesis, and the shadow of a doubt that opens a line of escape, insinuating that the text does not quite fit. At the very end of Holmes’s retrospection, loyal but vigilant Watson goes: “No doubt. There only remains one difficulty.” (*Hound*, 766) The two sentences present a bewildering oxymoron at the very close of the novel. “No doubt” should be final, and yet there is one remainder, one “difficulty” as Watson decorously puts it.

Despite his loyalty and though he understates his objection, Watson cannot pretend not to see what is in reality the elephant in the room—Stapleton’s lying about his identity would have to be exposed once he came to claim the inheritance: “If Stapleton came into the succession, how could he explain the fact that he, the heir, had been living unannounced under another name so close to the property? How could he claim it without causing suspicion and inquiry?” (*Hound*, 766) The final nominal proposition “No doubt” is here multiply expanded with the conditional “could”, the conjunction of coordination “if”, the adverb “how”, and the continuous -ING form—all signalling that all the ends are not tied, and that there is yet some “course of events” to steady. Holmes acknowledges Watson’s misgiving, and in doing so he does dissociate the past from the future, memory from adventure, while insisting that they are both to be reckoned with: “It is a formidable difficulty, and I fear that you ask too much when you expect me to solve it. The past and the present are within the field of my inquiry, but what a man may do in the future is a hard question to answer.” (*Hound*, 766) Yet, there seem to be, for him, absolutely no contradiction between stabilizing his version—and yet imagining a later rebuttal, an adventurous rebound in the facts. His answer abounds in conditional forms, his “mights” even less secure than Watson’s “coulds”, and he starts fictionalizing again, rewriting and reinforcing Watson’s oxymoron: “We cannot doubt from what we know of him that he would have found some way out of the difficulty.” (*Hound*, 766) In Holmes’s system, doubt is impossible, the case is closed—but there is still a caveat (“from what we know of him”), still conditionality (“would”), still indefinite fluidity (“some way”).

Conclusion. “No doubt. There only remains one difficulty.”

Memory and adventure thus go hand in hand in Doyle’s textual system, and Sherlock Holmes pays explicit tribute to them both: he uses memory to activate the past so that it is useful in the present, but reckons adventure will intervene in the future, and will propose yet another incidental, uncontrollable, and essentially open version. It is fascinating to note that even in its most urgent and final moments, even when the intention is to irreversibly kill the detective, he still makes room for “the advent of the event”, for a process on indefinite becoming. In this respect, the gap between the incipit and the excipit of “The Final Problem” is enlightening.

The first paragraph of “The Final problem” starts in a way that completely corroborates the finality of the title, and that closes the text before it is even started: “It is with a heavy heart that I take up my pen to write these the last words in which I shall ever record the singular gifts by which my friend Mr. Sherlock Holmes was distinguished.” (469) “The Final problem” is written *in memoriam*, and these are to be “the last words”, as is reinforced by the grammatical

irrevocability of the modal “shall” and the adverb “ever”. There is no place for advent, and “ever” closes the future.

Still, there is liminary evidence that the text may be taken for granted. As early as the second sentence, Watson returns to his favourite adjective to define his *Memoirs*, and provides an interpretative clue to the bereaved readers—the mourning arm-bands English people wore when that issue of *The Strand Magazine* was out in December 1893 could have been spared, had the text been read more closely: “In an incoherent and, as I deeply feel, an entirely inadequate fashion, I have endeavoured to give some account of my strange experiences in his company” (*Final* 469). Watson confesses it—and it is not self-deprecating modesty but deliberate literary technique: his memoirs are *meant* as incoherent, there is “inadequacy” in them, i.e. the constant temptation to stray¹. This is confirmed indeed in the ultimate paragraph of the short-story: the plain and blunt piece of information of the text, Holmes is dead, is deconstructed from the inside by a sense of incoherence, by a dissident *je ne sais quoi* as other, more adventurous and undefined forms erode textual density. Holmes body is not found: “Any attempt at recovering the bodies was absolutely hopeless” (*Final*, 480); the only supposed eye-witness has disappeared, and yet Watson once more resorts to the oxymoron no proof/no doubt: “The Swiss youth was never found again, and there can be no doubt that he was one of the numerous agents whom Moriarty kept in his employ.” (*Final*, 480); Watson also makes it clear that there are several versions of the event; the experts’ report is inconclusive, despite Watson’s antiphrasis: “An examination by experts leaves little doubt that a personal contest between the two men ended, as it could hardly fail to end in such a situation, in their reeling over, locked in each other’s arms.” (*Final* 480) The whole space of adventure unfolds in the quantifier “little”, which is developed in the convoluted double negation “as it could hardly fail to end”. In the Sherlock Holmes’ stories then, and despite the feats of hypermnnesia and retrospection, textual adventure always finds a way to escape resolution and to expand the text, which can never “hardly fail to end”. Conan Doyle thus confirms that “writing has got nothing to do with recounting one’s memories or imposing a form (of expression) on lived matter. Literature always lies on the side of formlessness or incompleteness²”.

1 In their life-long and friendly conversation about literature, James and Stevenson found fault with naturalism, because of the bolted nature of its discourse, and pleaded for a more adventurous form, for the text escaping through James’s beautiful “blue gaps in the hill”: “Vérité marks the rigid straightness of course from point to point. He [Zola] had seen his horizon and his fixed goal from the first, and no cross-scent, no new distance, no blue gap in the hill to right or to left ever tempted him to stray. [...] Of the absence in him of a doubt, indeed of his inability, once his direction taken, to entertain so much as the shadow of one, Vérité is a positive monument”, said James about Zola, in “Emile Zola”, *Atlantic Monthly*, august 1903. Stevenson similarly aimed at creating a form that would cultivate dynamic irruptions of unexpected elements, disrupting the order of the texts, opposing its inescapable causality.

² “Écrire n’a rien à voir avec raconter ses souvenirs, imposer une forme (d’expression) à une matière vécue. La littérature est toujours du côté de l’informe ou de l’inachèvement.” (Deleuze 11)

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