



## Performing Murder and Metaphor

### Red Herrings and the Knowledge of the World in *The Hound of Baskerville* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

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*And then, in correcting the proofs, we notice some misconstructions, some oddities... We send for Marana, we ask him some questions, he becomes confused, contradicts himself... We press him, we open the original text in front of him and request him to translate a bit orally... He confesses he doesn't know a single word of Cimbrian!*

-Italo Calvino

The Webster dictionary defines a red herring as “something unimportant that is used to stop people from noticing or thinking about something important”. This definition of a red herring as a mere distraction, however, fails at delineating the philosophy of red herrings, especially in its form of and as a literary device. Considering red herrings as sign systems then, the current paper seeks to outline a paradigm to understand not only the world of and around red herrings in a novel but also the subjectivities that both control and are controlled because of red herrings. Since red herrings are primarily deployed in detective fiction, the paper uses Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of Baskervilles* and Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* to both create the aforementioned theoretical paradigm and chart out a tradition of red herrings as it has been passed from Doyle to Christie.

Before a consideration of detective fictions, it seems fitting to discuss in brief Italo Calvino’s *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveler* because it exemplifies the philosophical complexities of red herrings in its entirety. While not a detective novel in the strict sense of the term, it uses almost all essentials of a detective story to frame its narrative: from a “crime” to the protagonist’s quest towards solving it. Divided broadly into two sections, the odd chapters of the book set up the reader as the central protagonist by narrating the events in second person: “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*” (1). The book, then, begins by telling that the reader-protagonist has bought and wants to read *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. As the novel progresses though, the reader-protagonist realizes that not only is the book he has got not *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*, but what he does have is not complete either. Duly, he goes back to the book-shop from where he had bought the book and asks for the novel he has begun to read instead of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler*. The bookstore clerk tells him that the

book he has been reading is a Polish novel called *Outside the Town of Malbork* and hands him that book. As the reader-protagonist starts to read the second book he realizes that it is not the book that he had been reading in the first place and is once again incomplete. This is a motif that runs throughout the novel: every time the reader-protagonist wants to read a book that he has begun with, he ends up having a completely different novel and each novel never progresses beyond the first few pages. Accordingly, each even chapter of the novel narrates the different beginnings that the reader-protagonist encounters in the novel.

Confusing as it may be, there is a linear narrative in the novel. It is only through the reader-protagonist's search for a book that he wants to read and his successive failure to do so is he able to find out the Truth behind Ermes Marana's deceptions. Marana is a translator who translates Cimbrian novels into English without knowing even "a single word of Cimbrian" (64). He also produces fake novels by using Silas Flannery's formula for creating best-selling novels. Further, it is Marana who is responsible for the reader-protagonist's constant encounter with wrong books. Considering Marana's denouement and the fact that the reader-protagonist is made aware of each title after he has gone through with the reading of whatever text is available to him, each title becomes a red herring. Every title of each novel-part is made to signal towards a novel by one character or another that it is not originally supposed to. While *Outside the Town of Malbork*, for example, is supposed to be the title of the novel that the reader-protagonist reads under the heading of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, the novel contained within and attached to the former that he receives is completely a different one. Red herrings in the novel then are not distractions inasmuch as they become signifying processes towards an end where the reader-protagonist is able to Know the truth behind the scams run by Marana. Each wrong and incomplete novel in the chain forces him to keep on looking for a right one, ultimately putting him face to face with Marana. The complex nature of red herrings in a sense allows a growth and a possibility of knowledge which wouldn't have been if not for such systems of signification. They are not mere distractions but become a way to know the world: knowledge made possible only by and through red herrings and not direct significations

To delineate this philosophical nature of red herrings (as exemplified by Calvino's novel) in *The Hound of Baskervilles* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* then, the current paper uses the theoretical paradigms of Martin Heidegger. Unlike any other theorist or philosopher, his treatise on equipments and signs finds comprehension of the Being of the world <sup>1</sup>not only through the signs (or equipments) that work as they are supposed to work, but also through signs that do not. In fact, for him, the latter takes precedence over the former. Considering red herrings as signs which signify objects or incur interpretation that they are not ideally supposed to, they Become as broken signs or broken clues; in which case, Heidegger turns out to be essential to understand how and why red herrings work. Further, red herrings take on far crucial a role in Doyle's and Christie's fiction (than Calvino's) because detective novels depend on clues for a successful narrative progression and a solution of each mystery. Clues become signs towards a successful disclosure of crime. Red Herrings, as broken clues, in a sense then, become as vital as any material evidence gathered in these novels: for not only the solution of the crime but also an understanding of world of the respective detective novel.

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<sup>1</sup> Knowing the world in its essence in fact becomes essential for a solution because the detective is able to comprehend each suspect only through such forms of knowledge.

The *Hound of Baskervilles* opens with Sherlock Holmes and his trusted friend Watson speculating the identity of a client from a cane that was left by him at their apartment. Simultaneous with Holmes' prediction of his identity, Dr James Mortimer enters their house and recounting the myth of a cursed hell hound haunting the Baskerville family of Devonshire, asks the duo to solve the mystery of the curse. Considering the recent death Sir Charles Baskerville in a manner that proves the reality of the cursed hound from hell and the arrival of Sir Henry Baskerville, the last remaining Baskerville heir, Mortimer urges for an urgent solution. As the story progresses Holmes finds that Sir Henry Baskerville is beset with a series of mysterious events. First, the young Baskerville receives an anonymous letter that warns him against his trip to the Baskerville mansion at Devonshire. Then his shoes mysteriously disappear from his hotel room. Finally Holmes finds out that someone using Holmes' name is following Henry and Dr. Mortimer. Interested in the case, Holmes sends Watson with Baskerville and Mortimer to Devonshire to investigate. Once there, Watson is made aware of a dangerous convict who has escaped from a nearby prison. Later in the novel Watson finds out that the Baskerville butler and his wife John and Eliza Barrymore, whom Holmes had initially suspected of tailing Sir Henry, are in fact related to the convict and are helping him hide from the law. The mystery draws to a close when Holmes finds out that one of Baskerville's neighbors, Jack Stapleton, is actually a Baskerville. It is Stapleton who, using a hybrid hound and phosphorous, manages to bring the curse to life to not only kill Sir Charles but also Henry; so that he could inherit the Baskerville fortune.

Published a quarter of a century after the *Hound of Baskervilles*, Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is set in the small town of King's Abbott. Narrated by the town physician Dr James Sheppard, the novel begins with the death of Mrs. Ferrars due to an overdose of Veronal. Most of the town, however, believes that her death is in fact suicide over the guilt of murdering her husband. As the novel progresses, it is revealed that Mrs. Ferrars had actually killed her husband and was being blackmailed because of it. Roger Ackroyd, an eminent industrialist who is expected to marry Mrs. Ferrars receives a letter posthumously from her revealing the name of the blackmailer. Dr Sheppard, though present with Ackroyd when the letter reaches him, leaves before Ackroyd is able to know the name of the culprit. After a while Dr Sheppard gets an anonymous phone call that Roger Ackroyd has been murdered. Rushing to his mansion, Sheppard asks Ackroyd's butler, Parker, to help him open the office door. Inside they find that Ackroyd has truly been stabbed in the neck with a silver dagger. The police immediately suspects Ralph Paton, Ackroyd's stepson, because of rumors of a feud between the two. After some preliminary investigation, they also find Paton's footprints outside Ackroyd's study. With an intention to save him, Flora, Paton's intended wife and Ackroyd's niece seeks the help of Hercule Poirot. Once involved, Poirot finds out that everyone in the Ackroyd household is hiding something that will help him bring the case to a close. Parker, for example, is found guilty of blackmailing his previous employer. The book though ends by ousting that it is in fact Dr Sheppard, the Watson figure of the novel who blackmails Mrs. Ferrars, murders Roger Ackroyd to hide his crime and frames Ralph Paton for the murder.

Insofar as red herrings are concerned, the two detective novels under consideration have a distinct pattern between them. Christie, perhaps understanding the importance of a red herring in all its complexity, not only incorporates similar herrings as Doyle does in the *Hound of Baskervilles* but also modifies them in a manner that makes clear a red herring's

philosophical conceit. The two novels for example, play on the idea of "the Butler did it"<sup>2</sup>. Both Holmes and Poirot suspect the respective butlers in each novel, the Barrymores and Parker, of committing the crime. Further, John and Eliza Barrymore and Parker are essentially guilty of one crime or another. But while the Barrymores' harboring of a fugitive takes a clear side-step from the main mystery of the murder (distracting Holmes, Watson and the reader from the main plot), Parker's blackmail of his former employer and the desire to do the same to Ackroyd positions him in a space which is well within<sup>3</sup> the parameters of the murder and its solution. Yet, like the Barrymores, the latter is a clear Red Herring (once again successfully diverting Poirot, the reader, the police and Dr Sheppard). The conception of the red herring Parker by Christie in such a manner signals towards a vivification of red herrings: to the extent that these misunderstood clues become essential for the knowledge of the world of the novel and subsequently the solution of the crime. Poirot is able to know him as red herring and move on to other suspects only after Parker's crime is brought into limelight. While the Barrymores had nothing to do with the murder, Parker takes up an intricate position within the scheme of Ackroyd's murder to become a tool towards its solution. Further, what this signifies is that the recognition of a red herring as a red herring is contemporaneous with the inculcation of a knowledge of the world around and simultaneously of the crime-solution complex.

It is important at this juncture of the argument to put forward Heidegger's aforementioned theoretical paradigm. In his philosophical treatise *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger posits that the Being of the Dasein<sup>4</sup> depends on its Being-in-the-world (102). Insofar as the Being of the Dasein holds significance over the Beings of all entities<sup>5</sup>, it becomes imperative for him to comprehend the compound of Being-in-the-world. He does so primarily through the idea of the Being of the world. For Heidegger this Being of the world cannot be defined simply by the things that inhabit the world because such a definition presupposes a world. The world then is that which not only allows entities to exist within it but also permits those entities to "show themselves in their being" (97). Hence, to understanding the Being of entities as something more than a "mere thing", showing themselves in their being, he lays the concept of the equipment (98).

An equipment differs from a mere thing in that every equipment is not just "present-at-hand" (97) but "manifests itself in its own right...[as]...*readiness-to-hand*" (98). The equipment does not simply "exist" within-the-world but presents the possibility of "manipulability" (98). This manipulability allows the equipment to be used and be interacted with and change nature into environment. Heidegger uses the example of a hammer to explain an equipment's readiness-to-hand. A hammer can only be a hammer when it is either being used for hammering a nail or is available for that purpose. In other words, the hammer can Be only when it is used towards the act (or the work) of hammering. All equipments in that sense have a referential nature "towards which" (99) they are attuned for the act of "work":

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<sup>2</sup> Often in detective stories it is the Butler of the household who commits the particular crime, hence giving rise to the cliché of "the butler did it" in detective stories.

<sup>3</sup> Since the novel makes clear that there is a connection between Mrs Ferrar's blackmailer and Ackroyd's murderer.

<sup>4</sup> Dasein, while literally means "being there" is translated into English as "existence". For Heidegger the Dasein is the human subject which is concerned with a concern of its Being.

<sup>5</sup> For Heidegger only through an understanding of the Dasein's Being is it possible to understand the Beings of all other entities

That with which our everyday dealings proximally dwell is not the tools themselves. On the contrary, that with which we concern ourselves primarily is the work-that which is to be produced at the time; and this is accordingly ready-to-hand too. The work bears with it that referential totality within which the equipment is encountered...The work to be produced, as the "towards-which" of such things as the hammer, the plane, and the needle, likewise has the kind of Being that belongs to equipment...the work which we chiefly encounter in our concerned dealings-the work that is to be found when one is "at work" on something- has a usability which belongs to it essentially; in this usability it lets us encounter already the "towards-which" for which *it* is usable. (Heidegger 99)

The referential quality of every equipment is important, for it is only within a contextual environment that the equipment can function. Heidegger terms this larger context an equipment structure: that which incorporates not only the equipment under consideration but every attendant material that the equipment works on or is worked on by. The equipment structure for a hammer therefore would include nails, wood, trees, metal, land, and so on. Any use of equipment then partially discloses the world because there is no limit to the equipment structure. It can start from the smallest of materials and extend up to encompass everything in existence; hence ultimately ending up with a contemplation of the whole world (100).

The disclosure of the Being of the world attained by substituting an entity's presence-at-hand with its readiness-to-hand however, as mentioned above, is partial because while readiness-to-hand does allow one to encounter the Being of all things ontologically, such readiness-to-hand is premised upon that entity's presence-at-hand. A thing can be ready for use only when it exists beforehand. Further, readiness-to-hand demarcates an entity's natural state in a natural environment. The hammer then can be used because all conditions for its use are ideal. In which case, as Heidegger says, the importance of both the presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand of an equipment fails to be noticed by the Dasein. Hence, Heidegger continues, it is only in a broken state<sup>6</sup> that readiness-to-hand can be truly recognized. Firstly, when the equipment is not in its natural state or environment, its unreadiness-to-hand transforms that entity into something merely present-at-hand (since it doesn't provide the possibility to be used anymore). Secondly, while that entity is just present-at-hand, instead of losing all readiness-to-hand, the entity displays a Being that necessarily includes its readiness-to-hand, albeit in a negative way. It is in an absence of and in an object that its true importance is realized. A pen for example cannot be used to hammer a nail. In effect, because of the absence of the hammer or the placement of the pen instead of it, the true Being of the both these entities is understood. Unlike the complete ready-at-hand equipment then, the broken entity possesses within it both presence-at-hand and through an absence readiness-at-hand. It is both, the possession and the knowledge of that possession of these two characteristics through which the complete Being of an equipment is realized. This realization is then followed by the complete comprehension of the "world" instead of the partial one attained through an unbroken equipment. The broken tool in this sense becomes important for a discussion on red herrings, for red herrings act as such broken equipments that are extremely necessary to understand the world concerned with and around it.

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<sup>6</sup> The broken state of an equipment includes its actual breakage, its implementation or use in an environment that is not suitable for it, a missing equipment and so on.

The above argument, considering red-herrings as equipments, draws upon Heidegger's classification of "signs" as equipments:

"We come across "equipment" in "signs." The word "sign" designates many kinds of things: not only may it stand for different kinds of signs, but Being-a-sign-for can itself be formalized as a universal kind of relation, so that the sign- structure itself provides an ontological clue for "characterizing" any entity whatsoever...signs are themselves items of equipment whose specific character as equipment consists in *showing* or *indicating*. We find such signs in signposts, boundary-stones, signals, banners and the like." (107-108)

What is highlighted through the classification of signs as equipments is a reference or a context "towards which" every sign is geared. Signs do not exist in vacuum or are simply present-at-hand. They are ready-to-hand towards a particular concern as well. Heidegger uses the example of turn indicators fitted in cars to explain this equipmental nature of sign systems. While these indicators signify that the driver-user wants to or is about to take a turn, such a system of signaling is also meant for other drivers and pedestrians on the road so that they either stop or give way to the driver using the turn signals. Therefore, these signs are used towards the work of driving on the road, not only for the driver using such signals but for everyone around.

Like the turn signal red herrings too are sign-equipments and have a definite interpretive referral. As mentioned above, however, red herrings act as broken equipments because more often than not red herrings are forcibly turned to have "unnatural" interpretations. Similar to a pen being used instead of a hammer, they are compelled either to refer to or be interpreted as something they should not ideally be. Further, such interpretations are made to *seem* natural so that these red-herrings can successfully perform their ostensible tasks as distractions. Dr. Sheppard, for example, in order to frame Ralph Paton for the murder of Roger Ackroyd, uses Paton's boots to create footprints outside Ackroyd's study and forces him to hide from the law. The footprints and Paton's disappearance are made to refer to something (Ralph's guilt) that they naturally do not refer to. Understandably, the police suspects Paton because they (un)successfully misinterpret the red herrings created by Dr. Sheppard as clues. Poirot is able to clear Paton of all charges only after he recognizes the red herrings as red herring. This recognition corresponds to the acknowledgement of a broken equipment and through that of the world.

Further, since signs are always meant for someone towards a particular use or a goal, red herrings too have attendant subjects. Red Herrings can only Be *because* of a set of persons and *for* a different set of persons. Both these sets have an important part to play in the functioning dynamics of red herrings as broken equipments: while one set "breaks" it, the other interprets the Being of these equipments through such unreadiness-to-hand. Conventionally, detective novels have the Author and the Criminal as the creators of red herrings and the Reader and the Detective as the ones for whom these signs are created. The Barrymores and Parker are examples of red herrings created by Doyle and Christie for their readers and for Poirot respectively. The current paper, however, concentrates on the criminal-detective binary with regards to red herrings because even though the author writes the red herrings into existence, s/he writes them as the criminal would want them to be. The reader on the other hand interprets the respective red herrings simultaneous with the

detective. Added to which is the unfair advantage that the author has over not only the reader but every single character: detective or criminal in the novel.

Red herrings are created by criminals through their “performances” of crime. Each crime, in a sense, becomes like a theatrical presentation. In the *Hound of Baskervilles* for example, the red herring of the hell hound is created by Stapleton through such actions. He doesn't simply murder Sir Charles Baskerville but sets the stage, gathers all actors and ultimately performs the murder like a play. The arrangement and the staging of Sir Charles' murder to look as if an actual hell hound has committed (or at least facilitated) his death creates the red herring which is uncovered by Holmes only at the end. The theft of Sir Henry's boots from his hotel room also becomes a part of the performativity of murder and remains a red herring till Holmes is able to use that red herring in its broken-ness to figure out the existence of an earthly hound. Similarly in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Dr Sheppard's setting the scene in Ackroyd's room, placing Ralph Paton's footprints outside, having himself phoned, finding the body, and playing along as the innocent chronicler of events all become performances creating multiple red herrings in process. Each act of such performances turn “materials” into “metaphors” allowing the incorporation and attachment of structures of meaning not apparent or natural to such materials: in process creating the possibility of a red herring. Further, insofar as red herrings, reflecting broken equipments, are indispensable for the ontological disclosure of the world, criminals, at least within the boundaries of a novel, become facilitators towards the attainment of such knowledge. The performance of a crime in a sense opens up the door to the understanding of the world within the novel, the characters in it and through them finally the World in general. Detectives on the other hand, through their uncovering of red herrings as red herrings and not simple clues, not only complete such forms of knowledges but also “grow” in course. Holmes is able to solve Sir Charles' murder only after he realizes the curse as a red herring. This realization allows him to move beyond the myth of the curse to think of a way that would have turned a myth into reality; en route of which find out who the culprit is.

Red herrings therefore are not simple distractions to deviate the reader's and the detective's attention away from solving the crime. Working as broken clues, they become fundamental towards the understanding of the world of the novel and through that of characters inhabiting that space and finally the solution of the crime. In a sense, red herrings are if not more, then equally important as material evidence in detective fictions.

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