Observing, Guessing, Drifting: Para-Noetic Methods in Detective Fiction

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Literary detectives are commonly characterized by their logical skills. At least, this is the pretension many of them want us to believe, ever since Chevalier Auguste Dupin in Edgar Allan Poe's narratives. According to their self-descriptions, detectives resolve and disentangle the hidden causes of mysterious events by using their analytical faculties in a methodical, highly controlled and self-reflexive manner. However ostentatiously their logical capability is presented, it does not stand closer scrutiny. Quite contrary to the detective's self-characterization, many mystery stories describe the actual detective work as an interplay of half-conscious observations, random guesses, and the ability to allow one's mind and body to drift. These techniques—observing, guessing, and drifting—are not mere deviations from the general model of the cunning investigator. Instead, as I would like to argue, detective fiction makes manifest a paradoxical relation between logic and the actual art of resolving problems: the detective figures as a key agent both inside and outside the framework of rational thought. In so doing, detective fiction opens up towards a problem-solving strategy that could be termed *para-noetic*.

In the first part of my paper I will consider the classical Dupin-Sherlock Holmes-model. Here, the detective is portrayed by a semi-detached first-person narrator who, though somehow occupied with the investigation, does not really have a share in it. Since this model has so far provoked the most attention in literary theory, the specific role of observation that results from this very difference is worth a close examination. Moreover, citing Eco's and Sebeok's classic *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, I will stress the aspect of guessing, which is already quite well established in semiotic approaches to detective fiction. In the second part I will turn to another narrative model in which the detective's mind (or mindlessness) is represented more closely, without the intermediate 'Dr Watson'-type figure. This has led to an array

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL MARCH 2014 MARS RCLC
0319–051x/14/41.1/72

of interesting and intricate narrative arrangements. Using examples from Herman Melville, Raymond Chandler and the contemporary German and Austrian authors Georg Klein and Wolf Haas, I will explore the role of mental and physical drifting in detective fiction.

1.

The first clues to a para-noetic methodology of detection can be found already in Edgar Allan Poe. In his famous first detective story, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), the "*acumen*" of Auguste Dupin is not exactly, or at least not purely, founded in a strictly logical rationality. His analytical method as such resides first and foremost in the 'lower' faculties of the soul as a way of enjoying oneself. The introduction to the story claims that "the analyst [glories] in that moral activity which *disentangles*. He derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talents into play" (Poe 528).

In fact, it is in gaming that these talents appear in their most essential form. The introduction to *Rue Morgue* features several games that call up such analytical powers. Particularly while playing draughts and whist, "the analyst throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not unfrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole methods…by which he may seduce into error or hurry into miscalculation" (529). As Poe has it, the opponent follows a "spirit," whereas the analyst uses some kind of impersonation to "throw himself into" that spirit, and then watches the opponent's mental movements to "see…at a glance" where to attack and to overcome him. This method of observing/impersonating an antagonistic mind is also featured in a famous passage where Dupin takes one of his beloved nightly strolls down the streets of Paris, accompanied by an unnamed admirer, intimate friend and fellow-lodger, who is at the same time the first-person narrator:

> Being both, apparently, occupied with thought, neither of us had spoken a syllable for fifteen minutes at least. All at once Dupin broke forth with these words:
> "He is a very little fellow, that's true, and would do better for the *Théâtre des Variétés*."
> "There can be no doubt of that," I replied unwittingly, and not at first observing (so much had I been absorbed in reflection) the extraordinary manner in which the speaker had chimed in with my meditations. (533-34)

The important part here is the opposition between the first person narrator's reflection (and meditation) on the one hand, and Dupin's observation on the other. As the narrator states, they had, "apparently," both been "occupied with thought," even though Dupin was actually being occupied with something else. Unnoticed by the narrator ("not at first observing…"), he was really observing his fellow walker over the last fifteen minutes. Dupin assumed that a certain minute event on the street must have triggered a certain thought in his friend. From that moment on he kept watching every move that seemed to betray the stream of thought in his friend's mind:

> "You kept your eyes upon the ground…so that I saw you were still thinking of the stones," "perceiving your lips move, I could not doubt that you murmured the word 'stereotomy'," "you did look up; and I was now assured that I had correctly followed your steps," "I saw you draw yourself up to your full height. I was then sure that you reflected upon the diminutive figure of Chantilly." (535-36)

Of course, there are always deductions and conclusions involved in observations like this, so it would be pointless to claim that Dupin was not thinking at all. But still, in this very first case he solves, the mental operation of thinking is methodically subsequent to the visual operations of observing, watching, and of seeing "at a glance."

During the criminal investigation of the actual *Rue Morgue* mystery, Dupin is demonstrating a similar strategy. Lengthy quotes from the newspapers (which form no less than a fifth part of the narrative) already provide him—and the reader—with a multitude of details about the gruesome murders of Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye, collected by policemen and ear-witnesses. This, however, is only the "shell of an examination," as Dupin states in his critique of the Parisian police, who have "no method in their proceedings." Dupin's own methodology is again based on a certain kind of visuality: While the bad observer "impair[s] his vision by holding the object too close," the attempt should be to gain "sight of the matter as a whole" (544-45). Poe again experimented with this idea in *The Sphinx* (1846). While sitting at an open window, the narrator watches a huge and hideous monster walking up a distant hill, only to be told afterwards that what he had held for a monster was merely an insect crawling up a spider's thread right before his eyes. (Similar to the *Rue Morgue* model, it is the first-person narrator who fails to be a good observer, and has to be corrected by a friend who knows his way about perspective.)

According to Dupin, truth is "invariably superficial" and must be realized through a certain kind of "contemplation," which is explained by an astronomical analogy: "To look at a star by glances" guarantees a better appreciation than to "turn our vision *fully* upon it" (545). Such attention to the superficial is the method of choice when Dupin finally visits the scene of the crime to "scrutinize every thing". Notwithstanding his "minuteness of attention" he still keeps himself distanced, avoiding to get lost in the details while still grasping the "unusual" and "*outré*" character of the case as a whole (546-47). Dupin's aim is to find out "what has occurred that has never occurred before" (548). In the aesthetic desire for the extraordinary, we find the initial pleasure principle again: a principle that reaches beyond the 'scientific' logic of investigation (cf. Frank) in triggering both Dupin's scrutiny in detail and his following deductions. Consequently, the spectacular final conclusion that the murderer was an Orang-utan does not so much pacify the crime as it culminates in an aesthetic of horror, for the first-person narrator declares: "I understood the full horrors of the murder at once" (559).

Dupin's analytic method is closely linked to a specific way of narrative presentation. When Dupin explains his train of thought to his friend, he speaks of "legitimate deductions," yet adds that these deductions are not only logically justifiable but "the

sole proper ones, and that the suspicion arises inevitably from them as the single result" (550). 'Deduction' here is a rather vague expression for 'inference' or 'conclusion' and does not signify the specific 'top-down' logic of deducing particularities from generalities. A little later, in fact, Dupin will indeed terms his mental operations "inductions" (553), this time speaking of the conclusions he has drawn from the minute details at the scene of the crime (i.e., conclusions from the very particular to the more general). Both logical directions, the inductive and the deductive way, seem to come together in Dupin's famous strategy of reasoning backwards, bundled up in his sentence: "I proceeded to think thus—*à posteriori*" (552).

Thinking *à posteriori* is a necessity since in the murder mystery of the *Rue Morgue*, the results are obvious but the causes are hidden. It was Poe's ingenuity, however, that he turned the logical structure of inferring 'from the posterior' into a narrative structure. For the important part about the phrase quoted above is the past tense: "I proceeded to think". At that moment, the process of reflection is already over. Dupin has made the necessary arrangements and is "now awaiting" (548) the decisive witness (who turns out to be the owner of the Orang-utan). All mental deliberation has been done before in the interval between the visit in the Rue Morgue and "now". During that time, however, the first person narrator would have been only able to tell what Dupin was 'proceeding to think' if he possessed his friend's ability of watching someone think. Since this is not the case—as we know from the initial 'mind reading' scene—he can only report that he wasn't told anything: "It was his humor, now, to decline all conversation on the subject of the murder" (547).

With Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's invention of Sherlock Holmes, this 'humor' was soon to become a habit. In most of the Holmes stories, the detective's intellectual work takes place in more or less unmarked interspaces. Holmes—who refers directly to Dupin in the first novel, *A Study in Scarlet* (cf. González Moreno)—loves to play the secret-monger vis-à-vis his clients and, especially, his friend Dr Watson. This first-person narrator, just like his nameless fellow in Poe's stories, is simply unable to relate what happens inside Holmes's head. Often enough he is explicitly told to just wait, sometimes with his revolver ready, and see Holmes convict the culprit. Only then he is allowed to learn how the detective had 'proceeded to think.' After Holmes, the habit became a convention in the portrayal of the detective figure. The classical mystery story usually combines a brilliant detective with a not-so-brilliant first-person narrator, the latter always lagging behind the former. Even if principally a bad observer, the narrator is required to observe the detective, and even as a poor analyst, he still has to infer the detective's conclusions. Hence the fascinating combination, in detective stories, of prospective suspense, on the one hand, and retrospective disentanglement, on the other. Both are intrinsically linked: When suspense reaches its apogee, the detective finally discloses his train of thought and gives the full account of both the facts in the case and the sequence of his own deductions. Narratives of this type put thinking in a structurally supplementary position.

This is probably the reason why detective fiction has been seen as a challenge to,

rather than a confirmation of, the laws and functions in classical logic. In their 1983 landmark volume *The Sign of Three*, Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok collected relevant essays towards a semio-logic of the detective story. In reference to Doyle's Sherlock Holmes novel *The Sign of Four*, the title indicates the editors' three chief witnesses to a semiotic understanding of detection: Dupin, Holmes, and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's paper on "Guessing" (1929) provides the background for several contributors to the volume. For them, especially the Peirceian notions of 'retroduction,' 'abduction,' and 'guessing' help characterize the modes of hypothetical thinking as shared by Dupin and Holmes, even though both detectives would have downright rejected such an interpretation. Contrary to Holmes's proud claim "I never guess," pronounced in the initial chapter of "The Science of Deduction" in *The Sign of Four*, Thomas Sebeok and Jean Umiker-Sebeok contend that the detective's powers "are in most cases built on a complicated series of what Peirce would have called guesses" (Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok 20-21).

Already for Peirce, this faculty transcends pure logic and enters the realm of intuition. From this transgression also results the somewhat irritating self-confidence in Peirce's account of his own success as a detective. In "Guessing", he claims to have convicted a thief simply by instinct—and based on the prejudice that he must be "colored" ("I then made all the colored waiters…stand up in a row" [Peirce 271]). As Peirce has it, the "singular guessing instinct" is even responsible for man's divination "of the secret principles of the universe" (281-82). In the 1983 volume, particularly Carlo Ginzburg's paper on "Clues" follows this vein. Not only is Ginzburg able to show that the Holmesian "paradigm or model based on the interpretation of clues" also was shared by several human sciences in the late 19th century, from art history to psychoanalysis (Ginzburg 88), he also examines the "roots" (ibid.) of this scientific trend in the anthropological faculty of reading tracks and traces, from prehistoric hunters via Hippocratic medicine to textual criticism. Likewise, Umberto Eco demonstrates that the scope of the detective story goes far beyond Doyle and Poe. At the minimum, it should include Voltaire's short novel *Zadig* and its trace-reading protagonist, but actually the scope of the genre even encompasses Aristotle's *Analytics*. Only this extension allows to generate a semiotic system that fully integrates hypothesis, abduction, "meta-abduction," "over-" and "undercoded abduction," and, finally, "creative abduction" (Eco 207-15).

To be sure, the Peirceian notion of abduction as a third way beyond the dichotomy of deduction and induction is certainly fruitful to overcome certain boundaries of formal logic. Moreover, it is an eye-opener for re-reading detective stories in the narrower sense of the term (cf. Wirth 1995 and 2012). Yet in the papers collected by Eco and Sebeok, a certain disinterest toward the narrative intricacies of these stories cannot be overlooked. In Sebeok's and Umiker-Sebeok's juxtaposition of Peirce and Holmes, for instance, the difference between Watson's presentations of Holmes's proceedings on the one hand, and Peirce's "true tales of successful guessings" (Peirce 281), on the other, is hardly mentioned. In Massimo Bonfantini's and Giampaolo

Proni's paper "To Guess or Not to Guess", starting with an analysis of Holmes's investigations in *A Study in Scarlet*, the question of narrative structure is explicitly disregarded: "what is of interest to us now is not a study of the narrative structure of the thriller but the *method* that is theorized in it" (Bonfantini and Proni 119). Such disregard is surprising in a volume that is, after all, devoted to a specific narrative genre. As the classical detective story foregrounds, the significance of techniques besides rational deliberation unfolds both along a methodical and a narrative aspect. On the one hand, Dupin's and Holmes's interpretive restraint as well as restrained action are the essential preconditions for the 'abductive' mix of reading traces, drawing conclusions, making guesses—and watching the opponent think. On the other hand, these techniques are in turn essential for the narrative presentation of the analytic method, since the conclusions have to be kept hidden to uphold the suspense as long as possible. Thus, on the methodological level, it might be irrelevant whether or not Dr Watson and his likes remain uninitiated, but on the level of narrative, their naiveté is of utmost importance. Even in the only story in which Holmes appears as his own narrator—"The Lion's Mane" from the last collection, the 1927 *Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*—the detective manages to keep his thoughts to himself: "I had known that there was something which might bear upon this matter. It was still vague, but at least I knew how I could make it clear. It was monstrous, incredible, and yet it was always a possibility" (Doyle 198)—upon which it takes the reader another five pages to find out what "it" would refer to.

2.

Methods complementary to rational thinking play an even more intriguing role in detective stories that do not follow the Holmes-and-Watson-model. In these stories the detective's actions and operations are not presented through the dim mirror of a partner's mind, but more or less directly through the eyes of the detective either in first or third person narrations. This produces complex internal focalizations, due to the imperative that the ending must not be spoiled and the solution to the mystery has to be—and is mostly being—suspended.

A rather early first instance for this model is Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*. This long narrative from Melville's 1856 *Piazza Tales* relates a mutiny of African slaves on a Spanish sailing-ship. In more recent Melville scholarship the story has mainly been read in post-colonial terms of "narrative self-justification" (McLamore; Sanborn 171-200). Its analytic structure, however, makes it a perfect mystery story, though the detective himself does not know about his task. Captain Delano, commanding a US trading ship, lays at anchor in the harbor of an uninhabited island off the southern coast of Chile, and goes aboard another vessel: "a Spanish merchantman of the first class; carrying negro slaves, amongst other valuable freight, from one colonial port to another" (Melville 48). What Delano does not see—and is not able to see until the

very last moment—is the fact that the slaves have taken command of the Spanish ship, that they have killed most of the crew, and that they use the captain, Benito Cereno, as some kind of puppet in order to deceive the American visitor. All of this is revealed only at the end, in the last fourth of the story, after Delano experienced what is called "a flash of revelation…illuminating in unanticipated clearness his host's whole mysterious demeanor, with every enigmatic event of the day, as well as the entire past voyage of the San Dominick" (99).

Following the "revelation", the last part of the narrative recounts the pre-history of the Spanish ship through a testimony by Benito Cereno, a conversation of both captains, and a narrator's concluding remarks. These remarks, in their organized manner ("let an item or two of these be cited" [116]), strikingly differ from the way in which the preceding story has been told. In these first three-fourths of *Benito Cereno*, Delano serves as "reflector" figure (in Franz Stanzel's narratological terminology [190-239]) whose actions and thoughts are presented in a quasi-internal mode. Hence his "revelation" will surprise almost everyone who is reading the story for the first time. Just like the unwilling detective, readers are held in a position where they only too easily would miss the many covert hints and clues played into Delano's hands by the desperate Spanish sailors, and especially by Captain Benito Cereno. The sailors cannot express themselves openly towards the American captain because they are constantly controlled by the mutineers: a fact that Delano continues to misinterpret as a very attentive and personal service from the part of the supposed slaves. Instead of reading the signs, like a detective should, he does not even acknowledge that there exist any such signs at all. In one of many instances, Delano watches an old Spanish sailor tying a bundle of ropes into an extremely complicated knot (at which, of course, this sailor is surrounded by the alleged slaves). It is quite obvious, even to Delano, that the knot, which combines several types of sailor's knots, is a puzzle:

> "What are you knotting there, my man?"
> "The knot," was the brief reply, without looking up.
> "So it seems; but what is it for?"
> "For some one else to undo," muttered back the old man, plying his fingers harder than ever, the knot being now nearly completed.
> While Captain Delano stood watching him, suddenly the old man threw the knot towards him, saying in broken English—the first heard in the ship,—something to this effect: "Undo it, cut it, quick."…
> For a moment, knot in hand, and knot in head, Captain Delano stood mute. (76)

The old sailor's answers, clues and hints remain completely opaque to Delano. Although he does notice that something is wrong—that there is 'a case'—he fails to make any sense of it in his "struggle to comprehend" (Fogle 120). His later attempt to sum up the "curious points" of the matter (78) immediately results in utter confusion:

> Coupling these points, they seemed somewhat contradictory. But what then, thought Captain Delano, glancing towards his now nearing boat,—what then? Why, Don Benito is a very capricious commander. But he is not the first of the sort I have seen; though it's

> true he rather exceeds any other. But as a nation—continued he in his reveries—these Spaniards are all an odd set; the very word Spaniard has a curious, conspirator, Guy-Fawkish twang to it. And yet, I dare say, Spaniards in the main are as good folks as any in Duxbury, Massachusetts. Ah good! At last "Rover" has come. (79)

It becomes quite obvious from this passage how mental operations besides self-controlled thinking can be represented in the 'reflector' mode. The logical problem of the case being "contradictory" is doubly deactivated in the expression that the points in question "seemed somewhat contradictory." Delano does not manage to actually focus on the contradiction as such; instead, he turns it into a mere phenomenon, an appearance ("seemed") which he himself is blurring even more ("somewhat"). Though he tries to concentrate (the twofold "what then?") he allows his mind to drift: to the approaching boat of his own ship, to prejudices about the Spaniards, and to his hometown. It is not by accident that the boat is called "Rover." Delano's own thoughts are rovering, wandering—aimlessly, as one could think. But in addition it may be the second meaning of 'rover'—'pirate'—that already prepares Delano's later realization of the facts. Hence his final "revelation" would not be as "unanticipated" as it seems, but could be understood as the result of an unconscious, rovering association from "Rover" to buccaneering to mutiny.

Melville's *Benito Cereno* has probably not served as the actual prototype for many mystery stories, but the very concept of the obtuse investigator has proved to be extremely important for attempts to avoid or circumvent the Dupin-Holmes-role-model. From the mid-20th century onwards, examples abound in which the detective, just like Melville's captain, seems completely lost in a superabundance of traces and signs and tries in vain to control and direct his drifting thoughts.

As every reader of Raymond Chandler's novels knows, this is quite often the case with Philip Marlowe. He repeatedly notices how his own thoughts are going wrong, or to be more precise: how they have been going wrong—for an important narratological part about these novels is the distance between Marlowe's narrated self and his function as first-person narrator. This analytic distance, however, is hardly ever thematized and almost always underplayed. As it were, Marlowe the narrator follows the traces of Marlowe the investigator as closely as possible. As a reader, one has to keep up with both functions of Marlowe, with the consequence that it is often hard and sometimes impossible to follow the plot structure, let alone to be a detective in one's own right and solve the case before the literary detective does. It is all the more fascinating to see Marlowe do his double job as private detective and as narrator. The para-noetic method of drifting resides in between these two modes, as can be seen in the following passage from one of the last chapters of *The Big Sleep* (1939):

> My mind drifted through waves of false memory, in which I seemed to do the same thing over and over again, go to the same places, meet the same people, say the same words to them, over and over again, and yet each time it seemed real, like something actually happening, and for the first time. (206-07)

The difference between investigator and narrator is crucial here. While statements like 'Right now, my mind is drifting' or 'My false memories seem real to me' would be simply paradoxical, the expressions "My mind drifted" and "it seemed real" are logically unproblematic. However, there is no instance of outside reality or solid state of mind represented in this passage, which goes on over two pages. We stay trapped in Marlowe-the-detective's memories, which have been declared false by Marlowe-the-narrator, and in which certain plot fragments keep showing up—some of which the reader has not known before. The unsettling character of Marlowe's 'drifting' is operative throughout the novel, and the bifurcation of Marlowe as investigator and as narrator is its main effect. Already in the first paragraph of *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe presents himself both from outside and inside. These sentences are programmatic and experimental at the same time: "I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn't care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective should be" (3). Obviously, Marlowe is in a constant state of self-observation—which often hinders his mental operations. This is true, for instance, in a situation in which he wakes up handcuffed, guarded by one of the notorious Chandleresque platinum blonde women who may be suspect, victim, enemy, or all of it:

> Her eyes were the blue of mountain lakes. Overhead the rain still pounded, with a remote sound, as if it was somebody else's rain. "How do you feel?" It was a smooth silvery voice that matched her hair. It had a tiny tinkle in it, like bells in a doll's house. I thought that was silly as soon as I thought of it. (190)

In moments like this one, self-reflection thwarts purposeful thinking—resulting in experiences of alienation which are of extreme poetic density ("as if it was somebody else's rain", cf. Rupp 202-209 for Chandler's use of similes). This is all the more so since "Silver-Wig," as Marlowe starts to call her, sets his mind spinning. In the course of their conversation it turns out that what she has to say is extremely important for the solution of the case, but Marlowe does not seem to remember the relevant facts he had gathered before: "My head was too fuzzy. I couldn't be sure" (193).

This is a typical state of mind as shared by many detectives in contemporary literature, film, and television: investigators are unfocussed, lost in thought, or completely thoughtless. They may suffer from phobias or obsessive-compulsive disorder like the consulting detective in the American TV series *Monk*. They may have been struck by losses of memory like the main characters in the movies *Clean Slate* and *Memento*, the latter of which is narrated in two opposing directions. One of the characters in the popular German *Tatort* TV series, a detective superintendent named Felix Murot, has a brain tumor with whom he keeps talking, thus making him his sidekick (not very subtly, the name Murot is an anagram of 'tumor'). In the novel *Small World*, published in 1997 by Swiss author Martin Suter, it is the main character's beginning dementia that turns him into an investigator in his own case. Since the disease brings back fragmented reminiscences of long-forgotten events, the man sets out to solve a crime connected with his family origins. And in Jonathan Lethem's

Motherless Brooklyn (1999), the detective has to make use of his Tourette syndrome to find the solution among the arbitrary speech fragments uttered by himself. In all of these narratives, systematic and acute thinking is not the detectives' main operation rather than that their method is restricted to maneuvering through their cases. Often, drifting not only appears as a state of mind, but also as a form of continuous, yet half-conscious movement.

An interesting recent example for this type of drifting is Georg Klein's 2001 "Detektivgeschichte" *Barbar Rosa* (cf. Schmitt). The investigator and first person narrator is a strange character named Mühler—a variation of the very common name Müller, in which 'Mühle' (mill) and 'Mühe' (effort) can be heard, hinting both at a cyclical instead of straightforward movement and at the toil of the ongoing investigation. Mühler is well aware of his own dullness: "I know I am slow in the uptake" (Klein 15). In his search for a lost money transporter, he relies on "a higher stupidity of stumbling forward" (129), following his own methodical premise that the solution is given by the inherent structure of the case:

> The logic of a case is concealed within the flesh of its progress like a skeleton. Only by moving, from the muscular flexion of actions, I can tell my distance from the last logical conclusion which is going to solve and clarify everything, while I am still fumbling in the forefield of cognition. (81)[1]

Accordingly, the mystery behind the seemingly simple case is approached through Mühler's chance movements and accidental meetings. Moreover, the very texture of *Barbar Rosa* is full of clues which the detective, as it were, has to collect while making his way through the novel. It is especially the names of persons, places and things, and the recurrence of the title words "Barbar" (comprising the meanings of 'barbarian', 'bar', and 'cash', which is also "bar" in German) and "Rosa" ('pink') that contribute to the solution—but only by making the case more and more opaque for Mühler, who is unable to draw the "last logical conclusion" and continues to stay in the "forefield of cognition." Finally, in his obtuse mind, sober perceptions and somber visions cannot be told apart, and he loses his consciousness while the novel strangely culminates in the German national myth about the return of the medieval emperor "Barbarossa," creating yet another "Barbar Rosa" pun.

A character somewhat related to Georg Klein's Mühler is the private detective Simon Brenner in the novels by Austrian writer Wolf Haas. Brenner, too, proceeds by fumbling and stumbling. Very often he is haunted by unclear reminiscences of songs, poems, or jokes with missing punchlines, which turn out to contain the decisive, albeit sometimes belated, inspiration for solving the case. Another troubling instance in these novels is the extremely talkative narrative voice that seems to reside inside Brenner's head, but continually addresses the reader, prattling in an artificially crafted oral style with elements of Austrian dialect (cf. Martens). Only in the next to the last of the seven Brenner novels is the narrator disclosed as an actual figure, being both Brenner's observer and quasi-guardian angel. Even though the narrator

incessantly fraternizes with the implicit reader, he is fond of Brenner's abilities as a detective—especially of his techniques of observing. The fifth novel from 2001, *Wie die Tiere* (*Like the Animals*), contains some relevant methodological reflections:

> Observing is a science. But an unknown science, because basically you can't inquire into observing. It's like falling asleep, you don't fall asleep when you think of falling asleep, and you can't observe yourself observing. And that's precisely why it is so difficult to learn how to be a detective. Because it is basically unexplored how to observe correctly. Either you are a detective, or you're not. (Haas 137)[2]

The claim that observing cannot be taught and learned turns observation into an innate, instinctive faculty which relates the detective to the eponymous animals—and thus distances him from the emphatically human, intellectual faculties of thinking and reasoning:

> The animals are good at observing, there are these certain chameleons sitting there for hours invisibly, and when the fly shows up, it can't look as quickly as it is already sticking on the tongue. That's what I call observing, and in humans it's some looking round at best, that's nothing in comparison. (137-38)[3]

In the chapter that thus comments on observation, Brenner himself is busy (or, rather, 'un-busy') observing the house of a suspect. The narrator is full of admiration for Brenner's technique of making himself almost invisible. The detective seems to vanish, to blend into the background. However, there is a certain danger implied in the programmatically thoughtless technique of observing, and that is, falling asleep. The narrator enumerates a series of caveats:

> The inner calmness, yes, the composure, yes, but falling asleep, no. Breathing more calmly with every breath, yes, but no dozing off. Observing inconspicuously from the corners of the eyes, yes, but no dropping of the head to the chest. (141)

As can be expected by this point of narrative comment, Brenner does fall asleep, almost misses the suspect and comes a little too late to prevent the next crime. All of which makes the narrator sound a little subdued: "Now I'm not sure if I have to have a bad conscience. That maybe the first class observer wasn't as good as usual because we observed him too much" (149).[4]

This brings us back to the twofold observer logic in the classical Holmes-and-Watson-model of detective fiction. There the 'first class observer' is being watched, too—not by a curious stalker, though, but by a loyal friend who knows when and how to keep his distance. "Watching the Detectives," to cite Elvis Costello's song title, intervenes into their operations. Obviously there is an intricate observer's paradox implied. Though "you can't observe yourself observing," as Haas's narrator states, he does his best to creep into the observer's oblivious mind. This creates some kind of second-order consciousness which makes the detective lose his mindlessness and, thus, become dysfunctional. By contrast, the success of most literary detectives is intrinsically linked to their secrecy. Both the supplementary role of rational explanation in classical detective stories and the complex para-noetic arrangements in

more experimental versions serve to protect the investigator from being too closely investigated. The literary detective not only is an expert in reading traces, but also in blurring his own.

Notes

1. "Ich weiß, ich bin begriffsstutzig" (15); "eine höhere Blödigkeit des Vorwärtsstolperns" (129); "Die Logik eines Auftrags ist wie ein Skelett im Fleisch seines Verlaufs verborgen. Nur wenn ich mich bewege, kann ich am Muskelspiel der Handlungen ermessen, wie weit entfernt vom letzten logischen Schluß, der alles lösen und klären wird, ich noch durchs Vorfeld der Erkenntnis tapse" (81). All translations are my own.

2. "Das Beobachten ist eine Wissenschaft. Aber eine unbekannte Wissenschaft, weil man das Beobachten im Grunde nicht erforschen kann. Das ist wie mit dem Einschlafen, man schläft nicht ein, wenn man ans Einschlafen denkt, und man kann sich beim Beobachten nicht beobachten. Und genau darum ist es ja so schwierig, dass du das Detektivsein lernst. Weil es im Grunde unerforscht ist, wie man richtig beobachtet. Detektiv bist du entweder oder bist du nicht." My attempt at translation (so are the following).

3. "Gut im Beobachten sind die Tiere, da gibt es die gewissen Chamäleons, die sitzen stundenlang unsichtbar da, und wenn die Fliege auftaucht, so schnell schaut sie gar nicht, pickt sie schon auf der Zunge. Das nenne ich Beobachten, und der Mensch bestenfalls ein bisschen Umschauen, das ist gar nichts im Vergleich."

4. "Die innere Ruhe ja, die Gelassenheit ja, aber Einschlafen, nein. Mit jedem Atemzug ruhiger atmen ja, aber nicht wegschlafen. Unauffällig aus den Augenwinkeln heraus beobachten ja, aber nicht den Kopf auf die Brust sinken lassen" (141); "Jetzt weiß ich nicht recht, ob ich ein schlechtes Gewissen haben muss. Dass der Eins-a-Beobachter vielleicht doch nicht ganz so gut wie sonst war, weil wir ihn dabei zu viel beobachtet haben" (149).

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