

---

# Detective fiction and common sense

---

Mircea Lăzărescu  
Victor Babeş University

*Common sense, inner sense, and good sense are defined and described in a Renaissance context, with constant reference to fantasy, magic and long-distance erotic manipulation – with special reference to Ioan Petru Culianu's detective fiction and, in general, to this stylistic genre.*

**Keywords:** *Ioan Petru Culianu; common sense; inner sense; good sense; eros; magic*

Crimes evolved in the age of Enlightenment to such an extent, becoming so elaborate that in the nineteenth century specialists were required for discovering their authors (cf. Foucault 1975). This is how detectives emerged and, with them, Sherlock Holmes and detective fiction. The highly appealing model resounded up to the work of Dostoevsky. The idea was thoroughly exploited in the twentieth century, to such a point that a statue of Hercule Poirot was erected, while the closed circle of suspects in Agatha Christie's books was passionately traced.

## *Detective fiction*

Ioan Petru Culianu's detective novel, *Emerald game*, also deals with a closed circle. The action takes place in Florence, during the Renaissance, in the time of Savonarola, after the death of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Thomas, an Englishman who had studied in Padua, comes to Florence responding to the invitation of his friend, Pietro degli Ecatti, a specialist in astrology. But hardly had they met, when the latter is killed in Thomas's presence, barely managing to utter these mysterious final words: "The Three Graces." Together with Vittoria Pitti, Pietro's friend, Thomas gradually enters the universe of magical symbols of Florence high society, by participating in the meetings of Plato's Academy at Ficino's mansion. The second victim is the alchemist Lutzius, who had discovered the

The Poe Legacy

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to mlazarescu39@yahoo.com.



Sandro Botticelli, *Primavera*

alchemic symbol of the Green Lion. This time, the intermediate murderer is known to be a monk from Savonarola's convent of San Lorenzo, who has put poison in the victim's wine. However, the author in the shadows is still unknown, as well as the motives behind these apparently gratuitous acts. After a third murder – Smeralda Vespucci being thrown from up high during a party ending in a mysterious show – Plato's Academy, led by Ficino, concludes that these are ritual murders, occurring in a certain order, each on days of the week under the sign of a certain planet: Venus, Mars, Mercury. Deductions and calculations are made in order to anticipate the following victims. A particularly active role is played by Dr d'Altavilla, a Da Vinci kind of experimenter. Most of the predictions are confirmed and cardinal Medici is saved at the last moment by his own presence of mind. But the macabre killings of monk Arnaldus and painter Monteleone seal the conclusion that the criminal sequences all lead to the symbolic burning of Botticelli's painting, *Primavera* (1482), with a high magical-symbolical quality. Moreover, this is to be done with molten

lead, to mark the end of a spiritual age. After many suspenseful episodes, Thomas, accompanied by d'Altavilla, arrives on time at the place where the author of the entire diabolical and intricate operation is about to perform the elaborate ritual. The painting of the Three Graces is thus saved.

#### *Common sense, inner sense, good sense*

This masterfully written novel is entirely worthy of the status of detective fiction. But it can also be qualified as a monograph, because it documents the various perspectives of the Renaissance philosophy of the world, focusing on astrology and magic. It reminds of Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, both of them modeled on the same detective structure. However, it goes beyond its forerunner through the depth of cultural documentation. Nevertheless, such precise qualities turn out to be restrictive as well. It is a book addressing a select readership, requiring a certain cultural level and a particular responsiveness to the matter in case. In fact, it is the fictional "sequel" to *Eros and*



*magic in the Renaissance*, by the same author. Not only does it prove rather difficult to read, if disconnected, but it happily complements the above-mentioned work of history of religions. Therefore, it requires a closer examination.

*Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* has many original ideas. Not only does it skillfully demonstrate the central role of astrology and magic in the culture of Renaissance, but it also shows how the model of long distance erotic manipulation, as anticipated by Giordano Bruno, corresponds to mass media today. Thus: "Historians have unjustly reached the conclusion of the disappearance of magic with the emergence of quantitative science... The magician now deals with public relations, propaganda, market prospecting, advertisement, information, counter-information, censorship, spying missions or cryptography, as this science belongs, in the 16th century, to the domain of magic." (Culianu 1994: 153)

But all this universe of remote magic, for which Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake, is connected to a problem of psychology – developed by Aristotle and resumed by the Stoics, that of the *inner sense*. In fact, it is *common sense* (*koinos aistesis*) or rather the sixth sense, which brings together information from the five senses and carries them by means of air (*pneuma*) through the arteries to a central place, heart or brain. Along the way imagination (fantasy) intervenes as mediating and synthesizing element. But the air comes from the outside, through breathing. At the time of the Stoics, the *hegemonikon* psyche was believed to use *pneuma* and fantasy as well, for the synthesis of the knowledge the soul has perceived. But now the soul descends from heaven, from the suprastellar areas, and descending, it inducts the air. And, passing by one's dominating planet, it *borrow*s subtle matter from it – which, along with air enters the body of the newborn, imprinting zodiac characteristics of Mars, Venus or Saturn. The impact of stars on the character is thus pneumatically accounted for – an idea appropriated by the Renaissance, through the good offices of Hermes Trismegistus.

Against this psychological pattern there is a surprising newcomer in the book: Eros, that "something" that impresses *pneuma* which circulates through the arteries, something that

concurrently activates fantasy. In the Renaissance, Eros began to dominate fantasy and, through erotic ties (*vinculum in genere*) sought to influence others, thus deliberately working a subtle, long-distance manipulation of the masses – which seems to have been Bruno's theory in late Renaissance (Culianu 1994). In our case, the conception about the Renaissance world came to a deadend, which is what the killer in *The Emerald Game* lets us understand. The end of a spiritual era is authenticated by the revolutionary vision of someone born in 1484, crumbling the whole magic astrological edifice of that time through his ideas: the Protestant reformer Martin Luther.

The *Emerald Game* and *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* are complementary in every respect. Both of them have, with different accents, an extraordinary amount of information about the culture of the era. But they are not just works of science, mind history, or literature. The topics under debate are part of a large problematic chain. That is the central theme of common sense and inner sense, in connection with Eros and the imaginary.

The origin of this idea is to be found in Aristotle. In late Ancient culture the Stoics also cultivated the theme of common sense and fantasy, especially in connection with social life, with the common understanding of the regular ideas and conventions of social behavior, mediated by *paideia*.

After the Renaissance episode commented by Ioan Petru Culianu (1994), the theme of common and inner sense did not disappear. When imagining a new science in the post-Renaissance era, different from the physical-mathematical one founded by Descartes, Gianbatista Vico appealed to Greek and Roman eloquence, supported by common sense. But now there was a semantic and conceptual game that Culianu did not take to its utmost consequences, perhaps because it was not exactly supposed to be important for the era he approached: that of the difference between common sense and inner sense. The second concept implied the first, but developed especially under the impulse of Augustine's meditations concerning the temporal subjectivity of the human soul that may target transcendence through anamnesis, while common sense, as the sixth sense, is rather more oriented towards

agreement among people. However, as it brings together the five senses, these particular senses thrive in social events and judgments.

It is the case of the judgment of taste. Still in full Renaissance, Balthasar Gracian saw taste as a "spiritualization of animality," claiming that one could speak not only of a culture of the spirit but also of a culture of taste. The educated man must also be capable of making judgments of taste. Taste is not just a private phenomenon but a social phenomenon. Cultivated taste helps us make better choices, and turn down what is "distasteful" or "in bad taste." Taste in the cultivated world involves spiritual keenness, lying at the basis of social action "style." The judgment of taste also refers to the adequacy of a thing, in connection with "fashion," too. However, it was introduced by Baumgarten in the development of his *Aesthetics*. Kant examined thoroughly this judgment of taste in his third *Critique*.

The judgment that refers to smell, *flair*, is also connected to a special sense. It is about globally receiving and decoding the status of a problem in a relatively vague and confusing ensemble, "following a trace" and thus getting to know the solution to the problem. As it is about a detective story, *flair* is firstly required of the detective, and not only of him. Any practical or theoretical problem-solving involves not only deductive capabilities but also intuition and a special discernment, being able to "smell," to realize that "you have a problem," and then to see ways to its fulfilment. Operational logic comes later on.

Another special sense, tactile, will guide us to correctly evaluate subtle social situations. In this case, it is necessary to "feel the situation" and proceed with "tact," to know what *ought* or *ought not be done*. It is a tacit understanding among people without explicit argument. Missing tact leads to social blunders and to the exclusion from a group.

All of the three directions of some special senses relied on a "good sense of situation and proportions." But *good-sense*, which also derives from common sense, has a special moral meaning. Its absence does not imply acts which seriously violate morality, but explicitly expresses the inadequacy of conventions, a moral and cultural deficiency.

The judgment of taste, *flair*, tact and *good-sense*, as expressions of common sense, articulate our everyday life. But the common sense mentioned by Culianu (1994), which is integrated in the inner sense, has a much deeper meaning. More specifically, it was conceptualized in Scottish common sense philosophy, and given the highest expression in Ried's philosophy; it was resumed in the early twentieth century by Moore's truisms. His successor in the Cambridge department, Wittgenstein, quoted it as "forms of life" supporting the "language games" of men. But the Anglo-Saxons were not the only ones insisting on common sense. The whole phenomenology of Husserl started from the "world of daily life" (*Lebenswelt*) which is nothing but the world of our everyday life relying on common sense. Heidegger's great construction of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*, also invoked the layer of everyday life in which we are all inserted through our common sense.

With Heidegger, however, references went further into the philosophy of Kant. That aspect of the inner sense now came into play, and took over the topic of common sense in post-Augustine comments. The imaginary inner sense, supported by *pneuma*, summed up information about the world: the a priori synthetic unity of *aperception*....

Now returning to Kant one yet has to stop, without forgetting about the inner sense quoted by Culianu with all of the *Eros* and love force it brings into play, the Renaissance *Eros* which still lies in the depths of the collective unconscious, present in all of us.

### References

- Culianu IP (1984) *Eros et magie à la Renaissance*. 1484. Paris: Flammarion.
- Culianu IP (1989) *La collezione di smeraldi*. Milan: Jaca Book.
- Culianu IP (1994, 1999) *Eros și magie în Renaștere*. București: Nemira.
- Culianu IP (2003, 2007) *Eros și magie în Renaștere*. Iași: Polirom.
- Culianu IP (2005, 2007, 2011) *Jocul de smarald*. Iași: Polirom.
- Eco U (1983) *The Name of the Rose*. New York: Harcourt.
- Foucault M (1975) *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House.