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## THE NEW WILD WEST: THE URBAN MYSTERIES OF DASHIELL HAMMETT AND RAYMOND CHANDLER

by Paul Skenazy



BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY  
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*The New Wild West:  
The Urban Mysteries of  
Dashiell Hammett  
and  
Raymond Chandler*

By Paul Skenazy  
University of California  
Santa Cruz

Editors: Wayne Chatterton  
James H. Maguire

Business Manager:  
James Hadden

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Puzzles and suspense have always been a part of storytelling, and some loyal critics of detective fiction like to say that every story has a mystery in it somewhere. They trace the roots of the detective form back to Oedipus and to the Bible. But the detective story as a genre is a product of the nineteenth century; it developed alongside the new police forces and detective agencies in the new industrial cities such as Paris and London, which required organized forms of municipal control and law enforcement and which used scientific methods of detection. Early detective "stories" were often memoirs of famous detectives such as Eugène-François Vidocq, a criminal who became the first chief of the Sûreté and published a fanciful account of his experiences in 1828, or such as Allan Pinkerton, who supposedly wrote several books about his detective agency, including *The Expressman and the Detective* (1875) and *The Molly Maguires and the Detective* (1877).

According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the first reference to "detective policemen" occurs in 1856, and to the "detective story" in 1883. Before that, however, Edgar Allan Poe, after reading Vidocq, wrote the first fictional tales of detection: "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842), and "The Purloined Letter" (1844). Poe established patterns which would become characteristic of the genre: the upper class milieu, the locked room, the hero's "armchair" solution of a case based on secondhand reports, the brilliant detective and his somewhat obtuse companion, the ambiguous and competitive relations between the detective and the police. Poe's stories develop a tension between gothicism, an environment of terror which convinces us of the power of the unknown, and what Poe refers to in a letter as the "air of method," a veneer of scientific rationalism. The aristocratic Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin is the hero as mastermind, able to clarify, explicate, and thereby tame the seeming mysteries and confusions of the world. But he also contains his own contradictory romantic impulses and longings. Dedicated to control and system, Dupin remains "enamored of the Night for her own sake."

The real reign of the detective story over the English imagination begins with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories and novels of the 1890s. Holmes is a perfect late Victorian: educated, rational, a master of lore esoteric and local, a decadent eccentric both chivalric towards and distrustful of women and physical beauty. He is an imperialist of the mind, having absorbed the secrets of all time and place.

An independent bachelor, Holmes is able to live free from obligations to money, to civil authority, to the aristocracy. He is the master scientist of the city. Stalking the fog-drenched London streets, confronting a world of changing values and of wealth and poverty, Holmes is able to penetrate the seeming chaos and to discover within

it the essential rationality of a civilized order he never seriously questions. Melancholy and addiction — his violin and his cocaine — are the prices he pays for his clarity of insight and precision of mind; they are Holmes' version of Dupin's romantic imbalance. They remain only the mild and decorous indulgences of the world-weary gentleman tiring of a world grown overripe in the Victorian hothouse of Progress.

The Holmes tradition reaches its highest level of development during the 1920s and 1930s. These mysteries, written mostly in England, generally share an extremely isolated English countryside location, a small cast of characters, a central murder which disrupts the carefree atmosphere, and a detective who solves the crime and returns society to its everyday path. The stories are puzzles, like the contemporaneous crossword puzzle fad. Mysteries in the Holmes tradition provide a reassuring game with rules about the introduction of evidence, the development of plot, even the allowable complications of character and psychological depth — rules which, by 1930, were firmly encoded in critical essays for the writer-to-be. Such stories continue to be written, read, and enjoyed today, and by and large they continue to display and to confirm the sanity and rightness of a civilized, hierarchical social order.

At the same time, a rowdy, bastardized, lower-class version of the detective and mystery story began to appear in the 1920s in America, reflecting the slangy realities of a different set of readers, people more accustomed to city slums and the gangster world of Prohibition than to fashionable estates and country weekends. This new version of the mystery formula was quickly dubbed the “gals, guts, and guns” school of detection; or, only slightly less pejoratively, the hard-boiled, or tough-guy, tradition, after the seemingly unemotional persona of its hero.

These stories were published in cheap magazines which used inexpensive wood-pulp paper for printing and which were called “pulp”



to distinguish them from the "slicks" such as *Smart Set*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The Saturday Evening Post*. The successors of the nineteenth-century pamphlets, broadsides, "penny dreadfuls," and dime novels which made stories available to the growing mass of literate working citizens, the pulps were directed to a predominantly male, predominantly urban, and almost entirely working-class readership. Like their predecessors, the pulps fed the popular taste for escape and fantasy adventure; they too would eventually be replaced, by radio serials, films, TV, and comics. But in 1935 there were more than 200 different pulp titles appearing regularly.

Among the best of these magazines was *Black Mask*, first published in 1920 by H.L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan. Its early masthead promised "mystery, detective, adventure, western, horror, and novelty." Soon, however, the masthead reduced its claims to "Smashing Detective Stories." The pun, intended or not, was accurate. *Black Mask* became synonymous with a new brand of violent, exciting tale written by its stable of regular contributors, which included Carroll John Daly, Dashiell Hammett, Earle Stanley Gardner, George Harmon Coxe, Raoul Whitfield, Paul Cain, and, eventually, Raymond Chandler.

The names of some of the detectives suggest the tone of the stories and of the magazine: Flashgun Casey, Tough Dick Donahue, Battle McKim, Steve Midnight, Keyhole Kerry, Satan Hall. The first and most famous of the early *Mask* detectives was Carroll John Daly's Race Williams, whose "little peculiarity" was "holding a loaded gun" while he slept, and who argued reasonably that "you can't make hamburger without grinding up a little meat." A "man of action" who could "think occasionally," Williams lived "by the gun," and was, consequently, "hardboiled" and "coldblooded." In one story, a woman tells him that she admires "the animal . . . the courage in you. The thing that drives you on . . . just guts."

Stories like these offered their audience a kind of naive sexuality, in which passion was displaced into violence. Motive remained primitive, often sadistic. People acted rather than thought, and they seemed the victims of forces beyond their understanding, let alone control. The stories contained a stylized, romantic version of the ethics of the street at a time of disintegrating law, shifts in urban population, and the disruption of traditional social and familial patterns of behavior. The tough-guy writers presented the traditions of romance in new dress, in verifiable streets lived in by identifiable characters, in a language that seemed to be the voice of the people. At times this meant that bad grammar passed for realistic dialogue. Still, the stories represented an effort to reproduce on the printed page the tones and sentiments of a new, drifting urban population.

Although the writing was crude, Race Williams and his companions established two characteristics of the hard-boiled tradition: the hero's ambiguous social position, and his self-reliance. Williams' role was to be "the middle-man—just a halfway house between the dicks [police, in this case] and the crooks." As such, the detective takes on a multiplicity of roles and enters radically different levels of society. He becomes our secure guide into the habits and dangers of the unlawful. He leads his readers up into the hidden world of the wealthy, down into the "underworld" of the criminal, and out again, letting them taste of their own forbidden, immoral dreams.

Owing allegiance to neither the police nor the wrongdoers, the detective has moral principles that are individualistic and idiosyncratic. As Williams says, "I trusted myself . . . my ethics are my own." The hero becomes judge as well as crime-solver, his private ethics mirrored in the sustained first-person point of view so characteristic of the genre. The Watson figure of Doyle disappears, replaced by the voice of the detective himself. Vision and morality unite in the isolated perceiver, introducing us to his world in his own

terms.

Hard-boiled writing like Daly's and Hammett's grafts the form of mystery and detection onto several American traditions. Most obviously, the detective story is an urban version of the Western, its hero a street-wise cowboy. Both genres trace their roots back to the rough-and-ready American male, a typology that runs from Royall Tyler's heroic Mr. Manly through Cooper's Natty Bumppo, to the traditions of Southwest humor and the confidence man. In "The Gunfighter and the Hard-Boiled Dick" and several other essays and books, John G. Cawelti has convincingly enumerated the many parallels between the Western and detective forms, parallels such as the hero's pragmatic ethics, his bachelorhood and lack of personal ties, his suspicion of gentility, high culture, educated speech and all things artistic, his puritanical and knightly attitudes toward women, even his occasional fits of melancholy (*American Studies*, 16 [Spring 1975], pp. 49-64). The strong, silent detective hero was modeled on the pattern of the popular Western hero established by Owen Wister's Virginian, with his aristocratic roots and democratic heart. The social and physical equal of any man, the Virginian is a hired hand by choice rather than necessity, a child of the school of social graces educated in the school of hard knocks, the Jeffersonian aristocrat of talent.

There are differences too, of course. For example, in a Western there is rarely a mystery—a hidden, unknown source of evil to be rooted out. Instead of the Western's contest of social forces, and the sense the Western provides of a society still in formation, the detective story tends to emphasize moral decay, individual motive, and themes of deception and ambiguity. The city seems to preclude most of the Western's interest in community, except as a tone of nostalgia for a lost, simpler time, or of mourning over unfulfilled hopes.

Still, the parallels between the genres are striking, and the inheritance is clear; so clear, in fact, that Hollywood was known as the "new wild West" when it became the setting for 1920s pulp detective stories. The detective writers themselves have even occasionally taken comic note of their indebtedness, as in "Corkscrew," an early Dashiell Hammett parody of the Western, or in Raymond Chandler's frequent mocking of his detective's heroism by comparisons Philip Marlowe makes of himself and the old-fashioned Western good-guy.

One also discovers some remarkable merging of American realities and myths in the detective figure. The term "private eye," for example, comes from the logo of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency: a large, open eye over the words "we never sleep." Pinkerton was the largest and most famous American detective agency by the 1920s; its logo came to stand for the whole profession. The advertisement promised continuous vigilance; nothing slips by the observant, ever-available, ubiquitous "eye."

It is unlikely that Allen Pinkerton had read Emerson when he first designed this image for his new agency, founded in 1850. But when Pinkerton wrote in 1877 that his detective had to be "able to distinguish the real from the ideal moral obligation" and be willing to "place himself in antagonism with and rebellion against the dictates of his church," he echoed, if unconsciously and with more pragmatic intentions, Emerson's call to the individual American to come to his or her unique spiritual wholeness (*The Molly Maguires and the Detective*, pp. 19, 21). Pinkerton's eye reminds us of Emerson's Transparent Eyeball: the condition of naive clarity that comes, in our tradition, when trained beliefs and assumptions are discarded and the self "reads" the meaning implicit in the material world. The belief in such a correspondence of self and nature results in an asocial moral view that the single, untutored, untrained individual can respond to this outside world and can even solve its mystery. This is the same kind of message—what Tony Tanner calls

the "reign of wonder" in our literary tradition—that one sees in a figure like Huck Finn: the magical ability to perceive anew inside each moment, to perceive without being confined by precedent, to perceive from outside the prescribed parameters of the situation.

#### DASHIELL HAMMETT

Born in 1894, Samuel Dashiell Hammett spent most of his childhood in Baltimore. In 1909, he was forced to leave high school after only one year to help support his family. He worked briefly and unhappily at several jobs until, in 1915, he became an operative of the Pinkerton Agency. This work enabled Hammett to travel throughout the country. It provided him with an alternative home; he left the Agency and returned to it many times in the next years. And these Pinkerton experiences were his source for much of his future literary material. They were to him something of what piloting was to Mark Twain, or working as a seaman before the mast to Melville, or soldiering to Hemingway.

Hammett left Pinkerton to serve in World War I. As a consequence of this war experience, he developed a severe case of tuberculosis which was to plague him intermittently for the rest of his life. The illness prevented him from returning to detective work for more than short stretches and, in late 1921, forced him to end his Pinkerton career. Weak, uneducated, with a wife and child to support, Hammett enrolled in a business school, learned to type, and started writing short sketches. He quickly found his subject in his earlier life as a detective, and almost as quickly began to publish his stories in *Black Mask*. His writing did not pay well—a penny a word in the pulps—but his success was immediate. Between 1923 and 1931, he wrote over sixty short stories and four of his five novels: *Red Harvest*, *The Dain Curse*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Glass Key*. *The Thin Man* followed in 1934.

In "The Simple Art of Murder," Raymond Chandler says that he doubts that Hammett "had any deliberate artistic aims whatever; he was trying to make a living by writing something he had firsthand information about" (*The Simple Art of Murder*, p. 16). In a sense, this is true. But Hammett's comments on his work also indicate a thorough knowledge of both the traditional detective story and the emerging literature of the tough-guy, and the hope that he might be the one to make art of the new style. In the October 1923 issue of *Black Mask*, for example, Hammett distinguishes his hero from "the derby-hatted and broad-toed blockhead of one school of fiction" and from the "all-knowing genius of another." To indicate his own artistic intent, Hammett makes claims for his hero's idealized realism: "I've worked with several of him . . . . He's more or less of a type: the private detective who oftenest is successful" (p. 127).

This early incarnation of the detective is far from our present stereotypes. Hammett develops a new, unique mix of romantic heroics, melodramatic action, realistic settings, and psychologically plausible motive. The Continental Operative, or "Op," is a short, pudgy, middle-aged man who works out of the San Francisco branch of the Continental Detective Agency, with offices in the same building as the actual Pinkerton detective network. The Op is part of a nationwide organization of investigators. He frequently works with colleagues, and he often aids and is aided by the police. He reminds us that the original meaning of the term "private detective" was commercial and not individualistic: to distinguish such figures from public detectives such as the police.

Hammett substitutes the feel and tone of a certain kind of 1920s American urban existence for the atmospheric effects and ponderous pages of deduction popular at the time. His stories emerge from the hypocrisies of prohibition and from the prosperity, the urban migrations, the wayward, drifting populations, the new sexual freedoms,

the burgeoning consumerism, and the excitement of a nation on the make. He demonstrates the disillusion, frustration, detachment, and sense of betrayal that ring such lives and succeed such hopes, and the cynicism and hardness that become survival tactics. As Chandler puts it in his famous homage to Hammett:

Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley. . . . [He] gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand. . . . He put these people down on paper as they were, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes.

Hammett writes best and most often about the world of cops, bootleggers, hoodlums, and small-time crime. Apartments, rented rooms, and other signs of impermanence are juxtaposed to the substantial and serene residences of the wealthy. His "responsible" citizens seek release from boredom through drink and drugs, and become vulnerable in their dissatisfactions to confidence games and the promises of religious and medical charlatans. Drink and sexuality become metaphors for the separation of law and ideals from the experiences and desires of the characters: a gap invariably bridged by crime, and the criminal.

The detective's job is to enter this abyss and sanitize it. His accomplishments are often almost janitorial, removing annoying impediments to the security and pleasure of the client. He functions by the same methods as the criminal world he opposes. He abstains from the vices of his employers, covertly condemns their lives, but rarely raises an overt challenge, at least in the stories.

There is almost nothing of idealism in the Op's actions. In an interview quoted in Richard Layman's biography of

Hammett, the writer gives the Op only the barest hints of a moral purpose:

I see in him a little man going forward day after day through mud and blood and death and deceit—as callous and brutal and cynical as necessary—towards a dim goal, with nothing to push or pull him towards it except he's been hired to reach it. (Shadow Man, p. 47)

The essential word is “hired.” The Op’s purpose—his very existence—comes through his profession. Not only is Hammett’s hero less intelligent, less heroic, and less handsome than our fantasy detective, but he is a working man. He is without a name, except in his work. He is an organization man, a corporate man. We do not see him at home, nor off the job. He has no idiosyncrasies, no endearing personal quirks like Holmes’ violin and pipe, or Philip Marlowe’s love for chess problems. He smokes and drinks, but seldom in excess. A very occasional woman attracts him, but he never succumbs, and his own lack of sexual appeal is quite apparent.

Although Hammett says that he “didn’t deliberately keep [the Op] nameless,” he goes on to say that he’s not “entitled to a name, anyhow” (*Black Mask*, October 10, 1923, p. 127). The Op is an anonymous worker. He is intensely impersonal in his procedures. He likes jobs to be “simply jobs—emotions are nuisances during business hours.” His real intimacy is with his Agency.

In what was to become a pattern characteristic of the hard-boiled genre, Hammett developed in his novels a system of false plots leading to solutions with multiple implications. In *Red Harvest*, for example, the Op comes to the town of Personville, or “Poisonville” as it is known to its inhabitants, on one assignment. He is hired for a second, worried about a third. He eventually breaks with his client to work on the larger issue of the town’s corruption. Two murders keep our focus on detection, but these killings are surrounded by almost



twenty more.

Similarly, in *The Dain Curse*, the Op is hired to investigate a diamond theft, and ends resolving questions of murder, friendship, loyalty, witchcraft, and madness. The ostensible problem of *The Maltese Falcon* is an errant sister; the real question, a jewel-encrusted statuette and the deaths that surround it. Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* starts with blackmail and ends with a demented woman and several deaths.

Like a dream, the hard-boiled detective plot moves us from its manifest to its latent content, from the immediate situation to the past disorders. The detective becomes something of a psychiatrist, something of an historian, something of a seer, in ferreting out the deep and often unconscious compulsions that propel the workaday motives. The original story and ostensible problem may be deliberately false, as in *The Maltese Falcon*, or merely peripheral, as in *Red Harvest* and *The Dain Curse*. But the form of detection carries its own message of reality as multiple, involving a split between the given and withheld, the material and its meaning.

This tension of plots within plots also involves the detective. While the hero solves a crime, he becomes complicitous in the motives he discovers. The plot serves as a double, or an acting out, of irrational desire systems, creating a mirror effect between the hero-narrator and the villains and victims.

In *Red Harvest* (1929), for example, the Op claims that he wants to destroy the existing power structure of Personville out of loyalty to his original client, but this idealism seems a bit far-fetched. More pragmatically, he simply sees an opportunity to manipulate powerful and ambitious men, and he uses his chance to advantage. Whether we should go on to extol his communal high-mindedness or to speak of him as a Marxist hero, as some critics do, is less clear. It would be as easy to argue that he is playing what Hammett often refers to as

the "game" of detection. Part of the Op's interest as a character comes from an intense, if sublimated, ambition. He desires to win, especially to be victorious over people of wealth and position who vainly depend on their invulnerability. This does not mean that the Op is a friend of the "little guy," in the way that Philip Marlowe often is, but that he works in a rather curious tension between his job, which requires him to serve those who pay, and his own need to remain independent, responsible only to his private ethical code. And that code demands control. He must be the manipulator even while the servant, the covert power while the overt employee.

The control the Op requires is different, however, from that of a Sherlock Holmes. Holmes acts as a kind of librarian or computer, cataloguing and arranging information in his head, testing and hypothesizing like a scientist. His faith is in the ability of the human mind to assimilate and organize, and in organized systems as in themselves checks on chaos.

The Op's method is more pragmatic. He likes to, as he says, "stir things up" and watch the broth of violence, distrust, and unrest until he sees what "comes to the top" (*Red Harvest*, Ch. X). There is something almost Darwinian about the Op's tactics, pitting forces against each other and trusting his intelligence to correctly read the patterns which emerge or remain.

To do this successfully, the Op must himself be untouched by need or desire. Eventually, this vantage of invulnerability collapses, and the breakdown becomes part of the tension of the novel. The Op begins to enjoy his power and to enjoy killing, until he becomes "blood-simple" (*Red Harvest*, Ch. XX).

Hammett represents the breakdown of the Op's rigid will through two laudanum dreams. Dreams or drug-induced hallucinations are our entrance into the detective's guarded interior. They convey the hidden terrors of the hard-boiled male, the moments in which

repressed fantasies surface through cracks created by the strain of his work.

In his first dream, the Op unsuccessfully pursues a veiled woman around the country. But when he admits his failure to discover her, she finds him, publicly kisses him, and thereby embarrasses him. In the second vision, the Op is successful in his pursuit of a man. But when he reaches the culprit, he discovers that he is clutching an empty shadow of himself, as he plunges to his death.

The dreams reveal the Op's no-win situation. When he is successful, he self-destructs; he is both detective and criminal, pursued and pursuer. His "failure," though, is an achievement. Yet as the woman discovers him, she also publicly shames him with her passion.

The Op awakens to find himself holding an icepick which has killed Diana Brand, a prostitute who has befriended him. Thereafter, he can't relieve himself of his sense of responsibility for her death, although he eventually discovers the actual murderer. He has become vulnerable to his own mixed motives. Emotions are a psychological "underworld," a dangerous shadow self. That hidden self, like the criminal gangs, is untrustworthy.

The pressure of *Red Harvest* is nihilistic, providing no firm base of moral meaning. The gangs of criminals eliminate each other, but they will be replaced by new political alliances. The Op leaves Personville "nice and clean and ready to go to the dogs again" (*Red Harvest*, Ch. XXVI). He has beaten the old mine owner but only by violating Agency rules. In his victory, he has all but killed himself. He has sacrificed his code and lost his conviction in his own invulnerability.

Even more strongly than in *Red Harvest*, one feels in *The Dain Curse* (1929) the same terrible, magnetic pulls of impulse, passion, and emotion. They are forces so attractive, and at the same time so dangerous, that they can only be exposed in their excessive forms, as

addictions and obsessions, as all-or-nothing conditions of total weakness and vulnerability, incapacity and madness, the will overpowered and possessed. The Op defines his heroism by his power to distinguish himself from them, functioning as he does for Gabrielle Leggett, as a catalyst to self-discovery.

Gabrielle struggles with the first of Hammett's European legacies, brought home to continent's end. She sees herself as cursed, like her mother and stepmother, nee aunt, before her. Beautiful, with Pan-like pointed ears without lobes, Gabrielle's fatality is confirmed as everyone around her—mother, father, stepmother, doctor, servant, healer, husband—dies violently. She escapes her terror in the more psychologically plausible curse of morphine.

The addictions represent not only Gabrielle's inheritance, but her fear of the dark, passionate sides of herself, displaced into the uncontrollable realm of blood and drugs. Forcing her out of her dependencies, the Op demands that she be responsible for her desires. At the same time, he uses his employment as an emotional shield, guarding himself from his own powerful attraction to this waiflike temptress.

More threatening still to the Op is Owen Fitzstephan. Fitzstephan is a plotter, responsible for almost all of the intricate, interrelated events and circumstances in the novel. He preys on the obscure dissatisfactions and the needs for spiritual faith of the rich; the unsatisfied sexual longings of women; the affection and friendship of the Op. He is also a novelist who, as William Nolan notes in *Dashiell Hammett: A Casebook*, physically resembles Hammett (p. 54). It is hard to know to what extent the plot serves as a parable of the artist addicted to his power of creation and obsessed by his own creations. But it is easy to imagine Hammett portraying himself in the ambivalent friendship which binds the Op to Fitzstephan: detective and writer, hero and villain, savior and killer, the reasoning control and the uncontrollably insane.

For all its suggestive power, one feels strangely disappointed by *The Dain Curse*. Fitzstephan absorbs the madness of the novel, releasing Gabrielle, the Op, and, coincidentally, the reader, from the need to face the reality of the past as character and destiny. The contemporary setting, contemporary overload of violence, and San Francisco locale create a nineteenth-century Gothic romance. Our Fair Damsel, still virginal despite a marriage and the penetration of morphine needles, is freed from the deceptive fog of her European inheritance and her ambiguous feelings, and readied for a California sunset of happy-ever-afters.

The paunchy Op has become the chivalric, saving knight. And like the knight, he remains distinct from the consequences of his actions. His lack of complicity diminishes the significance of his performance, of his understanding, of his clarity of vision, and of his emotional control.

At crucial points in both *Red Harvest* and *The Dain Curse*, the Op works independently of his Agency. This split never occurs in the earlier stories, where the accord of personal ethics and business interests is complete. It suggests the Op's growing individuality as a character, what some critics call his "softening." Even more, the Op's tension with his employer indicates the transfer of the theme of work as a value from the corporate to the private sphere, and establishes the groundwork for the private detective with a name, who works on his own, for himself.

*The Maltese Falcon* (1930) begins with the killing of Samuel Spade's partner, Miles Archer. The day after the shooting Spade has Archer's name removed from the office door. And while the conclusion of the book develops an ethical argument for Spade's responsibility to solve his dead partner's murder, Spade is clearly glad to be rid of Archer. Consciously or not, Hammett opens this most famous of his novels by creating his detective's separation from all business associations, and

ends it by having Spade deny his love for and allegiance to the woman who, as killer, made this independence possible. The story of the pursuit of the Falcon that occurs within this frame also features alliances sought and betrayed. The book becomes a study of loyalties and of the ethics that might, or might not, be possible in a world of deceptions.

Spade's name suggests associations both with Hammett himself—he is the only Samuel in the canon—and with the themes of chance, deceit, and control: the trump card; calling something what it actually is. The opening paragraph describes Spade as looking “rather pleasantly like a blond satan” (Ch. I). This image is ironically juxtaposed to Spade's affectionate use of the slang term “angel” for Brigid O'Shaughnessy, a killer, seducer, and betrayer. At times Brigid calls herself Miss Wonderly; at others, Miss Leblanc. Such verbal play helps to define the false structure of the novel, the disparity between the seeming and the actual, and suggests the inversion of values that underlies the action.

These comic reversals prepare us for two interpolated legends which function chorically. The first is a vision of life as a random world of chance, anonymity, and uncertainty, offered in Spade's story of Flitcraft, a successful businessman who abandons his middle-class life one day when a falling beam just misses killing him, and then, a few years later, drifts into an almost identical lifestyle, in a new city, with a new business, a new wife, and new children. As Spade says, “He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling” (*The Maltese Falcon*, Ch. VII).

The anecdote not only implies the unpredictability of life, but also the fragility of all associations that seem to provide the individual with social definition: family, place, work, love. Inertia, rather, is the compelling force. Schedule and habit assert their dominance

more firmly than any personal commitments.

Spade's answer to this condition is to remain a loner, dependent on no one and able to adjust swiftly to beams or to their absence. Other characters marvel at what they call his "unpredictability" and decry what they describe as his heartlessness. They never realize that his sanity is based on an unmerciful acceptance of flux and change, an awareness which creates a pragmatic ethic of context.

The villainess, Brigid, is not only Spade's equal but, like him, a calculator and deceiver, willing to exploit others' needs. The two struggle for mastery as they maneuver for sexual dominance. In the end, Spade's decision to "send her up" is less a matter of ethics than of power. Or, rather, it is an exposition of the ethics of maintaining control. Spade logically itemizes his alternatives. On the one side, there is the "maybe" of love which, like all emotions, remains uncertain. Hidden, like the presumed jewels of the falcon, it is an undependable promise, a chivalric medieval quest. To escape with Brigid would make him vulnerable to her knowledge; intimacy is a shared secret, a revelation that transfers power to another.

On the other side of the ledger is Spade's work code, which becomes something like the leftovers of a superego. He is "supposed to" do something when his partner is killed. He is a hunter, so it is not "natural" to let criminals go. Finally, Spade says he "won't play the sap" for Brigid because she depended on her power to maintain his loyalty when she needed it. In a world in which one is either the oppressor or the oppressed, to act according to calculations is to lose one's freedom; it gives others the chance to predict your responses and therefore to plan their own. Spade must remain unknown, unpredictable, capable of anything and everything. He must be not only constantly alert to the possibility of falling beams, but a beam himself.

The other central legend — and deception — of the novel is the

falcon. Brought for its unveiling to California (as to the last frontier) from the Orient, the falcon seems to represent the continuity of history. It differs radically from the kind of familial histories one finds in most of Raymond Chandler's novels. There, the move to California is an effort to separate oneself from one's previous life and actions, to destroy memory and break with time. The Golden State seems to promise separation from the past, the chance to begin again as a new person, with a new name.

The title bird of Hammett's novel *links* past and present, the old and new worlds. "A glorious golden falcon encrusted from head to foot with the finest jewels," originally a gift to the Emperor Charles from the Knights of Rhodes, the statuette is a wonderful, if obscure, symbol (*The Maltese Falcon*, Ch. 13). Ross Macdonald suggests that it embodies

a lost tradition, the great cultures of the Mediterranean past which have become inaccessible to Spade and his generation. Perhaps the bird stands for the Holy Ghost itself, or its absence. (*On Crime Writing*, p. 16)

The falcon might just as easily symbolize the continuity of greed. Passed from hand to hand for generations, it is perhaps an empty tradition or a false tradition or simply a fake. The only substance it finally has is as a leaded, rather than jeweled, statue, in which the presumed mask and covering is all there is, clear through—a suggestive image in a book so full of deceptions and deceivers.

Whatever the bird might mean in itself, it functions much like the doubloon in *Moby Dick*, as a brilliant device for presenting the impulses of human dream, greed, and obsession. Alliances form and dissolve around it, people live and die seeking it. The power of its legend obscures national boundaries and local realities. Its monetary worth is an inadequate articulation of its power and significance. Its pursuit gives life motive and purpose, and provides



clarity for one's actions. Its acquisition would, by association, relate one to history and to kings. And it is this associative power of the falcon—the bird, the “dingus,” in Spade's memorable phrase—that Hammett develops with such skill.

In *The Age of the American Novel*, Claude Edmonde Magny calls Hammett's narrative the “aesthetics of the stenographic record,” in which the writer “has chosen to know nothing of his hero's feelings” (pp. 40, 41). Hammett presumably knows quite a bit about his character's feelings, but he reveals nothing to us as readers, recording the physical world with precision while keeping the psychological world a void. So the first-person narrator becomes two figures: a friend, whom we trust as our point of view, and through whom we perceive and solve; and a mystery man, acting inexplicably, knowing far more than he tells.

This split is essential to the maintenance of suspense. But the almost complete separation of the detective's reactive mechanisms from reportability also suggests a deep psychological break within the figure, a wound Chandler later seeks to mend. The Op's professional roles as viewer and actor seem to have destroyed his potential private existence. He either lacks an interior life or has no interest in recording it. It exists only as threat: as dream, as obsession, as vulnerability and weakness.

The movement to the third-person point of view in *The Maltese Falcon* extends these tendencies. Hammett's narrative voice makes no commitments, not even to his detective, and we must take our chances with him as with the other characters. Though Spade serves as the model for all future hard-boiled heroes, his is a personality one doesn't particularly want to know intimately. He is too deadly, too self-protective, too accepting of the dark nihilism of a world ruled by chance, in which everything passes, and nothing and no one really matter. Distrust and deception have become universal. The detective

no longer dominates the plot by filtering the world through his individual perception; he resides within a higher authority, or lack of authority. We trust and admire, distrust and dislike, at the same time. The change in point of view suggests Hammett's distance from the detective and his ethics—and perhaps also the disintegrating power of the figure in Hammett's imagination as an incarnation of himself.

Certainly something like this has occurred by the writing of *The Glass Key* (1931). A violent, even sadistic, book, it was Hammett's personal favorite among his works. In its way, it is a remarkable novel, close to total denotation in its language. It opens on a gambling table, with a magnified vision of the dots on a die, and it maintains the magnification of a world of chance throughout. It prefigures the experiments with point of view, objectivity, and materialism as method and meaning that were to come in the French New Novel.

A study of friendship and loyalty within the tensions of political alliances, *The Glass Key* is again about the use people make of each other, particularly the way the wealthy maintain the image of their purity through the skills and manipulations of criminals and gangsters on their behalf. Gambling and bootlegging sustain the peaceable kingdom of civilization. Hammett again writes a story of power, where knowledge comes through resisting the illusions that obscure one's ability to calculate with accuracy the sum of social and political equations.

*The Glass Key* is Hammett's first work since his apprentice days to feature an amateur detective: Ned Beaumont, a political hanger-on and full-time gambler. The events of the novel occur in an unnamed city on the East Coast, presumably something like the Baltimore of Hammett's youth. That shift of setting announced Hammett's imminent departure from California. He returned thereafter only for brief

periods of work as a scriptwriter in Hollywood. In leaving, he also all but terminated his career as a writer of significance. A few short stories appeared, and one more finished novel: *The Thin Man* (1934).

This last tale is literally a "vacation" story: a retired detective, who is also married and a wealthy businessman, spends Christmas shopping in New York City. It is told in the first person, but the person has changed: to a witty party-giving social delight named Nick Charles, who lives in the flamboyant mode of the famous writer Hammett, as the earlier heroes did in the mode of the young, hungry, and unmarried detective-turned-author. Nick is no longer part of the criminal world. He still knows the faces and the names, but not the life.

The world as Hammett depicts it is still dominated by chance and greed. It is still absurd, but now comically and benignly so. Nothing threatens; nothing is important. The "game" has changed to play. We get motive that is mere words, a string of maybes to wrap the package. The droll tone of the last lines is as polite a sendoff to the detective genre as one can imagine:

"Murder doesn't round out anybody's life except the murdered's and sometimes the murderer's."

"That may be, . . . but it's all pretty unsatisfactory."

(*The Thin Man*, Ch. 31)

On a smaller scale, Hammett did with the pulp detective story what Mark Twain did with the tradition of Southwest humor. Like Twain, Hammett had youthful experiences that provided him with a strong suspicion of life lived or written "by the book." Like Twain, Hammett expanded the range of American literary language through the freedom allowed by functioning in a "subliterary" genre. Like Twain, he converted a folk tradition into an artistic one by refining the colloquial voice and locating moral complexity in the

narrative point of view. There is nothing naive about Hammett's Op as there is about Huck Finn, but both are know-nothings, outsiders to the established societies of the respectable and the criminal. Untrained in social preconceptions, taboos, and sacred faiths, they are able to view with clarity. At the heart of detection in a democratic culture is the undressing of pretensions; the stories of Huck and the Op are modern, complex versions of the myth of the Emperor's new clothes.

At his best, Hammett presents us with a morally ambiguous figure for the detective. His vocabulary, one realizes, is almost devoid of moral or religious structure; good and bad, right and wrong, corrupt and pure are not elements of his, or the narrator's, language, though they become central to Raymond Chandler's point of view. Hammett's is a world of contest and context, winning and losing, struggle and chance. His stories are about survival tactics—about the habits of clear vision, the lack of attachment, and the constant wariness required to make it through.

Hammett's hard-edged voice of the 1920s emerged from the criminal environment and spoke to the pulp audience. By the mid-1930s, Hammett had grown distant from his subject and from that unique experience, the life of the operative, that he had to contribute to our canon of human characters at work. But for a time, he was able to translate that earlier life into a language and an ethic, and to offer a cold, unsentimental, stark vision which has never been equalled.

Hammett's works seem the product of a happy conjunction of man, mood, and moment. Four of his five novels appeared between 1929 and 1931. They bear the stylistic and thematic consistency and historical stamp of a single artistic impulse. There is a remarkable development in literary control and skill, but the exterior world of the novels is of a piece. They record a particular, if peculiar, urban

environment.

Hammett's California does not differ markedly from Personville or the unnamed Eastern city of *The Glass Key*. There are local San Francisco characteristics in the California works: Victorian homes, the hills, the bay, the inlets used by bootleggers, the fog. The particular ethnic mixes of California—especially the Chinese population in San Francisco—are essential to several plots. And many of Hammett's characters are migrants to the region. But there is no sense that California offers any unique opportunities for, or myths of, a new beginning or a second chance.

When Hammett does have a character speak seriously about place, it is in the context of anonymity and the need for defining parameters. Near the end of *The Maltese Falcon*, for example, Spade says: "This is my city and my game. . . . You birds'll be in New York or Constantinople or some place else. I'm in business here" (*The Maltese Falcon*, Ch. 19). Spade's loyalty is pragmatic. San Francisco, as home territory, is the place he knows and where he is known. He can win the "game." Knowing a place is knowing its power structure as much as its geography. With Spade, one feels that it doesn't so much matter where he is, as that he know where he is, and be known there. San Francisco is the place where he is someone.

#### RAYMOND CHANDLER

In contrast to Hammett's single burst of creativity and to his attitude to California, yet in a direct line of literary succession, are the works of Raymond Chandler. Chandler was born in 1888, six years before Hammett, and he died two years before him, in 1959. But Chandler did not publish his first story until 1933, when he was forty-five, nor his first novel until 1939, at fifty-one. Unlike Hammett's, Chandler's works seem the products of a happy *disjunction* of person, place, and times. He records the shifting Los Angeles landscape of

the 1940s and 1950s with a sensibility shaped by the early years of the century.

Chandler spent his childhood in Chicago and Nebraska until his parents divorced when he was eight and he moved with his mother to England. The two of them were made to feel their poverty while they lived with, and were supported by, his mother's class-conscious, educated British family. He was sent to public schools, trained in Latin as well as modern subjects, treated to the Continent to finish his education and polish his manners.

Chandler later wrote that he grew up feeling like "a man without a country":

I was not English. I had no feeling of identity with the United States, and yet I resented the kind of ignorant and snobbish criticism of Americans that was current at that time. . . . Most [Americans] seemed to have a lot of bounce and liveliness and to be thoroughly enjoying themselves in situations where the average Englishman of the same class would be stuffy or completely bored. But I wasn't one of them. I didn't even speak their language.

*(Raymond Chandler Speaking, pp. 24, 25)*

Chandler had maintained his American citizenship, however, and in 1914 he traveled to California to escape the stifling family atmosphere and his Civil Service job. He enlisted in the Canadian armed forces during World War I, then settled permanently in Los Angeles with his mother and went to work as an accountant for several oil companies. By 1930, he was vice president of three of them; by 1932, with the collapse of the oil markets, he was out of work.

Chandler was then in his forties. He was a heavy drinker. His mother had died, but he was married to a woman eighteen years his senior. He began to write mystery stories, working at them

systematically by rewriting the fiction he found in magazines like *Black Mask*. It was only in the 1940s, with his later novels and his film work, that he began to live comfortably on the returns from his writing. After frequent moves from one home to another in the Los Angeles area, he and his wife settled in La Jolla in the late 1940s. He remained a slow worker throughout his career, producing seven novels between 1939 and 1958.

Chandler made two major contributions to the detective form in America: the subservience of realism to a romantic quest, and the development of the scenic and verbal properties—the tone of weariness highlighted by the shocking simile—that have become a trademark of the crime novel. Both these alterations from the Hammett mold reveal directly the different educational and work experiences of the two men, as well as how, when, and why their careers began.

All imaginative creation is to some extent compensatory. Hammett's compensations came through enlarging the known and experienced. However stylized are particular elements of his work, and however adept he became with symbols, his stories and novels remained essentially referential. Hammett was a materialist, in his style and in his metaphysics. Writing was a tool to reproduce and preserve a particular kind of life he knew intimately.

Chandler creates an alternative world in which the aging writer turns into the middle-aged detective, and the sedentary British aesthete becomes an able, attractive, and mobile California native. He relies entirely on secondhand sources for his knowledge of police and detective procedures. His hero grows from thirty-three to forty-five during the nineteen years of the novels, while he himself becomes a weary, occasionally suicidal, and frequently alcoholic seventy. His detective's attitudes often seem anachronistic, as if he speaks from and lives in two times and two places.

In his preface to the 1934 Modern Library edition of *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett distinguished American from British detectives and justified himself as a writer through his experiences as an operative:

your private detective does not—or did not ten years ago when he was my colleague—want to be an erudite solver of riddles in the Sherlock Holmes manner; he wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent by-stander, or client.

(quoted in *Shadow Man*, p. 106)

Hammett's detective is never far from criminality. In this, he echoes the pragmatic morality of a figure like Simon Suggs—"It pays to be shifty in a new country"—or even Huck Finn. Huck's naive wisdom obscures his marginality. He is a scavenger, living as he can, lying as and when he must.

Chandler accepts Hammett's focus on the marginal environment of poverty and crime, but he radically alters its significance as a conditioning agent through his sustained first-person point of view as detective Philip Marlowe. After praising Hammett's amoral pragmatism in "The Simple Art of Murder," for example, Chandler goes on to say that "it is not quite enough," that Hammett's prose "had no overtones, left no echo, evoked no image beyond a distant hill." The echo that he yearns to hear and that he himself attempts to create, involves what he calls "a quality of redemption":

Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor—by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without say-



ing it. . . .

He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. . . . He is a lonely man. . . . He talks as the man of his age talks—that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness.

The story is this man's adventure in search of a hidden truth. (*The Simple Art of Murder*, pp. 17-21)

Chandler had the express motive of creating a contemporary version of the medieval romance tradition. When Hammett began writing, his first hero was nameless. Even his own alias, "Peter Collinson," signified "nobody's son" in street jargon. The voice of the stories came from the crowd. Chandler, on the other hand, experimented with "Mallory" as his hero's name in the early stories, and settled finally on Philip Marlowe, referring to Philip Sidney and Christopher Marlowe, a reference at once literary, historic, and chivalric. The name is natural and affected, realistic and symbolic. The detective partakes of the everyday yet is guided by the imperative "must" of Chandler's remarks.

Chandler writes of actual Los Angeles streets, and he gives his characters allusive names such as Quest, Grayle, Kingsley. He entitles his books *The Big Sleep*, *Farewell, My Lovely*, *The Long Good-bye*, *The Lady in the Lake*. He invests the sordid environment with romantic longing, with tradition, with an added grace note of sentiment. He also willingly mocks his own pretensions: the "sleep" is death; the "lovely" is a killer and the "farewell" a killing; the "good-bye" is long because a man betrays Marlowe and preys upon his friendship; the "lady" is a murder victim and a dangerous killer, the "lake" a discarded Hollywood set, a military base, a vacation resort.

These poetic evocations and Arthurian echoes function as irony

and emphasis. They remind us how romance and idealism have been corrupted to seduction and deceit, and how, even within the inverted and immoral patterns of experience the contemporary world offers, a kind of epic meaning remains, as well as a need for a "hero," a man "in search of a hidden truth."

Chandler writes with a double vision, as an American trained in England: viewing California, participating in its culture, and relishing the American vernacular as an outsider. He chronicles his adoption by, and adoption of, the state. In so doing, he also judges the changes in California in two ways: (1) against an earlier, more pastoral landscape, and (2) in contrast to idealized presumptions about this world which come as part of his persistent image of it as an alternative to the class-bound hierarchical system of social relations and language of his youth.

Chandler's novels are a sustained study of Los Angeles over the memory span of a life. As Thomas Reck has said, Chandler's city is "a kind of hallucination, a returning nightmare" ("Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles," *The Nation*, December 20, 1975, p. 661). But like Faulkner's dream world of Yoknapatawpha County though far more fragmentary in form, the Los Angeles Chandler has created is not only recognizable to its inhabitants, but has helped form our perceptions of the region. His books continue to be regarded as authoritative accounts of the realities of Southern California.

In 1920, shortly before Hammett began writing, Los Angeles housed only 70,000 more people than San Francisco. Between 1920 and 1960, San Francisco's population only increased from 506,676 to 740,316, or by slightly more than 30 percent. But in those forty years the state's population rose from three and a half million to over sixteen million people, and the population of Los Angeles changed from 576,673 to 2,479,015, or by nearly 500 percent. It is hard to overestimate the impact of this population explosion on both the

geographical and social conditions of the area. The change reflects not only the *myth* of California as a golden land of opportunity, but also the *reality* of industrial and agricultural growth. Such immense migration serves as a backdrop to all of Chandler's novels and stories, and occasionally even becomes the overt subject, as in *The Little Sister* (1949), when Marlowe mutters to himself over the changes in his city:

I used to like this town. There were trees along Wilshire Boulevard. Beverly Hills was a country town. Westwood was bare hills. . . . Hollywood was a bunch of frame houses on the interurban line. Los Angeles was just a big dry sunny place with ugly homes and no style, but goodhearted and peaceful. . . . Little groups who thought they were intellectual used to call it the Athens of America. It wasn't that, but it wasn't a neon-lighted slum either. . . .

Now . . . we've got the big money, the sharp shooters, the percentage workers, the fast-dollar boys, . . . the flash restaurants and night clubs they run, and the hotels and apartment houses they own, and the grifters and con men and female bandits that live in them. . . .

(*The Little Sister*, pp. 202-203)

Chandler describes the cultural, economic, architectural, and geographic peculiarities of this changing world, from the way neighborhoods alter in their class, ethnic, and racial balances to the styles of wealth and the fashions in clothes. His terrain is wider than Hammett's, and the car becomes a third home for the detective, after his apartment and office. We view Beacon Hill, gone to seed with its tiny rooms and battered apartment walls; we note the fine distinctions that separate wealth in Beverly Hills and Pasadena; we visit the unmapped (but real) suburban areas that ring the center, such as "Idle Valley" and "Bay City." The sociology extends to behavior:

brands of liquor; forms of gambling; tastes in jewelry, music, cars; the way a rich estate in *The Big Sleep* allows the family to gaze down admiringly on their oil wells, insulated from the stench of the oil itself. And behind these physical descriptions of homes and apartments and offices is the larger socio-political organization that sustains and is in turn sustained by it: the interrelationship of wealth, government power, courts and the police, and gambling, and their illicit control over political action and inaction.

But the main story Chandler has to tell is not about the surface alterations of the region, but the inner family circumstances of those who live there: how their lives intersect, and how the past re-emerges in the midst of present crises. With the prominent exception of Marlowe, most of the characters in the novels are migrants from other states and from other unspoken, suppressed, and usually failed dreams. They range in class affiliation, in wealth, and in ambition. They come to California hoping for a new start—or at least hoping to stave off despair for a time. They try to change their habits, their names, their personalities, discarding the past like an outdated fashion.

At the center of all of Chandler's books are stories of passions turned sour, defeated by the blindness of obsession, the destructive power of jealousy, the complicating distortions in emotion which come when feeling tries to survive against the grain of monetary greed. The central evil in this world is the usurpation of another's life, which Chandler's rich and spoiled characters such as Carmen Sternwood, Elizabeth Bright Murdock, or Eileen Wade assume as a privilege of their station. But this attitude is not the exclusive property of wealth. Inevitably, such egotism ends in murder, the consumption of another to feed one's selfish needs.

A coincident form of usurpation, which occurs in all of Chandler's novels and invariably results in murder, is blackmail. Blackmail in-

volves monetary payments which acknowledge the power a person acquires over someone else by knowing his or her secrets. Such knowledge is a violation, an unwanted entrance into the past. Here again, forced intimacy is created through an aggrandizement of another self. At the same time, the knowledge of the blackmailer creates a bond of shared experience which can develop its own forms of dependency. The blackmailer functions as a kind of supervising and punishing superego.

Blackmail as a crime depends on a particular kind of vulnerability: the victim's attempt to deny some previous experience. It reveals a failure to accept responsibility and a hope that no action is irrevocable. Such a vulnerability is only possible in a world of social roles, in which one's environment admits of a separated public and private life, where appearance is distinct from actuality, and where one's inner and outer selves have split. Blackmail is the individual form of a society's denial of the compelling power of history and inheritance. It is a perfect symbolic crime for Chandler's California because it spotlights a susceptibility particularly rampant in a culture which promises the possibility of self-fulfillment and self-creation.

Chandler's detective becomes an alternative model for the way the individual can impose himself on his world: a model in his refusal to accept judgments not based on equality before the law; in his disdain for the misuse of authority in whatever form, be it by the rich, the police, or the criminal world, the individual or the institution; in his impulses to forgiveness and mercy. As opposed to Hammett's violent heroes, Marlowe kills only once in the novels. And he is the one figure who won't use someone else's secrets for personal empowerment. The slang surrounding the detective's role — peeper, shamus — suggests his potential as a blackmailer. But Marlowe investigates to acquire knowledge — and power — only over reality, not over other people. Understanding is a solution, not a means to other ends. It is the

product of personality, not a shortcut to selfhood through accumulating the past deeds and misdeeds of others. Marlowe offers the potentially healing powers of self-acceptance, when knowledge might stitch together past and present into a whole, and responsible, self. He offers what he knows to his clients, even when they resist the information; he doesn't tease and finally withhold it, as the blackmailer does. Marlowe's ambition is truth, not relationship.

Chandler has Marlowe call himself a "shop-soiled Galahad" (*The High Window*, Ch. 28). When Marlowe makes his first appearance in *The Big Sleep* (1939), Chandler establishes his character through comic mirroring in the stained-glass figure of a knight "fiddling," vainly trying to untie a naked lady from a tree. "I thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him." And when he returns to his apartment to find the "damsel" in question, Carmen Sternwood, naked in his bed, his reaction to the unmaidenly beauty is to turn to his chess board and attempt and then reject a move with the knight: "Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn't a game for knights" (*The Big Sleep*, Chs. 1, 24).

The compulsion to realism and romance, representation and redemption, permeates every aspect of Chandler's work, from his hero to his plots and language. A part of him is forever mocking his own creations; another part, forever charging them with added significance, sometimes even more than they can bear. Such self-conscious mockery as we have here does not deny the validity of the knightly role so much as qualify it by triangulation of the traditional medieval pose in the window, the defined moves of the chess piece, and the ambiguity and confusion of the live individual facing the instant's necessities. *The Big Sleep* is not a "chronicle of the failure of romance," as Jerry Speir calls it, but a redefinition of the romantic roles (*Raymond Chandler*, p. 30). Marlowe speaks in a new, modern

voice, but he is no less heroic—and perhaps no more real, at the same time—for the difference.

Marlowe's apartment and office provide apt images of his relationship with the world. The office has two rooms: the first is an outer waiting area with an unlocked door for clients, and the second, protected by a second, locked door, is an enclosed inner chamber containing his desk, filing cabinets, liquor, a safe, and a calendar with a self-portrait by Rembrandt. His apartment also suggests Marlowe's efforts to maintain an interior world, preserved from intrusion. His home offers Marlowe perfection and purity. It is a sanctuary, a place of contemplation and calm within a world of intense movement. Marlowe retreats to his apartment to recover its "homely smell, a smell of dust and tobacco smoke, the smell of a world where men live, and keep on living" (*Farewell, My Lovely*, Ch. 28). He drinks, he smokes his pipe, he attempts to solve chess problems, and he replays master chess games. Chess, with its quiet, cold, implacable rationality, offers not only a formalist protest against the chaos of life, but also a perfection unavailable in the inconclusive speculations and ambiguous motives of the real world. It suggests the purity of art as opposed to the impure and finally unresolvable and unplottable aspects of reality. Every move has been calculated and ordered, every question solved, every alternative considered. Like a Hemingway character's escape to nature, Marlowe's retreat to his apartment and to chess helps him re-establish the clarity of his sight.

Intrusions into this personal space are equated with violation or, in the rare instances when Marlowe invites entrance, with intimacy. When Carmen invades, for example, Marlowe throws her out, airs the apartment, and violently tears the sheets from the bed. He locates himself and his personal relations in the accumulated meaning of his meager store of material objects:

This was the room I had to live in. It was all I had in the way

of a home. In it was everything that was mine, that had any association for me, any past, anything that took the place of a family. Not much; a few books, pictures, radio, chessmen, old letters, stuff like that. Nothing. Such as they were they had all my memories. (*The Big Sleep*, Ch. 24)

Powerful as such sentiments are, they also suggest the posturing Marlowe sometimes displays as a romantic hero, as if posing—or being posed by Chandler—for a portrait. Marlowe confirms his existence through such speeches. He articulates himself far more frequently than does a Hammett hero, who maintains his tight-lipped mastery. But while such exaggerated moments disrupt the rhythm of the novel, they seldom intrude in an extreme way. We are simply reminded of the writer behind the detective mask. Most of the time, however, the mask—Marlowe's first-person point of view—is sustained with extraordinary consistency. Chandler's "shop-soiled Galahad" maintains his integrity and our interest.

Chandler is less skillful than Hammett in his plotting, but far more attentive to individual scenes. He early rebelled against the "who-done-it" revelations of cause and effect which were expected as the resolution of the mystery. He himself tells of a confused call from Howard Hawks during the filming of *The Big Sleep* about "whether one of the characters was murdered or committed suicide . . . and dammit I didn't know" (*Raymond Chandler Speaking*, p. 221).

Chandler says he began writing to "play with a fascinating new language." His challenge was to discover complexity and meaning within the colloquial American tradition:

to see what it might do as a means of expression which might remain on the level of unintellectual thinking and yet acquire the power to say things which are usually only said with a literary air. I didn't really care what kind of story I wrote; I wrote melodrama because when I looked around



me it was the only kind of writing I saw that was relatively honest. (*Speaking*, p. 214)

Chandler contains his meaning in individual scenes and in the metaphoric language he uses to create them. In the brilliant opening sequence of *The Big Sleep*, for example, we are introduced to the patriarch of the family, General Sternwood, "an obviously dying man" whose "few locks of dry white hair" cling to his scalp "like wild flowers fighting for life on a bare rock." Sternwood is preserved by his wealth in a hothouse of orchids which stands for one part of the over-ripe, stifling atmosphere of wealth:

The air was thick, wet, steamy and larded with the cloying smell of tropical orchids in bloom. . . . The light had an unreal greenish color, like light filtered through an aquarium tank. The plants filled the place, a forest of them, with nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men. They smelled as overpowering as boiling alcohol under a blanket. (*The Big Sleep*, Ch. 2)

The other side of this insularity of money—the size and purity it can seemingly buy—is as artfully and economically suggested in the description of the Sternwood daughter's bedroom, a room "too big," with ceilings and doors "too high . . . too tall," a white carpet "like a fresh fall of snow," full-length mirrors, ivory furniture, "enormous" ivory drapes, and ivory satin cushions. "The white made the ivory look dirty and the ivory made the white look bled out" (*The Big Sleep*, Ch. 3). In both cases, Marlowe emphasizes the anemic, in-human quality of this world. Jungle and jewel, hot and cold, the generations split in sentiment but share an artificiality of environment, the deliberate residence in an unreal atmosphere.

Central to the power of such descriptions is Marlowe's wit, particularly that of his outrageous similes—aquarium light, the washed fingers of dead men, alcohol under a blanket. This language raises

the stakes of observation by introducing a second, more intricate, level of meaning. Here too Chandler can at times be accused of straining, asking us to step out of the story to admire his inventiveness. But his similes are usually remarkably flexible tools in Chandler's hands, able to serve as threat, as in *The Big Sleep*, or even as comedy:

I was as dizzy as a dervish, as weak as a worn-out washer, as low as a badger's belly, as timid as a titmouse, and as unlikely to succeed as a ballet dancer with a wooden leg.

(*The Little Sister*, Ch. 22)

At one level, the simile is a stylistic pose. It is the height of the literary. However descriptive, the extreme juxtapositions one finds in Chandler's books speak of *themselves* as much as the story. They remove us from the scene to the surface, and remind us of the self-referential quality of perception.

On the other hand, the simile involves a democratization, and a praise of the commonplace imagination. The elements compared are relatively simple, merely rearranged in unusual combinations. Wit is a weapon Marlowe uses to equalize the odds of class standing, wealth, criminal power, and sexual seductiveness. The similes help us have confidence in him as anyone's equal.

Language becomes a form of control. One of Chandler's most famous lines, for example, describes a huge, showy man as "conspicuous as a tarantula on a slice of angel food" (*Farewell, My Lovely*, Ch. 1). The phrase evokes threat, juxtaposes peace and frenzy, yet also belittles the significance of this man's extraordinary physical presence. Marlowe is able to respond to the experiences he has, contain them, and even rearrange and mentally compare them to others. The most surprising of life's juxtapositions is accepted, because the imagination has the power to surprise us still more in the conjunction of the contents of the memory. At just the moment

Marlowe becomes engulfed in the complications and confusions of a case or a lie or a physical assault, the simile overpowers the environment, reducing it to comparable, and therefore comprehensible, size.

Such use of the imagination also thickens the meaning of the urban world, expanding its range of implications. Nothing is only itself. We are reminded that we live in concrete and jungles, reality and dream, the known and the barely conceived. The similes provide a swinging door between limit and possibility.

The similes also move the detective story away from Hammett's materialism to an emphasis on perception. They are models for what the imagination might do not only to contain the unknown and fearful, but to solve it. Reality is not in the eye of the beholder, but it is not, clearly, only in the beheld. Rather, perception has a property of magic, a transformative power over the material world.

Chandler's moralistic impulses, his continuing struggles with the detective form, his determination to use it for commentary and even preaching, and his aged perspective on the California world become most overt in his last books, especially *The Little Sister* (1949) and *The Long Goodbye* (1953). Both expose the smaller cultures built into Los Angeles: the world of Hollywood, and the suburban landscape of wealth which would become the central environment for Chandler's successor in the hard-boiled line, Kenneth Millar (Ross Macdonald). Both novels are marred by a stridency, an archness and sentimentality, that loads the reportage with judgment, nostalgia, and regret for lost hopes and for a vanished era. Both are too long, filled with a self-conscious artiness. Both strain for effect.

Yet each has moments not available elsewhere in Chandler. They confront, though not entirely satisfactorily, the difficulty of time.

Marlowe is growing old. We watch him try to cope with his cynicism, brought on by years of disappointments, as he struggles to maintain the “good” fight in an increasingly “bad” environment.

*The Long Goodbye* in particular is a fine study of friendship and betrayal. It lacks what Chandler calls the solid “bony structure” of unforced invention that one found in *The Big Sleep* and *Farewell, My Lovely* (*Speaking*, p. 224). But rather than focusing on the failures of heterosexual love and marriage, or parental and sibling ties, it brings the relationship between two men to center stage. It speaks less to the histories people bring to California than to the histories people make there and to the problems involved in enduring the successful upper-middle-class lives these citizens have created for themselves at continent’s end.

*The Long Goodbye* also features Marlowe’s first—or at least first reported—sexual relationship with a woman: Linda Loring. This is followed in *Playback* (1958) by two more evenings of passion. Though Loring is not a character in *Playback*, each sexual escapade begins with a mental reference to her on Marlowe’s part, yet strangely ends the next morning with a comment on the sexual perfection, and nonrepeatability, of the casual mating: the one-night stand as epic performance.

At the beginning of the unfinished *The Poodle Springs Mystery*, Marlowe and Loring are married, and Marlowe is a loner no longer. What might have happened to this softened hero is anybody’s guess, though knights seldom have been known as good family men. Even Chandler seems uncertain of his hero’s future, worrying over the detective like an overprotective parent:

I think I may have picked the wrong girl. . . . [Marlowe] is a lonely man, a poor man, a dangerous man, and yet a sympathetic man, and somehow none of this goes with marriage. I think he will always have a fairly shabby office, a

lonely house, a number of affairs, but no permanent connection. . . . He would not have it otherwise. . . . I see him always in a lonely street, in lonely rooms, puzzled but never quite defeated. . . . (*Speaking*, p. 249)

Mortal, vulnerable, Marlowe remains, permanent in his lonely pursuit, white knight and greying citizen, armed by and burdened with the weighty projections of his creator.

Notice, however brief, must be taken of Kenneth Millar, who under the pseudonym Ross Macdonald has written knowingly of the Southern California area. Born in California, Macdonald grew up in Canada. Like Chandler, he writes with "the suspicious eye of a semi-outsider who is fascinated but not completely taken in by the customs of the natives." As a man raised "under a society of privilege," he finds a "rough-and-ready brand of democracy" in the West, and he explores "the American vernacular . . . as a kind of passport to freedom and equality" ("Foreword" to *Archer in Hollywood*, p. viii).

Macdonald's California is a world where cars, freeways, and airplanes have helped establish an almost continuous city from Los Angeles south to San Diego, north to Santa Barbara and San Francisco, with suburbs across the state boundary in Las Vegas and Reno/Lake Tahoe. Even California's landscape is not sufficient; as a character says in *The Zebra-Striped Hearse*, Mexico is "the real New World," the "fifty-first state" people turn to when they've "run through the other fifty" (Ch. 11).

Macdonald is a more self-conscious novelist than either Hammett or Chandler. A Ph.D. in English Literature, he writes with a keen awareness of the detective tradition, and he writes skillfully about the form as well. Lew Archer, the hero of eighteen of his twenty-four novels, takes his name from Sam Spade's unfortunate partner in *The*

*Maltese Falcon*, and his initial character traits from Chandler's Marlowe. But there are differences. Archer is a divorced man from the beginning of the series. He retains edges of the know-nothing, but occasionally quotes Shakespeare or argues Freud with surprising skill. He also has a memory. He is haunted by reminders of the past, regrets about his inability to sustain his marriage and raise a family, and guilt over his weaknesses of character. These pangs of remorse culminate in *The Doomsters* (1958), in which he meets and rescues his own shadow self in the form of a man he once befriended and then failed in a moment of crisis.

All of Macdonald's works are self-reflexive. Archer's career is only one among many that demonstrate the skewed, crippled, regret-filled lives of the primarily upper-middle-class California residents who fill the pages of this world. As Macdonald is quick to acknowledge, popular fiction affords him "a mask for autobiography." He tells the story of the "reclamation of a California birthright" in tale after tale of Californians who suddenly realize that they, or their children, are repeating patterns of action originally lived through years before in another setting ("Down These Mean Streets a Mean Man Must Go," *Antaeus*, 24/25 [Spring/Summer, 1977], pp. 214, 215). He writes his own life as a cross-cultural study developed through contrasts of type, bound by the themes of displacement and exile. Almost all of his novels are about California immigrants who come drawn by the prospect of a new beginning, in retreat from the life of the (usually Midwestern) past. Like Macdonald, his characters live, as children and adults, in separate worlds. Their desire to forget the past is their exile from it; the past's inevitable return suggests its haunting power.

Archer functions as a psychiatrist, what Macdonald calls the "mind" of the novel (*On Crime Writing*, p. 24). His own failures are the basis for his sympathy and insight. He refathers the adolescents

who are at the center of most plots; his clients become his lost family. His solutions temporarily relieve his guilt over his failure to sustain his attachments.

Macdonald's dual ambitions—to depict our contemporary patterns of behavior, and to write his way into his own heritage—often prove incompatible. The detective story becomes a family saga. The range of mystery plots is reduced to a retelling of the Oedipal myth. Individual distinctions of character, personal idiosyncrasy, and even the qualities of randomness and disconnection that are so much a part of contemporary California are swallowed by the psychoanalytic pattern into a too often unbelievable web of interrelationships. The explanations frequently deny the very abundance and invention that make the stories interesting. One gradually realizes that all the hidden linkages among the characters, and all the hidden motives that compel crime in all the novels have an identical source in the days surrounding the beginning of World War II. One discovers that the books repeat the theme of the lost father, the engulfing mother, and the child left bereft and psychologically maimed, until respect for Macdonald as a social analyst turns into curiosity about his unresolved personal obsessions.

Macdonald's work also suggests the incredible flexibility of the detective form as a personal and social language. Freak detectives, as in Roger Simon's *The Big Fix*, and gay detectives, like Joseph Hansen's Dave Brandstetter, now stalk the pages of California myth alongside the traditional tough-guys. The subliterate genre of sixty years ago has become respectable. Yet for all its edged brilliance in confronting the perversities of human character, the inhumanity of our society, and the debilitating obsessions that take hold of our psyches, it remains a limited form. Perhaps this is because, as Raymond Chandler once wrote in his journal, "the detective story is a tragedy with a happy ending." While it is a story that centralizes

death and demonstrates our intricate ruses for denying the lessons of time, the formulaic qualities have so far made it a story of death circumvented. Through the detective we are left to live another day, witness another crime, resolve another of the endless contradictions that mock our mortal days.

But if we are released from our anxieties, and if we remain unconvinced of our interest in crime, that reassuring happy end to the somber proceedings permits us to follow our curiosity into hidden regions of ourselves and our world. The formula becomes our entrancing invitation to explore our vulnerabilities and inadmissible mysteries under the protective, illuminating gaze of the private eye.





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