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Part I

1920–45

Sudden violence signifies a radical disruption of normal existence. Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* opens with the gentle and non-violent narrator recalling the moment at which he fired a bullet into Gloria's head; in Paul Cain's *Fast One*, Gerry Kells just wanted 'to be let alone', but has been 'mixed up in five shootings in the last thirty-two hours' (58, 67); in Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*, after 16 murders in less than a week, the Continental Op says that he fears he himself is going 'blood-simple' (139). Only half-jokingly, Raymond Chandler suggested that the main principle of construction in the hard-boiled thriller was 'When in doubt, have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand.'¹ His comments on the role of the man with a gun are a reflection on the reading public's appetite for violent action, but Chandler also argues in the same essay that the 'smell of fear' generated by such stories was evidence of their serious response to the modern condition:

Their characters lived in a world gone wrong, a world in which, long before the atom bomb, civilization had created the machinery for its own destruction and was learning to use it with all the moronic delight of a gangster trying out his first machine-gun. The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night.²

The noir thriller began to develop as a popular form in the aftermath of one devastating war and came to maturity in the two decades that terminate in a second world war. In its most characteristic narratives, some traumatic event irretrievably alters the conditions of life and creates for its characters an absolute experiential divide between their dependence on stable, predictable patterns and the recognition that life is, in truth, morally chaotic, subject to randomness and total dislocation. In the best-known parable of ordinary life disrupted, Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade tells the story of Flitcraft, who comes to realise life's arbitrariness and absurdity when he is nearly killed by a falling beam. The thrillers of the period repeatedly represent the sort of transformation that leaves the protagonist feeling, as Flitcraft does, that 'someone had taken the lid off life and let him look at the works' (*The Maltese Falcon*, 429). In one of Benjamin Appel's stories, 'Brothers in Hell's Kitchen' (1935), two brothers fail to understand one another because only the elder has gone through World War One and therefore 'couldn't be the same inside'; the younger, at the end, thinks he has gained the upper hand over the brother who is 'all wiped up', but then

reflects, 'ME, I'm younger, I got something ahead of me. What, he thought, another war?' (*Hell's Kitchen*, 124–5). This sense of disillusionment in the years between the wars was heightened by political and economic disasters for which people were wholly unprepared. In America there was the folly of Prohibition and its attendant gangsterism, as well as growing evidence of illicit connections between crime, business and politics in American cities. Crises afflicted both American and European economies, bringing the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression, which Keynes saw as the worst catastrophe of modern times. With the failure of parliamentary governments in Europe and the rise of totalitarian dictatorships, there was the spectre of another war.

In the noir fiction of this period, the anxious sense of fatality is usually attached to a pessimistic conviction that economic and socio-political circumstances will deprive people of control over their lives by destroying their hopes and by creating in them the weaknesses of character that mark them out as victims. In post-World War Two thrillers, a protagonist's fate is most often linked to difference from others, to an isolating inability or refusal to conform to conventional expectations. Interwar thrillers, on the other hand, incline to economic determinism, stressing the pressures exerted by an economically unjust and fragmenting society. Where the psychology of the characters is explored, it is predominantly in terms of ordinary human shortcomings. For example, obsession with success, aggressive drives, self-deception and lying to others are presented as weaknesses of character that precipitate disaster under the strain of adverse socio-economic conditions. The thrillers of this period are frequently described as 'harshly realistic', but their focus on the real conditions and problems of interwar society is repeatedly joined to the fantastic and the symbolic. Violence itself, though it is sometimes no more than 'thriller sensationalism', can take on symbolic force, as, for example, in Hammett's *Red Harvest* or Paul Cain's *Fast One*. There are heightened, sometimes surreal descriptions of threatening and oppressive scenes or of destruction and viciousness. Amongst the most memorable images of the period's thrillers are the hellishness of Daly's Satan Hall stories and of Hammett's *Red Harvest*, the terrible brutality of a corrupt society encountered in Burnett's *Little Caesar* and Armitage Trail's *Scarface*, the blackly satiric or tragic scenes of entrapment by misfortune that dominate McCoy's novels and the work of James M. Cain. This combination of abrasive realism and satiric intensification is a hallmark of tough-guy writing. As David Madden argues in *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, these are novels that provide

'stylised exaggeration of very real traits in the American character . . . the nightmare version of the American Dream'.³

The preoccupation with characters goaded or defeated by adversity was often interpreted, by interwar critics of both the tough thriller and *film noir*, as an acceptance or even encouragement of moral bankruptcy. It was seen as a form of collusion in the neurosis and violence of the world depicted. George Orwell, for example, in 'Raffles and Miss Blandish' (1944), attacked James Hadley Chase (René Raymond) and his 'half-understood import from America' as a debased expression of the 'moral atmosphere' of the age that witnessed the rise of fascism:

In his imagined world of gangsters Chase is presenting, as it were, a distilled version of the modern political scene, in which such things as mass bombings of civilians, the use of hostages, torture to obtain confessions, secret prisons, execution without trial, floggings with rubber truncheons, drownings in cesspools, systematic falsification of records and statistics, treachery, bribery and quislingism are normal and morally neutral, even admirable when they are done in a large and bold way.

The essay complains that 'lowbrow fiction' has followed modernist literature and the 'serious novel' (Lawrence, for example) in abandoning all sense of 'a sharp distinction between right and wrong and between legality and illegality'. It is one thing for the intelligentsia to think in this way, but quite another for the mass of the population: now that 'Freud and Machiavelli have reached the outer suburbs', the 'common people' will lose completely their moral bearings.⁴

Orwell's criticism is echoed in John Houseman's often quoted disparagement (in 1947) of *film noir* as lacking in moral energy, giving in to 'fatalistic despair' and representing people 'groping their way through a twilight of insecurity and corruption'.⁵ Like Chandler's assertion of the 'authentic power' of such thrillers, the comments of Orwell and Houseman focus on social and political content – on the fact that these films and novels refer to a world in crisis, destabilised by one war and moving into another. Orwell's protest is a backhanded acknowledgement of the relevance of the newer kind of crime novel to events in Europe (a relevance made clear, for example, in Brecht's or Graham Greene's use of mythologised gangsters as emblems of fascist violence). What Orwell in effect denies is that such fiction can do more than 'express' the disintegrating moral atmosphere of the time. To take his

own example, the truth of the matter is that, beneath the surface of the American tough-guy pastiche, Chase *is* exploring the pressing question (one raised by many British thrillers of the thirties), that is, the extent to which passivity should be judged culpable in the face of psychopathic violence. For most writers of the time, such themes are much more to the fore than they are in *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. In taking as their subject what Ezra Pound called ‘disillusions never told in the old days’, ‘serious’ thriller writers of the interwar period judge the society portrayed. In breaking with the existing conventions of the detective novel, they provide, from the early twenties on, a form of popular fiction that deals critically with the ‘wrongness’ of ‘a world gone wrong’ and that confronts the catastrophes brought about by the intrusion of violence, the betrayal of trust and the corrupt exercise of power.

The noir thriller had its forerunners (Conrad, Dickens, Dostoevsky, amongst others), but the 1920s was the period in which it became firmly established as popular fiction. The label ‘hard-boiled’ began to be applied, distinguishing this departure in crime-writing from the classic detective story. The most important publication of the twenties in encouraging and marketing the new kind of crime story was *Black Mask*. The magazine was founded in 1920 by H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, who sold it after half a year, and from then on it was given over to crime, adventure and western stories. In the early 1920s, Dashiell Hammett and Carroll John Daly began writing for *Black Mask*, and the identity of the magazine became more sharply defined when the editorship was taken over in 1926 by Captain Joseph T. Shaw. Shaw encouraged a high standard of colloquial, racy writing, favouring ‘economy of expression’ and ‘authenticity in character and action’,⁶ all of which are important features of the hard-boiled style. Shaw greatly increased the circulation of *Black Mask*, and other pulp magazines (for example, *Dime Detective*, *Detective Fiction Weekly*, *Black Aces*) were soon competing in some numbers. Several of the writers discussed in this section were amongst the regular contributors to *Black Mask*: in addition to Daly and Hammett, Frederick Nebel, Raoul Whitfield, Paul Cain (George Sims), Raymond Chandler, Horace McCoy.

Although much ‘hard-boiled’ fiction is in essential respects closer to the traditional adventure story than to ‘noir’, there is considerable common ground. In examining the development of literary noir, I will begin with a discussion of the American hard-boiled investigator – a tough, independent, often solitary figure, a descendant of the frontier hero and cowboy but, as reimagined in the 1920s, a cynical city-dweller: ‘He finds no way out. And so he is slugged, shot at, choked, doped, yet

he survives because it is in his nature to survive.⁷ He can achieve a degree of control, but, unlike the classic Holmesian detective, he cannot restore order and set all to rights. The basic narrative pattern pits this lone investigator against brutal criminals, often in league with a corrupt power structure. His function is in some respects analogous to that of the satirist:⁸ he exposes and punishes, though by no means always claiming the moral high ground. One of the main contrasts I will look at in the hard-boiled stories and novels of this period is that between two types of investigators: on the one hand, those who possess some form of moral superiority (Chandler's Marlowe comes first to mind); on the other, those who are more implicated in the world of corruption, depicted as entering into a scene of disorder and acknowledging their own anarchic tendencies and capacity for violence (as in the novels of Hammett, Paul Cain and Raoul Whitfield). These 'compromised' investigators are key figures in the evolution of literary noir, which, as it develops in the late 1920s and the 1930s, turns to the portrayal of deeply flawed, transgressive, often criminal protagonists.

In the thrillers of this time it is the character of the male protagonist that has the clearest relationship to the novel's theme and structure. In contrast to the post-World War Two period, the roles of female characters tend not to be of determining importance. The women represented are often defined primarily as the helpers of the men, either as, say, the gangster's moll or as the basically tough, good girl who helps the down-trodden gangster or endangered victim (for example, Marie in Burnett's *High Sierra*, Keechie in Anderson's *Thieves Like Us*, the character of Midnight in Woolrich's *Black Path of Fear*, the Communist heroine in *No Pockets in a Shroud* and Grandquist in *Fast One*). There are some notable examples of the femme fatale in Chandler's novels and occasionally in the work of Hammett and James M. Cain, but it is only really with the post-World War Two boom in paperback thrillers that this iconic figure comes into her own. My main subject in this section, then, will be the shifting representations of the male protagonists. The second and third chapters will deal, respectively, with the criminal and the victim. In Chapter 2, I look at the novels of Paul Cain, James M. Cain, W. R. Burnett, Armitage Trail (Maurice Coons), Benjamin Appel, Edward Anderson and Ernest Hemingway, and consider the various ways in which crime-centred narratives use the rebellious figure of the criminal and the hierarchical structure of the criminal organisation both to challenge and to ironise capitalism and the business ethic. Having made a career of illegality, the gangster functions as the dark double of 'respectable' society, undermining its claims to legitimacy and parody-

ing the American drive to succeed. Chapter 3 focuses on the ordinary man as victim, wrongly persecuted or finding himself doomed to failure in the commission of a crime. A weak and ineffectual character, the victim-protagonist lacks the survival skills of the investigator or gangster; he can serve a purpose within the novel comparable to that of the satiric naif who acts as foil to those who are corruptly competent. In the American novels included here (by, for example, Horace McCoy, James M. Cain, Richard Hallas [Eric Knight] and Cornell Woolrich) economic determinism is often very pronounced, as it is, of course, in other naturalistic fiction of the time. Characters have little scope for effective action, and the narratives tend towards bleak, suicidal pessimism.

The second and third chapters also include British thrillers of the interwar period. At a time when the main threat of violence seemed to come from the rise of aggressive continental political ideologies, writers of serious British thrillers – Eric Ambler, for example, and Graham Greene – tended to cast the armed gangster in the role of fascist thug and to represent the victim-protagonist as a man who hesitates to act against fascist violence for fear of losing his own humanity. In novels such as these, narratives are often constructed in a way that foregrounds Orwell's equation of criminal brutality with the atrocities of the 'modern political scene'. They aim, however, not simply to shock but to explore the dangerous dilemmas faced by those accustomed to what Orwell, in another essay of the time ('Wells, Hitler and the World State'), called 'the sheltered conditions of English life'.⁹

1

Hard-boiled Investigators

At the end of *The Maltese Falcon* (1930), Brigid O'Shaughnessy asks Sam Spade whether he would have treated her differently if he had received his share of the money from the sale of a genuine falcon. "Don't be too sure I'm as crooked as I'm supposed to be," Spade replies. "That kind of reputation might be good business – bringing in high-priced jobs and making it easier to deal with the enemy." His answer suggests the ambivalent position of the archetypal hard-boiled investigator. Self-aware and self-mocking, he acknowledges that he is often seen as indistinguishable from the crooks with whom he has to deal. However, while he readily admits looking after his own financial interests, he is not ultimately motivated by greed. In spite of his apparent amorality and tough cynicism, Spade does have at least some standards – a personal code against which unscrupulous 'enemies' and the disorder they create can be judged. The label 'hard-boiled' is often used synonymously with 'noir'.¹ Although this is to some extent misleading, there is substantial overlap, and much of the best noir crime fiction is unquestionably hard-boiled. Both labels connote the use of crime stories to provide insights into the socio-political disorders and moral dilemmas of the time in which they are written; they look critically at the illusions and hypocrisy, the rotten power structures and the brutal injustices of a superficially respectable society. Protagonists tend to be isolated and estranged, existing on the margins of society and, as outsiders, capable of seeing with a satirist's eye. As much as anything, it is the investigator's ability to strip away pretence and reveal the sources of corruption that gives him his effective agency, enabling him to survive in (and giving him a kind of freedom within) a hazardous environment.

'Hard-boiled' and 'noir' can both refer to narratives that have as their protagonists predators or victims as well as investigators. It is the tough,

independent investigator, though, who is most strongly associated with the hard-boiled tradition. Most accounts of this figure begin with the *Black Mask*, which from 1923 on printed the kind of tough crime stories in American settings that became one of the key points of origin for American hard-boiled writing. The focus of these stories is on the activity of exposure, but this activity involves much more attendant danger and moral uncertainty than there is in the orthodox detective story, with its puzzle-solving sleuths analysing clues and providing rational solutions. The hard-boiled investigator not only enquires into entrenched power structures but engages in combat against them and can choose to inflict punishment. This enforcer element, the individualist ethic of taking things into one's own hands, is particularly marked in some of the early *Black Mask* stories. In the retrospective investigations of the 'Golden Age' of crime fiction, the detectives of Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers or S. S. Van Dine are themselves insulated from the crime that has taken place. In the characteristic *Black Mask* story, on the other hand, every case becomes part of an ongoing sequence of violent events. The time of the crime and the time of the investigation are no longer separate. Narratives are commonly, though not invariably, in the first person, and the narrator's own sense of control is always open to challenge: he is 'caught in a narrative that writes him as much as he writes it',² and thus cannot have the aloofness and detachment of the classic detective. There are, however, a variety of positions from which such an investigation can be conducted, and narratives can be classified in terms of the psychological and moral distance of the protagonist from the world of crime investigated.

The archetypal hard-boiled character is, of course, the private eye. He is the figure most often analysed in comparisons between hard-boiled crime fiction and classic detective fiction, to the extent that comparisons with the white male hard-boiled tradition (for example, in analyses of female-authored or black crime fiction) are generally constructed solely with reference to Hammett's Sam Spade or Chandler's 'crusader/knight' of the mean streets. The private eye, in a way no less than the traditional detective, can function as a very positive figure. Many private eyes, adhering to an individualistic core of values, are distanced from the world investigated by qualities that ultimately distinguish them from those 'on the wrong side of the fence'.³ Their characterisation can be seen as based in 'romantic images of the lone male – strong, brave, independent – a compendium of the *macho* values apparently so popular in American society'.⁴ This summing up of the nature of the private eye is a fair enough description of the kind of protagonist

popularised by Chandler and his heirs (for example, Howard Browne, Richard S. Prather and Robert B. Parker) and by such contemporaries as Frederick Nebel, Carroll John Daly and George Harmon Coxe. These are writers who created a gallery of breezily macho action heroes whose hard-boiled manner gives a tough veneer either to fairly traditional detection or to high-spirited adventure tales, rather than compelling us to enter the despondent, morally insecure world of noir.

The romantic crusader image does not, however, apply nearly so well to other investigative figures of the thirties. Hammett, for example, can be credited with the inauguration of an altogether less comfortable kind of crime fiction. He introduced characters who much more nearly conform to the description of the private eye as 'half gangster' – a man whose innocence has become so tarnished as to be no longer visible, and who is a close relation of the crook-as-investigator protagonists who emerge in other thrillers of the early thirties. The range of investigators, then, is considerable. At one end of the scale, often presented in a lightly comic manner, is the Marlowe-like private eye of unshakeable integrity, together with such honourable private eye substitutes as tenacious reporters and newspaper photographers, and the triumphantly pugna-cious action hero. At the other end are Hammett's decidedly unknightly Continental Op on his more turbulent days and other protagonists who lack even the legitimate credentials of private eyes and news hounds – the ex-cons or the hard-bitten strong-arm men to be found in the work of Raoul Whitfield and Paul Cain. As is evident even from the cover art of the period (see Figure 2), criminals and investigators can often appear to be indistinguishable.

From pulp heroics to Poisonville

The divergent possibilities within hard-boiled fiction – in terms of tone, narrative resolution, characterisation and moral vision – are apparent from the outset in the work of 'the *Black Mask* boys', sometimes within the work of a single writer. So, for example, Frederick Nebel, a good friend of Hammett's and one of the most popular of the early *Black Mask* contributors,⁵ uses grim urban settings and writes in a tough style ("Now pipe this, you eggs . . ." ⁶). His stories and novels often darkly delineate a Depression America that is greedy, politically corrupt and morally chaotic, in which only the tough can survive. In his first novel, *Sleepers East* (1933), a journey brings together people involved in concealing a murder that has serious political ramifications, leaving characters caught up in 'a vast contraption whose existence depended on

Figure 2 The hard-boiled investigator: Pocket Books 1943 edition of Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key*

the co-ordination of all the other cogs' (113). One of his stories was adapted as a film, *The Bribe* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1949), which contains enough noir elements (pervasive corruption, a sense of defeat and betrayal) to bring it within canonical *film noir*.⁷ His 'Tough Dick' Donohue can be counted as one of the main successors to Hammett's Op: a man who 'had seen crime in its many strata',⁸ Donohue is the protagonist in a series of violent and cynical stories published in *Black Mask* in the early thirties. In many of Nebel's stories, however, especially those using the series characters of MacBride and Kennedy, his light-hearted prose carries him towards a more thoroughly comic world of knockabout antics and whimsical humour. Humour (the wisecrack in particular) is a basic ingredient of much hard-boiled writing, but when the dominant tone becomes genially comic the effect tends to be protective and reassuring. Kennedy, ace reporter and falling-down drunk, reels through more than 30 droll *Black Mask* tales in which he alternately aids, annoys and is propped up by Captain John MacBride and his fellow policemen: 'The reason I'm holding him up, Cap, is that the souse can't stand. He fell out of a taxi, fell over the curb and started crawling up the path...'.⁹ The same combination of pulp heroics and a jaunty, humorous tone is to be found in Nebel's later Cardigan stories, published in *Dime Detective*, one of *Black Mask's* most important rival magazines, which first appeared in November 1931. 'Kick Back' (April 1934), for example, begins with a grey-coated gunman disarmed after he slips on a banana peel and ends in an exchange of light comic banter, with the good guys 'bickering all the time, like a couple of kids'.¹⁰

Another of the early *Black Mask* writers whose work shifts between different hard-boiled tones is Carroll John Daly, Hammett's most important co-contributor and at first the more popular of the two.¹¹ His stories are crudely written and, for the most part, are not notably akin to noir. They do, however, break sharply from traditional detective fiction in being more violent and urban and in establishing a partial prototype of the hard-boiled investigator.¹² Daly's December 1922 story, 'The False Burton Combs', is often taken to be the first of *Black Mask's* hard-boiled stories. It contains, like most Daly stories, little by way of serious social criticism, partly because what is represented is the intrusion of a gang into an orderly community, rather than (as, say, in Hammett) a whole community that is corrupt. But 'The False Burton Combs' does offer its share of cynical one-liners – as when the narrator observes that 'There ain't nothing in government unless you're a politician. And as I said before, I ain't no crook'.¹³ Also, though he is an 'adventurer' rather than

a detective, the narrator uncovers wrongdoing from a position that he locates between the crook and the policeman. It is this 'middleman' position that is most obviously related to the development of hard-boiled detection. Daly's investigative figure, the nameless first-person narrator, is both morally ambivalent and dangerously implicated. Guilty and vulnerable, he occupies, at different stages of the story, the three roles kept carefully separate in most classic detective fiction, that is, victim, murderer and detective. He is paid to impersonate a potential victim (the 'false' Burton Combs). Although he is wrongly accused of being a professional killer, he believes that it is 'good ethics' to shoot a man down after he has been duly warned (if 'you happen to have my code of morals'¹⁴). By the end of the story, however, his public image has been transformed from that of 'desperate criminal' to heroic detective, credited with the confident agency of the traditional heroic protagonist. When the narrator tells the reader, "'I guess I'll take that job – if it pays enough to get married on,'"¹⁵ it is clear that the story has been resolved by an optimistic and romantic conclusion which henceforth disqualifies the hero from the role of the lone investigator.

In Daly's writing, rather than the light-hearted, resilient humour that characterises Nebel's stories, it is all-conquering, two-fisted action that distances his protagonist from the corrupt world he enters. His first series character and his most famous creation, Race Williams, can be regarded as 'the true progenitor of the American private eye'.¹⁶ Well armed and well paid for fearlessly tackling brutal gangsters and master criminals, Race dispenses rough justice when the situation seems to call for it: "'Call it murder if you like – a disregard for human life. I don't care. I'll run my business – you run yours.'"¹⁷ The Race Williams stories (over 30, published in *Black Mask* between 1923 and 1934) occasionally probe sources of socio-political corruption, but the boastful exploits and rugged individualism of the hero closely connect him to such traditional action heroes as the frontiersmen and gunfighters of the American West.¹⁸ For Race Williams, being situated between cops and crooks mainly implies a willingness to resort to violent means and to proceed without formal legal sanction. His violence of response in part functions as a critique of violence in society, and as means of bringing to light hidden corruptions (in such a society, the implication is, only violent means are effective). But, like the earlier American dime novel heroes, Race acts out fantasies of revenge against popular scapegoats, like foreign master criminals. Excessive evil is routinely vanquished, as in the Race Williams novel *The Snarl of the Beast* (1928),¹⁹ which ends

with the dispatching of 'the Beast', a 'notorious English criminal' with 'flaming eyes' and 'great hairy hands' (49 and 280).

From the point of view of literary noir, the more interesting Daly series character, appearing in *Detective Fiction Weekly* from the early 1930s,²⁰ is Satan Hall, a policeman, but one whose methods isolate him within the force in much the same way that the private eye is isolated. Published at the height of the public obsession with gang warfare and city corruption, the Satan Hall series aims for a degree of verisimilitude in its social and political references. At the same time, though, the stories contain strong elements of ironic inversion and satiric fantasy. In contrast to the Race Williams stories, the nature of the crimes portrayed has shifted towards contemporary relevance and the investigative figure is pushed much further towards moral ambivalence. Instead of concentrating on devious criminal masterminds and foreign villains, Daly focuses on the corruption of local politics. Society is shown to be at war because the forces of destabilisation and threat are within. In *Satan Sees Red* (1932), for example, 'the system' and 'the racket' are treated as synonymous, and the cause of both is said by the world-weary captain to lie in 'crooked politics, stupid laws and human nature' (40). Bowers, a big racketeer closely involved in the political life of the city, is in origin just a local 'gangster and gunman' hunting his enemies in the 'dark alleys'. The description of the grotesquely caricatured Daggett, in *Satan Laughed* (1934), epitomises the way in which Daly represents the relationship between city political power and organised crime: the ironised 'great man' has 'worked his way into control. Gangster, racketeer, politician. Now a power behind the throne; the throne of evil that dominates all too often in many large cities' (220–1).

Satan Hall, as his name suggests, is also a larger-than-life figure. All of the details of his appearance and manner associate him with his evil namesake, from the sinister curves of his thin lips to his hot breath and a 'steady tread' – the 'Footsteps of Doom' – associated with the inexorable fate that awaits malefactors (*Adventures of Satan Hall*, 16, 31). His character, in contrast to that of more ordinary detectives, is defined in terms not of duty but of passion and obsession, the embodiment of a barely contained 'pent-up force' capable of sweeping away the corrupt (52). Daly plays sardonically with the metaphoric possibilities of 'Satan' Hall, the fallen angel who is without the blessing of those who sit in judgement, as the only effective opponent of 'the infernal system' (14), the 'lower city' controlled by Bowers and his kind. The predecessor of later avengers like Mike Hammer and Dirty Harry, Satan has to go into the dark doorways and dismal streets, keeping 'close to the gutter' and

dispensing his own form of justice: it might be murder in the eyes of the state law but not in the light of 'The criminal's law. Satan's law' (92–3).

In spite of Daly's greater renown at the time, it is, of course, Dashiell Hammett whose reputation has survived and who has much the stronger claim to be seen as the progenitor of literary noir. In 1923, eight years before Daly's creation of Satan Hall, Hammett introduced in *Black Mask* a protagonist, the Continental Op, who was a much more plausible inhabitant of the territory 'close to the gutter'. The Op was followed in 1929 by Sam Spade and in the next year by Ned Beaumont, an investigative figure who is himself the associate of racketeers and corrupt politicians. Hammett's immense influence is due in part to his superior ability in creating a distinctive voice, a true 'hard-boiled' style that is in itself an implicit rejection of bourgeois hypocrisy and conventional values. His spare, unembellished prose is appropriate to his no-nonsense protagonists. Hammett is often praised as a realist, and unquestionably part of his superiority to a writer like Daly lies in his greater verisimilitude. His flawed, vulnerable narrators and his hard, direct representation of contemporary material give him an ability to lay bare the 'heart, soul, skin and guts' of a corrupt town (*Red Harvest*, 12). As a phrase like this suggests, Hammett does share something of Daly's fondness for mythologising,²¹ though not for the kind of insistent patterning that characterises the Satan Hall stories. What really distinguishes Hammett from Daly, however, are the qualities which have led critics to label him a modernist and which also identify him as a more obviously noir writer: his development of more sophisticated ironies, his ambiguity and complexity, his disruption of reliable narrative and of binary oppositions between good and evil, order and disorder. The ambivalence of Hammett's stories is not produced (as it is in Daly's Satan Hall stories) just by playing with moral inversions but by injecting into his writing a thoroughgoing scepticism that affects themes, structure and narrative techniques.

In creating his most famous protagonist, Sam Spade, Hammett uses the image of a 'blond satan' (*Maltese Falcon*, 375) which may well, of course, have influenced Daly's creation of Satan Hall. Spade (like Satan) is the 'good guy' who is also capable of killing without much compunction, and the emphasis on his satanic appearance leads us to reflect from the outset on his 'wicked' side. In contrast to Daly, however, Hammett uses the image in passing, rather than as a means of shaping and colouring the whole story. The comparative subtlety of Hammett's narrative methods is evident in the fact that it is only in the final pages

of *The Maltese Falcon* that we discover the full deviousness of Spade's character. It is only at this juncture that the reader realises not just that he was hired by the woman who murdered his partner but that he has been aware of her guilt from the beginning and has nevertheless made love to her and played along with her until the end. It is typical of Hammett that this crucial piece of information emerges without comment or explanation, so that it is readers themselves who must work out what has been revealed (that is, if Spade knows now he must have known all the time) and who must think through the implications for their assessment of Spade's character. Repeatedly in Hammett novels the protagonist's closest alliances turn out to be with those who are most guilty and who have most to conceal. In *Red Harvest*, the Op is working for the Willsson family, hired by the son of the man who is at the centre of the town's corruption and who himself hires the Op only when he is persuaded that his gangster associates mean to murder him as well. In *The Dain Curse* (1929), it turns out that the Op has been collaborating with the murderer, Fitzstephan, and it emerges that Ned Beaumont, in *The Glass Key* (1931), is working for Madvig, who in turn works for the murderer. Nick Charles, in *The Thin Man* (1934), is relying on the information of another friend and killer, Macaulay. All of these are connections that are hidden from the reader until the end.

What the reader is certain of from the first in Hammett's novels are his protagonists' imperfections, their human weaknesses and self-distrust. Fat and middle-aged, the Op often has to cope with things that undermine his strength and competence. In 'The Gutting of Couffignal' (*Black Mask*, 1924), for example, his loss of masculine effectiveness is imaged in his lameness – a defect for which he compensates by stealing a crutch from a cripple. More like Conrad's Marlow than Chandler's Marlowe, the Op has no higher motivation than dedication to his job. His work ethic makes him painstaking, patient and dogged. Tough when necessary, the Op never glorifies toughness: he admits that there is a certain attraction in brutality, but is self-doubting enough to be worried by this. There are arguably some 'knightly' qualities in the Op, particularly in *The Dain Curse*, in which his compassion for and rehabilitation of the mistreated damsel in distress (Gabrielle) is much more to the fore. But on the whole he is deliberately created as the antithesis of a knightly hero. In the 1927 *Black Mask* stories later published as *Blood Money*,²² for example, he is situated between characters who represent opposing types of ally, the romantic boy, Jack Counihan, and the hardened criminal, Tom-Tom Carey, a contrast used to define the choices the Op himself has to make. The young operative Counihan, at first teased by

the Op for his self-image of 'youthful gallantry' (382), must ultimately be condemned for the romantic vanity that leads him to think he can play the part of 'a desperate suave villain' (411), so betraying the Op, who goads him into a response that ensures his death. Carey, on the other hand, traffics in guns, booze, dope and illegal immigrants, and is capable of torturing information out of a man in a most grisly fashion ('ribbons of flesh had been cut loose' [387]). He is, however, a much less treacherous ally because honest about his greed and villainy. In *Red Harvest*, where the Op's own character is 'infected' with the poison of violence, he plays all factions against one another and abandons himself to the violent atmosphere in full awareness of the corruption of his own character and motives: 'It makes you sick, or you get to like it' (139). Ned Beaumont, in *The Glass Key*, lacks even the partial legitimization of the private eye, since he is merely the henchman of a prominent racketeer and politician. Beaumont is a gambler who is capable of being thoroughly unscrupulous, for example, of planting evidence; he is a man of dubious values and cloudy motives, telling harsh truths about some things and lying about others.

One of the essential characteristics of noir is a preoccupation with the problems of seeing and speaking the truth, evident in its exploration of new narrative forms and its tendency towards narrative fragmentation, subjectivity and unreliability. This tendency is fundamental to Hammett's novels. Instead of simply (as Daly and Nebel do) aiming to expose the falsity of public discourse and to bring out the hidden connections between the criminal and the official, Hammett creates narratives in which lying and deceit undermine and erode all human relations and all of the fictions sustained by respectable society. Like Conrad, Hammett depicts society as a network of secret agents, men and women concealing their true identities and past crimes, telling false stories that leave them entangled in a web of lies. Macaulay, one of the more accomplished deceivers in *The Thin Man*, only succeeds as well as he does because so many others are also dishonest, so acting as his unwitting accomplices. False narratives are not just the means by which the powerful establish their ascendancy, but are often the only way for victims to try to protect themselves and for the investigator-protagonists to gather information and survive. The duplicity is so pervasive that it appears to typify the whole nature of discourse in the modern world.

Hammett's involvement in leftist politics in the mid-thirties, a few years after he published his last novel, has led some critics to read back into his novels (particularly *Red Harvest*) a Marxist political agenda.²³

The critique he develops is in many respects left-wing, for example in its hostility to the greed and exploitation he associates with unrestrained capitalism. The economic structure of capitalism appears, however, to be more an effect than a cause. Hammett expresses a pessimistic vision that is essentially political without being programmatic. In this he again resembles Conrad, conveying a sense of irremediable human flaws, abuses of power, inescapable violence and death, rather than a hope that changing the structure of society will bring a utopian transformation. The atmosphere of ubiquitous deceitfulness is such that moral chaos and betrayal seem the norm rather than the exception. Anarchic human appetites – sometimes sexual, but more often the lust for wealth or power – disorder all relationships from the most personal to the political and economic. In *Blood Money*, the title itself underlines the symbolic coupling of money and violence. Surreal confusion follows the gathering of 150 gangsters in San Francisco for an assault on The Seaman's National and The Golden Gate Trust, after which (with trust shattered) murderous greed seems to infect the houses of the city, filling them with death and betrayal: 'All the house held was fourteen dead men' (340); 'Larrouy's home was pregnant with weapons' (354). In *Maltese Falcon*, the initial pretence of a quest for the restoration of family harmony – 'Miss Wonderly's' search for a sister whose loss would kill 'Mama and Papa' (376–7) – is rapidly replaced by the real names and actual motivation, the quest for fabulous wealth. The all-devouring Gutman, whose history of the Falcon is a tale of the universal pursuit of riches, is the father-figure of a grotesque family group constituted by its lust for the Falcon. In seeking its possession Gutman will do anything, whether it is killing others or quite readily agreeing to the sacrifice of his surrogate son Wilmer.

In other novels, instead of creating treacherous criminal confederacies as analogues for the unchecked materialism of the larger society, Hammett devises narratives in which those who are most apparently respectable maintain their position in conventional society. They do so by creating intricate lies to conceal their exploitation of everyone associated with them, so revealing their readiness, like Gutman, to betray those closest to them. All bonds of trust disintegrate, making orderly, sustaining social relationships impossible. Whether it is in the tortured relationships of *The Dain Curse* or the broken families of *The Thin Man*, family members in Hammett novels routinely damage one another. Men of power safeguard their careers by sacrificing their children: Senator Henry, in *The Glass Key*, betrays his daughter by using her attractions to secure the support of Paul Madvig, and, having killed his own

son, shows himself willing to kill Madvig so that he would carry the blame for the earlier crime. Children cannot conceive of the perfidy of their fathers. In *Red Harvest* an idealistic son begins a newspaper campaign against the corruption of Personville, unaware of how deeply involved his own father is in these crimes. None of these are problems that seem susceptible of a solution. The powers of destruction are too entrenched. If the end of the novel appears to bring resolution, it is a brief point of equilibrium after which things will return to the same sort of conflicts which set the plot in motion. At the end of *Red Harvest*, when the Op leaves Personville after a frenzy of cleansing and retribution, he has merely given the town back into the same hands as before. Personville is 'all nice and clean and ready to go to the dogs again' (181), and the Op is under no illusion that he has achieved something of lasting value. Similarly, at the end of *The Glass Key*, as Ned Beaumont prepares to depart, he stares 'fixedly' through an open door, and we are left pondering the open question of whether Madvig stands any chance of 'cleaning house' and ultimately managing to 'get the city back' (783).

Instead of remediable political-economic ills, there is a sense of deep-seated moral disorder in the patterning of Hammett's novels, reinforced by symbolic suggestions of randomness, disorder and loss of control. So, for example, the town of Personville has an element of historical specificity. A mining town of about 40 000 people, it had a strike in 1921 that led to the influence of criminal elements. The resident criminals have helped to put down the strike but cannot be kept in check by Elihu Willsson, himself implicated in their corrupt methods. Hammett also, however, makes extensive use of the naming of the town, which is known by two names, both metaphoric. As 'Personville' it suggests a representative population and, in terms of the power structure, one man's presumption in taking over the whole town, making it in every respect his personal property ('Elihu Willsson was Personville'). The insidious nature of the corruption he presides over gives rise to the town's other name, 'Poisonville', with its suggestions of crookedness and violence spreading like a toxin through the body politic, not just in one small town but (given the representative nature of the name) through the whole of American society. Hammett's titles very often point towards a symbolic reading: the horrific violence of a 'red harvest'; the 'glass key'²⁴ that suggests a liminal passage into darker experience through a door which, once opened, cannot be locked again; the fetishised falcon which, valueless in itself, is invested with meaning by those who seek to possess it; the 'thin man' who symbolises man

reduced to a financial resource, 'as thin as the paper in that cheque', alive only 'on paper', as an asset to those whose greed leads them to feed off him. Meanings are amplified by inset dreams and parables, hinting in one way or another at the dark truths that cannot be contained: the falling beam in the Flitcraft parable, which makes it seem as though someone has 'taken the lid off life'; the snakes that cannot be locked up again in the dream Janet Henry tells Ned Beaumont; the story of cannibalism in *The Thin Man*, which supports the wider theme of insatiable greed by describing in gruesome detail an isolated man's reversion to primitive impulses, to a savagery that cannot ultimately be concealed by his 'conflicting stories'.

Beautiful manners and flawless English

Hammett's most famous successor, Raymond Chandler, started writing for *Black Mask* in December 1933, shortly after Hammett published *The Thin Man*, his final novel. Aside from the tale of cannibalism, *The Thin Man* has a lightness of tone that has led critics to dissociate it from the body of his earlier work. This dissociation was strengthened by the series of 'Thin Man' films originating with the novel, in which the 'thin man' came to be identified as Nick Charles, so that the darker implications of Hammett's imagery of rapacity were forgotten. The work of Chandler is characterised by a much more consistent lightness of tone. Chandler combines witty detachment with an underlying sentimentality that is also there in some film adaptations, heightened, for example, in a romanticised adaptation like *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946). Hawks' film foregrounds the relationship between Marlowe and Vivian Sternwood which, like that between Nick and Nora Charles, seems capable of withstanding the threatening and corrupting forces of the noir underworld.²⁵

Of other Hollywood adaptations of Chandler novels, the most 'canonically noir' is *Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944), adapting *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), and it is in a way this film that best suggests why Chandler is usually regarded as Hammett's heir.²⁶ The place of Hammett and Chandler within the *film noir* canon has led many critics to overemphasise the relationship between the two, and their names, of course, are routinely linked as creators of the private eye, with the image of Bogart playing both Spade and Marlowe acting as iconic confirmation of their union. The novels themselves, however, are very different in style, themes, narrative patterns and attitudes to action. There are unquestionably noir elements in Chandler's work, and these

are accentuated in Dmytryk's film adaptation. Dmytryk underscores the 'quintessentially noir' role of the femme fatale and the immersion of a vulnerable protagonist in a world gone wrong, peopled by grotesque characters. He creates an atmosphere of paranoia, heavy with threat and violence. An 'uncompromising vision of corruption and decay' is intensified by surreal, expressionistic distortions.²⁷ *Murder, My Sweet* is, however, a film that destabilises Chandler's world, undercutting the comparative detachment and superiority that Marlowe preserves in the text through verbal wit. Limits to his masculine competence and insight are suggested, for example, by expressionist shooting, with its attendant sense of disorientation and vulnerability, as well as by Marlowe's symbolically bandaged eyes in the framing interrogation.

Wider social and political concerns of the sort voiced in Hammett's novels are sometimes more evident in the stories Chandler published between 1933 and 1939 than in his novels. 'Finger Man' (*Black Mask*, 1934), for example, an early story which Marlowe narrates, does little to develop the character of the private eye, focusing instead on the machinations of 'a big politico' who is willing to go to great lengths to 'fix' things in his territory.²⁸ Another short story, 'Guns at Cyrano's' (*Black Mask*, 1936), ultimately reveals the consequences of the unscrupulous behaviour of 'that thin cold guy', a corrupt state Senator.²⁹ And in 'Trouble is My Business' (*Dime Detective*, 1939) the real villain of the piece is old man Jeeter, who ruined people during the Depression 'all proper and legitimate, the way that kind of heel ruins people', driving them to suicide while never having 'lost a nickel himself'.³⁰ The crimes of power-hungry politicians, the clandestine alliances of government officials with gangsters and the criminality of 'legitimate business', often supported by brutally corrupt policemen, are preoccupations to be found in Chandler's novels as well, where such themes provide a public dimension to the narrative. Chandler has not, however, always convinced his readers of his serious commitment to exposing corruption in high places. Docherty, for example, argues that the 'big bosses' – the corrupt businessmen and political manipulators – are often perceived by Marlowe as 'presentable and decent', Chandler perhaps being more inclined to exculpate gangsters than to imply that all businessmen are really gangsters. It is certainly true that, in comparison to Hammett, the reader is not immersed in a sense of nightmarish urban corruption, and figures like Eddie Mars and Laird Brunette do remain 'civil' and 'presentable'. It might be said that the keyword here, though, is 'presentable'. A characteristic Chandler trope is the picture of a beguiling surface, of a scene that can remain 'presentable' even after we have

returned from the subterranean horrors of finding the body in the lake. Part of the point about his smooth businessmen-gangsters is that they retain their façade of gentlemanly respectability, and having succeeded in this they do, in fact, go unpunished, because that is the nature of the society portrayed. Chandler depicts a world of 'respectability', but one should not underrate the disturbing elements lurking just out of sight. The suburban Dad that Marlowe conjures up in *The Little Sister* (1949) is sitting 'in front of a picture window', but it gives him no view of 'the big money, the sharp shooters, the percentage workers, the fast dollar boys . . .' (202–3). Even those who play down the socio-political dimension in Chandler's novels see in them a modernist sense of urban anomie and moral disintegration.

There are, however, several aspects of Chandler's work which muffle his critique of American society. Most important is his use of the same first-person narrator, which, combined with some recurrent features of style, means that his novels are considerably more homogeneous than those of Hammett. When Marlowe develops beyond the sketchily realised narrator of 'Finger Man', the fictional world created is always reliably mediated by the voice of a protagonist who unfailingly combines honourable conduct with penetrating judgement and self-mocking humour. Though Marlowe is caught up in plots of notorious complexity (and is significantly less in control than, say, the figure of the classic detective) he continues to provide the reassurance of a stable and trustworthy perspective. His detachment places him much closer to the masculine competence and 'rightness' of traditional detective fiction, and so moves him away from a noir sense of uncertainty.

The protective presence that Marlowe establishes is above all stylistic. The witty, ironic aloofness of his narrative acts to evaluate and to contain the moral disorder of the society he investigates. When Hammett's Op is shot in *Red Harvest*, he issues a declaration of war on Poisonville and on 'fat Noonan', the chief of police: "'Now it's my turn to run him ragged, and that's exactly what I'm going to do. Poisonville is ripe for harvest. It's a job I like, and I'm going to do it . . . I've got a mean disposition. Attempted assassinations make me mad'" (64). This mood of aggression, leading the Op to fight the corruption in Poisonville by means of violence and brutality, provides *Red Harvest* with the distinctively noir element of immersion in a world gone wrong. It is very unlike Marlowe's response to extreme provocation. Both Marlowe and the Op speak with a satirist's mocking insight, but Marlowe's insights are not the savage ironies of the Op. Instead, his habitual form of self-defence is teasing, elegantly phrased and ironically

guarded. In *Farewell, My Lovely*, for example, when Marlowe tries to make Anne Riordan see the rottenness of Bay City, he says, “‘Sure, it’s a nice town. It’s probably no crookeder than Los Angeles. But you can only buy a piece of a big city. You can buy a town this size all complete, with the original box and tissue paper. That’s the difference. And that makes me want out”’ (295). The effects of this quip are characteristically double. Marlowe is urging Anne (and the reader) to see the realities of local corruption, and his irony underscores his fastidious taste and the weary cynicism of his disillusioned gaze. The sarcastic use of ‘nice’ (a recurrent feature of Marlowe’s style) and the reductive image of the whole town gift-wrapped combine to satirise the deceptiveness of decent appearances and the ease with which powerful coalitions can buy and sell influence. The satirical diminishment and the arch manner also, however, provide a distancing humour, removing both Marlowe and his audience from the brutal scene just experienced and making it clear why he ‘wants out’. Indeed, even when he is being physically coerced, Marlowe’s self-ironising manner simultaneously acknowledges his limitations and draws attention to his separateness: “‘Don’t make me get tough,” I whined. “Don’t make me lose my beautiful manners and my flawless English”’ (*Farewell, My Lovely*, 289). Marlowe’s superiority to his environment is not, though he is resilient, a matter of physical prowess but of a subtle intellect that can manage a self-deprecating joke even when he has been sapped and imprisoned and ‘shot full of dope and locked in a barred room’ (288). Unlike the Op, Marlowe would never ‘go blood-simple’. What we most remember in Chandler’s novels is not the narrator losing himself in a violent, crowded scene but the wry voice of the satirist, scathing, defensive or appalled, but ultimately disengaged.

The high degree of stylistic control, it has been argued, goes with an ‘authoritarian romantic core’.³¹ It can be seen as reflecting the bourgeois individualist’s distaste for and essential separation from the sordid world he investigates. As critics have often observed, when Marlowe does enter into conflict with the depraved society around him, his preferred role is that of the questing knight. This sentimentalised figure engages in encounters that simultaneously propel him on and test his skill in arms, challenging his fearlessness and integrity and leading him to a more sophisticated understanding of his moral make-up. Marlowe’s knightly qualities are everywhere apparent, from the history of his naming (‘Mallory’ in the early *Black Mask* story, ‘Blackmailers Don’t Shoot’, with ‘Marlowe’ as its ‘coded version’) to Chandler’s own description of the man of honour, ‘good enough for any world’, who must go down ‘these

mean streets'.³² When Marlowe contemplates the stained-glass window in the Sternwood house, he reflects that the knight rescuing the lady looks so ineffectual 'that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him' (3). Chandler is seen as promoting the positive side of the 'Great Wrong Place' myth, the American dream of the 'last just man' whose alienation is the guarantee of his integrity. In addition, however, his idealised representation of the private eye has led many to psychoanalyse the 'real' nature of both Marlowe and his creator and to search for unintentional revelations of Marlowe/Chandler's own obsessions and neuroses. One might in fact argue that it is this inadvertent revelation of inner weaknesses that has been most responsible for making adaptations of Chandler's work of such interest to critics of the classic *film noir* cycle. Marlowe's isolated knightly superiority can be interpreted as a hedge against his own neurotic unease. His inner-directed, intellectualising defensiveness in such a reading acts as a compensation for paranoid fear and inadequacy.³³ *Murder, My Sweet*, in particular, with Dmytryk's expressionistic suggestions of paranoia, its strongly subjective flashback structure and its shadowed, dreamlike distortions of perception, can be taken to reveal personal aversion and crisis – noir sexual anxiety, the destabilising of masculine authority and the placing of the protagonist in a situation of impairment and powerlessness. The romantically admirable knight, then, can be read as an ideal of mastery generated by a tortured self whose fears of losing control are projected, for example, in the fascinated disgust he expresses for effeminate men like Marriott, Lavery and Geiger.³⁴

Marlowe's neurotic alienation, his fears about loss of agency, about violations of self and fragmenting identity are expressions of characteristically modernist anxieties. In comparison to Hammett's modernism, however, Chandler's involves shifting the focus of his thrillers away from wider socio-political disorder and corruption, and towards terrors that are more inward. His novels bring together the public and the personal: the crimes of crooked policemen, businessmen and politicians provide an outer structure within which more private crimes are enacted. Part of Chandler's point is that these personal wrongs are inextricably related to the larger controlling forces at work in early twentieth-century society: as Marlowe says in *The Big Sleep*, 'it all ties together' (158–9). But it is equally evident that the intrusive forces of urban criminality function more as background than as foreground. The kinds of intrusion Marlowe himself seems to find most disturbing and repellent are those that surface in personal relationships, particularly those which

threaten bodily violation, as encounters with sexually attractive, dynamic women do. Chandler is one of the few writers of this period to make substantial use of the figure of the femme fatale – in fact, to habitually place the femme fatale at the centre of his plots. Critics often take this to be an individual neurotic response to the sexy manipulative woman. Women are always associated with ‘the nastiness’ of which Marlowe fears he has become part, and against which he protects himself both with humour (“‘I’m the guy that keeps finding you without any clothes on’”; ‘It wasn’t a game for knights’) and, at times, with astonishing ferocity: ‘I put my empty glass down and tore the bed to pieces savagely’ (*Big Sleep*, 163–4 and 111–13).

‘The hardest of the hard-boilers’³⁵

Chandler often refers to Marlowe’s marginality. It is part of his claim to integrity that, for no more than ‘twenty-five dollars a day and expenses’, he is willing to risk getting himself ‘in Dutch with half the law enforcement of this country’ (*Big Sleep*, 81). But however at odds he is with ‘law-abiding society’, Marlowe does not occupy any position outside the law other than that of lowly independence. Unlike many another ‘loogan’ (‘a guy with a gun’), though he may sit on the fence, he never falls on to the wrong side of it (*Big Sleep*, 105). Chandler did allow one or two protagonists who were more tarnished than Marlowe,³⁶ but on the whole his chosen perspective is poor but ostentatiously honest. Amongst Chandler’s fellow *Black Mask* writers, on the other hand, there were some who gave much more scope to morally ambiguous protagonists, to men whose position ‘outside the law’ gave them an angle of vision very different from that of the essentially pure Marlowe. Like Daly’s Satan Hall and Hammett’s Ned Beaumont, such figures are characteristic of the early thirties – of a time, that is, when the gangster (both real and imagined) had become one of the most easily recognisable emblems of the changes afflicting urban America. One of the significant developments in the *Black Mask* writing of this period is the creation of investigative figures who are more clearly tainted by the corrupt milieu they are investigating. In terms of respectable society, they are marginalised by their criminal connections rather than by their shabby integrity. Corruption is judged, but there is no secure position within the text constituting a moral high ground.

Two of the most notable *Black Mask* contemporaries of Chandler, Paul Cain and Raoul Whitfield,³⁷ both moved their investigative figures nearer to criminality, emulating the ‘tougher’ strains in Hammett’s

writing, particularly in *Red Harvest* and *The Glass Key*. Their protagonists fulfil the functions of the private eye and are not altogether without scruple. But they are exposing the underside of a society from which they cannot themselves be dissociated. Whitfield, who wrote nearly a hundred stories (of varying quality) for *Black Mask* between 1926 and 1930, published (starting in December 1929) 'The Crime Breeders', a story sequence reissued in 1930 as a novel called *Green Ice*. The narrator, Mal Ourney, is an ex-con. As in Hammett's *Woman in the Dark* (1933), in which the protagonist, Brazil, has just been released from prison, the status of the ex-con creates a dubious kind of freedom. He is a character technically free but unable to dissociate himself from the way in which society has defined him. Unlike the private eye, who is often said to be a man without a past, the ex-con has a past that is of determining importance. Ourney, like Brazil, is not a true criminal, having gone to jail because he has taken the blame for a death caused by the driving of his drunken girlfriend, but neither is he blameless ('She'd been drinking my liquor'). He is, in relation to real killers, an outsider, that is, 'not a crook' in comparison to those 'inside' the criminal fraternity. On the other hand, much more like the Op or Ned Beaumont than Marlowe, he has criminal connections and risks becoming a crook by using unscrupulous methods. For example, he taunts and psychologically torments a hospitalised criminal in order to get a name out of him: 'It wasn't easy to do – not with the woman-faced fence dying on the bed' (142–3).

Mal Ourney sees himself as a crusader, but of rather a rough and pragmatic kind. Crimes are interpreted and judged from the perspective of the aggrieved underdog rather than from the moral vantage point of the knight errant. Whitfield shared what was, in the Depression years, a common conviction that the source of many social ills lay in the exploitation of the small and weak by the large and greedy. The object of Ourney's crusade is to bring down some of the big crooks who are 'the breeders – the few who rope in the dumb ones, the weak ones' (*Green Ice*, 31). He generalises his objectives to include exposure of all those who use others, making explicit the 'greed and exploitation' theme that lies behind much of the writing of this period: 'I got the idea that just a few humans were using a lot of other humans as they wanted, then framing them, smashing them . . . I'd like to smash some of the ones who use the others up' (65). A cynical and not overly optimistic friend of the underdog, Whitfield's protagonist identifies with the small crooks, the human debris that is presented as the cost of profit-making on the part of the criminally rich and unscrupulous:

'It's a dirty street all the way, but some of the debris is important – to me' (29).

What *Green Ice* shares with Hammett's fiction is a narrative movement that draws the protagonist ever deeper into a densely crowded scene of corruption. As the earlier title, 'Crime Breeders', implies, there is a proliferation of the forces of corruption. In contrast to Chandler, who confessed that a 'crowded canvas' bewildered him,³⁸ Whitfield used the frenetic, apparently disconnected movements of his large cast of characters to express the nature of a society in which deceit and betrayal, framing and double-crossing, are the norm. The intricacy of the connections in itself suggests the web of urban corruption and the intractable difficulty of knowing the truth: 'I spent most of the time trying to separate lies from truths. After a while I gave it up' (159). The movement associated with Ourney is 'blundering' (133), and the confusion of his quest is underscored by the image of 'green ice', the emeralds that everyone is after. Fetishised by those who greedily compete for them, they are in reality cold and deadly. The pursuit is ultimately of death itself, of stones that are 'perfectly cut. Something like a coffin' (179). The trope of the emeralds as coffin/death is an irony compounded by the fact that the 'five big ones' are, like the falcon in Hammett's novel, fake – intrinsically worthless symbols of the fabulous wealth that motivates treachery in remote places and an endless chain of betrayals. This 'unending' quality is one of the most noir aspects of the novel. The climax of the plot is a shoot-out at a funeral, which is again heavy with the sort of irony that attaches to the theme of wealth and death. Gunmen rise out of the flowers and kill for emeralds that are 'fused glass. . . . Cold as – death' (191). In the end, Ourney thinks back over the list of the dead and acknowledges that he has only stopped two of the 'crime breeders'. As the 'New York dick' says, "'You didn't do so damned much reforming, Ourney'" (191).

The stories of Paul Cain are similarly grim and downbeat, centring on morally dubious protagonists who are closely involved with the corruption they investigate. Cain, whose real name was George Sims, started writing for *Black Mask* a year before Chandler's first story appeared. William F. Nolan dubbed him 'the hardest of the hard-boilers'. The effectiveness of his stories, however, is due to more than just their sheer toughness. What is most unsettling is the use Cain makes of morally equivocal perspectives to disorient the reader. This is reinforced by his use of delayed recognition. Cain often suppresses, for example, the identity of the narrator and his relationship to the violent scene he is investigating, which, when ultimately revealed, is invariably com-

promised. The protagonist is never just a detached investigator. Through first- or close third-person narration, Cain provides fragmented descriptions of violent scenes, encounters with both criminals and corpses that are made strange by a focus on what at first seem to be disconnected details or disconnected body parts. In 'Black', for example, we first witness three apparently unrelated people: a dying man, the narrator and a cabby. These men seem to have been thrown together by chance but are, we eventually learn, all players in the same violent and complicated set of rivalries. The way that the reader and the protagonist find out information is fragmentary and apparently haphazard: the narrator looks through a small window, with the rain drumming, hearing the conversation inside as a buzz that does not mean anything. As in Hammett, the corrupt interests controlling a small town are a microcosmic version of big city corruption, and, like the Op, the narrator controls the unravelling of guilt and stage-manages punishment. In contrast to the Op, however, this narrator is not employed as an investigator but as a hired gun, sent by his boss to seek revenge. His function, as he moves silently through the small town, is to bring together those who are corruptly and secretly connected. Having offered to work for each of the rival factions, the narrator forcibly brings the parties in the dispute together and then ironically proposes that he accept money from both and kill them both: "I'm auctioning off the best little town in the state . . ." . . . I was having a swell time' (11–12). As elsewhere, the hallmarks of Cain's writing are black humour and a laconic manner, the stylistic equivalent of the narrator's blunt vision and methods.

Images of showmanship and game-playing dominate Cain's stories, with the implication that success and indeed survival in such a world are entirely dependent on luck, cunning and an ability to manipulate appearances, though Cain avoids suggesting that a tough masculinity and aggressive individualism will invariably prevail. In 'Murder in Blue', for example, the protagonist, Doolin, is a young man retained as a bizarre kind of showman to organise a violent entertainment for a dying villain. He orchestrates assorted killers to perform in his show with the same element of playing both ends against the middle as in 'Black'. His plans as a showman, however, are made in ignorance of secret connections, and he finds himself an unwilling actor in a grotesque, dehumanised final scene of violence. This denouement is presented to us as Doolin sees it, like strips of motion picture film, with surreal laughter and automaton-like characters killing and dying. Doolin himself only fortuitously survives to tell the tale. Cain develops in an extreme form the undermining of trust that is a recurrent feature of the thrillers of

this period. The ironies of his stories spring from a widespread tendency to trust the wrong people, or to distrust 'everybody except the guy who was holding the knife' (181). Characters often make errors of this sort, and there is *always* someone with a knife. Paranoia is on the whole structural rather than clinical: if someone has come to the view that everyone was trying to double-cross them, then 'Everybody probably was' (184–5). As readers, we cannot even feel sure that the narrator is trustworthy, since he is as likely as any other character to be guilty. In 'Parlor Trick', for example, we appear at first to be reading another narrative describing the entry of the narrator-protagonist into what we suppose is an alien and threatening environment. We share what we think is his shock at seeing Frank with 'a thin knife-handle sticking out of one side of his throat' (52). The first twist in the story comes with the revelation that the narrator himself has put the thin knife in Frank's throat; the second reversal occurs when he has resigned himself to being taken away for execution by 'the boys' but finds that the gun is turned instead on one of his supposed executioners: 'Frank's number has been up for a long time' and McNulty was 'in it with him' (61). Cain thus turns what at first looks like an investigative structure into the narrative of a criminal.

This transformation of the protagonist into the criminal is much more than an isolated narrative trick for creating suspense and surprise. In September 1930, *Black Mask's* editor, Joseph T. Shaw, argued, in defence of his magazine, that *Black Mask* had published only one story, the serialised parts of Hammett's *The Glass Key*, in which 'the gangster was in any sense "the hero"' and this, he said, was justified as a representation of the alliance between corrupt politicians, public officials and organised crime. It was a demonstration of 'one of the most serious illnesses, to put it mildly, that our body politic has ever suffered from'.³⁹ During the course of the thirties, however, in *Black Mask* and elsewhere, the use of criminal protagonists and very often the abandonment of an investigative structure became increasingly common in narratives of both private and public crimes. The next chapter looks at the stories of the very public careers of gangsters. In these narratives, the tensions apparent in Paul Cain's 'Parlor Trick' are often central, with the business rivalries of powerful gang bosses and the powerlessness of the small-time crook epitomising the imbalance and 'illness' of Depression America.

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