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> A telephone bell rang in darkness. When it had rung three times bed springs creaked, fingers fumbled on wood, something small and hard thudded on a carpet floor, the springs creaked again, and a man's voice said:
>
> 'Hello.... Yes, speaking.... Dead? ... Yes.... Fifteen minutes. Thanks.'
>
> A switch clicked and a white bowl hung on three gilded chains from the ceiling's centre filled the room with light. Spade, barefooted in green and white checked pyjamas, sat on the side of his bed. He scowled at the telephone on the table while his hands took from beside it a packet of brown papers and a sack of Bull Durham tobacco.[1]

Anyone who grew up with the movies will recognise that scene, or something like it. Possibly they will not recognise it from *The Maltese Falcon*, from which it is taken, but rather will register it as a topos, a commonplace of a particular film genre: the darkness, the sound of the telephone, the slightly incoherent dialogue, the expressionistic lighting that suddenly reveals the image of the sleepy speaker, the telephone in the foreground, the drab apartment. One might think that the writer had been influenced by the narrative style of film, which habitually uses this kind of visual and aural play to heighten dramatic effect. Except that this was written in the late 1920s, around the time the first sound picture was screened and well before cinema had discovered how to do scenes like this.[2] If anything, in this scene Dashiell Hammett was prefiguring by a good ten years the narrative stylings that would eventually be accepted as peculiarly cinematic, and Hammett's novel would prove decisive in bringing about a revolution in filmic narrative and narration.

The mystery novel had already found a place on the big screen by 1941, and indeed Hammett's novel itself had already been filmed twice before first-time director John Huston persuaded Warner Brothers executives to let him have his turn. Huston's decision to bring to the screen not just the plot but the literary atmospherics of the book was crucial. So faithful is this film to its literary source—certainly for a 1940s studio adaptation—that a Hollywood legend has grown up around it, suggesting that when Huston finally persuaded Warner Brothers to allow him to direct his first picture he asked his secretary to construct a scene by scene breakdown of the book as the beginnings of its movie treatment. Somehow this breakdown found its way into Jack Warner's office, he read it, and approved it for shooting.[3] Thus Huston's film of *The Maltese Falcon* was peculiarly faithful to its original because what

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1This essay was first published in *Sydney Studies in English* vol. 34, 2008, 109-140.

Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon* (London: Pan Books, 1975; originally published 1930), p. 12.

2 A shift to the present tense accentuates further the scenic nature of Hammett's description:

> A telephone bell rings in darkness. When it has rung three times bed springs creak, fingers fumble on wood, something small and hard thuds on a carpet floor, the springs creak again, and a man's voice says:
>
> 'Hello.... Yes, speaking.... Dead? ... Yes.... Fifteen minutes. Thanks.'
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> A switch clicks and a white bowl hanging on three gilded chains from the ceiling's centre fills the room with light. Spade, barefooted in green and white checked pyjamas, sits on the side of his bed. He scowls at the telephone on the table while his hands take from beside it a packet of brown papers and a sack of Bull Durham tobacco.

was shot was the book itself, rather than some Hollywood production committee's idea of what the movie version should be (*Satan Met A Lady*, for example, the previous unsuccessful screen version of *The Maltese Falcon*, tampered significantly with character and plot.)

This legend attests to a general sense that the movie captures something essential about the novel. Certainly the action follows the novel scene for scene—allowing for the odd deletion and modification[4]—and much of the dialogue is taken from the printed text. Huston said of the process of adaptation:

> I don't think we can avoid interpretation. Even just pointing a camera at a certain reality means an interpretation of that reality. By the same token, I don't seek to interpret, but to put my own stamp on the material. I try to be as faithful to the original material as I can.[5]

At first this seems a contradictory statement: 'I don't seek to interpret,' says Huston, 'but to put my own stamp on the material;' and then: 'I try to be as faithful to the original material as I can.' But perhaps what he means is that his greatest effort goes into finding a cinematic equivalent for what strikes him as the essence of the novel—in this way he could be both 'faithful' to the original while putting his 'own stamp' on it. If so, then what struck him as essential to *The Maltese Falcon* was not simply its narrative content but equally its narrational style and its tone or mood, which are most effectively evoked by his film through a number of cinematic devices such as low-key lighting with chiaroscuro effects, skewed camera angles, a dark *mis-en-scene* with a preponderance of night-time scenarios, and the near ubiquitous presence of the central character, Sam Spade. In tandem with Hammett's mystery plot and exotic array of characters these devices would produce a new cinematic style, for what this film represents is a singular moment within the history of literary-cinematic relations in which a literary text inaugurated one of the most distinctive of all cinematic genres: film noir.

If this premonitory edge to Hammett's novelistic style does anticipate later filmic style in the striking manner illustrated above, *The Maltese Falcon* may be considered cinematic in another way. It appears to be told in the third person—as indeed at times it is—and yet it drifts imperceptibly into the first with such deceptive ease that we might say it is less told by a narrator than conveyed through a dominant centre of consciousness which we come to recognise as Spade's. This is certainly not the case initially, as we are introduced to Sam with a set of wry observations which are unlikely to coincide with his sense of self:

> Samuel Spade's jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller, v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale

3 There are many versions of this story. Screenwriter Shane Black retells it in the documentary *The Maltese Falcon: One Magnificent Bird*, accompanying the Warner Brothers, 2006 DVD release of *The Maltese Falcon* (1931), *Satan Met a Lady* (1936) and *The Maltese Falcon* (1941).

4 The most egregious modification is the excising of the character of Gutman's daughter, but dropping characters for narrative economy was standard practice at the time when it came to trimming literary works for the constraints of the 100 minute feature film. There was also some significant rearranging of scenes, which will be discussed below.

5 Andrew Sarris (ed.), *Interviews with Film Directors* (Avon Books: New York, 1967), p. 257.

> brown hair grew down— from high flat temples—in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blond satan.[6]

But the narrational mode of this text plays deftly with the space between omniscience and subjectivity, casting everything into a mode of apprehension that appears to align with the central consciousness of Sam.[7] The quotation with which I opened is clearly from Sam's point of view—he is the one in darkness, he is the one who does not know what the object is that thuds to the ground, but he does know that the floor is carpeted. Shortly he will meditatively digest the news he will receive over that ringing telephone that his partner Miles Archer has been murdered, an act of consciousness that will be dramatised in the minute concentration of his forming and lighting a cigarette with the uncertain object of the earlier paragraph, which now not only becomes known, but familiar—a pigskin-and-nickel lighter:

> Spade's thick fingers made a cigarette with deliberate care, sifting a measured quantity of tan flakes down into curved paper, spreading the flakes so that they lay equal at the ends with a slight depression in the middle, thumbs rolling the paper's inner edge down and up under the outer edges as forefingers pressed it over, thumbs and fingers sliding to the paper cylinder's ends to hold it even while tongue licked the flap, left forefinger and thumb pinching their end while right forefinger and thumb smoothed the damp seam, right forefinger and thumb twisting their end and lifting the other to Spade's mouth.
>
> He picked up the pigskin-and-nickel lighter that had fallen to the floor, manipulated it, and with the cigarette burning in a corner of his mouth stood up. He took off his pyjamas. The smooth thickness of his arms, legs, and body, the sag of his big rounded shoulders, made his body like a bear's. It was like a shaved bear's: his chest was hairless. His skin was childishly soft and pink. (p. 12)

The realisation of the precise nature of the lighter is certainly Sam's, as may be the wry reflection on his bear-like stature, a reflection which is quickly corrected, with a detective's observant eye, to include the hairlessness of the chest and then, as more detail comes into focus and the mind makes its associations, the self-deprecating childishness of the skin. It is a mode of narration that simultaneously evokes reality and dramatises a consciousness of that reality, resolving fully neither in omniscience nor subjectivity. This effect is especially marked in the famous Flitcraft episode, where Sam's telling of what appears to be for him a crucial existential allegory drifts into and out of inverted commas, the text thereby signalling that there is no effective distance between Sam and any objective or omniscient narrator of the text.[8]

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6 *The Maltese Falcon*, p. 1.

7 Hammett once wrote that he had hopes of 'adapting the stream-of-consciousness method, conveniently modified, to a detective story,' adding, 'I'm one of the few—if there are any more—people moderately literate who take the detective story seriously.... Someday somebody's going to make "literature" of it.' Quoted by James Naremore in *More Than Night:* Film noir *in Its Contexts* (University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1998), pp.51-2.

8 For a thoughtful discussion of the Flitcraft episode in terms of its relation to prior cultural narratives—different to those I will be considering here but relevant in terms of the perspectives it raises—see John T. Irwin, 'Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them: Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*,' *Literary Imagination*, vol. 2, no. 3, Fall 2000, 341-376.

This blurring of narrational authority is crucial to the conceptual and stylistic conduct of *The Maltese Falcon*, but it is also a mode of narration which we have come to recognise as essentially cinematic, as Brian McFarlane argues:

> In broad terms, it appears that neither first-person nor omniscient narration is, of its nature, amenable to cinematic narrative. Both seem always to know too much, or at least to know more than we feel is known in advance by the more directly experienced film narrative; and this sense of foreknowledge is no doubt intimately connected to the characteristically past-tense rendering of the prose narrative as opposed to the perceptual immediacy of the film. The novelistic form of the *restricted consciousness* (as in *Daisy Miller*) perhaps approximates most closely to the cinematic narrative mode.[9]

Hammett's use of the restricted consciousness mode of narration was influenced in part, no doubt, by the subtle and profound explorations of free indirect discursive form by his countryman Henry James, but it was influenced too by traditions of the mystery novel with which he was to engage very consciously in his texts.

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Hammett began writing detective fiction in a series of stories in which he developed his archetypal 'hard-boiled' detective figure, the Continental Op—that is, an 'operative' for the Continental Detective Agency, who narrates the stories but who is never named in them. The mystery story itself originated in this first-person narrative mode, although, unlike the Op stories, that first person tended to be the observer rather than the agent in the mystery. It is, of course, in the interests of the mystery narrative that a certain amount of information remain hidden from the view of the audience, and yet as the genre developed practitioners became acutely aware of the dangers of 'cheating' the readership. For this reason the convention emerged that readers need to have access to all the facts but not necessarily to the thought processes of the investigative mind. In his Dupin stories ('The Purloined Letter' and 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue') Edgar Allen Poe had solved this problem at an early stage in the development of the genre with his use of the first person observer, the character who apprehends everything that the detective does but cannot process it with the same analytical skill. This was a narrative strategy he had in turn adopted from the gothic mode, where texts such as *Frankenstein* and *Melmoth the Wanderer* provided Poe with the model of the ordinary witness to extraordinary events which he was to find so useful in his own tales. Seemingly keenly aware of the device, he would pun wittily upon it in the title of his 'The Fall of the House of Usher', in which an unknown and unremarkable narrator is 'ushered' into the presence of the master of the house, Roderick, thereby ushering us into an absorbing world of gothic bizarrerie. 'I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up,' he tells us, his sense of the uncanniness of his surroundings increasing as he nears the master of the house. 'The valet now threw open a door of one of the staircases,' he continues, 'and ushered me into the presence of his master.'[10] This device allowed gothic writers to insinuate the uncanny and irrational into our own world of reason

9 Brian McFarlane, *Novel to Film: an Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* (New York : Oxford University Press, 1996), pp.18-19.

10 Edgar Allen Poe, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) in *Selected Writings*, ed. David Galloway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 141.

by conveying it through the anodyne vehicle of the bland narrator, our ‘usher’ who would provide seemingly objective evidentiary proof of the incredible through his first-person account. In this way the nestled narratives of the gothic were structured as a contagion, and Poe knew that the 'ushering' effect worked both ways, so that our prurient glimpse into the gothic world through the vicarious means of the narrator meant that we were left with that world lodged disturbingly in our own imaginations.

But it is not simply the events themselves that are extraordinary in Poe's early detective mysteries—even more so is the figure presiding at them. The narrator of 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' takes great pains in establishing the 'preternatural' character of his friend C. Auguste Dupin, arguably literature's first modern detective, a nocturnal creature ‘enamoured of the Night for her own sake,' an eccentricity into which, 'as into all his others,' the narrator tells us, 'I quietly fell'. With him he would

> sally forth into the streets, arm in arm, continuing the topics of the day, or roaming far and wide until a later hour, seeking, amid the wild lights and shadows of the populous city, that infinity of mental excitement which quiet observation can afford.[11]

Mentally excited by his keen observation of the chiaroscuro nightlife, Dupin is an appropriate forerunner of the modern detective amid the mean streets of the urban crime narrative. But unlike Sam Spade, who blends unremarkably into the dark urban milieu, Dupin belongs to that class of investigators who might be called egregious and whose odd, unnatural, foreign, alien or downright anti-social behaviour is cause for remark by those who faithfully record their analytical adventures with a mixture of objectivity and admiration. In a narrative tradition that sharply distinguishes between detection and narration and that stretches from Dupin and his unnamed chronicler through the eccentric Holmes and Watson to the defiantly Belgian Poirot and Hastings and beyond, the extraordinary investigator became a focus for popular fascination, supplanting the prior interest in the popular imagination of the malefactor, whose own social deviance had originally been his attraction.[12] In this way the detective story came to acquire a generally conservative ideological emphasis: the investigator astonishes his faithful chronicler, and through him polite society in general, because his reasoning is literally beyond their ken, but the effect of this is that the narrative confirms the homeostatic nature of the social order. All the institutional agencies of investigation are exhausted (the Prefect of Police, Le Strade, Chief Inspector Jap, and so on) necessitating the arrival of the eccentric or asocial investigator; and yet their services are required precisely because elements alien to that society—not only criminals but criminal motives and criminal intentions—have infiltrated it. The grand manicheistic landscape this provides remains external to the society at large which, fortified by its blandness, situates

11 Edgar Allen Poe, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841) *Selected Writings*, op. cit., p. 193.

12 Foucault makes the point:

> It was not only broadsheets that disappeared with the birth of a literature of crime; the glory of the rustic malefactor and his sombre transformation into a hero by the process of torture and execution went with them. The man of the people was now too simple to be the protagonist of subtle truths. In this new genre, there were no more popular heroes or great executions; the criminal was wicked, of course, but he was also intelligent; and although he was punished, he did not have to suffer. The literature of crime transposes to another social class the spectacle that had surrounded the criminal. Meanwhile the newspapers took over the task of recounting the grey, unheroic details of everyday crime and punishment. The split was complete; the people was robbed of its old pride in its crimes, the great murders had become the quiet game of the well-behaved.

Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977), p. 69.

itself irreproachably between the forces of good and evil that regularly vie for its destruction and restitution (as when the super-human Dupin combats the threat of the sub-human ape in 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'). Order is restored, an order that would have remained undisturbed but for these incursions from without.

Things change, however, when the detective takes pen in hand, the most notable early instance of which is surely Wilkie Collins's mystery *tour de force*, *The Moonstone* (1868), a narrative in which *everyone* has a narrational hand and in which psychoanalytic elements are seriously at play. In 1957—well before the detective novel had become the Lacanian industry that we have seen emerge in the last thirty years[13]—Charles Rycroft began to reflect on *The Moonstone* in this way, expanding on Pederson Krag's earlier hypothesis concerning the genre in which it was claimed that the crime (generally a murder) is 'a symbolic representation of parental intercourse' and that 'the victim is the parent for whom the reader (the child) had negative Oedipal feelings'. [14] With an extension of this logic Rycroft went on to speculate:

> If the victim is the parent for whom the reader (the child) had negative Oedipal feelings, then the criminal must be a personification of the reader's unavowed hostility toward that parent. The reader is not only the detective, he is also the criminal. One reason, I suspect, why the detective story so rarely achieves the status of a work of art is that this identification of the reader with the criminal remains denied. The detective story writer connives with the reader's need to deny his guilt by providing him with ready-made fantasies in which the compulsive question 'whodunnit' is always answered by the self-exonerating 'not I'. In the ideal detective story the detective or hero would discover that he himself is the criminal for whom he has been seeking.[15]

In Collins's classic mystery tale the protagonist, Franklin Blake, does precisely this—enthusiastically setting in motion an investigation which will end in establishing his guilt, ignorance, and innocence all at once, for his crime was committed unconsciously. At the same time Blake's investigation also establishes the alien, asocial character of the guilty party, the unconscious itself, which is therefore understood as separable and distinct from the nature of one's public being.[16] Blake then organizes for all parties in any way concerned with the

13 Jacques Lacan's 'Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter' first appeared in English in *Yale French Studies*, No. 48, *French Freud: Structural Studies in Psychoanalysis* (1972), pp. 39-72, and has had a significant impact on subsequent critical and psychoanalytical debates concerning detective fiction. See John P. Muller (ed.) *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988).

14 Quoted in Charles Rycroft, 'A Detective Story: Psychoanalytic Observations', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, xxvi (1957), 229.

15 Ibid, 229.

16 That the search for the unconscious might require some particularly canny detective work was recognized by no less esteemed a psychic investigator than Freud himself, who pointed out:

> It is true that psychoanalysis cannot boast that it has never concerned itself with trivialities. 0n the contrary the material for its observations is usually provided by the inconsiderable events which have been put aside by the other sciences as being too unimportant—the dregs, one might say, of the world of phenonena. But are you not making a confusion in your criticism between the vastness of the problems and the conspicuousness of what points to thern? Are there not very important things which can only reveal themselves, under certain conditions and at certain times, by quite feeble indications?... If you were a detective engaged in tracing a murder, would you expect to find that the murderer had left his photograph behind at the place of the crime, with his address attached? Or would you not necessarily have to be satisfied with comparatively slight and obscure traces of the person you were in search of? So let us not underestimate small indications; by their help we may succeed in getting on the track of something bigger.

incident to contribute their own personal account to a record of this investigation, and it is this exorbitant display of evidentiary documents that highlights the manner in which Oedipal associations and Oedipal structures emerge within the first-person narrative form of the mystery genre. Blake explains the purpose of the documents that comprise the text in this way:

> 'In this matter of the diamond,' he said, 'the characters of innocent people have suffered under suspicion already—as you know. The memories of innocent people may suffer, hereafter, for want of a record of the facts to which those who come after us may appeal.'

Questions of public interest and the character of public understanding are raised, then; and allied to these are matters of considerable narrative significance, as Blake continues:

> 'There is no doubt that this strange family story of ours ought to be told. And I think, Betteredge, Mr Bruff and I have hit on the right way of telling it.' [17]

Perhaps it is appropriate that a text such as this offer some explanation for its exorbitant narrational method, and yet—improbably filling the roles of perpetrator, investigator and chronicler simultaneously as he does—Blake's feeling that the story 'ought to be told' conceals at least the possibility of divided motives. Is the compulsion to tell part of a desire for a pure, expiative confession? Or is it allied to a desire to satisfy the inquisitions of the social body? According to Foucault, confession is

> a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual ... in which the expression alone, independently of its external consequences, produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it; it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him.[18]

But then the same could be said for that other first-person discursive form so common to detective fiction: the alibi. In their desire to have the tale told Blake and his lawyer Bruff—whose interests are similarly divided between those of his client and those of justice, and who would have expertise in the framing of public and legalistic statements—announce that they have 'hit on the right way of telling it'. Presumably there is a wrong way, but the 'right' way of telling is first-person narration—the very model of the confession, just as it is the very model of the alibi. And to the extent that *The Moonstone* draws attention to the manner in which the assembled accounts are offered to placate public inquisitiveness and familial self-consciousness it puts in play, peripherally at least, a suspicion regarding the purpose and nature of these accounts, since they will ultimately perform the dual functions of confession and alibi for the contradictory roles of criminal and detective performed by Blake. Such a suspicion not only impugns the integrity of the gentry whose affairs are getting an airing here, it also suggest a narrational and narrative model for the mystery story more ideologically subversive in its trajectory than the conservatively inclined form of the seemingly objective observer's chronicle noted earlier. Indeed, this suspicion questions the very existence of objectivity and, in its collapsing of confession and alibi, suggests the troubling nature of the first person in the mystery narrative.

Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, The Pelican Freud Library, Volume 1, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, originally published 1916), pp. 52-53.

17 *The Moonstone*, p.39.

18 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1, An introduction*; trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 61.

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If the 19th century saw the rise of the eccentric, asocial detective in the literature of crime, this seemed to be required by the nature of the emergent social landscape—a bland, bourgeois world in which true wickedness or evil was as alien as true perspicacity and analytical genius, each understood as the attributes of a higher class of person (the sleuth as Romantic amateur in contest with the aristocrat of crime, the criminal mastermind). But in the 20th century, and particularly in the hands of Hammett, Chandler and Huston, the detective was destined to become a zeitgeist figure. In the *Black Mask* stories of the 1920s and 1930s and in the first film noir cycle (1941-1959) which these generated, the detective, now suitably 'hard-boiled', is of his milieu—a corrupt and corrupting place—and yet adrift in it. He is called in *in medias res* to uncover the workings of a determining fate, the lost or repressed or concealed events of the past that have fashioned a puzzling present. He thus enters a world without contingency, its fatalism only masked by duplicity and ambiguity, and his task is to uncover those hidden but determining forces which created the circumstances in which his own life—as detective—becomes meaningful. As he records his adventures in the first-person he textualizes his place in this world so that each case becomes for him a biographical trace, and, like the modern consciousness itself, in his recurrent search for the truth of the matter the hard-boiled detective is put at stake in a world in which he finds, and sometimes loses, himself.

Michel Butor plays with this complex of ideas in his absorbing, puzzling and inconclusive detective fiction (or metafiction) *Passing Time*, in which his mystery-writing protagonist speculates:

> 'The detective is the true son of the murderer Oedipus, not only because he solves a riddle, but also because he kills the man to whom he owes his title, without whom he would not exist in that capacity (without crimes, without mysterious crimes, what would he be?) because this murder was foretold for him from the day of his birth or, if you prefer, because it is inherent in his nature, through it alone he fulfils himself and attains the highest power.'[19]

Understood in this way the detective exists—or his existence acquires meaning—only in the act of detection, and his search for the criminal therefore mirrors an unconscious inquiry into his own existential being. In this sense he cannot be understood as a disinterested agent but rather as one always potentially compromised by or somehow implicated in the criminal state of affairs. In the Continental Op stories Hammett had already given thematic point to aspects of this idea: nameless and lacking any trace of a life outside the agency, the boss of which he refers to invariably with the familial phrase 'the Old Man', the 'character' of the Op is only realised in the act of detection itself and in the accounts he gives of this. Moreover, that act is motivated neither by a scrupulous and idealistic regard for the truth nor by an ethic that antedates the act. Steven Marcus has noted that the Continental Op stories concern themselves very little with the patient and ultra-rational excavation of truth such as we find in the Holmes or Dupin stories; in fact the Op's main business is to disturb and subvert, rather than discover and order. What he does find, according to Steven Marcus:

19 Michel Butor, *Passing Time*, trans. Jean Stewart (London: John Calder, 1965, originally published 1956), p. 145.

> is that the 'reality' that anyone involved will swear to is in fact itself a construction, a fabrication, a faked and alternate reality—and that it has been gotten together before he ever arrived on the scene. And the Op's work therefore is to deconstruct, deplot and defictionalize that 'reality' and to construct or reconstruct out of it a true fiction, i.e. an account of what 'really' happened.[20]

In Hammett's work we begin to see the duplicity of the world encountered by the detective contaminating the fidelity of the investigation itself. The Op has nothing to work with but the fabricated reality of the word, the alibi, and his task is to translate that discursive reality through the mechanism of interpretative inquiry, disguised under the neutral term 'detection'. Thus each text concludes with a second discursive reality, the 'true fiction' that gives order to this world of increasing mendacity to which, worryingly, the detective himself appears to have contributed.

The potentially factitious character of the order of things established at the resolution of the mystery seems to have concerned and fascinated Hammett, whose final novel, *The Thin Man*, provides his most pointed reflection on this troubling element. In this novel there is an almost philological distinction between the first and second of the 'discursive realities' that frame the mystery, for the first of these has become a series of typed letters, print, but the interpretative task is troubled by a further level of mendacity as these letters are counterfeit, forgeries, and their putative author is long dead. Here, Hammett raises in its most acute form the issue of judicial plausibility and the claims of truth and probability in the modern mystery narrative as, in the cross-play between husband and wife, a fundamental suspicion is formalized and, in the voice of Nora, contaminates the whole business of detection and discovery: 'But I thought everybody was supposed to be considered innocent until they were proved guilty,' Nora complains to Nick, 'and if there was any reasonable doubt, they —' 'That's for juries, not detectives,' Nick replies.

> 'You find the guy you think did the murder and you slam him in the can and let everybody know you think he's guilty and put his picture all over the newspapers, and the District Attorney builds up the best theory he can on what information you've got and meanwhile you pick up additional details here and there and people who recognize his picture in the paper—as well as people who'd think he was innocent if you hadn't arrested him—come in and tell you things about him and presently you've got him sitting in the electric chair.' (Two days later a woman in Brooklyn identified Macaulay as George Foley who for the past three months had been renting an apartment from her.)
>
> 'But that seems so loose.'[21]

Nora has a point, and it is a deeply unsettling one that appears to reflect Hammett's own unease at the developing sense of the fabricated, self-consciously mendacious nature of truth, justice, and the social order which bases itself upon these. "That may be, but it's all pretty unsatisfactory,"[22] Nora concludes, and so, apparently, did Hammett, as he wrote no more after this.

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20 Steven Marcus, 'Introduction' to Dashiell Hammett, *The Continental Op*, ed. Steven Marcus (London: MacMillan, 1975), p. xx.

21 Dashiell Hammett, *The Thin Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974, originally published 1934), p. 184.

22 Ibid., p. 190.

The Op, however, has no dialectical opponent to whom he must justify himself and his actions. He is absorbed instead by the investigation and its transcription, dual aspects of a singular process of inquiry that appears to take place in a world of increasingly questionable justice. "'Just' and 'unjust'," writes Nietzsche,

> exist ... only after the institution of the law (and not, as Duhring would have it, after the perpetration of the injury). To speak of just or unjust in itself is quite senseless; in itself, of course, no injury, assault, exploitation, destruction can be 'unjust', since life operates essentially, that is in its basic functions, through injury, assault, exploitation, destruction and simply cannot be thought of at all without this character.[23]

Such is the grim ethico-legal principle which informs the world of these narratives. And if, within that world, the task of the Oedipal detective is both to solve the riddle and to discover the meaning of the self in the search for origins, then—like the blurring of confession and alibi in *The Moonstone*—truth and fiction inevitably will blur too as he composes himself and his sense of reality in the midst of things. Nora detects such a blurring in Nick's judicially adequate but veridically suspicious reconstruction of events in *The Thin Man*, but the suspicion was Hammett's from the start, reflected in the early stories and the Op's willingness to manipulate or fabricate events to bring about a satisfactory conclusion. The more one reads these stories the more it becomes apparent that the Op's 'reconstruction' of what 'really' happened effectively represents what he can live with, so to speak. Beyond or even despite the claims of justice, the Op is just as likely to wrap up the case with an aesthetic rather than analytical sense of achievement, as here in the delightful judicial irony that concludes 'The Golden Horseshoe':

> 'I can't put you up for the murders you engineered in San Francisco; but I can sock you with the one you didn't do in Seattle—so justice won't be cheated. You're going to Seattle, Ed, to hang for Ashcraft's suicide.'
> And he did. [24]

Here, then, the detective who writes involves himself in a problematic and complex process leading to dark suspicions about truth, justice, and the self. Indeed to write, for the detective, is to revive textually the precariousness of an existence whose very point and meaning is its own annihilation: the solution to the enigma. In the process what is exposed is the factitiousness of resolution and the way in which one is always implicated, because one's existence is both dependent upon and determined by the sinful events at the heart of the mystery. 'Formally the mind wants to conceive a point in either time or space that marks the beginning of all things,' Edward Said has argued, 'but like Oedipus the mind risks discovering, at that point, where all things will end as well.'[25] That is why in closing the narrative (the case, the 'true fiction') the Op makes his literally fatal mistake: without detection the Op has no 'business' being there any longer; has no business *being* at all. Whence the characteristically

23 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans., Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1969, originally published 1887), p. 76.

24 Dashiell Hammett, 'The Golden Horseshoe' (1924), in *The Continental Op*, p. 81.

25 Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 41.

sombre and abrupt conclusions to these stories, as in the concluding line of the aptly titled 'The Farewell Murder': 'They hanged him.'[26]

4

Certain kinds of existential and generic pressures, then, weigh upon the detective who tells his own story. The inward turn of the mystery narrative—and the the problematics of confession and alibi, truth and artifice, identity and authenticity to which this gives rise—may be seen as the consequence of the genre allowing investigation and narration to become vested in the one figure. In the hands of Hammett and those writers who followed his lead, the capacity of the mystery story to deliver an objective truth is put in question, but so too is the capacity of the social world in which it takes place to accommodate that truth and the justice it should support. At the service of polite society the detective may enter the dark world of criminality with noble intentions, like Philip Marlowe in the vestibule of the Sternwood mansion, gazing at the stained glass image of the knight rescuing the damsel in distress and politely concealing her nakedness in the process; but in the resulting adventure he can find himself implicated somehow, discovering in the truth of the matter a disquieting darkness of self. 'I was part of that nastiness now,' Marlowe reflects ruefully on the final page of *The Big Sleep*,[27] after covering up not the maiden's nakedness but the sinful and murderous impulses of Carmen Sternwood, nymphomaniacal daughter of the plutocracy to which he has become contracted. No wonder that the inwardly spiralling Oedipal narrative would contend with another of equal cultural potency but one which offered a more linear, a more uplifting, and a less troubling narrative model.

Reflecting on his own fascination with the genre W. H. Auden observed that, for him: 'In the detective story, the Quest for the Grail, maps (the ritual of space) and timetables (the ritual of time) are desirable'. Having formed the quest object for countless medieval—and even contemporary—romances, the Grail provides an obvious narrative paradigm for the mystery story and clearly underlies such tales as *The Moonstone* or Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle' (1892), which revolve around the search for a valuable artefact with a romantic history. Auden went on to admit that his addiction to detective fiction arose, in part, from its 'specificity—the story must conform to certain formulas', adding parenthetically, 'I find it very difficult, for example, to read one that is not set in rural England,'[28] and there is no question that it becomes tempting to distinguish between American and English examples of

26 Dashiell Hammett, 'The Farewell Murder' (1930), in *The Continental Op*, p.287.

27 Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, originally published 1939), p. 220. The passage is worth giving in full:

> What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump, or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of that nastiness now.

By contrast, the observed investigator negotiates his way out of play. For example, by refusing to take possession of the purloined letter and thus enter its strict order of propriety, returning it rather to the order of the Law in exchange for his investigator's reward, Dupin protects himself from its world of duplicity. Thus Lacan makes the point that the purpose of the 'profit Dupin so nimbly extracts from his exploit ... is to allow him to withdraw his stakes from the game" ('Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"', 68-69).

28 W. H. Auden, *The Dyer's Hand* (London: Faber, 1948), p. 151.

the genre almost on the basis of this difference in narrative models, which generate significant differences in style and structure. Of the Grail type, for example, Todorov (who refers to it as the 'whodunnit') notes:

> Theoreticians of detective fiction have always agreed that style, in this type of literature, must be perfectly transparent, imperceptible; the only requirement it obeys is to be simple, clear, direct.... One publisher put out real dossiers, consisting of police reports, interrogations, photographs, fingerprints, even locks of hair; these 'authentic' documents were to lead to the discovery of the criminal (in case of failure, a sealed envelope, pasted on the last page, gave the answer to the puzzle; for example, the judge's verdict). [29]

This represents the apogee of the objective observer's account, which contrasts markedly with the subjectively inflected narration—implicitly suggesting that all 'truths' are compromised to some degree by the view from which they are comprehended—that characterises tales written according to the Oedipal model. Other contrasts may readily be observed. In the Grail kind, for example, the crime is an alien manifestation, an outrage to civilised society, whereas in the Oedipal kind crime is a recurrent event in a criminal world in which the detective fits easily, and is not himself untarnished (there is an air of the diabolical about Sam Spade, for example, a 'blonde Satan', as Hammett calls him.)[30] The institutional authorities tend to be part of this corrupt world—unlike their simply inept colleagues in the 'whodunnit' model—and often are content with half-truths or fabrications, which frequently threaten the detective, as when Sam looks like he will be framed for Miles's murder. And ultimately, the Grail model defines the detective heroically in terms of the holiness of the quest, which restores equilibrium and decency to society by extirpating an alien element of evil; the Oedipal model, on the other hand, involves the detective in a mystery that inevitably spirals inwards, implicating him by exposing his connection to a corrupted world in which something is uncovered, with an attendant sense of it having been sinfully concealed. Between the two narrative models, Grail and Oedipal, then, there is a world of difference—the difference between the idea that there is something to be found, and the idea that there is something to be found out.

Hammett's extraordinary achievement in *The Maltese Falcon* is to put in play *all* of these textual dynamics—competing narratorial modes, transverse narrative paradigms, and antithetical symbolic structures. Apparently concerned with the quest for a lost prize, a Grail, it is in fact structured around the internecine spirals of murder; apparently told in the third person, it is effectively told in the first, not as a written record as such but as a dramatizing of consciousness. Sam Spade, the Oedipal detective, is required to solve a symbolically familial murder, that of his partner Miles Archer. In the course of his subsequent investigation the Grail term becomes actualized—the hunt for the Maltese Falcon assumes puzzling but urgent priority. Here, of course, the Falcon is found to be a false Grail, a counterfeit, but the machinations of that discovery have disclosed the pattern of the original hermeneutic sequence and compel the Oedipal resolution. The seductive Brigid O'Shaughnessy—who had originally secured the services of the agency—is found to be the murderer, a discovery which not only illustrates that, for this narrative, in the end is the beginning, but also determines a

29 Tzvetan Todorov, 'The Typology of Detective Fiction' in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 46.

30 *The Maltese Falcon*, p. 5.

symbolic scarring of the detective, akin to Oedipus's self-blinding (generally read to be a kind of castration):

> He said: 'I'm going to send you over. The chances are you'll get off with life. That means you'll be out again in twenty years. You're an angel. I'll wait for you.'[31]

The sexual contract effectively struck between detective and client is violated and Spade ultimately finds himself adrift in a melodramatic ritual of impotence and repulsion, evidenced in his final conversation with Effie:

> Her voice was queer as the expression on her face. 'You did that, Sam, to her?'
>
> He nodded. 'Your Sam's a detective.' He looked sharply at her. He put his arm around her waist, his hand on her hip. 'She did kill Miles, angel,' he said gently, 'Off-hand, like that.' He snapped the fingers of his other hand.
>
> She escaped from his arm as if it had hurt her. 'Don't, please don't touch me,' she said brokenly. 'I know—I know you're right. You're right. But don't touch me now—not now.' [32]

Moreover, the Oedipal structure of the story has contaminated the narrative as well as Spade, and so the reader, victim to the duplicity of the romantic false quest, is denied the romantic resolution the narrative appeared to promise, while Spade appears condemned to a life of sterile recurrence, foreshadowed in the final scene of the novel as Effie enters his office to tell him of what comes next:

> She said in a small flat voice: 'Iva is here.' Spade, looking down at his desk, nodded almost imperceptibly. 'Yes,' he said, and shivered. 'Well, send her in.' [33]

This concluding dialogue pointedly echoes the opening of the tale, but contains none of its sexual ebullience:

> She finished shutting the door behind her, leaned against it, and said: 'There's a girl wants to see you. Her name's Wonderly.' 'A customer?' 'I guess so. You'll want to see her anyway: she's a knockout.'
> 'Shoo her in, darling,' said Spade. 'Shoo her in.' [34]

31 Ibid, p. 195.

32 Oedipal narratives became more and more popular as the first film noir cycle progressed. Notable instances include John Farrow's *The Big Clock* (1948), Alfred Hitchcock's *Rope* (1948), and Otto Preminger's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950). Film historians often date the start of the second cycle from Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974), which cast John Huston himself as the incestuous patriarch of its world of evil, and featured the Oedipal scarring of the detective in the most self-conscious manner, with the director in a cameo as a hired thug taking the knife to detective Jack Nicholson's nose.

33 *The Maltese Falcon*, p.201.

34 Ibid. p.5.

Both here in *The Maltese Falcon* and elsewhere[35] Hammett invokes the image of the Grail to declare it a sham, a counterfeit. The Falcon itself is indeed a very studied inversion of the Christian Grail: it has a shadowy history originating with the crusaders, the Knights Templar, but their motives, as Gutman explains, were mercenary and imperial, not spiritual; instead of the Christian image of the dove it offers the image of the predatory falcon; instead of the base metal cup concealed within bejewelled gold, it is bejewelled gold concealed within base metal. To an early 20th century audience it might well recall the falcon of Yeats's 'The Second Coming', whose predatory and uncontrolled spiralling through the skies announces the coming of the Anti-Christ. And, more subversively still, since the Grail tended to show up in the English countryhouse and the Oedipal figure in the mean streets of newly urbanized and industrialised early 20th century America, the Maltese Falcon just might have evoked the image of another bird altogether, one which outwardly promised so much but increasingly was suspected of being a sham: the American Eagle, symbol of democratic promise.

In putting all of these textual dynamics at play in a single but multi-levelled narrative, Hammett seems to have been at pains to question the implicit idealism of the Grail model while affirming the cynicism of the Oedipal pattern. Before becoming a writer Hammett was a detective for the Pinkerton Agency and he saw the underside of American society; a lifelong Marxist, he would have recognised the radical political power in the revelatory structure of the Oedipal mystery story and the implicit conservatism of the Grail model. For, in essence, the Grail model affirms the order of things. It details a narrative of external discovery implicating the protagonist in a quest pattern that is predicated upon an essentially heroic goodness of character, and the successful conclusion of the quest fixes that character in a stable individuality, just as it literally fixes the social order: everything is returned to its rightful place. Against this, the Oedipal model details a narrative of internal discovery, but what is discovered is a catastrophic truthfulness that destabilises the sense of self and exposes the social as a dark maze of unforeseen criminality. The order of things is seen to be a ruse, a sham, covering a deceitful disorder. So the difference between a story in which something is found and a story in which something is found out is the difference between a narrative of affirmation and a narrative of disillusion. What made such a story especially fascinating for the American public, I suspect, was the fact that at the time of Hammett's writing America was beginning to comprehend itself through an essential criminality.[36] What the 'lost generation' of the 1920s had lost above all was the sense of innocence that propelled American society through the second half of the 19th century; by the early 20th century this sense had become damaged by successive scandals in monopolistic and oligopolistic industries, by the crowding of cities and the spectacle of vast extremes of wealth, by the contracting of the judiciary to financial interests, and by the suppression of political dissent through union-busting by goon squads acting as corporate para-militaries. Moreover, in 1919 the Volstead Act was passed, Prohibition was introduced and, at a stroke, the US Congress effectively criminalized the majority of its adult population and created a breeding ground for

35 Hammett features a sham cult in the chapter 'The Unholy Grail' in *The Dain Curse* (1930). It is a measure of just how conscious these writers were of narrative structures at play in their stories that Chandler also explicitly repudiated the Grail model in Moose Molloy's quest for the false 'Grayle' of his old girlfriend, Velma, in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940).

36 This is perhaps most evident in Hammett's contemporary F. Scott Fitzgerald's choice of Jay Gatsby —an upstart thug and bootlegger, but also a 'Son of God' who 'sprang from his own Platonic conception of himself'—as his symbolic personification of America and its historical aspiration. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, originally published 1926), p105.

crime and institutional corruption. Everyone went to speakeasies to drink illicit liquor; everyone flouted the law. Prohibition was not repealed until 1932, by which time the damage was done.[37] In 1929 in Atlantic City a convention of criminals convened by Lucky Luciano created Organised Crime, with grim affiliated industries such as Murder Incorporated, modelled on the structures of Corporate America and formalizing what was already the reality in many American cities, like Chicago, under competition between George 'Bugsy' Moran and Al Capone. This is the background for the sense of a universal criminal milieu which Hammett's text evokes, and the reason why it struck such a responsive chord in its criminalized audience.

Huston's avowed intention with his adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon* in 1941 was to 'stick to the ideas of the book':

> I've written scripts and made pictures out of them in two weeks. At other times I've worked a year and a half just on a script. *The Maltese Falcon* was done in a very short time, because it was based on a very fine book and there was very little for me to invent. It was a matter of sticking to the ideas of the book, of making a film out of a book. [38]

Presumably such a translation from word to screen meant projecting through the film medium the novel's socio-political cynicism bred out of Prohibition and the failure of democratic institutions and the free market of the '20s, but the film is further informed by the long trauma of economic Depression and by a sense of cultural crisis in the midst of world war (a war against anti-democratic tyranny in which isolationist America was at this time still refusing to involve itself).[39] It was in part for this reason that Huston used those iconic devices mentioned earlier—skewed angles, low-key lighting, expressionistic effects and so on—to enhance the atmosphere of the text and underscore its moody cynicism. But Huston also appears to have fashioned this style in order to personalise the screen in and around Sam's consciousness, thus translating into cinematic terms the narrational mode that had developed in Hammett's hands as an exploration less of the mystery than of the phenomenological nature of modern reality as a negotiation between consciousness and the world in which it finds itself—that puzzling world of self-conscious mendacity and Nietzschean 'justice' that took shape under the pressures of modernity. The world of film noir is a world as one person experiences it, knows it, feels it; it is this that puts in play the fundamental existential questions of identity, truth and the real that make the hard-boiled genre and the film-noir cycle it inspired so compelling for modern audiences, while at the same time the genre casts a cynical eye on the fabric and direction of modern democratic societies, amid the dislocations of which those questions are posed.

The cinematic devices Huston used in making *The Maltese Falcon* had already been employed in the horror films of the '30s, but there they lacked the metaphorical reach and resonance they would acquire when put at the service of the mystery narrative. Only two years before *The Maltese Falcon* Bogart had appeared—as a *vampire*—in the horror picture *The*

37 Perhaps too often we forget that in Hammett's novel, when Spade takes a drink from Gutman, he is breaking the law.

38 *Interviews with Film Directors* op.cit., p. 255. Cf. also James Naremore's observation: 'As John Huston recognized, Hammett's novels were already virtual scripts, containing little more than objective descriptions and exchanges of pungent dialogue.' *More Than Night*, p. 63.

39 Huston's next feature, *Across the Pacific* (1942), once more starring Humphrey Bogart, Sidney Greenstreet and Mary Astor, was about the necessity for America to enter the war.

Return of Dr X, in which director Vincent Sherman stylizes the screen image in ways that were to become familiar to fans of film *noir*, as in the foregrounded lower lighting and upward angle shot of Bogart, or with the figure of the investigative reporter, Wayne Morris, discovered amid the play of venetian blind shadows:

Yet in both these instances the shadows, the camera angles, the expressionistic mise-en-scene are basically ornamental. It was only when these effects were used in conjunction with Hammett's mystery narrative that they were to become compelling, providing an

appropriate stylistic dimension for the cinematic exploration of themes and perspectives put in play in the hard-boiled literary genre and launching a decade of stylistic experimentation in the subjectivized screenscapes of film noir.[40] Except for the dramatic interpolation of the shooting of Miles the camera follows Spade at all times and our knowledge of events is precisely correlated with his, with point of view shots complemented by many over the shoulder shots and a fluid editing style picking up Spade's rhythms of consciousness.[41] Throughout the film the camera tends to be set at waist rather than eye level, skewing the frame just sufficiently to give it a subjective inflection, as in the expressionistic upward angle shot of Gutman in conversation with Spade, which correlates less with Sam's view of Gutman than with his apprehension of him:

40 The increasing reliance on voiceover in later film noir underscores the importance of the subjectivized character of the narrative. Cf Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film* (Routledge: New York and London, 1989), particularly Ch. 5, 'Flashbacks and the Psyche in Melodrama and Film Noir'.

41 Cf. David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's analysis of Huston's editing style in the opening scene as reflective of the rhythms of consciousness: 'In short, the analytical editing cooperates with framing and figure behaviour to focus our attention on Brigid's tale, to let us study her demeanour, and to get a hint as to Spade's response.' *Film Art: An Introduction* (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1997) p.288.

This subjectivized sense of the narrative[42] then becomes enhanced by Huston's use of light and the play of shadow—as in the case of Brigid O'Shaughnessy's dazzling apartment, which anticipates the shadowy figuration of her punishment at the end of the film:

42 Huston uses this technique with great subtlety in establishing narrational subjectivity throughout *The Maltese Falcon*. However, the strict point-of-view shot as a personalising device for cinema can be clumsy and artificial when used to excess, as clearly shown in Robert Montgomery's ambitious but unsuccessful screen version of *The Lady in the Lake* (1947), in which—in an effort to replicate Chandler's first-person style—every shot is from the detective's point of view.

In *The Return of Dr X* the visual metaphor of the shadows of the venetian blind might indicate to us the puzzlement of the reporter, but they indicate nothing to him. Here the figurative play of light in association with the subjectivized narrative style allows us to read these images of Brigid in relation to shadowy bars both as actual and as Sam's sense of the actual simultaneously (like the qualifying description of the 'nickel-and-pigskin' lighter in the novel). Sam already has a suspicion about Brigid in the first scene, even if he can't quite put his finger on the reason;[43] by the final scene his darkest suspicions have been confirmed, and these are played out in the screen imagery. So the objective and the subjective blur into one another, accenting both the nature of Sam's perception and the unstable and deceptive nature of the reality presented. Similarly, the story generally takes place at night and interiors are dark and low-lit, casting expressionistic shadows over the players. In such ways the lighting of *The Maltese Falcon* suggests both pools of illumination and dark pools of mystery among which Spade has to navigate.

This is especially effective in scenes of conversation as characters manoeuvre into and out of the light, jockeying for psychological dominance and knowledge, as when Sam, placed under the light, is quizzed at 2am by detectives still wearing hats, which they use advantageously to shade their own faces:

43 'We didn't believe your story, Miss O'Shaughnessy, we believed your $200,' Sam tells her when she apologizes for concealing the truth from him when she first came to his office.

But Sam Spade is as effective as anybody—and more effective than most—at negotiating the dark mazes of this criminal world: indeed, he fits neatly into its milieu of mendacity and deceitful performance. In order to recognise the truth he has to be skilled in its duplicitous ways, and he has to be suspicious and cynical because no-one is what they seem and no-one can be trusted. This is dramatically shown in the novel when Gutman accuses Brigid of stealing $1,000—she protests but Spade strip-searches her, knowing her exterior is nothing but show. Delicacy, and the Production Code Authority, prevented Huston from using this scene in the film, so Spade is unusually chivalrous at this moment, rounding on Gutman and accusing him of palming the note, which he had. But Sam's distrust of others, no matter how romantically close, is evidenced effectively at other times, as when he allows Brigid to plead her melodramatic case for protection only to deflate her with the sarcastic observation:

> *Sam:* You won't need much of anybody's help—you're good. It's chiefly your eyes, I think, and that throb you get in your voice when you say things like, 'Be generous Mr Spade.'

Spade is as much a performer, a practitioner of deceit, as any other, but he needs to be, both in order to recognise such qualities in others and to navigate the treacherous paths of this duplicitous world. Huston underscores this when he juxtaposes scenes in which Sam is interviewed first by Gutman and then by the District Attorney, with both of whom he puts on an act of angered outrage. These scenes are separated in the novel; by bringing them together Huston showcases Sam's talent for deception while accentuating the necessity for deceit whether one is dealing with the lawless or the lawful.

Yet no matter how effective he is in this world the problem for Sam in both book and film is that, by virtue of its deep criminality, it is an unfulfilling and a hollow one. Unlike the hope of redemption offered by the Grail, the world of the Oedipal detective is without promise. Sam's greatest performance is the one that will wound him the most: his deception of Brigid, who only realises at the last moment that her own romantic manipulation of Sam's

loyalty has failed. 'You came into my bed to stop me asking questions,' Sam says to her—he knows that sex is used for self-interest, and that there is no place for love.[44] Love is a weakness: to fall in love means 'playing the sap' for someone else, but for Sam not to fall in love means going back to what he had before, but no longer to have an appetite for it, because the false romance of the Grail offered momentarily the temptation that true romance might be possible—not just the romance of men and women, perhaps, but also that distinctively American romance of a new beginning in a world of grace.

It was Hammett who first charted this dark thematic territory by exploring the metaphorical resources of the mystery novel in a distinctively American setting; Huston's triumph was to find a cinematic language for the purpose—a language foreshadowed in the literary text yet so essential in its filmic elements that it inaugurated an entire genre in which the troubling questions asked by Hammett would continue to be posed. The American dream, as it became known, was as alluring as any Grail, as both Hammett and Huston knew, but it would prove a cheat and a torment to those who inhabited the dark worlds of hard-boiled crime fiction and film noir like Sam, who—unlike his counterparts from that other school of detective fiction—find the experience of mystery both darkly disillusioning and disturbingly self-revealing. Eyes wide open yet deeply scarred by his involvement in the plot, Sam knows as much, and says as much, at the end of the film in words that Dashiell Hammett never wrote, but William Shakespeare almost did:

Nulty (looking at the Falcon): What is it?
Spade: The stuff that dreams are made of.

44 *The Maltese Falcon*, p.195.