THE KNOWLEDGE
A Collection of Poetry
and
THE *POEM NOIR*:
Film Noir in Contemporary Poetry

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Abstract

This thesis consists of a collection of poetry, *The Knowledge*, and the first critical investigation into the '*poem noir*', an unidentified and unexplored mode within contemporary poetry that exhibits thematic and visual echoes from the body of films known as *film noir*. Taking its title from the London taxi driver's rigorous examination, *The Knowledge*'s key theme is displacement: from social class, education and from a sense of home. It echoes the quest of the doomed *film noir* protagonist, who, in a thirst for knowledge, is drawn into a psychological descent into a metaphorical underworld. Like the poems *noir* analysed in the critical section, these possess an anxious, pessimistic and obsessive engagement with the world, and are set within *noirish* locales to excavate the autobiographical and the imaginative. Inspired by *film noir's* portrayal of individuals whose identity is called into conflict, the poems take the lid off the works of memory and place, to examine a personal and public moral compass, and to dramatize the past and the present.

   After providing a definition of *film noir*, the critical section outlines a model for reading a *poem noir* by analysing a selection of seminal American *films noir* of the classic 1941 to 1958 period, along with several *neo-noir* films produced from the 1970s onwards. It then provides close readings of Paul Muldoon's hard-boiled Chandleresque poem, 'Immram' (1980), Deryn Rees-Jones' book-length murder-mystery poem, *Quiver* (2004), and David Harsent's nightmarish labyrinthine poem, 'Elsewhere' (2011), and introduces them as *poems noir*. In conclusion I consider how writing poetry is a *noirish* act, sharing a similarity with Seamus Heaney's notion that the role of writing poetry is to unearth revelations about the self, and with Henrik Gustafsson's thesis that *film noir* is concerned with taking the lid off the works to expose whatever truth lies beneath.

Acknowledgement

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A Collection of Poetry

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"The Knowledge is the in-depth study of a number of pre-set London street routes and places of interest that taxicab drivers in that city must complete to obtain a license to operate a black cab. It was initiated in 1865, and has changed little since. It is claimed that the training involved ensures that London taxi drivers are experts on London, and have an intimate knowledge of the city."

Taxicabs of the United Kingdom, Wikipedia.[1]

"I have been brought here by imagination, and now I am stuck with the memories."
Charles Fernyhough, from *Pieces of Light*.[2]

[1] Wikipedia contributors, 'Taxicabs of the United Kingdom', *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 22 July 2004, 10:55 UTC, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taxicabs_of_the_United_Kingdom> [accessed 15 February 2015]
[2] Charles Fernyhough, *Pieces of Light: The New Science of Memory* (London: Profile Books, 2013), p. 45.

I

Baptism by Fire

Tonight the soot-faced men have taken
picks below to mine what's left
of money from the money mine
to fuel the furnace of the air.

They will not stop until there's nothing,
nothing to burn, nothing to heat,
but the air's own silent machine,
that has you sweating your confession.

Tell your loved ones that you love them.
Tonight, you are the flame.

Hansard

I've been writing elegies for the undead.
Imagining the hovels where their souls will be led,
and making sense of their still-in-use possessions.
I'm pressing ears to walls and doors, and taking
the minutes of the air, my pen on paper
a cardiograph. I'm planning funerals ahead.
But nightly, ghosts arrive with tickets to the picture house
to see a film from *their time,* shot in black and white,
with the pale leads dressed in 'old-style hats and coats.'

And even though we spoke this morning, I see
my teenage father help the Rt. Hon. George Brown
rise out of the gutter, with Dave Darkins and a copper,
as I walk past Downing Street, no armed guards or cameras,
to a black cab on Whitehall. No waiting paparazzi.
My father's on a year of half-nights, printing
Hansard from the Commons. I hear him whisper
as I stroll: 'I signed the Official Secrets Act.'
Smug to know the price hike before the printers' local.

And as I write some copy on a client's APR rates,
I hear myself say to him: 'Dad, you ever get creative?
Change the words? Revise the budget?'
'No, never, not our place. We left the lies to higher men.'
And as I get this down on paper, I watch him prime the typeset,
see him hold his inky hand, much younger than I am now,
to pass the baton, no, the torch, no, a cloudy pint.
Now here's my mother's father who never touched a drop,
lighting up to watch the TV. I ask him what he's viewing

but his eyes and mouth are stitched up and I do not have the heart.

Returning from the North

One night the family men returned across
the brook and through the corn, from work
abroad on oil rigs, to find their wives
moved on with newly fathered children,
the locks changed, the pub knocked down,
the market bare of fish and scales,
no means to weigh their sighs.

Like them, I came home by that chance,
across the field to vault the fence,
to slot my rusted key and breathe
a home-cooked scent.
But I turned to find the plants removed.
The garden scooped of stem and root.
No rowan tree, no oak, no green.

And in pallid light, I unlocked the door
and breathed the cocktail of exhaust
that slurred my sight and unbalanced me.
The house I thought I knew appeared
to glow and rise, then split and drift
as though I'd lit the gas
that had been leaking since I took my leave.

Camphor

Cedarwood, a teenage jacket, coat cupboard, an attic,
the poem-homes of musk, damp, camphor, mint and pinecone.
This is the wood where childhood built dens
from fir and dead oak branches. This is the cupboard
where hide and seek played its final game,
and this, the attic of jaundiced photos, webs
and rusty bikes, their silenced bells and spokes.
You know this scent, this little signal, this promise of retirement
to go as far as nostalgia allows,
as if the scent had shaped a key, its grooves and teeth
as sharp and solid as the first you ever owned.

Blood

I rose as the milkman planted his bottles
in our plastic cradle, to help you scrape
the windscreen's frost, never a curse on your lips.
At Stratford Market I watched you lift

boxes of cabbage and leek, your arms as thick
as horse's thighs, your vest always damp with sweat.
You loaded the buyer with England's growth.
The sun ploughed light into the market's heart.

Your lips loosened as you drank into morning
and lit up the doings of countless nights,
how even the Krays were spreading the fruit,
how business advances by spill and spread:

how money that lasts is made by blood.
A cotchel of stock and a packet of ponies
was all retirement afforded, as time deferred
and we overlapped: I rose and started the engine.

On the rank I handle the headlines. My hands,
already dark from notes, sweat the bad news
from the paper. At home, my son, who put in
the line breaks, works in the light of a desk lamp.

Dark Heat

Coals flare and flake grey on unlit barbecues.
      Ivy, that ladder climber, is loosening the masonry.
            The petrol tanks of parked cars whistle, on the boil.

            There are wires beneath our driveways fusing
      with the soil that's soldering our utilities
to strengthen our reliance on the subterranean grid.

Annexed at the garden's end, fields of corn
      and rape turn luminous as the light fails.
            The flesh of buried relatives is tender to the ground.

            This weather is beneath our skin, it turns the small
      particulars – the tongue's clack, the mouth's twitch,
the habit of the knuckles – into escalating pitches.

And with each degree Celsius homicide's excuses
      rise to pay out dividends to underworld investors.
            The flames are burning out from the wicks of our bones.

The Fire Door

I opened a door laid on the rubble
of blistered goods, sunburst glass
and rafters wrinkled by the heat,
and climbed into a tunnel built
from herringbone masonry.
The fire had arranged the walls
as a regiment of dominos
that at my touch fell to give
a second of every age I'd lived.

I wasn't there when the fridge
began to utter an irony of smoke.
I wasn't there when they found the bed,
the frame and springs coated with
what might have been my flesh,
but I arrived just as the fire's
language forged a carbon key
to compensate me with the promise
it would burn through any lock.

The Third Men

I follow dead men to the picture house.
The once-plush velvet chairs now occupied
by private eyes, shamed by malpractice,
by South Pacific veterans, deserters still in
shore leave whites, and life insurance investigators
forced out by legislation. They're here to watch
their *films noir*. They light electric cigarettes.

But this afternoon their attitudes,
their dubious morality that no amount
of drink restrained, their incorrigible silence
troubles the modern audience who have
come here to escape with their sodas
and their popcorn from the ethical impasse
of their intellectually unrequited lives.

And although there's half a century
and the Atlantic separating us, I can't help
but identify with these outcast pessimists,
doomed in every future, unacknowledged
poets who have forced open the manhole
to the sewers to investigate the darkness
where their shadows roam without indemnity.

The Love

Where does it go? Depots mainly, on the edge
of Kent and Essex. Try the Dartford Crossing.
Sewage treatment, substations, traffic heavy,
anonymous; a perfect place for murder.
They keep it stored in wooden crates on endless
shelves on endless floors in endless subterranean
bunkers: love contained like unsold cargo,
or books un-pulped, the self-help kind, flat packed love
for easy storage, love damp and jaundiced.
Love worn on no one's sleeve, love rattling
as shattered ceramics on the tusks of a forklift.
How does it get here? It just comes for early
career researchers, who mill about the aisles
dressed in protective suits, who unearth
platonic love from cases, like plutonium,
careful not to spill a drop of all this used
and wasted love. They've heard the rumours,
spots, blindness, madness, mania, jealous rages,
fits and giggles, murder. To appease authorities,
recipients of the Turner prize are hired
to make collages to chronicle love's decline,
or replicate Rodin's *The Kiss* from unworn
engagement rings, dredged from sewers, rivers,
pawn shops, and love-locks clipped
from the *Pont Des Arts* to pause the weight of love.
Musicians have the sound of love digitised
on laptops, the moans like warping steel
or wood, a music of altered mass. Meanwhile,
the poets, in rubber gloves, read the charred
and tea-stained letters, the cached emails
from jilted lovers, to recycle Eros and Aphrodite
from the mulch of love's organic, kitschy compost.

Operator

There will come a time to exist,
to rein in the acts tomorrow regrets;
a scuffle with a broken bottle neck,
a woman swathed by a man against
the altar of a silver bonnet. Zoom.

My finger wavers above the button
to heighten the drama, to send
in a chorus, to finish my shift
with a bang. Night awaits my decision.
Is it a false alarm? I listen.

Discourse on *Noir*

The diner smells of black and white, of gasoline
and smoke: detectives, salesmen, veterans,
woman-haters. Men. Marie reads to read and dreams
of reading the contours of the highway's page,
indents in tar, potholes in words, where the key
has been struck a little too hard and the letter
has burst through the paper; a bullet through the heart.
But Marie, there's no hope of leaving here, unless,
that is, you believe in *noir*, and any minute
a man might walk straight in from a bus ride west
to sweep you with his dead-eye stare, and like all
good men according to the rule of 1940s film,
convince you of your worth, lend muscle to your idea:
slay your husband, the nameless chef, and take you
far away from here. A woman's work is murder.
And say it plays out like you've read it, you
and he holed up in a motel beyond the county line,
the red O of its neon sign on the blink to shed
a little shadow on your otherwise success,
as an engine cuts in the parking lot, its door
shut with just a hint of pessimistic fatalism,
and a figure appears in silhouette, grown backlit
from some desert moon at the room's blind,
room: triple six. Is this your considered present?
Or rather, is it his? His past, come from east to west,
to collect what he by rights never should have owned
or never even knew he did, his life, your kiss of death.

Hallmark Hotel, Carlisle

When you find yourself in a hotel bar
by the railway, your train delayed,
a bowl of dry roasted nuts
half-full, your fingers wet with dew
from a glass of fresh Stella Artois,
then you have sat where the countless have sat,
away from their partners on company trips,
kept up late by optimism:
the one will walk through the door to the sound
of a slow dance at a wedding reception.

But you are thinking of her or of him,
the salubrious peeling of smalls in the heat
you imagine home is enjoying
(the air sweet with marinade),
thankful for time to think about love,
as you strip the glass to its foamy vest
and picture the thoughts of the guests at the bar
consulting martinis, manhattans and sodas
like horoscopes, to learn whose room
they'll see in the sunrise, and leave.

Ugly-on-Sea

'I have located it, my ghost town'
                    Michael Longley

If you have found the strip of clubs,
windows licked with adverts for nude shows,
The Main Event and three-for-twos on pain
relief, that stretches down the promenade

to a black, wrecked pier, then tribute acts
and pantomimes and blue comedians
have come to give the final show
at the domed pavilion that burned years ago.

The ticket in your hand will buy a turn
in the teacups, the chance to win a coconut,
or passage through the phantom house, long
closed like innocence, condemned to the rats.

And in the bar you call into, the ghouls
fixed in rubber masks prop up the bar with grief,
and the acrobats who lost their grip
sport their twisted injuries. The beer tastes of loss.

Later, before the vaudeville, you're called
down to the seafront where locals
wearing headlamps hunt the churned,
dismantled beach for any new arrivals.

The moon casts a corridor out towards
the oil rigs anchored on the night's horizon
like a row of fuses, then soon, you're told,
the fireworks to end all fireworks.

Seaside *Noir*

This town harbours weather that could kill
or inspire the setting for a mystery
that stars a lead with a city past heading
an investigation, not just of a murder,
but of the town, or so it seems
within the subtext that is heavy with its close-ups
of the seafront slowly going under,
and the mandatory punch-ups in the local
where our lead is never welcome, but drinks
because there is no place to go.

If he'd only get over himself and the grief
he thinks he hides (in series two we learn
that he once had a wife), and head out to the water
where each night the dead return as living
proof of their own demise, to find the clothes
they left behind beneath the dark strip
of the pier. He'd know the culprit's not the mayor,
or the owner of the hardware store,
the landlord or the butcher's wife, but is the town
he'll never leave, in this life or the next.

II

The Storm Door

The door that sung its stunted hymn
that roared on its hinge and with each day
grew a skin of rust and with each month
warped millimetres out from its frame,
that welcomed every kind of curtain,
stair-rod and pin-head rain, to submerge
the exit and direct the stairs into the sea –

it ceased the day I woke with the knowledge:
that rain was laced with milk, that thunder
was some Foley artist's echo-chambered
cough, that the script I'd learned,
practised till I had the lines by heart,
was only the dénouement to the true
storm's prologue, set, and yet to break.

Pond Life

Biology brought us beneath the rain, to poke
through algae and scoop frogspawn with empty
strawberry jam jars. Eye level with the fizzing
midges we injected the pond with a pipette.

The days were spent waiting for the thin shadows
of tadpoles to stretch and bloat into the frogs
that maidens kissed in picture books. As cells divided
in the classroom, we undertook new searches.

Rumour led us to tread old ground, where we found
fists of paper. Each unfurled into a page of creased
red mouths, parted legs, and faces pulled and set

as if by wind; the accident of innocence that kept
us looking for the cheat, to learn love by all its shapes,
and how, when our time came, to procreate.

Hail

for R.F.C.

When I first tried to flag one down
I couldn't summon the confidence
to imitate professionals who never ask
politely, but command awareness.

I gave a junior impression of a minor
royal, or politician seeking re-election,
though something in my demeanour
said *recently graduated*.

But I know of their commitment
to The Order of the Hackney Carriage.
They meet at listed shelters to recite
the litany of streets, alleyways and crescents.

And in their mobile offices absolve
us of our sins. Affairs. Fragile
marriages. Promotion envy. Guilt.
When finally I flagged one down

I couldn't *not* apologize to my scholar
of the road, who knew my destination
and all the routes to reach my home
before I said a word.

Hand Composition

Here we are, both with precision –
you, selecting crafted letters
with straight literate edges,
in the copy shop, the searing metal
cooling and the sound of paper
reeling through the cylinders
like a stylus playing silence –
and I, arranging punctuation,
writing the family Hansard.
The difference lies not in desire
(once, I'm sure, you loved that work,
the printing press camaraderie
those well-earned Friday pints,
for after all, these are your stories),
but in the grease behind your nails,
the overbearing furnace heat,
the burn marks on your webbing.
Compare that to my lack of scars,
the ink soap washes off.

Terminus

My days have all flown in at once
to queue and cross the border.
A differently clothed promenade,
from freshly laundered funeral blacks
to mud-splattered sportswear.
Through binoculars, some are crawling:
the days I can't remember.

These days have not the Edwardian
conduct of our ancestors,
but are days from unknown eras,
no patent on delivery
of art, fashion, speech and manners.
They lack the official insignia.
To which shall I grant asylum?

Ignore the metal in their case,
the liquids that exceed the limit,
their bribes in withdrawn currencies,
and stamp their passport (out-of-date),
blind-eye to their luggage weight
over the hold's allowance?
Days, your papers aren't correct.

You're still on walks around the block,
or paddling in the freezing sea,
full of the fish and chips I bought,
and love my loved ones meant for me.
Days, your hands are soft, your skin
still pale, your joints and legs
still strong enough to stand. Please wait.

Tomorrow's country will open up
when I am only paper, boxed
on my sister's garage shelves.
I can almost hear my words aloud
as interest starts to take my nephew,
who's peeling back the parcel tape
and pulling pages from their envelopes.

The Race

On the oak table's underside, there, in the corner.
On the base of the claret armchair and its matching sofa.
On the *in* of the Georgian cabinet –
glassware winks in opened light – on the stem
of each crystal flute: a pink stickered dot.

But the race began years ago. In pencil marks
still on this wall, beneath the cream and floral paper,
our names and ages, our changing heights,
hers the hare and mine the tortoise.
Only reaching five-foot-four, she never *stood* a chance.

A picture of us at Wembley. Those are my short
awestruck arms. She, the first to hold the cup.
The very cup my father's aunt stowed the night
in '75 West Ham put two past Fulham.
I try to recite the known story. She starts on the attic.

Us, framed on the claret sofa dressed in our Shell Suits,
our second skins (how fashion always suffers),
hers a lurid pink and purple, mine blue, with a dash of green,
the shade my eyes take in the sun, and of the dot
that I now thumb to the back of this photograph.

Because I've none and you've three (in kitchen,
living and bedroom), you bequeath to me their television.
Doesn't matter if the set is old, and still in use, I add.
'But, what if? It's yours', she says before she touches
on a deeper note, her serious tone. She mentions wills.

Will I keep her son, what if? I boil the kettle, rinse
out the dregs from four un-stickered mugs, and wonder
whether, years from now, saddled with one, maybe
three kids, I'll make the same request before they divide
my possessions? I stir in milk for the not-yet-dead.

Rec.

i.m. Donald Ball

Look. Your deflated armchair, the shape
of your fingers pressed onto the knuckle.

The lever on the right, worn to matte,
opens the chair like a doctor's bag:

the stool appears like an advert break.
In a drawer to the left is your secret store

of cigarettes beside your remotes.
Their well-thumbed volume buttons

speak as loudly as we spoke. They operate
the stacks of VCRs that issued boxes

of martial documentaries; your subject
and history. I lean to hear our yesteryears

confess themselves to video. Before
switching the power off, I pause to let

the tape consider: gunfire at Gold
and Sword, a shell-wound in a bunker,

the final shot: a silhouette
weaving between the rows of stars

and crosses stretching far beyond
the length of videotape.

Clockmaking

Precise as the general surgeon, he transplants
the final cog into his mercury compensation
pendulum. Or for short, his clock.

Its weighty tonsils swing a maiden
Dom Pérignon against the hull of HMS *Infinity*
to set all thought in time.

First, a God, toes to the wind, from his ledge
of cloud, winds the Rolex of the sun,
and creation turns its pockets out.

Next, Eve, steps from her leaves to bend
for Adam's sac. Each thrust, a cluck
of the misadventure and seconds come to echo

through our caves, castles, terraced houses
and now, this exam hall, where I face
the antagonistic void of this question's answer box:

Do you think of us inventing time, or of time inventing us?

A Lock of Larkin's Hair

It's laughable I find you here, between the fusty
documents in a library archive, underground.
And is it even yours? A black, maybe pubic strand
curled beneath a plastic sheaf above the ordinary
loops of your reclusive signature on the typewritten
manuscript of the foreword to *A Rumoured City*.
Who's to know? The editor? I asked. He's forgotten.
The past is neatly boxed for my own detection.

I thank the one who saw ahead, how one day
academics would bore through the letters
where our predecessors wrote of disillusionment
with life, their withdrawal from the public.
What would you say to this? Get a proper job?
And what if I took your lock, cycled to the clone-lab,
and all of these boxes from the not-so-distant
past of our vocation could be yours to unpack?

Would you make the same mistakes or follow sex
away from here? Into advertising? Architecture?
I can only speculate between the lines of a legacy
that plays the role of outsider, peering from the high
window on still-cobbled streets of the sad
provincial town, where every shop is closing down,
and we, the last inhabitants, flock to raid the bargain bin
for marginalia from a place just south of now.

Focus

When stories no longer tell themselves and the tree
is a cindery slag, I swap my beanie for a flat cap,
jeans for woollen slacks, and conceal a camera across
the border. I arrive in the year he is lugging the chain

with a hundred hardened cockneys. Fresh from war,
the only jobs were mooring ships at Docklands.
Discreetly I extend the tape, a yellow aluminum tongue,
and twist the cylinder of the camera's lens

as if to set a thermostat. But out of reach the shot's a blur,
beneath the masonry of entire streets; buried
in the mudflats; underneath the slack sail of the sickbed sheet;
the snuffed blue landscape, void of body heat.

I've watched that footage countless times and tried
to count the men in line, but how can I as archivist
do more than play the part of witness
to how a name can vanish, as easily as saying Challis?

III

In medias res

Or was it the tonic suit I wore to Aunt
Patricia's wedding? Grey of puddle and sealskin,
vacuum sealed, mothballed, it still hangs

in my wardrobe, the necktie noosed
around the collar, the silk coral handkerchief
reaching from the pocket.
                                        Or cinnamon

doughnuts, New Year's Day, how they called us
to the coast? You couldn't keep the sugar
off your jumper or your coat, it salted in-between

our fingers like sand in our shoes. A sweet
murder in my hair and eyes, their taste
and warmth remains.
                                    Or was it the toy my father

brought back, years before he cultivated
the runs of the knowledge? A rattling black taxi-cab,
itself a premonition. I remember you could lift

the bonnet, poke the plastic engine: spark plugs,
ignition coil, dipstick to check the health,
how even though in replica
                                              everything connected.

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The Edge of Campus

after 'The Park by the Railway' by Sean O'Brien

Where should we meet but the edge of campus
where the light of academia bleeds into the fields?
There are plants here I cannot name, the trees
are all the same, and the unknown song from unknown
birds sounds against the rain. Unimportant facts.
But why are we the only students out tonight?
Our flat mates are gossiping, updating online profiles,
circling the internet for memes, news, pornography;
anything to avoid the silent parent of the desk.
And for what? To offset the present roles
of their genetic forbears – taxi drivers, dinner ladies,
infant school teaching assistants, bricklayers,
electricians – is their employment stale, stagnated
like this standing water bubbling with spawn?
We overdub their conversations seen through
dorm room windows: everything is sordid.
There are no cars or minicabs bound for clubs
in town. Our professors have already boarded
southbound trains to conferences. The campus
theatre's dark. The last Hawaiian's been devoured.
Sodden pale initiates, in coats and shoes
designed for summers that this year never came,
we operate within the hours emptied of central life
to see the rain inside the rain wash at the countryside,
the lichen blotted stone and stile, the fairway
of the golf course, the A roads and the B roads;
our magnetic futures humming in the haze of car
exhaust. The more I squint I see the others,
rain glittering from their shoulders, studying
the in-betweens of educated concrete and fenced-
in existence, souring in sodden jeans, in soaked-
through corduroy, in army surplus jackets.

Into the Maze

O Summer of our Uni friends getting hitched
in country houses, endless in its bookings
of service station Travelodges, I plead with you:
relent, give my weekends back.
I cannot bear to wear the grey (it oppresses
like a wetsuit) or noose the skinny tie I'm told
that fashion now dictates, or swab my brogues
for spots of sick from Halifax, last week.

Spare me the hours starving while the couple
act contented beside the giant chess board,
the ivy-strangled archway, the hired,
polished, horse-drawn carriage that almost
turned the nervous stomachs of those newlyweds.
Instead I choose to follow her into the stately
labyrinth, its walls of English Yew
grown as if to mute the flashbulbs.

In the centre is no golden falcon, or man-
beast minotaur, nor the spandex-wearing
David Bowie rolling Baoding balls
(the opening of 'Let's Dance' on the ear's mind
from the distant PA), but the wilderness,
un-manicured, no footpaths or mile signs,
no half-worn desire paths. Canapés offered DIY.
The best man speech diminishes.

Godless in these heavens without a camera
bent on conservation, memory is put to time's
unaided test of sense. No flute to drink
from, fork to spear with, only hands to hunt
and pick, to jimmy roots, to gather firewood
and divine the spark to warm her skin,
in our cabin built of only air, I'll study here
beneath her to learn all of nature's names.

Blackbird in a Rowan Tree

East End boy, my father never learnt the names
for trees, birds, flora, fauna, never held
me to the window and, pointing to a waving branch
where a mother fed her nested young,
whispered 'Son, look over there, we call that one ...'

At sixty-three on the phone one spring he told me
of his differences between the crow and blackbird.
The latter's tiny whistling lithe-and-bright-as-orange
in the background of our call. The crow?
'Large and dark as shadows on the smoker's lung.'

Always one to question anything and everything,
he told me of an argument over trees in the garden.
A rowan tree, I said, concurring with Mum.
And finally, *reluctantly*, for once he admitted that
we might have a point, though his paternalistic tone

implied he had his doubts. The way he doubts
the printed word, as if the names for things are lies,
and truth defies the language, is closer
to a worship, untellable as love, and maybe why
he calls me Jack, although she named me John.

Naming the Light

We've christened light as *light* but it has no
knowledge of the name. It doesn't notice how
it falls between the branches and the blinds,
or how it casts a glow on us, who rise
to meet its wakening, in every living form.
Don't cheapen it as the reward, it doesn't think
itself as the doing of the Lord. It has no mind
to show the way when everything has burned.

When we face the darkness, *light* will fall
out of our language. I know if I'm to name this,
this lost-for-words I feel with you
that I would call the Lord's work if I were
a man of faith, the word would never do.
And would I want to, when our silence is enough?

IV

Arcade Britannia

Since birth we have been spending here
on rally driving and shoot-em-ups, on Pac-Man,
hockey and beat-em-ups, but now, as even

the arcade shuts, the engineers, ex-union men,
have arrived to unplug the lot, to wipe
the scores and our initials from the leader board.

Friends, although I haven't rung or written
to you for years, do you remember
how we spent every weekend of the nineties,

and found, as we left the screens to find
new disciples, with the bug ignoring calendars,
and our hormones on the rampage,

that somehow the game we played,
shooting balaclavaed men in Middle Eastern
markets, had become the actual news?

The Underpass

Even now, places mothers warn their sons
and daughters not to hang around,
worsen in the offices of newly elected ministers

who plea hollow promises to redesign
these DMZs, these preying grounds for men
who failed at being men.

What is this place of anarchy?
Short cuts for the hopeless, who've had their fill
of tragedy, where pedants spray

their literature, illiterate, abbreviated,
and flashers wait in overcoats shivering
to expose themselves, where never-doubted

dog owners locate the murdered pensioner,
where youths better suited to the statelessness
of modern war, shape a hooded terror.

Residence of rats. The origin of chills.
It reeks of vomit, urine, blood, of beds for the homeless.
Cameras, rarely in service, film the silent film

of the one-way expeditions
of all who make their cameos, posing for a screen test
as they pass into the shadow.

Someone ought to bury it, entomb the selectiveness
enforced by the toll guards, or render
an inscription to civility in the stonework.

Or else dig an underpass so that we may avoid
the failure of the minister, and exit
in the forecast sun to our desperate mothers,

who have waited and prayed so long,
that now even the beauty spots, the green parks
and corn fields, are lost and warned against.

The Lavender Line

The old have come to re-enact – boxes
wrapped with parcel paper strung over
their shoulders, broom handles painted black
for rifles. A brass band orchestrates
'We'll Meet Again' by the ticket office,
a tea room and a model shop, where inside

a lamp hut, a signal box and plastic fireweed
are circled by an 0-6-0, its trail of vapour
uttered in a whisper to the private.
He salutes the girl at the fence who holds
a flimsy Union Jack. His wife's lips
are pursed to blow a kiss she'll never blow.

Outside, the porters have loaded the luggage
of women with curled, immaculate hair,
and helped the men with chests full of medals
to board the Kitson Austin 1, restored
from a war of shunting. The coals burn,
the engine sputters weightless stones of steam.

Plague Ground

I. 2013

At Farringdon Crossrail my spade struck
neither leather ball nor ceramic bowl,
but a seventeenth century plague victim's skull.
Heavy. Its sockets were filled with muck.

As I held his skull I thought of the sod -
how he went untreated, no anaesthetic.
I took a photo of bones arranged like sticks
in the plot where death laid him, where now I stood.

II. 1665

I stood in the plot where I laid him dead.
Dead from his groin to his arm-pit cave
where the boils spread till he coughed up raves
of blood. A corpse cushioning his head.

Commissioned to dig the old graves free,
I dug the fragments of fibula and femur,
the bones of the fourteenth century,
until the soil was shovelled clean.

III. 1348

Back into digging, I shovelled the turf
over my shoulder until six feet deep
my spade struck rock. I pushed the heap
of bodies down, smoothed over the earth.

Hammered a post, no monument
or list of stone-carved names, but a caution
not to cross this land, this hastily undone
field, plagued at Farringdon, north of London.

Old Spitalfields Market

Where he lugged the sacks and cotchels
still covered in dirt from the earth.
Where he spilt his sweat hauling the boxes,
whistling 'Oranges and Lemons'.

Where the gate closed on the market boundary,
a sign hung out that read:
                              We've relocated
fruit and veg to Guatemala and Senegal

is where I shop for her birthday present.
Mao Feng white and sweetfruit tea,
a manatee shaped strainer, picks and dice
repurposed into long, dangling earrings,

or a light olive tote bag, embroidered
with a bowl of fruit, re-imagined cubist,
that surely one-day will be left on the tube
and passengers treat as *suspicious*.

Uses for an Archive

Imagine all your poems balled,
stuffed in the pants and shirts
of London's unclean citizens,
your darkest thoughts acquainted
with a smackhead's shrivelled sac.
I mean no disrespect.

But imagine in the deep summer
when supply in the city's low,
they pull their paper clothes
apart, and the words that drown
in their cider vision,
gradually start to float?

What would remain of your poems?
Rust brown and odorous,
worn as thin as sales figures,
half the book a damp mash,
the commissioned sequence
on climate change used to wipe their…?

Still, I mean no disrespect.
But imagine what survives of us.
The fillers and the B-sides,
whatever lyric on cats or class
that still retains the geometry,
the structure of its free verse,

and is read within the quiet
of Waterloo's dank aqueducts,
how the words you strung iambic
palpitate their hearts,
how the focus of your voice
tempers the usual dark.

The Drunks

after Ralph Hedley's 'Out of Work'

What work have you done today that earns
you such a simple rest? The kerb your pillow,
the road your bed, the midday sun your blanket.

What graft is hard enough to have you drop
in such a spot, when rest in books is golden
ocean, lavender and bluebell pollen?

Why such bare exhaustion? Are you
out of work or have you made your work a study
of the earth? To know each stone by skin?

To answer that consider first what is and isn't
learned. As sweat is a given, as well as earned,
can we think of work as concrete?

The Drink

And is this the way we learn ourselves?
By drawing from that well each night,
shattering all that is still to sate the thirst insatiable?
Say the bucket brought back nothing,

that whatever spell or influence left
with you its rough kiss, that the words
returned and the word you felt in your throat,
on your tongue, was drought?

I'd say, *go on*. It's safe to look. Look
by the moon's torchlight, before the level rises,
at everything the drink hides, to where
your dateless wishes hoard the brief shining.

To a B Road Lay-By

Wind down the window: onions fry in lard,
a finger-thin beef burger whispers on a grill.
Other seasons may discover a stall of Kent cherries,
blackberry and Braeburn juice or doughnut peaches.
But tonight the menu's meat: cow, pig, maybe horse
for lorry drivers, RAC vans, the family on a shoestring,
the learner restricted to non-lit passages,
the country's near forgotten maze of beta roads.

OK Diner, the Little Chef, Little India, Chinese China,
the UK's *largest* adult store, are all closed for the night.
The Roman keep, the botanic garden, the steam
railway museum, the battle site, the ruined fort,
the *secret* Cold War mausoleum, have sent
school tours and eager parents away to view the present.
The ketchup-covered tabloids pile up in the bins,
their dates mashed together by cold tea and rain.

This plot, partitioned from the empire, is a slip-
road out of England. There's no MP or constituency.
There's no one to blame. A tree full of Tesco bags
rattles like a broken toy. A rusted Ford Granada rests,
clapped-out and burnt, clamped by an oak's trunk
is a playground of vines with an 80s mixtape
unspooled in the glovebox. Relief, sought in ragged
scrub, abuts *Auto Trader* and a spoon.

With the company of his generator rattling close
to expiration, he'll fuel those who chance upon this back-
neck of nothing where carbonized St George flags
are lifeless in wind. Twice, the van with *CLEAN ME*
fingered on its rear, pleads to remain ungoverned
in this scrubland of a hamlet. But on the third,
against the odds, the van gasps into life and reignites
the night; there are miles still on the clock.

The Driving Range

We stand side-by-side talking with our drives.
      The ting and swoosh of blasphemy
dithers from beginners hacking divots
      from the turf. We launch, along
this corridor of thwacking, hooking, slicing,
      white balls from the planet
to vandalize the sky. I must have rained
      a thousand resin hailstones into fox holes,
sparrow's nests, seeded fields and blunted
      ploughs, and once I struck a windscreen.
Shot-by-shot, the perimeter expands.
      For hours with the swing doctor
I fought the urge to prove my strength, learnt
      to hold the rubber grip, one thumb
above the other, and how to articulate
      my aim towards the flagpole, as though to salt
the green would guarantee a hole-in-one.
      I slowly draw the iron back,
my stance firm and shoulders straight,
      and swing my arms to follow-through,
to smack the ball through gravity, and feel
      the connecting ting travel through
my blood to resuscitate my inner pro.
      Now he wears my polo-shirt,
my club raised above his head, left foot flat,
      right on its toes – a statue of Montgomerie
or Faldo in every plywood box, eyeing
      the horizon, waiting for their balls to drop.

The Cabin

There was a time that I was in-between
taking leave, as we all must, and making my return.
The tunnel was full of occasional light
as if it staged a burglary, and I was playing
the role of thief, torch-lit in the cabin.
From the front of the carriage I watched the dark
and knew, then, how the driver felt
when he clocked a tiny salute from a colleague
or eyed the flare of a yellow jacket
when it caught the cool of the lights as they kissed
the lips of an unused tunnel. In that instant
I allowed myself to think how far the passage went –
whether the tracks ran on and on, impervious
to wild weather, fallen trees and signal failures,
to a shadow world beyond the world,
nameless and forgotten, where I would teach
its daughters' tongue instead of thieving love –
and for that unobstructed time, it is her I cheer
for keeping me in the warm bed of her cabin,
unsure if I had taken leave or if I had arrived.
Hung-over and half asleep, I crossed
the border ticketless and gladly paid the fine.

The Listeners

You can try to forget the words and shake
the melody you hum jogging along the river,
but at low tide a ghetto blaster will dredge itself
out of the mud to play your couple's song.

And on Sunday's your father's vinyl frisbees from the loft
to dust and spin itself, to conduct your inner mod.
And from beneath the floorboards a wireless will tune
into the hits of crooners; 'Fly Me To The Moon'.

On the A1 driving south now for the first time
without her to itemize the playlist, she sings
along with every track from every CD, goading

you to do the same, listening for your errors,
when you mispronounce the lyrics, or your rhythm
falls from time, to pounce and seize the wheel.

Blackspot

We brave the road the dark has taken,
whittle a lane with our headlights.

Yawn past sleepers on the shoulder
who have met their mile quotas.

And when the headlights appear
behind us and use our mirrors

to blind us, the impatient pass,
stretching the fabric of the dark;

the dark speaks back with sirens.
Everything slows to a curve of brake-

lights glowing beneath the flood.
In the window the phosphorus smudge

of a fluorescent accident worker
is mining a car from the water.

The Speed of Sound

Days when you can hear it coming, the crash before the fall,
the loss before the love, like clouds on the horizon

bringing rain, bringing hail, sounding thunder before the lightning,
are here this afternoon, and I am not surprised.

All week I've heard her words arrive as though her mouth
was out of sync, although her eyes were wet with love

and nothing in her body said anything of ends. So I'm out
like a secret, badly kept before her final act, taking in

the nightfall, the onset of killing chill, watching how
the alleyways are filling up with falling ash, having heard

the starting boom, the echo of the shockwave, the shrill flight
of knowing birds, vegetation withering, and beneath

the tinnitus, the final beats of hearts as their bodies go on walking.
I've already heard the thud of the wordless, collapse.

V

Flashback

I hear them call from Canvey Island, Southend
and Clacton-on-Sea. In the swoosh of doors as a train
departs the platform. I eye them in the dregs of pints
when old stories pop to mind, and turn to my partner
to recite from their memory, not mine.
I see them in my own reflection, my nose and chin
a ghost of theirs, in a District Line window
as I ride through Bow and Plaistow, to Upton Park
or West Ham. Ancestral double vision.

The Corbets Tey Road Phone Box

They wait on high streets, unengaged,
filled with cigarette butts and circulars
for massage parlours. An archive
of conversation; untraceable, anonymous.

Tonight one is calling me
to rescue it from a legacy of superheroes,
liars, spies, to reconnect
with younger me, truant, dialling randomly

from nineteen ninety nine, making use
of how his broken voice imitates his father's.
Though absent from the classroom,
I still received astrology from Uri Geller

and Mystic Meg, language from prank-
dialled men, and faked *education*
from the pound-a-minute line. I answer –
my father's voice reeling off excuses:

colds, fevers, funerals, a felled tree
on the drive, then, the flatline of an ECG
as though I'm caught and dragged
to school, to serve my crimes of truancy

in a poisoned with asbestos room, no one
but myself to set the quota of forgiveness.
Once again, to spring myself, I clear
my throat, and lift the black receiver.

Dead Fox Blues

Shrieks from the field behind the garden,
as wind shakes its subjects naked, seek
the call of their kin through the fence.
From the dark of my window I spy them
through the un-mown grass, thin
translucent ciphers, haze above a fire.
A fluster of wind at the window's an owl
and within its wings: the past.

If I were to step out from my shade
with only the flashlight of my phone,
would these tormentors scatter?
Or would they look on as friends
who call me back to walk the wetlands,
to strum a guitar with beer-hands,
and burn the night as I'd done the times
before fear had a heartbeat?

Alone, shivering off the storm, I open
a beer on a street name, then stop
the stile banging away the seconds.
On the scent of an airy brew of char,
I kneel before a still-warm-pit, a grey nest
of twigs and kindling, singed paper,
crates of Carling, the sound of bad
slide guitar, a pass code on the air.

And this is where I choose to knock
three times on a hawthorn trunk
to open the forest's letter box and offer
my face for recognition, to a pair
of knotted eyes. I slip through a door
between the trees into the cedar wood
that's bubble wrapped in the cotton-ash
of extinguished fireweed.

Later I woke, soaked in the garden,
a smile bent in the fence where I'd climbed.
I saw the brush of a fox's tail
like a bunch of catkin, alive.
But it was only wind, atrophied.
With my keys lost and phone drained,

I raised the fox on the shovel's end.
I eased the weight back over the fence.

The Knowledge

Not the knowledge chosen for the national
syllabus, nor knowledge scrawled by Mrs Smith
on the board in shaky chalk, but the knowledge
I hear my father practice, out loud after tea.

Not a knowledge of capital cities, of England's
football captains, the number of caps of David Beckham,
nor any pub quiz question, but a knowledge of maps,
London's maps in more than three dimensions.

Maps that covered the dining room, a cheap print
of *The Hay Wain*, of *Bubbles* and our photographs.
Maps he rose each day to enter, a clipboard
on his handlebars, to expand his hippocampus.

But I don't buy the idiom, that employment
is hereditary – that sons will make the same mistakes
and follow into mines of time-sensitive
politics, and give their lives to work they learnt

the ropes for in their childhood, to sweat
beside the fires in the engine room of industry,
or within their mental offices – no, I learnt
not from the front, but from the back seat of his cab

that ferries the decision makers, Canary Wharf
to Westminster, past navvies tunnelling
the underground, through the husk of blackout
London, to here, now: this argument.

Taught to speak by sixteen years of answering
the register, by milk, chalk and cartridge ink,
Shakespeare and the Lord's Prayer, you raise your arm
to pay your coins, your tributes to the knowledge.

The Cellar of Central Bar

I love the sober glimpse of the cellar
      working the hours the regulars sleep,

a crash mat laid to soften descents
      of vodka, whisky, barrels of *Badger*,

Red Kite, Centurion, *Rivet Catcher*
      slotted from mild to stout in the stillage,

how a tube that smothers the keg's mouth
      wires the graft, the barley and light

to network of pipes, underground,
      and milks to blue-collar blues, all night.

The Closed Road

Hills Street closed to taxis, lorries, kids and prams
and Jewish girls in long black skirts, Magpie fans
and the EDL who fill their souls with Dog
and nuts in the Nag's Head, now refurbished.

Haven for U-turns, drop-offs, pick-ups, the band
loading gear at the end of the gig, the morning delivery
of barrels of ale, the kerb a scum of Durex and chips:
a through becomes a cul-de-sac, frozen since spring.

No one cares that now it's winter the bus-stop advert
still promotes Famous Grouse for Father's Day.
No one cares for the loner outside the open-as-usual
Station Hotel, who posts the butt of his stubbed tab

in a box of overflowing ash, un-emptied since closure.
And no one cares for the haulage bridge, damaged
by wind and rain and years. Its repair makes
our journeys stiff with redirected traffic.

The tarp across its diseased mouth reflects streetlight
to light a game of two-touch that two lads play,
each too young to hold a pint, against the wall of Central Bar,
sending tremors across the drinks of knackered men

on the other side, like stones skipped on rivers.
Let them have it, this makeshift pitch of glass
winking on tarmac, with scaffolds for their goal posts,
the workman's gangway for their crossbar,

let them glide like skaters across a frozen Tyne
and have this road, remade to leisure, for a time.

The Decline of the Market Town Hotel

My hipster peers would never settle
for this tartan red and green décor,
ceramic dogs and pigs and cats,
pastoral prints on tablecloths,
the single rooms not sanitised
by global connectivity.

But the old are more adventurous.
They dare the syphilitic beds
where twentieth century artists slept
and bedded everyone.
The carpet weeps with ancient drinks.
The bed with, can you guess?

They've bought the time with time
to spend retired hours conjuring
the spirits of the eccentric dead
in places never modernized
with fibre optic politics,
to pick up their lives where they left off.

In England's desolated towns
they assume *The Thinker's* pose
in the poetic-realist bathroom,
on the toilet that is window height
and practice the philosophy,
voyeurs of the *jouissance*.

They scribble down the likeness
of the rain spooling from rooftops,
like sharp, silver cutlery,
of terraced homes that stretch
as far back as the etiquette
they obeyed to lead them here.

A Wake

Although you are only an hour under
at your wake we begin to speculate
on the whereabouts of your soul.
My uncle is the first to wonder
if your body has turned to bait
for the worms to burrow into?
And if a pheasant has fed on them?
And if the pub chef picked the shot,
plucked, cooked and served
that same pheasant on our plates?
And what of the vampiric greens
that bled you of your nutrients?
Does the spinach represent
your soul? Was it you we ate?
Have you already filtered down
to ruminate in our bowels?
When my uncle holds his pint glass high
and circles the ring of teary eyes,
each word of every toast he sounds
works to speak your soul awake.

Murphy

I found his grave one winter noon whilst
visiting my grandparents, and recognized
the tough, shaven–headed glare he shot me
all those years ago in dinner queues when he cut
in line, or from the gate with chain or bat,
trapped within a silver frame beside a vase of flowers.
On death, our grief can never truly judge.

But I can't ignore the nagging voice that wants
and will condemn the choices made by this
eternal boy who refused to love or care for those
he sought to punish for their crimes
of having different coloured hair, wearing specs
or raising hands in class to answer questions.
Why so bitter? Why so angry? Why so clichéd, boy?

No one else to pick on now but those
already dead, who cannot feel the tremors
of your terminal unease, as you fight, as you
did in life, against a common faith. You're not
alone, we did it too, but had our chance to tell
the wrong, and learn to make it right.
I stood then as so many do, ready to forgive.

Prayer

On the last night we saw the moon,
that sad controller monitoring
the night shift, who are ushered forwards
and thrown before the shoreline,
only to be broken and told to go
back out to try, try and try again.

Pillbox

The tide is coming in to sink the unkempt path.
All our toes are blistered and our naked legs
are pocked with hives from the thigh length grass.
We are hurrying through resistance. And although
the rain is driving from the east into our faces,
the ground beneath us sucking at our boot soles
as if the island is descending, its Northern plate
quickening its diplomatic shift to align further
with the West, we break at the pillbox holding vigil
through the onslaught at England's fastened edges.
Camouflaged by fireweed, dandelion, clover,
a half-moon of concrete sunk into the white sand
by the weight of soldiers never slain, stares down,
from its loophole, the invasion that never came.
This public convenience stocked with torn cloth
and rusted tin, punctured buoys, ships in bottles,
polystyrene clamshells, black bags of dog's muck
is abandoned to the youth's abandon and used
by ornithologists as peepshows for coastal birds.
Although it'll never command the beach with light
machine gun fire, or offer shelter to our sons
as Panzers disembark to tread down our English
roses, it reminds me of the sacrifice of land
for our nature, how space that is occupied resists.
The sodden path ahead is strewn with crab legs
and pincers. The air blazes black flies, irritates
with midges. We tread on through the nettles towards
the sluice gate and beyond it through a golf links
that hides the path signposted: *English Heritage*.

Advertising

All night they have been touching meat,
thrusting trolleys stuffed with cheek,
shoulder, ear and leg, and now the day's
come back to life they're closing
Smithfield market; sewing up the partly
butchered, washing off the blood.

I watch them from my office vantage
as they strip their overalls. I button up
my collar for handshake after handshake,
to present our creative for clients to dissect.

The past lowers like a theatre set.
Axes swing for human heads, the gallows
start their jig, men sell their unwanted wives,
and horseshit is piled high beside meat labelled fresh.

Arson

The sun will bleach the butcher's awning.
A pig on the spit will roast till crisp.
The page in the fire will ripple to dust.
But frequently these permanent effects
are cauterised and reversed in a second,
then all it has taken rewinds from ash:

the smouldering soot and timber awakes,
the bricks wind in layers and climb,
the roof unfolds, the clouds of glass
spool back to web the window frames.
The sky is a laughter of orange and red;
our hollowed homes are burning again.

The War Book

I. The War Book

My father operates monotype to perforate
a paper helix with God forbid the last
surviving language: he breaks into characters
the right to grant a surge of power to the wartime state.
Each key struck on his keyboard is a gun's
cocked hammer, as he casts into the present tense
one version of our future. Next, he unfurls
the spool, sets it in the caster, runnels a river

of hot metal into hollow sentences.
The mould unalterable, the state off-loads
a thousand rounds, the sound of shaken change,
ushers the final signed-off script to briefcase,
lock box, portrait safe: members of the shadow staff
cast to play the cabinet; R-hour, underground.

II. Secret Nuclear Bunker

Eighty feet below the surface, at the bunker
at Kelvedon Hatch, the tour-guide parts
the iron curtain, a blast door thick as a man.
In the soundless plotting room I can almost hear
the bleeps of sonar tracking the routes to impact,
static from northern cities report on their losses,
and the new leaders of our country mount
the rehearsed offensive. With every rumble

overhead, lamps shake their skirts of dust,
bulkheads moan their whale song, pipes punch
their jets of mist, and the world begins to tilt.
A suited man made out of plastic, our field
of vision shaky now, is settled behind the camera
to orate us out of history. He doesn't even flinch.

Pension

In the queue I considered his position:
a man who'd worked for fifty years
coming, unexpectedly
into a forced retirement
on an unremarkable Thursday
because of a faulty fuel injection.

The black chassis, the diesel engine,
the red light in the passenger cabin
that clicks on when the cab's in motion,
the fold down seats with ads
on the back, from where I watched
the journey to our home in reverse,

became a mafia envelope,
thinner than you'd expect,
and licked with the knowledge
that once they'd fixed and shipped it north,
where the rules relax on the age of cabs,
it would supplement *their* livelihood.

Gasholder, West Ham

My father points to where he was born
as the tube pulls out of Plaistow.
Silent at this hour between the bookends
of the rush. Or was it over there? He points
east across the carriage to a gasholder,
the frame of some long-launched rocket.

A week since retirement, questioning his knowledge:
no, he says, pointing back to where a bank
of terraced homes turns away stretching north
as if it held a frontier rich with the untold,
and I am his passenger, half listening
half keeping eye on his meter as the digits rise.

Charon, Re-Employed

When he heard he'd been called down for service,
first he feared for his sanity.
Then, he thought to puncture his ears
using the pin from the all zone badge,
to deafen the pleas of the penniless,
and the roar of the flame at his back.

But what of his eyes? The sight of the dead?
He reckoned to push the butt of the oar
through his eye socket, and twist.
Last, he dreamed to sweeten the Styx
by throwing himself in the water,
and the great employer rose to speak:

> *All of this is justified,*
> *every sinner, damned to the drama,*
> *deserves the heat of the fire.*

Whatever it was that kept him going
to endure the grief of his charge,
it wasn't the torture his employer curated,
but the thought of himself breathing the rain
upstairs in the not-so-dark of the living,
where he loaded the cab with boxes and bags,

and held the door for the soon-to-depart,
and started the meter and listened
to the rich to the poor and the children,
soon to require his service again
when their sterling is tender below.
To forget, he remembers their stories.

The Eleven Percent

I know that eighty-nine percent of Wilder's
Double Indemnity unfolds in a flashback,
that Walter Neff is only given eleven percent
to sort affairs, and think towards the present.
What ratio of my life is spent in recollection?
I've cooked the books since childhood

to calculate the times I've prised the lid
from the old Roses tin, or started the red-book
conversation: this my life laid out in stanzas,
flashbacks to my other selves through steam
from ovens, kettles, plumes of breath
in gardens, fields, and smoke, pre-ban, in pubs.

Like Neff, I leave my typed confession
to know I'm done with before, with the ghost.
Stay for the lock-in, drink out your liver,
commune with the ages through empties,
I'll slip out the back-way, unnoticed. From here
on it's me and only me, and my percentage.

A Withdrawal

This evening my ancestors gather
to partake in the pleasure of triumph,
to inhabit their rituals of decay,
when the crime is solved at the close of day.
This lasts as long as the next killing
in the country, the village, the city.

Not many are granted an audience
with our prodigal detectives,
topping up their highballs, they reorder
the facts for their disciples.
After the chase, the arrest, the gallows,
a tipple seems perfectly logical.

On a chaise longue lies Sherlock Holmes,
a pipe to his lips in the gloom.
His coveted powers of deduction
put to transcendental use,
he dreams of the analytics involved
in untangling any enigma.

Elsewhere Miss Marple takes her snifter,
smug in her mahogany study.
When she has finished the weeding she knits
beside the well-stoked fire
in the sanctity of her class and waits
for the police chief's latest blunder.

Meanwhile, cool and moral Marlowe,
streetlight filtered through window blinds
across his all-day drinking eyes,
waits for a murderous blonde to arrive.
Each swig from his bottle of bourbon
a curse on his insoluble city.

Laudanum, Opium, Jimson Weed,
the seeds of my ancestors' absence used
to numb the knowledge terror sows
in churches, alleys and country homes.
Forgive these little indiscretions.
If only you knew what we'd seen.

This cask strength is my conduit
to ferry me past Cerberus,
to get me through the next few hours
of knowledge dreamed, not lived.
Where she is and what she's doing,
nothing's worse than imagination.

Alone with only drink and theory,
I weigh my time with worry,
and after another I'm further
from both, but closer to truth somehow;
the script having borne its scrutiny
is signed-off for production:

Lestrade arrives in Baker Street.
Marple eavesdrops at luncheon.
Marlowe can't resist the charm
of the blonde with the dubious case,
and I within their company wait
for another poem to show its face.

Addendum

Each night I build the homes I've known
and try to find my way to bed, stumbling
through the darkness from maisonettes
to terraced homes, but stub a toe on details,
a velvet seat I can't recall in a too-large
living room, or trip up on the carpet
in an aisle that doesn't end, never reaching,
never finding the *you* I've come to find.

Night Safe

Rain now, as the papers predicted would fall
at the hour of achieving the knowledge
that despite the entrusting of all we have earned
all that is passing would still come to pass.

Notes

Hansard: 'old-style hats and coats' is a direct quotation from 'This Be The Verse' by Philip Larkin. APR stands for Annual Percentage Rate.

Blood: A cotchel is a crate of unsold stock that market sellers would take home. A pony is twenty-five pounds.

The Lavender Line: is a preserved railway in East Sussex.

The Eleven Percent: *Double Indemnity's* film time lasts for 102 minutes and 40 seconds, starting from the point when Walter Neff is seen in silhouette on screen on crutches as the credits begin, and a total of 91 minutes and 24 seconds of this film time functions as a flashback, resulting in 89% of the film told in flashback.

Acknowledgements

THE *POEM NOIR*:

Film Noir in Contemporary Poetry

Introduction

In *The New York Trilogy* (1987), Paul Auster writes that the detective and the writer are 'interchangeable',[3] that both are engaged with a search for and a sorting through of facts to illustrate and learn from a chain of events that reconstruct something, be it a crime, a memory, or an idea. Although *film noir* is a contested grouping of films, alongside their common tendencies in tone, mood, and visual style they often feature characters who are either detectives, or are acting as detectives, and are going about the process that Auster describes. Although Paul Schrader claims that the classic period of *film noir* stretched from '*The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to *Touch of Evil* (1958)', many critics argue that *film noir's* thematic occupations continue to the present in films and other media, including *The New York Trilogy*.[4] For Henrik Gustafsson, *film noir* draws its protagonists and the viewer into the 'threshold between "the lid" and "the works"', between 'visibility and invisibility', between 'perception and knowledge', which offers room for a transformation, not only of the tangible space on screen, but psychologically within the protagonist who is acting as detective, lifting the lid from the surface-level city – 'the illuminated skyline and the paved sidewalk, the routines of lunch hour and police procedure' – in order to expose the works, the metaphorical 'crater of formless matter' that 'refuses to be translated into legible meaning'. In doing, however, the protagonist illustrates how 'the surface and the substructure… support each other', allowing the viewer the opportunity to see how these two vastly different spaces, which could be described in terms of a heaven and hell, a right and wrong, coexist.[5]

The viewer and the protagonist are not drawn into an underworld in a necessarily mythological or criminal sense, but, instead, are given the opportunity to glimpse behind the coverings 'where the earth shows through', at the edge 'where the city loses its foothold'.[6] These locations offer 'a marginal space at once within and outside the system' that is symbolic of the line between moral and immoral actions that *film noir* protagonists often walk.[7] In *film noir*, the protagonist making his investigations is led towards places where this liminal otherworld is exposed, such as emptied hotels, bars or diners (*Fallen Angel, Scarlet Street* [1945], *The Killers*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [1946], *The Big Combo* [1955]), desolate towns in the middle of nowhere (*The Postman Always Rings Twice, Fallen Angel*),

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[3] Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p 8.
[4] Paul Schrader, 'Notes on *Film Noir*' in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), p. 54.
[5] Henrik Gustafsson, 'A Wet Emptiness: The Phenomenology of Film Noir' in Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson, eds., *A Companion to Film Noir* (Chichester: Wiley, 2013), p. 53–55.
[6] Ibid., p. 53–55.
[7] Ibid., p. 56.

sewers (*The Third Man* [1949]), railways at night (*Double Indemnity* [1944]), construction sites (*The Maltese Falcon* [1941]), and bombed-out buildings (*The Third Man*, *Night and the City* [1950]). Common in all of these *films noir* is their presentation of the city at night, as an emptied, dangerous place where possibilities open up for characters who are playing detective to be drawn into psychological or otherworldly descents that question their moral judgement. Within this thesis, I argue that the '*poem noir*'[8] engages with this process of truth-seeking, either to solve a mystery, or to investigate a speaker's fragmented identity. In both cases, the lid is taken off the works, in an attempt to expose whatever truth lies beneath.

Critically, the primary concern of the thesis is to introduce the *poem noir* by demonstrating the affinity between certain examples of contemporary poetry and *film noir*. I will identify key elements of *film noir*, which, I argue, are manifestations of anxiety, obsession and pessimism both in *film noir's* visual style and through plot and character action, and provide examples of where these key elements occur in particular examples of contemporary poetry. Although this thesis does not comment directly on the influence of cinema on poetry or vice versa, preferring, instead, to examine the influence of the particular permutation of cinema that is *film noir* on contemporary poetry as something that occurs due to *film noir's* presence within a contemporary mediascape, my engagement with scholarship on the relationship between cinema and literature in the introduction demonstrates that writing within a cinematic sensibility is an existing, if underexplored, area of scholarship in contemporary poetry. The introduction will also engage with scholarship on *film noir* in order to provide an overview of *film noir's* cultural lineage, to present definitions of *film noir,* referring to the *films noir* of the 1940s and 1950s and the influences on *film noir* leading up to the 1940s, and to present a case for *film noir*'s continuing cultural importance.

The poems in *The Knowledge* attempt to explore a fragmented identity through an anxious and obsessive engagement with family heritage that is presented in poems that often use poetic equivalents of film stylistics in order to move around in time and undertake border crossings into the past. Although some are more clearly aligned with the *film noir* world than others, the majority of the poems exhibit a pessimistic search for a displaced identity, a search that Gustafsson claims is the occupation of *films noir* protagonists who 'frequently mull over their incomplete knowledge' during their attempts to learn the truth.[9] As a whole, the collection is aligned with Auster's suggestion that the writer and the detective share a process and purpose, given that each poem acts a detection of the self, of certain memories and of place.

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[8] The term 'poem noir' originates from a creative writing exercise created by the poet Sean O'Brien around 2005–2006. Sean O'Brien, Personal Interview (by email), 17th June, 2011.
[9] Gustafsson, p. 51.

Chapter 1 of this thesis, 'Identifying the *Noir* Paradigm', focuses on defining the phenomenon of *film noir*. By using examples from twenty-two *films noir* and three *neo-noirs*, I provide evidence of the ways in which *film noir* presents a departure from the norms of Classical Hollywood cinema, in order to examine *film noir* as a discrete corpus. To do this, I also examine the emergence of *film noir* in relation to the development of detective fiction since Edgar Allen Poe, and claim that the departure of hard-boiled literature (on which many *films noir* were based) from Golden Age detective fiction echoes *film noir's* move away from Classical Hollywood. By doing this, I illustrate how *film noir* is a complex artistic expression into which some scholars, such as Robert Porfirio and Mark T. Conard who explore *film noir* under the lens of existentialism, read an engagement with philosophy, and how, according to Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, *film noir* aims to disorientate viewers. This second line of enquiry is followed by Gustafsson, who explores how *film noir* should be examined as a phenomenology that 'engages and affects' viewers, providing them with a transgressive experience. [10] To conclude the first chapter, I will define the three main elements that I claim are consistent throughout much of *film noir* – anxiety, pessimism and obsession – and by doing so gather the key components to look for within contemporary poems.

In Chapter 2, 'Introducing the *Poem Noir'*, I argue that poets writing *poems noir* are engaged with this *noirish*[11] process of looking behind the scenes, of imagining what is beyond the realm of the visible, and of acting as the detective, either literally, by employing a speaker who narrates a clue-by-clue structure, or by acting as a detective of themselves, looking, as David Harsent writes in his libretto for *The Minotaur* (2008), 'through the eyes of the beast to find the man.'[12] Firstly, I read Deryn Rees-Jones' book-length collection of poems, *Quiver* (2004), as a *poem noir* of anxiety, albeit with a cinematic sensibility, and as a series of poems that uses the typically phallocentric structure of the detective story in order to retell it from a feminist perspective. Secondly, I read Paul Muldoon's 'Immram', from *Why Brownlee Left* (1980) as a poem obsessed with parodying hard-boiled material in order, like Rees-Jones, to hijack the material, and as a poem that contains a narrative of obsession. Lastly, I read David Harsent's 'Elsewhere' from *Night* (2011) as a poem of pessimism in which a descent is performed into both an imaginative and a psychological underworld, as the speaker of the poem begins a quest to find meaning within his life. To conclude, I introduce other examples of the *poem noir* in order to demonstrate its presence as a consistent mode within contemporary British and Irish poetry, and, by drawing on ideas from James Naremore and

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[10] Gustafsson, p. 52

[11] I use the term *'noirish'* as an adjective to denote something that contains a mixture of *film noir* cinematic stylishness, anxiety, pessimism and obsession, examples of which are outlined in chapter 1.

[12] David Harsent, *The Minotaur* (London: Boosey and Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd, 2008), p. 46.

Wheeler Winston Dixon, consider the ways in which *film noir* has constituted one of the 'dominant intellectual categories of the late twentieth century',[13] to suggest how echoes of *film noir* appear within examples of contemporary poetry. Finally, I will consider how my creative work in *The Knowledge* relates to and fits within the *poem noir* mode, and conclude by suggesting that *film noir*, and writing poetry, engages with, and views the world, through anxious, pessimistic or obsessive lenses, undertaking a descent, like the detective, in order to excavate and see behind the works.

Lost in Translation? Literature into cinema, cinema into literature.

Seminal scholarship that explores the relationship between cinema and literature predominantly concerns itself with how cinema, as a new technology of modernity, and modernist poetry, experienced an 'aesthetic convergence'[14] at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rather than reducing the relationship between the two art forms to influence, David Trotter argues that modernist literary texts, such as T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), and early cinema should be understood as siblings. Both forms sought to offer representations of human experience differently from pre-existing texts, and both offered very different modes of expression for exploration. For modernist poetry, writes Trotter, cinema provided an 'addition to the repertoire of ways in which the world may be known'.[15] In the case of the influence of poetry over cinema, Susan McCabe asserts that film borrowed 'the rhythmic splicing of images',[16] amongst other techniques from poetics, that is evident in filmic montage.

In cinema, for Trotter, modernist poetry found a portrayal of 'us watching ourselves watching', a way of seeing human behaviour via an inhuman medium: the automatic gaze of the camera. This, he writes, presented a paradox: whilst confirming our presence in the world, cinema also represented our absence from it.[17] We become actor and spectator, participant and onlooker, exemplified by Eliot's disembodied spectator in *The Waste Land*. Don Paterson's sonnet, 'The Light' (2004) explores a loss of faith, and depicts the speaker of the poem becoming both actor and spectator: 'And out of pure habit – / no, less, out of nothing, for I was nothing – I watched myself sit down for one last time.'[18] This cinematic mode that

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[13] James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir In Its Contexts,* 2nd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 2.
[14] David Trotter, *Cinema and Modernism* (Malden, MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. xi.
[15] Ibid., p. 10.
[16] Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 9.
[17] Trotter, p. 17.
[18] Don Paterson, *Landing Light* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p. 71.

Trotter identifies in modernist literature is still evident in contemporary poetry. A similar instance occurs in the *poem noir* 'The Wood Of Lost Things' (2010) by Robin Robertson, where the speaker, lost in a woodland setting, finds certain events from his past enacted before him as though in the present, and presents the speaker as agent and spectator.

> He was shivering. *It's cold,* I said.
> He looked up at me and nodded, *It's cold*.
> *What is this place? What brings you here?*
> *This is my home*, we replied.[19]

Here, the speaker is also the spectator of himself, whom he sees at the end of the poem when speaker and spectator become one, implied by the emphasis on 'we' in the final line. Pier Paolo Pasolini argued in 1988 that writers only need to engage in 'aesthetic invention', while filmmakers were tasked with both linguistic and aesthetic invention in order to create a unique cinematic semiotic language.[20] In emphasizing how historically cinema had to forge its distinct language, Pasolini observes that, at its inception 'as a new "technique" or "genre" of expression,' cinema also established itself as a 'genre of escapist performance', utilising narrative techniques which had more in common with the '"language of prose narrative"' than that of poetry.[21] Like Pasolini, Kamilla Elliott acknowledges the inherent problems in this critical discourse: words and images 'do not and cannot translate'; both belong to their specific semiotic worlds and it would be 'semiotic heresy' to suggest that form can separate from content.[22] However, Elliott explains that content can seep 'into form from context in multifarious ways, confusing categories of form, content, and context, blurring narratological lines between surface and deep structure'.[23] Osmosis takes place, consciously and unconsciously, through exposure to form and content, eroding the boundaries of form through a process of adaptation and analogy, a creative ventriloquism. Although Elliott acknowledges that a pure adaptation is impossible since both cinema and literature are made up of vastly different lexicons, she suggests that the only way adaptation between the two can exist is through the use of 'a structurally constrained model of analogy' which suggests film must find 'visual equivalents for verbal signs.'[24] Adapting literary material for the screen must be viewed as the process of creating an analogy. In this sense, the process is a deeply creative practice that offers the possibility of invigorating literary texts in new ways. The *poem noir*

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[19] Robin Robertson, 'The Wood Of Lost Things', *The Wrecking Light* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 69.
[20] Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'The 'Cinema of Poetry'' in *Post-war Cinema and Modernity: A Film Reader,* ed. by John Orr and Olga Taxidou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 40.
[21] Ibid., p 41–42.
[22] Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Cambridge, New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 4.
[23] Ibid., p. 183.
[24] Ibid., p. 4.

could be examined as a literary form that rises to the challenge of expressing the material of *film noir* within poetry. If it is possible for the language of literature to seep into film, as Elliott suggests, then further study is needed to examine whether signs of the cinematic experience can pass from film into literature. Although Elliott does not explore this reversal, she does provide a model for backwards analysis, claiming that 'films find visual equivalents for verbal signs.'[25] Whilst this thesis considers poetic literary correlatives for prominent cinematic devices, such as voice-over narration, flashback and edits, its aim is to examine the ways in which certain examples of contemporary poetry contain elements of *film noir's* narratives, themes, and emotional content.

 Catherine Munroe Hotes provides a much more specific study of the relationship between cinema and contemporary poetry. Through a close reading of poems by Adrienne Rich alongside a reading of films in the poetic-realist tradition, such as Cocteau's *Orphee* (1950)*,* and Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), Munroe Hotes investigates how an adaption of film technique challenges the 'limitations of literary language'.[26] Although focused on the work of one contemporary poet, Munroe Hotes recognises that 'the movies created a common language and mythology that had an indelible impression on the way people understood themselves and society'.[27] It is because of the power cinema had to reflect and further our understanding of human experience that it influenced Rich's work. A similar argument can be made for the influence of cinema over the poets I examine. Given the ubiquity of the cinematic experience and its power, as Munroe Hotes and Trotter agree, to present the world in a new and previously unseen way whilst opening windows for further imaginative engagement, how can anyone living in Britain or Ireland during the twentieth and twenty-first century claim to not have had contact with this powerful and imaginative medium?

 In *We Saw The Light* Daniel Kane investigates the influence of American avant-garde cinema on the group of American poets published in the 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*. Kane sidesteps a discussion of the semantics of influence by opting to call the relationship between the two art forms 'interplay'.[28] His investigation of the relationship between film and poetry focuses on conscious attempts between filmmakers and poets to develop an 'interdisciplinary art form.'[29] He examines the aesthetic influence of film on poetry in the example of Robert Duncan, whose work, he claims, emulates film technique,

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[25] Ibid., p. 4.
[26] Catherine Munroe Hotes, 'Film into Poetry: The Influence of Cinema on the Poetry of Adrienne Rich' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 2004), p. 2.
[27] Ibid., p. 25.
[28] Daniel Kane, *We Saw the Light: Conversations between the New American Cinema and Poetry* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2009), p. 1.
[29] Kane, p. 5.

and details how the influence of cinema on Frank O'Hara's work is most evident in his references to particular films within his poems. Kane also acknowledges that these poets were also involved with New York's avant-garde film scene during the 1960s. This steers the focus of Kane's study towards a study of parallelism, instead of a study of the nature of lasting influence. Unlike the poems and films I explore, Kane addresses his focus to non-narrative film and poetry. Scholarship on the influence and relation between narrative film and poetry is in short supply. Although focusing on one particular type of cinema, *film noir*, Chapter 2 addresses the ways in which *poems noir* find literary equivalents for some cinematic techniques.

Also of note is Philip French and Ken Wlaschin's anthology, *The Faber Book of Movie Verse* (1993), which collates a broad range of poems written about and inspired by cinema. In his introduction, French, like Munroe Hotes, recognises that cinema has 'fundamentally changed the way we experience the world, refining and defining the syntax of vision'.[30] Rather than attempting to canonize what a poem of the cinema must contain, French merely points out the influence of cinema as a cultural phenomenon, and does little to take the study further. Unlike Trotter and McCabe, who examine cinema and modernist literature as contemporaries, French, like Munroe Hotes, argues for the power of cinema as a medium that extends a ubiquitous and continuous influence over all areas of popular culture, including poetry. This thesis follows this argument, that the influence of *film noir* on the work of poets writing *poems noir* is largely inevitable because of the far reaching and dominant vision that the cinema creates, the content of which, to go back to Elliott, will imaginatively seep from the form of cinema into the context of poetry through various methods of conscious or unconscious adaptation, analogy, or accidental or non-accidental ventriloquism.

As both Trotter and McCabe seek to reinvigorate academic discussion of the relationship between early, non-narrative cinema and modernist poetry, they only begin to touch upon the relationship between narrative cinema and poetry. By examining the presence of *film noir* narratives and themes within examples of contemporary poetry, this thesis comments upon the complex relationship between literature and cinema, a relationship that on one hand, according to Trotter, shows the manners in which sibling art forms react to, share content, and appear within each other, and on the other, following the arguments of Munroe Hotes and French, reveals a relationship where cinema can be viewed as a dominant influence on all art forms, including poetry. Although this thesis builds upon these lines of inquiry, occasionally offering ways in which a translation between film and poetry is visible, its

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[30] Philip French, 'Introduction' in *The Faber Book of Movie Verse,* ed. by Philip French and Ken Wlaschin (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 13.

primary goal is to provide a focused examination of the multifarious ways in which the narratives and themes of *films noir* of the 1940s and 1950s, along with *film noir's* later cultural forms, such as *neo-noir,* appear within examples of contemporary poetry by Deryn Rees-Jones, Paul Muldoon, and David Harsent.[31]

A Knife Fight in the Expanding Alley: *Film Noir* Scholarship

Nino Frank is commonly regarded as the inventor of the term *film noir*. After viewing the influx of wartime American films in Paris after the Second World War (WWII) in 1946, including *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), Frank identified a new genre of 'criminal psychology' films that explored the 'dynamic of violent death and dark mysteries'.[32] For Frank, these *films noir* were a natural evolution of the familiar 'whodunit' formula of deduction and explanation in films about crime. Instead of the detective functioning as a 'mechanism', as in the tradition of Poe, Gaboriau and Conan Doyle, the detective now 'had an emotional life', and was pessimistic, prone to obsession, and prepared to walk the line between right and wrong.[33] It no longer mattered who committed the crime: what mattered was why they did it.

Although Frank coined the term, Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton were the first to explore *film noir*'s influences in the groundbreaking *Panorama du Film Noir Américain 1941-1953* (1955) [translated as *Panorama of American Film Noir* by Paul Hammond in 2002]. For them the primary artistic influences of *film noir* were hard-boiled detective fiction, American genre movies of the 1930s, (particularly horror and gangster movies), and various modes of European cinema, such as German Expressionism, French Poetic-Realism and Italian Neo-Realism. Societal influences suggested include increases in crime and violence after WWII, and the popularization and widespread use of psychoanalysis.[34] From these factors Borde and Chaumeton deduced that *film noir* was solely American, and concluded that its aim was 'to create a specific sense of *malaise*'.[35] All *film noir*'s particular components, such as its shadowy visual style and obsessive and alienated characters, were used in conjunction to disorientate the viewer and create an oneiric quality,

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[31] David Harsent was born in 1942, Paul Muldoon in 1951, and Deryn Rees-Jones in 1968. All have grown up with the entire body of the classic *films noir* available.

[32] Nino Frank, 'A New Kind of Police Drama: The Criminal Adventure' in *Film Noir Reader 2*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1999), p. 15.

[33] Ibid., p. 15–16.

[34] Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, *Panorama of American Film Noir: 1941–1953,* trans. by Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2005), p. 15–28.

[35] Ibid., p. 13.

expressed through the portrayal of protagonists stumbling into a world of incoherent brutality and erotic violence.

Not until the 1970s did American critics begin to seriously examine the *film noir* phenomenon. Some critics began to retrospectively explore *film noir*'s social, historical and artistic influences, whilst others examined its underlying themes and asked whether it had become an artistic mode of expression. In Paul Schrader's seminal essay 'Notes on *Film Noir*' (1972) he claims it was the German and Eastern European expatriates arriving in Hollywood in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger and Billy Wilder, who defined the expressionist lighting and chiaroscuro typical of classic *films noir,* such as Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945) and Preminger's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950).[36] This evidence questions Borde and Chaumeton's assertion that *film noir* is typically 'American in atmosphere', since its hallmark style can be attributed to European sources.[37] Recognizing the importance of Raymond Durgnat's influential essay, 'The Family Tree of *Film Noir*' (1970), Schrader builds upon Durgnat's claim that *film noir* should be defined by consistencies in 'motif and tone'.[38] For Schrader the core themes of *film noir* – 'loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity' – are characterized by a particular style that he claims emerged from a mix of American and European filmmakers, influenced by European films, interpreting American social conditions in the 1940s. However, Schrader also claims that this style had evolved by the 1950s – illustrated by films such as *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) – into 'a new artistic world' of 'American mannerism which was by far more a creation than a reflection,'[39] suggesting that, as opposed to solely reflecting social conditions, *film noir,* in its later phase, became an artistic mode. *Film noir*, as an artistic practice as opposed to a social commentary, reappears, revised and expanded, and uninhibited by the Production Code from 1968 onwards, in *neo-noir* films such as the revisionist period *noir* of *Chinatown* (1974), and later, in complex and ultra-violent *neo-noirs* including *Memento* (2000) and *Drive* (2011).[40]

In 1979 Alain Silver claimed that, like the Western, *film noir* is 'an indigenous American form', a 'self-contained reflection of American cultural preoccupations'. Silver's assertion is based upon uniquely American social, economic, technical and aesthetic factors. Alongside the adaptation and influence of American hard-boiled detective fiction, he claims

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[36] Paul Schrader, 'Notes on *Film Noir*' in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), p. 55.

[37] Borde and Chaumeton, p. 22.

[38] Raymond Durgnat, 'Paint It Black: The Family Tree of the *Film Noir*' in *Film Noir Reader,* ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), p. 38.

[39] Schrader, p. 58–63.

[40] The Production Code, which imposed strict rules to restrict what could and could not be shown in American films, was replaced in 1968 by the MPAA film rating system, which 'evaluated motion pictures along age-appropriate guidelines ranging from family-friendly to adults only'. Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen & the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 334.

that 'gangsterism' in the 1920s and the 'social upheaval' caused by WWII helped create the 'class of individuals' that would often feature in *film noir*: small-time sociopathic gangsters, and shell-shocked veterans and amnesiacs who underwent 'physical and emotional changes' altering 'their perceptions of civilian society' as a result of going to war. Post-war economics also dictated the 'recycling of existing [film] sets' and film stock, which contributed to *film noir* becoming a 'fiscally sounder proposition' than previously feasible genres. And McCarthyism and the threat of the atomic bomb became 'the unspoken inspirations' for a leitmotif of fear and paranoia that resounds in post-war *films noir* such as *Out of the Past* (1947) and *Night and The City* (1950). For Silver, these factors were instrumental in creating the 'essential traits' – including high-contrast lighting and shadowy sets, produced, in part, by filming at night to save costs – recognizable in most *films noir*.[41]

However, Marc Vernet challenges Silver, claiming that social conditions in France were a fundamental and often ignored influence. For Vernet, French critics created the category of *film noir* in order to 'justify a forbidden love', in order to praise American culture without praising American capitalism.[42] In addition, he deconstructs the popular hard-boiled fiction and European sources of *film noir*, claiming that these influences both shaped Hollywood films before the 1940s. Vernet's thesis is elaborated by later critics, such as James Naremore, who also claims that *film noir* existed before the 1940s, and within other media. This suggests that whilst there is an identifiably American representation of *film noir* that manifests itself during the 1940s influenced by hard-boiled fiction and America's particular social and historical climate (as claimed by Silver), there are also other types of *film noir* that share some, but not all, of the same influences. Thinking about *film noir* this way recalls Durgnat's claim that it can only be defined by consistencies in 'motif and tone'.[43]

Whereas Schrader attempts to move discussion of *film noir* towards art rather than social commentary, Robert Porfirio moves towards examining philosophical themes. A key theme, he argues, is its 'underlying mood of pessimism which undercuts any attempted happy endings' and prevents the films from being viewed as 'Hollywood escapism'. Likewise, the *poems noir* explored in depth in Chapter 2 all share variations of the non-Classical Hollywood ending. He claims that *film noir* often presents 'a disorientated individual facing a confused world he cannot accept…devoid of any meaning but the one man himself creates.'[44]

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[41] Alain Silver, *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style,* ed. by Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, 3rd edn (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1992), p. 1–3.
[42] Marc Vernet, '*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom' in *Shades of Noir: A Reader,* ed. by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), p. 5.
[43] Durgnat, p. 38.
[44] Robert Porfirio, 'No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the *Film Noir*' in *Film Noir Reader,* ed. by Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), p. 80–81.

Existentialism, Porfirio persuades, is a common motif in hard-boiled fiction, depicted by the 'non-heroic hero': a lonely and alienated character, usually a detective or private eye, whose attempts to find order in chaos involve cigarettes or drink and occasionally 'taking a beating or facing death' in a corrupt and paranoid world.[45] As in Auster's definition of the detective, for Raymond Chandler the detective is a man on an adventure who is also 'in search of a hidden truth'.[46] For Porfirio this 'hidden truth' might be the nature of life itself: the quest for meaning in a nihilistic and violent world. Characters become driven from their nihilistic everyday experiences to find some transcendental meaning, be it represented by an object, a woman or justice. This is common ground for the poems that I explore in depth in Chapter 2. Mark T. Conard continues Porfirio's line of inquiry, arguing that existential pessimism is at the heart of *film noir*, and that the 'narrative elements' and 'filmmaking techniques' found in *film noir* are merely the tools used to communicate this particular mood of 'pessimism, alienation, and disorientation' along with the 'moral ambiguity' and 'threat of nihilism and meaninglessness' present in classic *films noir* such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) and *The Killers* (1946).[47]

James Naremore is less confident about defining *film noir*, arguing that it must be considered discursively, and that it would be misleading and reductive to suggest that *film noir* is a genre. Instead, he combines these two central theses – *film noir* is, on the one hand, defined as a solely American art form, and on the other hand, defined by tone and motif – and opens up new areas of inquiry. He argues that *film noir* should be read as a network of relationships and imaginative associations that continue to develop over time,[48] adhering to Elliott's idea that the boundaries between form and content are blurred, problematizing definitive claims that one form influences the other, highlighting the difficulties in claiming that *film noir* has directly influenced contemporary poetry. For Naremore, there now exists what he calls 'The *Noir* Mediascape'; he claims that not only have the classic *films noir* of the 1941 to 1958 period become 'historical artefacts' in their own right, possessing 'a certain artistic or cultural cachet', but that consequently they 'spread their aura across different media'.[49] As a result, Naremore argues, we can now find the plots, styles, motifs, tones, moods, and emotional material of *film noir* present in other cultural forms, including the contemporary novel, radio, television, and comic books.

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[45] Ibid., p. 84–92.
[46] Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 18.
[47] Mark T. Conard, 'Nietzsche and the Meaning and Definition of *Noir*' in *The Philosophy of Film Noir,* ed. by Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), p. 17–19.
[48] Naremore, p. 5–6.
[49] Ibid., p. 255.

It is important to remember that *film noir* has spawned much scholarship. For Naremore, the weight of this scholarship suggests that *film noir* has become one of the 'dominant intellectual categories of the late twentieth century'.[50] Since the emergence of the classic *films noir* identified in 1946 by Nino Frank, *film noir* has continued to attract scholars and filmmakers, which further develops its cultural significance, and attributes weight to Wheeler Winston Dixon's 2009 claim that 'This is the age of *film noir*'. Winston Dixon emphasizes that *film noir* is essentially 'the cinema of paranoia', striking out far from its clichéd rainy cityscapes, doomed lovers and hard-boiled detectives, which, according to him, 'represent only one manifestation' of the pervasiveness of *film noir*.[51] *Film noir* exists beyond *film noir*. Naremore surmises: it 'is both a thing of the past, extending to a time before I came in, and a symptom of the media-obsessed present. It began in Europe, but it has now become a persistent feature of American culture and will remain so.'[52] To illustrate this he suggests that *noir* traits appear both before and after the appearance of the term '*film noir*': in Modernist literature, such as Eliot's *The Waste Land,* and in *neo-noir* films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Andrew Spicer expands on this, arguing that, publicly, the term '*film noir* has shifted from adjective to noun, from descriptive term to category, becoming an accepted and unexceptional label habitually used by critics and reviewers',[53] suggesting that the term *film noir* has been appropriated for marketing. *Film noir* is a critical but also a creative discourse. The most recent compendium of scholarship on *film noir*, *A Companion to Film Noir* (2013), edited by Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson, inducts less-explored artistic media, such as radio and television programmes, comic books and graphic novels, into the *noir* canon, which lends weight to Naremore's claim that *film noir* continues to expand and grow in relevance both critically and creatively.[54] I argue that it also features within contemporary poetry.

Conclusion

As Spicer reminds us, *film noir* was defined retrospectively. The limitations of subsequent scholarship on the subject of *film noir* are illustrated by the fact that it will always be based on

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[50] Ibid., p. 2.

[51] Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Film Noir and the Cinema of Paranoia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 1.

[52] Naremore., p. 8.

[53] Andrew Spicer, 'Introduction' in *European Film Noir,* ed. by Andrew Spicer (Manchester: Manchester, UK; New York: University Press, 2007), p. 4.

[54] Andrew Spicer and Helen Hanson, eds, *A Companion to Film Noir*, (Chichester: Wiley, 2013) features essays on Radio Noir in the USA by Jesse Schlotterbeck, on Television Noir by Steven Sanders and on Noir Comics by James Lyons.

theories of interpretation since no 'contemporaneous documentation' highlighting *film noir* as an 'industrial category' exists.[55] It seems, then, that the term *film noir* has a dual usage. First there is a wider everyday use of the term to denote a particular brand of stylistic cool and hard-boiled pessimism. Examples of this include the original *film noir* cycle, and later reinterpretations of what Winston Dixon claims are the classic archetypes of *film noir*: 'the lone protagonist in a dark, rainy alley, accompanied by an omnipresent voiceover on the soundtrack [*The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Murder, My Sweet* (1946), *The Big Sleep* (1946)], of doomed lovers on the run from the police [*Double Indemnity* (1944), *Raw Deal* (1948), *Gun Crazy* (1950)], or hard-boiled detectives unravelling labyrinthine mysteries with cynical assurance [also *The Maltese Falcon*, *Murder, My Sweet*, *The Big Sleep*, and others such as *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)]'.[56] Secondly, there is a more scholarly usage of the term *film noir*, which not only debates the meanings and influences of *film noir* but, according to Porfirio and Conard, denotes an existential and pessimistic world view. Examples of this more open-ended view of *film noir* would include the more complex *The Killers* (1946) and *Out of the Past* (1947), which both feature liberal use of the flashback to illustrate a protagonist's existential crisis, but would also include later, and still more complex, *neo-noirs* that, whilst retaining some of the archetypes, such as detectives, doomed characters, and the stylistic cool of the first brand, expanded the *noir* world to feature complex female protagonists, such as in *Klute* (1971) and *In The Cut* (2003), gothic or horror iconography and themes, such as in *Angel Heart* (1987) and *The Ninth Gate* (1999), increasingly fragmented narratives, such as in *Pulp Fiction* and *Memento*, and comic-book parody, such as in *Sin City* (2005) and *Sin City: A Dame to Die For* (2014). What characterizes this second usage then, is the hybrid nature of the films, which is also reflected in the ambition of the scholarship. Like the archetypal detective unravelling cues and connecting the dots, the scholar works to highlight the many new connections between *film noir* and conceptual, critical, and philosophical thought. Given Auster's idea that the writer and the detective share certain similarities of process, it can be no coincidence that more and more later *neo-noirs* take the figure of the writer, artist, journalist or scholar, a character who is often engaged in searching for something within themselves, or finding an external truth, as their protagonist in place of, or in addition to, the detective.[57] See, for example, *The Ninth Gate*, *In the Cut*, *State of Play* (2004), *Secret Window* (2004), *The*

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[55] Spicer., p. 2.
[56] Winston Dixon, p. 1.
[57] Naremore lists Auster as a modern novelist engaged in alluding 'to the *noir* literary tradition'. He also lists William Gibson, Don DeLillo, Martin Amis, J.G. Ballard and Susanna Moore alongside Auster. Naremore, p. 255–256.

Midnight Meat Train (2008), *Red Riding: The Year of Our Lord 1974* (2009), and *The Ghost Writer* (2010).[58]

This second use of the term, which regards *film noir* as an expression of a particular way of viewing the world, pairs with the observation shared by French and Munroe Hotes, that the advent and continued dominance of cinema offer new modes of expression to poets. Evoking Elliott's appraisal of how content can seep into form from various sources, and by acknowledging examples of intentional references or allusions to the cinematic and to *film noir* and its contexts revealed during personal interviews with Deryn Rees-Jones and David Harsent, and through a close reading of the poems in question, this thesis recognises the importance of both usages of the term *film noir*: as a term to denote a stylistic brand of pessimistic cool, tied to a series of archetypal settings and characters, and as a particular way to view the world. By viewing various *films noir* and *neo-noirs*, and through an engagement with the scholarship on *film noir* as a starting point, this thesis illustrates the connections between certain poems and *film noir*, not to suggest a clear cinematic mode of writing poetry – although I do suggest certain ways in which the poems allude to cinematic technique – but to illustrate what a *poem noir* should contain in addition to allusions to cinematic technique: the emotional themes, moods and tones common in most *films noir*. By considering the echoes of *film noir*, as defined by my study of *film noir* and its updated form, *neo-noir*, which appear in the work of Deryn Rees-Jones, Paul Muldoon and David Harsent, this thesis builds a framework in which to read a poem as a *poem noir* that allows *noirishness* to be recognized outside *film noir*'s typical setting.

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[58] All of these films could be classified by *neo-noirs* due to their reliance on paranoia, obsession, pessimism and anxiety, mixed with classic *film noir* archetypes, cinematic techniques, and narratives of border crossings or identity crises, which I explore in Chapter 1.

Chapter 1: Identifying the *Noir* Paradigm

In this chapter I identify and define the narrative devices and emotional outlooks that are characteristic of *film noir*, in order to identify a model for reading a *poem noir*. Out of the 303 *films noir* and *neo-noirs* identified by Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward,[59] I draw from twenty-two films that many scholars agree are seminal, produced during *film noir's* core time-frame of 1941–1958.[60] Although I use examples from *film noir*'s classic period to discuss the narrative devices and emotional outlooks to establish the details of a *noir* paradigm, I also touch upon *neo-noir* – using the *neo-noirs Klute* (1971), *Se7en* (1995) and *Memento* (2000) – in order to provide evidence of *film noir*'s longevity.[61]

Classical Hollywood Cinema and *Film Noir*

Film noir is difficult to categorize as a typical branch of Classical Hollywood cinema because many *films noir* contain certain cinematic techniques that challenge it. At its base level, Classical Hollywood narrative is fundamentally concerned with telling stories that conceal their 'artifice through techniques of continuity and "invisible" storytelling'.[62] Classical narration pairs a narrational omniscience with 'narration-through-character-action', such as narration through character-centred experience (flashbacks, retelling stories), character-centred causality (cause-and-effect), and character development (goal-orientation). With character action as the driving force behind causality, Classical narration 'plunges us *in media res* and proceeds to reduce signs of its self-consciousness and omniscience' rendering it 'invisible': a 'concealment of artifice' seeks to make 'watching the film like viewing reality'.[63]

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[59] As identified in Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style,* 3rd ed. (Woodstock, New York: The Overlook Press, 1992).

[60] *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity*, *Laura*, *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *Fallen Angel*, *Scarlet Street* (1945), *The Big Sleep*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *The Dark Corner*, *The Killers*, *The Locket*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), *Lady In The Lake*, *Out of the Past* (1947), *Raw Deal* (1948), *D.O.A.*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950), *The Big Heat* (1953), *The Big Combo*, *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) and *Touch of Evil* (1958). These twenty-two films are featured regularly throughout the *film noir* critical discourse. Nino Frank identified *Double Indemnity*, *Laura* and *Murder, My Sweet* as key *films noir* in his essay 'A New Kind of Police Drama: the Criminal Adventure' (1946). Paul Schrader, Robert Porfirio, Frank Krutnik, Alain Silver, Ian Jarvie, Mark T Conard, Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo have written about these films in various chapters of their works cited throughout this thesis.

[61] Andrew Spicer lists all three of these films in his extensive list of *neo-noirs* in *Film Noir* (Harlow; Essex, England, Pearson Education: 2002), p. 231–234.

[62] David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 3.

[63] Ibid., p. 25–38.

Although *film noir* was made by Hollywood studios,[64] it evades consistency by appropriating different techniques from a variety of European sources, by moving outside the norms of Hollywood's aesthetic style – most evidently in its use of lighting to strongly emphasise darkness and shadow, and its angular framing – and through its mood of despair and hopelessness. Spicer claims that the fundamental difference between *film noir* and the Classical Hollywood narrative model is that *film noir* can be characterised by its 'ambiguous and inconclusive endings'.[65] If Classical Hollywood narrative is defined by its consistency in using the logic of cause-and-effect to show the achievement of physical or psychological goals by morally defined characters in a world of successful heterosexual romance, told in a visually clear and cohesive style, and underpinned by a decisive and unquestionable conclusion, then there are four main ways in which Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson suggest that *film noir* challenges and fails to conform entirely to the Classical Hollywood narrative model.

Their first is concerned with reading *film noir* as 'an assault on psychological causality'. Motives in *film noir* are often not coherent or discernible. Protagonists suffer assaults on their development that manifest themselves through *film noir*'s subversion of the Classical Hollywood conventions of 'logical action' and by its reliance on 'attractive killers, repellent cops, confused actions, gratuitous violence, and weary or disorientated heroes' to drive narrative forwards.[66] Evidence of an attractive killer's effect on a protagonist are found in *films noir* such as *Double Indemnity* (Phyllis Dietrichson lures insurance man Walter Neff into helping her murder her husband, then later shoots Neff, fearing that he will confess), and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (the ambitious Cora coerces the drifter, Frank, into helping her murder her husband, which leads to his own demise, when he is ultimately, and wrongly, convicted of murdering Cora).

A classic instance of the effect of the repellent cop on the protagonist appears in *Touch of Evil*. The xenophobic Captain Quinlan plants sticks of dynamite on the Mexican, Sanchez, in order to convict him of blowing up a car, and later arranges for the protagonist Vargas's bride, Susie, to be kidnapped and drugged, then framed for a murder, as revenge for

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[64] *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep* were produced by Warner Bros; *Double Indemnity*, *The Blue Dahlia* and *Sunset Boulevard* by Paramount Pictures; *Laura*, *Fallen Angel*, *The Dark Corner* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Twentieth Century Fox; *Murder, My Sweet*, *The Locket* and *Out of the Past* by RKO Radio Pictures; *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Lady in the Lake* by MGM, although produced by Parklane Pictures, *Kiss Me Deadly* was later distributed by MGM, *Scarlet Street* (with Fritz Lang Productions), *The Killers* and *Touch of Evil* were produced by Universal, and *The Big Heat* by Columbia Pictures Corporation. Of the twenty-two *films noir* I explore in more depth within this chapter, only three were produced by smaller studios: *Raw Deal* by Edward Small Productions, Reliance Pictures; *D.O.A.* by Cardinal Pictures (although released by United Artists); and *The Big Combo* by Security Pictures, Theodora Productions.

[65] Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education, 2002), p. 75.

[66] Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 76.

Vargas' accusations against him. At the end it turns out that Sanchez really was the culprit, proving that Quinlan, although now dead, was correct, thus unsettling the convictions of the seemingly moral protagonist, Vargas. Confused actions and narratives drive *D.O.A.* (Frank Bigelow spends the entire film on a confused mission to learn the identity of his killer after he is randomly poisoned), *The Blue Dahlia* (the viewer is offered three possible murderers, before a fourth is introduced at the end and out of the blue) and *The Dark Corner* (private eye Bradford Gait suffers continual threats to his stability as he finds himself framed for the murder of his ex-partner).

Although many *films noir* contain large doses of violence, particular examples that unsettle the protagonist's development occur in *The Big Heat* and *The Big Combo*. In *The Big Heat* the seemingly happy Sergeant Bannion is morally driven to bring down a crime syndicate, which retaliates by blowing up his wife in her car, causing Bannion to become increasingly pessimistic. And in *The Big Combo* Lieutenant Diamond is rewarded for his obsession with bringing down the crime boss, Mr Brown, by being tortured with a hearing aid, deafening him with high-pitched screams, and having a bottle of hair tonic poured down his throat. Feelings of disorientation and weariness feature in many detective-orientated *films noir*, and are usually an occupational hazard. Sam Spade, in *The Maltese Falcon*, sounds neither shocked nor saddened when he is called in the middle of the night and informed of his partner's murder. Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* and *Murder, My Sweet* remains resolutely detached in the face of danger throughout. Overall, the assault that the protagonist suffers on their development usually leads to an unresolved ending. In *Double Indemnity*, *Scarlet Street*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Touch of Evil*, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, *D.O.A.* and *Raw Deal*, it also leads to the metaphorical or actual demise of the protagonist.

Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson claim that *film noir*'s second affront to Hollywood Classicism is the way in which it presents 'a challenge to the prominence of heterosexual romance'. Instead of working to win the female protagonist as a romantic partner, the male *film noir* protagonist is barred from 'reaching his goal' by the female, to escape from whom he often has to either kill her or 'die himself'. [67] In *Scarlet Street*, Cross never gets the girl, and even when he thinks he has, she, along with her conman boyfriend, is actually deceiving him. Cross's relationship with Kitty inhibits his efforts to achieve his goal (to become an artist), as opposed to aiding him to achieve it, or being its focus. Comparable sexual treachery is evident in *Double Indemnity*. By assisting Dietrichson, Neff still does not win her love. Only after Neff has killed her does he realize the truth of her deception and escape her control.

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[67] Ibid., p. 76.

The third departure from Hollywood Classicism is concerned with *film noir*'s rejection of happy endings. *Scarlet Street* ends in hopelessness: Cross, homeless and unemployed, is left staring at his own paintings in the window of an art dealer. By killing Kitty, he has cemented her role as the artist behind his work. Again, in *Double Indemnity*, although Neff's obsession with Dietrichson is resolved, ultimately he dies after his cathartic confession. Both examples end on pessimistic notes, which prompts an audience to question whether the protagonist's struggle was worth the effort. *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Out of the Past*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *D.O.A.* and *Raw Deal* all end with the death of the protagonist, caused by their undertaking a series of desperate and hopeless actions.

The fourth aspect of *film noir*'s departure from Hollywood Classicism is its 'criticism of classical technique' by its use of night filming, expressionist camera angles to create anxious and disorientating effects, and narrative techniques that challenge the status quo, such as internal diegetic sound in the form of a character's voice-over narration or internal monologue, the subjective camera, and a diverse and often unusual use of flashbacks.[68] High-angle and low-angle shots, and a lack of clear lighting, challenge the 'invisibility' of Classical Hollywood style, whilst also providing a visual experience that 'unsettles the viewer', and expresses the 'hero's disorientation'.[69] Many classic *films noir* contain scenes where the lighting level is so low that the screen becomes almost completely dark. In *Double Indemnity* the viewer experiences fourteen seconds of darkness as the injured Walter Neff navigates his way from office door to desk lamp (figure 1.1). In *The Dark Corner,* the poor lighting is used to cover Bradford Gait as he hides from the man in the white suit who has been tailing him (figure 1.2). In *The Big Combo*, the thugs Fante and Mingo, on their way to attempt to kill Diamond, are only visible when the neon hotel sign lights up a dark corridor (figure 1.3).

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[68] Ibid., p. 76.
[69] Ibid., 76.

Figure 1.1: *Double Indemnity* **(1944). Neff is barely visible in silhouette. The screen remains dark for fourteen seconds as he stumbles to his desk and turns on a lamp.**

Figure 1.2: *The Dark Corner* **(1946). Bradford Gait is barely visible as he hides in a shadowy alleyway from the man in the white suit.**

Figure 1.3: *The Big Combo* **(1955). Only the thug Fante is visible: his partner, Mingo, is hidden by the shadow. When the neon sign in the background pulses the screen goes completely dark.**

One of the most common narrative devices in *film noir* is a use of internal diegetic sound ('sound which comes from inside the mind of a character'[70]) to provide a voice-over narration – borrowed from the first-person narration in hard-boiled novels – which usually works to initiate and narrate a flashback, or express a character's interior thoughts. *Double Indemnity* is bookended by such a device. It starts with the protagonist Walter Neff recording his story for his employer. The audience experience this as one long flashback. The effect of this is cathartic: Neff confesses his betrayal of his fatherly employer, Barton Keyes, and by doing so comes to terms with his obsession with *femme fatale* Dietrichson. This use of the confessional mode of voice-over narration enables Neff to escape Dietrichson's spell. In *Murder, My Sweet* Marlowe recounts a 'crazy coked-up dream' he suffered as a result of being drugged by the quack Jules Amthor. In the following scene Marlowe's psychological state is illustrated as he describes how he felt and what he saw while the audience are shown Marlowe falling through black holes and walking through a series of doors to a heightened, tense musical accompaniment and voice-over narration repeating lines from earlier in the film. This contravenes the basic objectivity of Classical narrative, which, though it includes the norm that the viewer should observe the world 'via' character (the principle of character-centred experience), avoids identifying with a character to the extent that subjective state

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[70] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 9th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), p. 290.

takes over from the stream of information about events in the story-space. The scene aims to instigate an experience of Marlowe's psychosis in the viewer.

Another dominant narrative device in *film noir* is the use of the subjective camera to align point of view. Spicer claims that this technique derived from German Expressionism's 'attempts to provide a visual correlative for disturbed psychological states,' which in turn gave *film noir* a set of visual devices to heighten the paranoia and anxiety of its characters.[71] The most thorough example of this is Robert Montgomery's take on Chandler's novel, *Lady in the Lake*, which is narrated in its entirety in the first-person from the perspective of the protagonist, Phillip Marlowe (see figure 1.4). The camera here emulates the role of the detective and invites the viewer to see the world through the detective's eyes and imagine himself or herself as the detective.

Figure 1.4: *Lady In The Lake* (1947). Occasionally the viewer is shown Marlowe's body parts, such as his hands, to remind the viewer that they are viewing the film from Marlowe's perspective.

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[71] Spicer, p. 80.

Figure 1.5: *The Maltese Falcon* **(1941). Spade's partner, Archer, is shot by a hand holding a gun that appears from the first person perspective, as if the viewer sees from the perspective of the shooter.**

Figure 1.6: *Murder, My Sweet* **(1944). In one isolated instance, a torch's beam pans across a room from the first-person perspective.**

Figure 1.7: *The Big Combo* (1955). Lieutenant Leonard Diamond is punched by a thug in a misty alleyway. The fist appears from the first-person perspective, as if the viewer sees from the perspective of the thug.

A use of subjective camera problematizes the dialogue between the screen and the viewer, as it reverses the expected function of character – that is, in J.P. Telotte's words, to act as a 'social construct' that 'securely places [the viewer] in the narrative world'.[72] Instead, the film attempts to thrust the viewer into the heart of the action *as* the character. The subjective camera also ignores the Classical model's reliance on omnipresence, as the viewer is only permitted to see the film from a single perspective. Unlike Classical Hollywood narration, which utilizes the viewer's awareness of the 'spectator position' in order to generate identification, the creation of 'blind space' troubles 'our spectator position, our inscribed *characterization*' and acts as an obstacle to the development of emotional attachment since 'the place from which we are to see and understand, our consciousness, comes to seem estranged and foreign.'[73] Subjective camera also frustrates the principle of transparency: it draws attention to the fact that the film is a film, which in turn challenges the 'invisible storytelling' artifice that Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson claim is a paramount concern of Classical Hollywood narrative convention.[74] This narrative technique, paired with *noir*'s other hallmark technique – the flashback – works to punch 'a hole in the conventional

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[72] J. P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p 20.
[73] Ibid., p. 20–21.
[74] Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 3.

picture we have of reality', which Telotte argues is the reality portrayed by Classical Hollywood narrative.[75]

The most common type of flashback in *film noir* is a bookended flashback, whereby a flashback is initiated at the beginning of film time, and then returned to at the end of film time, such as in *Double Indemnity*, *Murder, My Sweet* and *D.O.A.*[76] A more complex use occurs in *The Killers*, which features several flashbacks from multiple character perspectives, that serve to illustrate events occurring earlier in story time to aid the investigative work of insurance investigator Jim Reardon. *The Locket* illustrates an even more complex approach, with flashbacks contained within flashbacks to tell the story of a woman's childhood-induced trauma. Other variants occur in films such as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Sunset Boulevard*. The former is narrated from the story-present by Frank Chambers in his jail cell to a priest. *Sunset Boulevard*, however, is narrated entirely from the point of view of a man already dead.

Although flashbacks are used within some Classical Hollywood narrative films from this period, such as in *Casablanca* (1942) and *A Letter to Three Wives* (1949), *film noir*'s use of flashback subverts the Classical Hollywood model. In the two Classical Hollywood films mentioned, the flashbacks either work to inform the viewer of some element of a character's history (Rick's relationship with Ilsa in *Casablanca*), or to create intrigue that moves the film towards its conclusion (by showing the three strained marriages in *A Letter to Three Wives* in flashback, the viewer is then given the opportunity to participate in guessing which husband Addie Ross has run off with, before revealing the actual truth). In *films noir*, the flashback offers neither a period of romantic reflection nor a way out of the potentially fatal situation that the protagonist who recounts it is often facing. In *Double Indemnity* and *D.O.A.*, the protagonist dies after his flashback is complete. In *The Killers*, the flashbacks mimic Reardon's investigations, but the film is pervaded by hopelessness as the main character who is the subject of these flashbacks is already dead. Lastly, in *The Locket*, after recounting the flashbacks, Blair's arrival on the wedding day is the final straw for Nancy, which causes her to go mad. The film ends with her being led away to an asylum.

It is important to remember that *films noir* were originally 'defined chiefly by their difference from the mainstream Hollywood product' by French scholars such as Frank, and Borde and Chaumeton, who compared the films *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, *Laura*, and *Murder, My Sweet*, to their own *noirish* films such as *Pépé le Moko* (1937) and

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[75] Telotte, p. 18.

[76] Richard Maltby defines 'film time' as the length of time the film actually lasts. 'Movie time', or 'story time', on the other hand, is 'the time represented in the narrative', which might, in some films, span across several years. Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), p. 419–423.

Quai Des Brumes (1938).[77] Telotte describes this move away from Hollywood cinema as a violation that abrogates 'the American dream's most basic promises – of hope, prosperity, and safety from persecution.'[78] *D.O.A.*'s one long flashback, for example, initiated at the beginning of film time in the story-present with Bigelow telling of his murder, and concluding by returning to the story-present, with Bigelow's death after he has told his story, reverses the American virtues of 'ambition, vision and drive', which Thomas Elsaesser claims provide the 'underpinning architecture' of the Classical Hollywood narrative model.[79] Flashback in films like *D.O.A.* serves to initiate a loop of failure, reversing the ideology of progress.

Detective Literature and *Film Noir*

Many seminal *films noir* were adapted from the works of celebrated hard-boiled writers.[80] Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson claim that it is from this literature that *film noir* inherits its narrative difficulties, such as 'the relativity of right and wrong', its portrayals of 'the city as a jungle of corruption and terror' and its use of 'the solitary investigator' as the agent of the plot, that work together to challenge the Classical Hollywood narrative.[81]

Hard-boiled detective fiction departed from a third phase of the detective genre. For Foster Hirsch, before Hammett and Chandler came 'Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Agatha Christie, whose work represents three phases of the literature of crime and detection.'[82] It was Poe who introduced the archetypal eccentric detective with C. Auguste Dupin in 1841. Dupin revelled in solving criminal mysteries through a process of ratiocination and deduction, and provided a model for Conan Doyle's character Sherlock Holmes, a comparison Conan Doyle makes himself in his first Holmes novel, *A Study In Scarlet* (1887): 'You remind me of Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin', claims Watson, much to the dissatisfaction of Holmes. Here, Conan Doyle simultaneously pays homage to the linage of detective stories and outlines his intention to develop the genre in Holmes' reply: 'in my opinion, Dupin was a very inferior fellow. That trick of his of breaking in on his friends' thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour's silence is really very showy and

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[77] Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 75.
[78] Telotte, p. 2.
[79] Thomas Elsaesser, 'The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 1970s. Notes on the Unmotivated Hero [1975]' in *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s,* ed. by Thomas Elsaesser, Alexander Horwath and Noel King (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), p. 280–282.
[80] For example, Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939) was adapted for film in 1946; *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), re-titled for the screen as *Murder, My Sweet* in 1944; *Lady in the Lake* (1943) in 1947; and *The Long Goodbye* (1953) in 1973. Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) was adapted for film in 1941, and *The Glass Key* (1931) in 1942. James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) was adapted twice, in 1946 and 1981, and *Double Indemnity* (1943) was adapted in 1944.
[81] Ibid., p. 77.
[82] Foster Hirsch, *Film Noir: The Dark Side of the Screen* (Da Capo Press: Cambridge, 1981), p. 24.

superficial.'[83] Conan Doyle has a sense of humour. Not only is he telling his reader that he has done his research, he is also scrutinising the quality of his predecessors. Holmes follows his critique of Dupin by claiming that he could solve a case that took Gaboriau's Lecoq six months 'in twenty-four hours'.[84] What Conan Doyle is suggesting here is his intention to create a more exciting brand of detective fiction that is evident in the example of Holmes' signature hyper-ratiocination. At one stage in *A Study In Scarlet* he instantly deduces the details of a murder listing the sex, height, shoe size, boot make, cigar brand, mode of transport, length of finger nails and murder weapon used by the culprit, baffling the professional detectives, Lestrade and Gregson. This forms the second evolution of the detective novel.

The third phase is evident in the whodunit detective and puzzle stories of Agatha Christie, Dorothy L Sayers, Margery Allingham and Ngaio Marsh whose novels differed from the Holmes novels by presenting a series of wrong guesses to the reader. In the Holmes novels, wrong guesses were typically supplied by authority figures who offered their logical conclusions before Holmes humiliated them with the real conclusion. The third phase adds a presentation of many possible murderers, before gradually proving each suspect innocent, until only one remains. For example, in Agatha Christie's novel *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) the unpopular Colonel Protheroe, who has seemingly made an enemy of everyone in the village of St Mary Mead, is murdered. Christie presents the reader with seven possible murderers, each of whom has a viable motive. For example, one suspect is Protheroe's unhappy wife, Anne, who has grown tired of his temper; two others, a visiting professor and his granddaughter, are obsessed with breaking into Protheroe's study, and the professor is later revealed to hold a wartime grudge against the colonel; and a third suspect is the local maid, whose lover Protheroe sent to prison for poaching. In novels like *The Murder at the Vicarage*, each suspect is assigned a connection with the victim and a motive for the murder, which invites the reader to engage in their own investigation. In addition, murders in this phase of detective fiction are less random. They are not committed because of irrational motives, or in the heat of the moment, as is more commonly the case in hard-boiled fiction and *film noir*. The conclusion is usually neat: a seemingly innocent character who has been present from the start is found to be the guilty party.[85]

In his Dupin stories, such as 'Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841), Poe presents this motif of the city as a 'dark and dangerous' place, a motif that is at the heart of the *films noir*

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[83] Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study In Scarlet* (Penguin Books: London, 1981 [1887]), p. 23.
[84] Ibid., p. 24.
[85] In the case of *The Murder at the Vicarage*, it is revealed that the murderer was Mrs Protheroe along with the local artist, Lawrence Redding, with whom she had been having an affair.

of the 1940s and 1950s.[86] Conan Doyle also continues this tradition of presenting the city through a pessimistic lens, although, as the Holmes novels are mostly written in the past tense from Watson's perspective, the descriptions of the city are passive, as opposed to the more active, past continuous descriptions in the hard-boiled fiction of Chandler and Hammett. Compare these two examples. In *A Study In Scarlet*, Watson reflects on the grimness of a Victorian London morning: 'It was a foggy, cloudy morning, and a dun-coloured veil hung over the house-tops, looking like the reflection of the mud-coloured streets beneath.'[87] In *The Big Sleep*, by contrast, Chandler turns a potentially passive reflection into an active scenario, where the environment serves as much to furnish Marlowe's state of mind as it does to tell the reader what it actually looked like, which is, of course, helped by the switch into the much more active past continuous tense: 'A yellow window shone here and there, but most of the houses were dark. A smell of kelp came in off the water and lay on the fog. The tyres sang on the moist concrete of the boulevard. The world was a wet emptiness.'[88] The Holmes novels also provided a lead character with flaws such as drug abuse, which hard-boiled protagonists would expand upon and take to new extremes.

It is the two traditions of Poe and Conan Doyle that hard-boiled fiction draws on much more heavily than Golden Age detective fiction. In Chandler's essay 'The Simple Art of Murder' (1944), he chastises British detective fiction by writers such as Christie and Sayers for being dull and for containing flaws that invalidated their stories, although he admits that the stories of Conan Doyle, amongst others, made it possible for hard-boiled literature to exist. As a reaction, Chandler claims that 'if the writers of this fiction wrote about the kind of murders that happen, they would also have to write about the authentic flavour of life as it is lived.'[89] This is what Hammett did: he 'gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand'.[90] Both Hammett and Chandler wrote their hard-boiled literature in the first person, usually from the perspective of the detective protagonist, as opposed to the three previous stages of detective fiction, which took different narrative approaches: Poe's Dupin stories are written from the perspective of an unnamed narrator who is a friend to Dupin; similarly Conan Doyle's Holmes novels were mostly written in the first-person from Watson's perspective;[91] Christie and Sayers, with some exceptions, wrote from the third-person point of view.

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[86] Hirsch, p 25.
[87] Conan Doyle, p. 29.
[88] Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (London: Penguin, 2011 [1939]), p. 162.
[89] Raymond Chandler, *The Simple Art of Murder* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), p. 11.
[90] Ibid., p. 14.
[91] Aside from a few detours such as Part Two of *A Study in Scarlet,* which is written in the third person.

In his essay 'The Guilty Vicarage' (1948) W.H. Auden suggests how Greek tragedy and the Golden Age detective story share a similarity that differs from Elizabethan tragedy. For Auden, both Greek tragedy and the detective story share characters who appear 'unchanged by their actions'. In Greek tragedy it is because 'actions are fated', and in detective fiction 'because the decisive event, the murder, has already occurred'. Both share a sense of fatalism, which initiates the routine of explaining the when and where 'of what has to happen or what has actually happened'.[92] This, for Auden, differs from Elizabethan (modern) tragedy, in which characters 'develop with time', because in detective fiction characters 'are not changed in or by their actions'.[93] Although the detective fiction to which Auden refers is the formulaic, Golden Age variety, I argue that hard-boiled fiction goes even further to align itself with Greek tragedy in this way, since it contains characters who are even more unprincipled and fatalistic than those in Golden Age detective fiction. In comparing *The Murder at the Vicarage* to *The Big Sleep*, it is Miss Marple in the former who is motivated throughout to solve the case; Marlowe, on-the-other-hand, remains detached and fatalistic throughout.

This attitude amongst characters can also be found in *film noir*. In *films noir* such as *Double Indemnity*, *The Killers*, *D.O.A.* and *Sunset Boulevard* the action is fatalistic. The audience is told what will happen, often that the protagonist is going to die from the beginning (sometimes by the protagonist themselves), so the resolution of the narrative cannot be the defining reason for watching the film. Instead, like in Auden's description of Greek tragedy, the film runs through the events that lead to a murder, or, as in the case of the examples above, that led to the murder. Since the protagonist knows that they are going to die anyway, it underlines a pessimistic and fatalistic truth, which renders the identity of their killer, the culprit, which is of paramount concern to a Golden Age detective fiction protagonist such as Miss Marple, of lower importance in *film noir*. Overall, a character's fate remains unchanged by any action they take during the film. Although absolutes can only ever be identified on a case-by-case basis, both hard-boiled literature and *film noir* appear to share some commonalities with Greek tragedy. Auden even admits that Raymond Chandler's work is a more complex study 'of criminal milieu', to be seen as a work of art instead of as a formulaic 'whodunit' detective story.[94] Hard-boiled fiction and *film noir* are more interested in the production of catharsis than the indulgence of escape, which Golden Age detective fiction, as a work of fantasy, aims to create. As I explain in the 'Pessimism in *Film Noir*'

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[92] W.H. Auden, 'The Guilty Vicarage' in *The Dyers Hand and other essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 148.
[93] Ibid., p. 148.
[94] Ibid., p. 151.

section of this chapter, further comparison between *film noir* and Greek tragedy refuses to take *film noir* on its own terms, as a popular form of film that occasionally overlaps with classical tragedy in its attempts to portray a more complicated view of human life than the Classical Hollywood model.

This multifaceted approach to defining *film noir*, as a form that departs from, borrows, and reinterprets elements of preceding and contemporaneous literary influences, and which troubles Classical Hollywood narrative conventions, is reflected in defining a *poem noir*.[95] Should a *poem noir* contain a narrative, this narrative may imitate or explore, in written language, the possibilities of first-person narration, direct address, the dream state, or a dislocated time frame, in order to drive the action of the poem forwards. It may also follow Classical Hollywood's cause-and-effect pattern. Should a potential *poem noir* not contain a narrative then *noirish* traits might be identified through the poem's use of form and imagery and in the emotional atmosphere that the poem creates. In the following section I explore three emotional themes – anxiety, pessimism and obsession – that I argue are at the heart of *film noir*, and thus at the heart of the *poem noir*, in order to illustrate how *film noir*, as an emotional and stylistic treatment, can be reinterpreted outside of film and its conventions.

Anxiety in *Film Noir*

In *The Dark Corner*, clueless private investigator Bradford Gait finds himself framed for his ex-partner Jardine's murder by art dealer Hardy Cathcart. Early on the viewer learns that Gait was jailed thanks to Jardine, and that having moved to New York to escape his past, he suffers unwanted attention from the police and a man in a white suit. Gait's anxious, paranoid manner is presented from the start: we see him repeatedly peer through his blinds down onto the street; we are shown a shot of his notebook with Jardine's name obsessively written all over it; and he spills coffee over himself as an extra humiliation when he has all but given up. 'I gotta feeling something's closing in on me and I don't even know what it is', Gait says to his secretary before anything has even happened. *The Dark Corner* is representative of a very *noir* anxiety. Gait doesn't understand how he's been framed, and his masculinity is threatened by his having to depend on his female secretary, who remains emotionally composed throughout. At one point later in the film, Gait claims, in defeatist mode, 'I feel all dead

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[95] Although overarching judgments can be made about *film noir* as a body of films departing, in a broad sense, from the conventional Hollywood style, a true case for this can only be made on a film-by-film basis. *Scarlet Street*, for example, makes a more significant departure, predominantly in terms of character and theme, than *Murder, My Sweet*. Regardless of this difference, both are still classified as examples of *film noir* by *film noir* scholars including Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward who list both films in their *film noir* encyclopaedia, *Film Noir: An Encyclopaedic Reference to the American Style* (1992).

inside. I'm backed up in a dark corner and I don't know who's hitting me'. As Frank Krutnik claims, Gait 'remains markedly inferior throughout'.[96] Gait is a man on the edge and knows less than the viewer. There is no resolution for Gait's anxiety. At the end, Hardy Cathcart's wife shoots Cathcart dead, thus refusing Gait revenge and closure to his anxiety. Sound lends a further anxious texture. When the viewpoint is in Gait's office, his speech is barely audible over the external diegetic sound (sound from a 'physical source' in a scene[97]) of the city: the tram that thunders past his window and the horns of passing cars. Gait is enveloped in an anxiety that is driven by his surroundings and his situation.

Anxiety is one of the most consistent underlying emotions in *film noir*. Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo explain this as a 'free-floating anxiety' that is a product of historical circumstance. For them, anxiety develops when traditionally well-tethered attitudes towards sex, race, and authority become challenged.[98] Given the rise in the employment of women and campaigns for the rights of African American soldiers during the 1940s in America, Oliver and Trigo argue that the traditional positions of authority held by white middle class men were beginning to be fundamentally challenged. They claim that the crossing of social borders within American society during the 1940s unconsciously informed the anxiety in *film noir*. A political anxiety is also generated in *films noir* such as *The House on 92nd Street* (1945) and *13 Rue Madeleine* (1947), which are concerned with efforts to defeat fascism, and with rewarding 'the vigilance, hard work and courage of American institutions.'[99] Others such as *Brute Force* (1947) and *Body and Soul* (1947) criticize modern America's hierarchical social structures and capitalistic greed. The body of classic films presents both a fear of losing traditional American values and a desire to expose and punish characters for having those very values.

In *Out of the Past*, Jeff Bailey crosses several borders: the border into Mexico – a location of 'unrepressed criminality and sexuality' – to locate the *femme fatale*, Kathie; the border into his past, as he informs his new flame Ann of his murky past as a contract killer; and the border that merges the past with the present as he allows himself to be drawn back into his former life by Kathie. Having expressed a desire to settle down with Ann, by the end Bailey has abandoned her for Kathie, and tries to escape, having already double-crossed Kathie by calling the police. Ultimately though, Bailey is shot by Kathie after she sees the

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[96] Frank Krutnik, *In A Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 65.
[97] Bordwell and Thompson, p. 290.
[98] Kelly Oliver and Benigno Trigo, *Noir Anxiety* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. XIV.
[99] Spicer, p. 69.

police. The crossed borders offer Bailey no reward, and generate in the implied viewer a sense of Oliver and Trigo's border anxiety.[100]

Another type of anxiety in *film noir* is caused by the abundance of methods to communicate. Many *films noir* contain characters unable to communicate effectively in a world where 'practically every mode of public and private discourse' is touched upon: radio, newspapers, cinema, the telephone system, the postal system, theatre. Tolette argues that this is paradoxical: *film noir* is populated by isolated characters searching for truth within narratives featuring many modes of communication.[101] *Film noir* highlights 'an uncertainty about the various voices that speak throughout our culture'; modes that encourage communication become significant as each highlights the communication failures.[102] Characters often need to communicate in order to absolve themselves before death. The protagonists' voice-over narration that bookend *Double Indemnity* and *D.O.A.* serve to suspend death and help them understand what has happened to them. Their earlier failure to communicate has led each to confess in order to resolve their anxiety.

Scholars tend to agree that one of the best examples of *film noir* anxiety is *Kiss Me Deadly*, an apocalyptic *film noir* in which Mike Hammer tries to find a mysterious McGuffin: an object or goal a protagonist pursues, often without clear explanation. From the start the film is imbued with images of anxiety: a panting woman desperately tries to hitch a ride on the freeway; the film's credits roll backwards to the sound of her sobs and the radio as if suggesting the world is 'running backwards towards oblivion';[103] and the woman's last words, 'remember me' – a reference to Christina Rossetti's sonnet 'Remember' (1862) which Hammer finds in a book in the murdered woman's apartment – lead to a scene where the viewer witnesses her torture, hears her screams, and views an angled shot of her naked twitching legs. What follows this terrifying opening is a race to find the McGuffin, a bomb that ultimately goes off, confirming the viewer's fears, justifying the anxiety that the film generates. Like *The Dark Corner* and *D.O.A.*, *Kiss Me Deadly* uses the protagonist's lack of knowledge to generate anxiety that is never positively resolved.

These anxieties are assisted through the combination of *film noir*'s cinematography, a use of external diegetic and internal diegetic sound and narrative conventions – flashback, voice-over and dream states – to validate its anxious world. Scenes in *film noir* that express anxiety usually occur in situations where the protagonist lacks control. In *D.O.A.* this occurs in the nightclub scene (see figures 1.8–1.10). The scene is dissected into a series of brief shots

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[100] Oliver and Trigo, p. XV–XIX.
[101] Telotte, p. 27.
[102] Ibid., p. 200.
[103] Spicer, p. 74.

that frequently cut between the musicians and their audience, while the editing pace gradually accelerates. The camera distance shifts from medium close-ups to close-ups which creates an unsettling effect. It is during this build-up that Bigelow unknowingly drinks the poison that kills him.

Figures 1.8–1.10: *D.O.A.* **(1950). The jazz musicians and their audience are driven by the music as Bigelow unknowingly drinks poison.**

Another classic scene of anxiety occurs towards the end of *Scarlet Street*. After murdering the deceitful Kitty, Cross retires to a motel room where internal diegetic sound is used to make his thoughts audible to the audience: he thinks of the haunting taunts of Kitty, and all the pet names and sweet nothings whispered to her by Johnny. The anxiety is heightened visually: the on-the-blink neon motel sign outside his window turns the room from dark to light. The scene culminates with Chris attempting suicide by hanging. A similar instance occurs in *Murder, My Sweet*. Marlowe, having already drunk his 'office bottle', is visited by tough guy Moose Malloy late at night. As the telephone rings and Marlowe ponders whether to take the case, the room is also lit at one-second intervals by the headlights of passing cars. In both examples the effects of sound, voice-over and cinematography build towards a crescendo of anxiety.

Pessimism in *Film Noir*

The pessimism of *film noir* offers another point of departure from Classical Hollywood narrative, and takes two main forms: thematic and tonal. It is largely a product of *film noir*'s existentialist interrogation of urban life and is generated from the existential motifs many

films noir explore. Often *film noir* protagonists are pessimistic due to their alienation from a 'social or intellectual order'. They possess a 'strong conception of the randomness of existence', understand the role of chance, and try to make sense of the world through 'restorative rituals' – drinking, smoking – within their sanctuaries, usually, as Porfirio puts it, a 'Spartan office or apartment'.[104] These existential characteristics and actions of the *film noir* protagonist differ from the 'psychologically stable hero' common in Classical Hollywood cinema.[105] This thematic pessimism is explained by Conard as an 'artistic response' to the gradual disintegration of religious faith, and a decline of belief in the individual spirit and the American Dream, which has caused a 'loss of value and meaning in our lives'.[106] This is evident in *films noir* such as *The Killers* and *Out of the Past*, both of which take the viewer on irresolvable and morally labyrinthine journeys that result in a 'quasi suicide'.[107] In both films the protagonists, Ole 'Swede' Andreson in *The Killers* and Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past*, are resigned to their fates in different ways. For Andreson a series of sacrifices for, and double-crosses by Kitty, alienates him, causing him to accept his fate. Andreson is rooted out and killed in the film's opening scenes. Even after being warned of his fate, he refuses to fight or run. For Bailey, the re-emergence of old flame Kathie draws him back to crime, causing him to realize the inescapable nature of his love and hate for her. In the end Bailey is completely resigned to the fact that they both have to go down together, and offers himself sacrificially in order to finish Kathie off and protect his new flame, the innocent Ann, from his criminal past. In both films the cause of the male protagonist's pessimism is the unattainable woman, with whom both men fall helplessly in love. A pessimistic attitude arises from unsatisfied sexual obsession that has driven both characters into moral conflicts.

Pessimism in *film noir* also connects with anxiety. Rather than relying on anxiety in characters to produce a sense of anxiety in the viewer, the more pessimistic *films noir* work to heighten a viewer's anxiety through the detached and careless attitudes of the character with whom they may have developed an emotional attachment. Anxiety is born from the conflict between the viewer's desire to see the character successfully reach their goal, and the character's indifference to doing so. The viewer is encouraged to pity Andreson's and Bailey's absence of options, and feel a sense of anxiety in place of their lack of it.

The tonal pessimism in *film noir* derives, in part, from the 'salty, clipped, no-nonsense tone' of the detective first-person narrator most associated with the novels of Hammett and

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[104] Porfirio, p. 84–93.
[105] Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, p. 76.
[106] Conard, p. 19.
[107] Ian Jarvie, 'Knowledge, Morality, and Tragedy in *The Killers* and *Out Of The Past*', in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. by Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), p. 169.

Chandler.[108] The archetypal loner who walks the dark and mean city streets often possesses a seen-it-all knowledge, as in the case of Hammett's Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* who in telling the story of Flitcraft – a man who learnt about the randomness of life by narrowly missing being killed by a falling beam – offers a nugget of pessimistic existential knowledge indicating that life is random and meaningless. Experience has instilled in Spade and Marlowe a brand of inherent pessimism, which Porfirio characterizes as existential angst in 'a world devoid of any meaning but the one man himself creates'.[109] In *The Maltese Falcon,* the death of his partner, Archer, at five minutes and fifty-seven seconds into the film, does not seem to cause Spade much sorrow.[110] Archer's early death also denies the viewer the opportunity to develop a sense of emotional attachment. Similarly, *The Big Heat* begins with violence when Officer Tom Duncan commits suicide straight after the opening credits. When a police officer pityingly says it is 'too bad' that he has had to make a trip out in the middle of the night to investigate the scene of Duncan's death, Bannion replies 'out of bed you mean'. In both examples, the film's narrative and the protagonist's attitude work to create a barrier of pessimism that distances the viewer from experiencing any emotional trauma as a result of witnessing the violence, and invites the viewer to experience, perhaps, a comparable sense of emotional nihilism.

Ian Jarvie turns to Aristotle to investigate whether the pessimism in *film noir* permits reading 'these dark films' as a 'popular extension of tragedy', aiming, like the classical progenitor, to induce 'pity and terror' and offer 'an emotional purge or catharsis to both characters and audience'.[111] Unlike Greek tragedy which, Jarvie explains, follows a prescription that 'if the protagonist is happy, the trajectory of tragic drama should be towards unhappiness' and vice versa, the protagonists in *film noir* are often unhappy throughout. Both Bailey in *Out of the Past* and Andreson in *The Killers* are unhappy in their pasts which are examined in flashbacks, and in the story present. Even though both protagonists seek happiness in love, each is deluded as the object of their affections, the *femme fatale*, has immoral intentions that, as Jarvie argues, present 'banal' portrayals of 'Woman as predator, man as victim'. Unlike Greek tragedy, the protagonists and antagonists in these two examples lack clear motives: why is the male protagonist so 'vulnerable', and why the 'femme so fatale'?[112] By barring the protagonist access to happiness in both the past and the present by the end of the film, the viewer is given permission to appreciate the thrill of violence alongside an experience of pushing moral boundaries, metaphorically visiting the underworld,

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[108] Hirsch, p. 24.
[109] Porfirio, p. 81.
[110] *The Maltese Falcon* lasts for 1 hour, 38 minutes and 50 seconds.
[111] Jarvie, p. 163
[112] Ibid., p. 166–167.

without experiencing feelings of guilt that come with the catharsis induced by Greek tragedy's typical dramatic trajectory. Jarvie concludes that *film noir* fails to conform to an Aristotelian notion of tragedy because the characters are one-dimensional, without clearly defined morals, in often morally questionable environments, which serves to 'create a world so exotic and unprincipled that the audience makes no more than the superficial connection with it needed to sustain its involvement'.[113] Whilst it is interesting to consider *film noir*'s classical heritage, Jarvie, however, ignores the possibility of reading *film noir* under its own terms, as a popular form of entertainment exploring more complicated portrayals of human life in counterpoint to the Classical Hollywood model. Rather, the pessimism with which the *films noir* examined here are imbued encourages viewers to emotionally distance themselves, and promotes a pessimistic worldview. *Film noir* then, could be seen as a form of post-tragic theatre, more given to ritual over realism, to pessimistic ennui than inductive of pity or terror.

Equally important in defining *film noir's* brand of pessimism is the actor Humphrey Bogart, whose performances in the film adaptations of both *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep* epitomize the knowledgeable, pessimistic tone-of-voice: nasal, monotone and summative. Lines Bogart delivers such as "The cheaper the crook, the gaudier the patter" (*The Maltese Falcon*), and "You know, you're the second guy I've met today that seems to think a gat [revolver] in the hand means the world by the tail" (*The Big Sleep*), offer a witticism underlined by a pessimistic tone. In *Out of the Past* Bailey admits during a voice-over sequence that "nothing in the world is any good unless you can share it." In *Laura*, McPherson (investigating the death of Laura Hunt) says: "when a dame gets killed, she doesn't worry about how she looks", whilst simultaneously playing a puzzle game. These lines share a detached knowledgeable attitude, which implies an equal knowledge of, and indifference towards, the way the world works. Often the most pessimistic lines are delivered when the character is making their last confession, as in the case of *Double Indemnity* and *D.O.A.* In the former, Neff confesses to the tape recorder: "I couldn't hear my own footsteps. It was the walk of a dead man", and in the latter, Bigelow realizes that "I'm not alive because I took that poison, and nothing can save me." In both examples the protagonist knows of their fate, and this creates in them the sense of meaninglessness found in the examples of *The Killers* and *Out of the Past* discussed above.

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[113] Ibid., p. 183.

Obsession in *Film Noir*

In *Laura,* Waldo Lydecker, an effete, acid-tongued columnist, develops an obsession with the beautiful Laura. The film begins with Laura already dead, and detective Mark McPherson investigating the case. What begins as a simple 'whodunit' murder mystery, with McPherson going through the motions of questioning Laura's friends and fiancé, turns to a study of sexual obsession as McPherson begins to fall in love with Laura after viewing an idealized version of her captured in a portrait in her apartment. Ultimately, Laura's death is revealed as a case of mistaken identity. Unable to face losing Laura to her fiancé, Lydecker attempted to kill her, but killed a woman with similar looks. *Laura* ends with Lydecker's second attempt to kill her, again driven by his fear of losing her, and is accompanied by a voice-over of his radio programme on great lovers, which acts as the final confession of his obsession: "Love is stronger than life. It reaches through the dark shadow of death".

Laura is just one example of the sexual obsession in *film noir* that we also see in the aforementioned *Double Indemnity*. In both examples sexual obsession breeds paranoid obsession, and it is a woman – either knowingly or unknowingly – who provokes a man to become the agent of his own undoing. Underneath this veneer of obsession though, lies a more complex power struggle. As Janey Place asserts, the dominant version of relationships in ''A' films of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s' holds that women are 'weak' and need a man's 'protection' to survive. In *film noir* however, what ensnares the male protagonist, such as *Double Indemnity*'s Neff, is the desire to control the female antagonist's sexuality 'in order not to be destroyed by it'.[114] Both Neff and McPherson desire the dangerous, seductive, shadowy woman, but are simultaneously aware of their need to repress their desire, as it reveals their own weaknesses and powerlessness. A dialogue between sexual obsession and paranoid obsession takes place. Neff's initial sexual obsession soon gives way to the anxiety and paranoia that leads him to murder Dietrichson, fearing she will report him as the sole murderer of her husband.

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[114] Janey Place, 'Women in *film noir*' in *Women in Film Noir'* ed. by, E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1978), p. 36

Figure 1.11: *Double Indemnity* (1944). Phyllis Dietrichson's provocative entrance.

Figures 1.12–1.13: *Double Indemnity* **(1944). The camera pans, keeping the frame centred on Phyllis Dietrichson's legs.**

In films such as *Double Indemnity*, *Laura* and *The Killers*, cinematography is employed to visually highlight the male protagonist's sexual obsession with their desired *femme fatale* during their first meetings. In *Double Indemnity* Neff is first captivated by Dietrichson as she appears dressed only in a towel (see figure 1.11). The camera places her at the centre of the frame, making her the focus of Neff's and the viewer's attention. As Neff looks around her living room whilst waiting for her to dress, his voice-over confession to Keyes continues – "I was thinking about that dame upstairs and the way she looked at me" – providing evidence of his obsession from the moment he first laid eyes on her. Following this is an obsessive close-up, a combined pan and tilt that follows her long bare legs as she makes her way down the staircase (see figures 1.12–1.13). In *Laura*, Laura's portrait is the centrepiece in almost every scene set in her apartment (see figure 1.14). McPherson's obsession with Laura derives from this fantasy image of her that he sees when he first arrives to investigate her murder. The portrait presents a safe representation of McPherson's desires. As Place affirms, the portrait also acts as a visual expression of Lydecker's 'idealized version of her', and symbolizes a male obsession with containing and controlling female sexuality.[115]

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[115] Place, p. 50.

Figure 1.14: *Laura* (1944). Laura framed beyond the grave.

Figure 1.15: *The Killers* (1946). *Femme fatale* Kitty's entrance.

Obsession in *film noir* is often the catalyst to the story. It causes psychosis in characters, anxiety, paranoia, jealously, possessive behaviour and ultimately crime, in the form of robbery and murder. Without obsessive characters and obsessive cinematography, many *films noir* would lack a driving force. When Kitty first appears in *The Killers* during Lily's flashback (see figure 1.15), it is clear that Andreson is hooked as he ignores his girlfriend for the rest of the scene and praises Kitty's beauty. As in the previous examples, Kitty is placed at the centre of the frame, with every face visibly turned towards her, highlighting her dominance and power. In these three examples, each frame's composition and lighting is arranged to depict the dominance of the female character, which highlights not only the protagonist's obsession but also an intention to instil in the viewer a sense of excitement and equal obsession.

The Paradigm Shifts: *Neo-Noir*

Neo-noir, in its simplest definition, is a film made after the end of the 1941-1958 classic period that nonetheless 'contains the *noir* themes and *noir* sensibility'.[116] Mark Bould claims that after its classic cycle, *film noir* 'presented a pre-sold concept to be repackaged and resold'.[117] This is evident in throwbacks that pay homage to period *film noir* such as *Chinatown* (1974) and *LA Confidential* (1997), and in remakes of classics – *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981), *D.O.A.* (1988) and *Night and the City* (1992).[118] However, where *neo-noir* deviates from classic *film noir* is in a third strand of *noirish* films that Conard claims are 'better able to embody the *noir* outlook' given *film noir*'s retroactive classification.[119] In this section I will briefly consider the evolution of *film noir* into *neo-noir*, and cite three examples of *neo-noir* – *Klute*, *Se7en*, and *Memento* – to highlight the continued contemporary importance of *film noir* and the visibility of the *film noir* paradigm features – anxiety, pessimism and obsession – that I have explored in this chapter.

By the 1960s Hollywood began to experience a change in its production practices. For Spicer, the decline in the production of B movies, the rise of a younger cinema-going audience, 'the explosion of film studies courses', and the removal of the Production Code in 1968, help to explain a resurgent interest in *film noir* and the subsequent rise of *neo-noir*.

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[116] Mark T. Conard, *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. by Mark T. Conard (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007), p. 2.
[117] Mark Bould, *Film Noir: From Berlin to Sin City* (London: Wallflower Press, 2005), p. 95.
[118] Nick James lists twelve *neo-noirs* made since 2000 as *Memento* (2000), *Mulholland Drive* (2001), *In the Cut* (2003), *Collateral* (2004), *Brick* (2005), *Sin City* (2005), *A History of Violence* (2005), *Tell No One* (Ne le dis à personne [2006]), *The Black Dahlia* (2005), *Three Monkeys* (2008), *Red Riding: The Year of Our Lord 1974* (2009), and *Drive* (2011). Nick James, 'Twenty-First Century Noir', *Sight and Sound*, February 2013, p. 56–64.
[119] Conard, p. 2.

European 'neo-modernist' *nouvelle vague* (New Wave) cinema started to reach American shores from France in the 1960s, and introduced American audiences to films that challenged the Classical Hollywood narrative model. Films such as Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de soufflé* [*Breathless*] (1959) used techniques that challenged the invisibility that Classical Hollywood narrative aimed to achieve, such as 'direct address to the camera'. In addition, these New Wave films looked at 'problems of identity and memory' through 'depicting unmotivated characters adrift in ambiguous situations beyond their comprehension which they are incapable of resolving', which built upon the existential themes of *film noir* and 'encouraged American filmmakers to break with the coherent, character-driven causality of Classical Hollywood cinema'. This, paired with the introduction of the ratings system, allowed more adult content to pass the censors, and gave filmmakers an opportunity to push the dark themes of *film noir* further. [120] In the *film noir* legacy, this would prove to be the second time French critics or filmmakers would provide a direct influence. Robert Kolker claims the French 'offered the intellectual means, through their criticism, and the practical means, through their films' to enable some American directors to 'stand back from their own tradition in order to re-enter it with different points of view.'[121] A combination of European influence and film education, then, enabled the rise of the notion of an American auteur, a director with a knowledge of film history and European influence at their disposal who could blend genres past and present to achieve their own 'artistic self expression'.[122] If anything, the later wave of *neo-noir* films in the 1970s and beyond, such as *Chinatown*, have a stronger claim than the classic *films noir* to the label 'classic *noir*', since they were *conceived* as *film noirs,* and filmmakers had at their disposal the weight of what had come before; the screenplay of one of the most celebrated *neo-noirs, Taxi Driver* (1976), was written by the *film noir* critic Paul Schrader. Other new Hollywood *neo-noir* directors of note include writer-director David Lynch – *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Lost Highway* (1997), *Mulholland Drive* (2001) – and writer-director Christopher Nolan – *Insomnia* (2002), *Memento* and the comic-book *noirish The Dark Knight* trilogy (2005–2012) – who both explore themes of pessimism, obsession and anxiety, within stylistically *noir* urban landscapes in films that they both write and direct.

Klute (1971) is an anxious *neo-noir* that explores themes of fragmented identities. Private detective John Klute is hired by Peter Cable to find the missing Tom Gruneman, who is believed to have visited prostitutes. At the film's start after Gruneman has been reported as missing, a detective muses that 'a man will lead a double life, a Jekyll and Hyde existence' as if to suggest the identity crises of its characters. Later, it becomes clear that Cable actually

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[120] Spicer, p. 133–135.
[121] Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness*, 3rd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 19.
[122] Spicer, p. 134-135.

murdered Gruneman because he discovered Cable's second, 'Hyde', identity, which involved murdering prostitutes. Caught up in this is prostitute and fallen woman Bree Daniels. From the start she is depicted as having an identity crisis as she tries to become a model and an actress to end her career as a call girl. In places *Klute* directly meditates on ideas concerning identity; the film is punctuated by Daniels' visits to her psychiatrist, in which she sits facing the camera, although not staring directly at the viewer, and questions her identity. In one scene she claims she is strongest when she is working as a call girl, as she is in a position of power, and later she claims to have lost all control, having fallen in love with Klute, and expresses nostalgia for her previous life. Earlier, after looking at her modelling shots, an agent gives Bree the advice: "it is important you know yourself", implying that she does not control her own identity. Later Bree states 'I forget myself when I act', suggesting that throughout the film she is trying to escape her identity, to forget her life as a call girl.

Klute's character is the most underdeveloped. As a local Pennsylvanian cop, he has never worked as a private detective, and his motives for taking the job are never clarified. He is apparently a friend of the missing man, although the viewer is never given any information as to the nature of their friendship, and his motivation is never fully realized, thus breaking one rule of Classical Hollywood narrative. Technically, *Klute* presents further departures from the Classical Hollywood style, and further alliance to the New Wave influence in its use of reverse zooms to create a sense of disorientation and vulnerability, which is particularly effective in one scene where Daniels takes a phone call late at night from an unknown, silent caller (see figures 1.16–1.18).

Figures 1.16–1.18: *Klute* (1971). A reverse zoom in *Klute* serves to heighten the isolation of Bree Daniels as her phone keeps ringing.

Figure 1.19: *Klute* (1971). The frame is fixed on Bree for two minutes while she listens to a tape recording of a prostitute's murder.

One other example is in the film's use of very long takes. Towards the end of the film the audience are shown a close-up of a partly lit Daniels listening to the tape recorder as it plays a sound recording of another prostitute's murder. The camera remains focused on her face alone, without any camera movement, for a full two minutes (see figure 1.19). These techniques illustrate an evolution from Classical Hollywood as well as from the classic *film noir* style. The anxiety in *Klute* places the film in the *film noir* tradition, whilst building upon it with a neo-modernist concern for questioning identity.

The *neo-noir Se7en* mixes classic *film noir* pessimism (as in *The Killers* or *Out of the Past*), a blend of technological timelessness and the characteristics of a superhero film. World-weary detective William Somerset is typically pessimistic in his acceptance of the brutal crimes he investigates, in contrast to the younger, naïve detective, David Mills. After the first body is found Somerset admits, "It's just going to go on and on and on." At one point Somerset offers his philosophy of detection, which reads like an ode to pessimism: "We're collecting the evidence, taking all the pictures and samples, writing everything down, noting the time things happen…putting everything in neat little piles and filing it away", a process which he then compares to "picking up diamonds on a deserted island, saving them in case we get rescued." The pessimism is maintained until the conclusion where both detectives are powerless to stop John Doe's super-villain plan.

Secondly, the film may take place in a recognizable American city, but its name is never mentioned, and it is only referred to as 'the city'. This city is mostly shot in pouring rain. The viewer is never shown a skyline shot or wide-angle shot of a large part of the city (see figures 1.20–1.22). The only wide, open shots that the viewer is shown of a large space occur in the final scenes in the desert (see figure 1.23). Instead, exterior shots of the city are usually close-ups of particular, anonymous buildings (see figure 1.20). This heightens the pervasive claustrophobia. In one scene the police mobilize to raid an apartment. A pan combined with a diagonal crane swoops downwards to restrict the audience's view of the building (see figures 1.24–1.27). Subsequent shots inside the building remain tightly composed and angular. Spicer claims that *Se7en's* director, David Fincher, withheld 'establishing shots' to create such an effect.[123]

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[123] Ibid., p. 157.

Figure 1.20: *Se7en* **(1995). Arriving at a house to investigate the scene of a murder, Mills and Somerset are followed by the camera as they walk down an alley. No establishing shot of the area outside of the alley is given.**

Figure 1.21: *Se7en* **(1995). Even the interstitial shots that introduce each day of the week show the city from restrictive angles. In this screenshot the city is only shown from a top-down view.**

Figure 1.22: *Se7en* (1995). **Another example of the tightly filmed shots in** *Se7en*. **Here, the camera follows Mills from behind during a chase scene.**

Figure 1.23: *Se7en* (1995). **During the climatic scenes, the viewer is finally shown wide and open shots of the desert.**

Figure 1.24–1.27: *Se7en* (**1995**). **In these four images, a pan combined with a diagonal crane swoops downwards to restrict the audience's view of the building.**

The action in *Se7en* takes place in a world where old and new technologies rub shoulders. The detectives work on typewriters even though computers are visible in the mise-en-scène of the police station. Somerset relies on old media (after-hours access to a library to conduct research) even though he carries new technology in the form of a pager. Further, literary works of the distant past – Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1308–1321) and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) – form central plot points, acting as thematic comparisons to the action, and are used to inform the present. Lastly, the superhero trope is evident in the presence of the super-villain mastermind, John Doe, who not only evades capture in one chase scene by performing a heroic set of acrobatic feats (jumping through windows, sliding down ladders, being hit by a car and surviving) but also turns himself in, as if to mock the no-hope detectives, to complete his criminal masterpiece: committing murders that enact the seven deadly sins.

If *Klute* exhibits the classic *film noir* anxiety, and *Se7en* the pessimism, then Christopher Nolan's *Memento* offers a postmodern variant of *film noir*'s obsessive theme. Protagonist Leonard Shelby, who suffers from short-term memory loss, is obsessed with finding the men who raped and murdered his wife. Obsession in *Memento* isn't driven by sexual desire, or a desire to control female sexuality, but by revenge, which Nolan attempts to convey in the film's narrative structure. *Memento* troubles the Classical Hollywood narrative model by containing two narratives and a set of flashbacks that seem to present different versions of past events. The film's main story, shot in colour, takes place in a 'reverse chronological order'. As each scene comes to an end, the viewer is then shown the beginning of the previous scene as the end of that scene. The second narrative, interspersed within the

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main narrative, features a series of black-and-white flashbacks that appear in 'normal chronological order', of Shelby in a motel room, and of a telephone conservation that takes place before the action in the colour sequences.[124] This structure seeks to keep viewers in a 'state of heightened attention' needed to understand 'the process of memory'.[125] Shelby is not only obsessed with revenge: he is also obsessed with finding out who he is, since he can no longer make new memories. In seeking to instil Shelby's backwards, past-obsessed, world view in the viewer by ending the scenes with the beginning of the preceding scene, *Memento* challenges Classical narrative's desire for clarity and invisibility, by offering the viewer an experience of its subject matter: memory loss. *Memento*'s narrative structure is as confusing as Shelby's attempts to make sense of his own identity, and is further troubled by a set of flashbacks. One set recounts the story of Sammy Jankis, another sufferer of short-term memory loss, who accidentally kills his diabetic wife. The second set of flashbacks presents the night of Shelby's wife's murder. What problematizes these flashbacks further is that they are shown again from differing perspectives. The Jankis story is later shown featuring Shelby as Jankis, to imply that Shelby may have killed his wife himself, suggesting that Shelby's obsession with revenge is an illusion. The second set of flashbacks show his wife's assault as non-fatal. All this seeks to disorientate and trap the viewer within Shelby's ambiguous obsession, which is never fully resolved and so implies that Shelby's search will go on and on.

What *neo-noir* adds to the *film noir* canon, then, is a much more self-conscious attempt to undermine Classical Hollywood narrative, by muddying character-driven causality, by challenging the invisible filmmaking principle, and by creating a more complex hybrid of styles, genres, and European influences. Since the original cycle of *films noir* were influenced by European cinema, Spicer and Kolker's emphasis of the influence of French New Wave cinema on *neo-noir*, for example, suggests that *film-noir*-type films continue to emerge, utilising whatever influences are available. This is also true of the way in which the later postmodern *neo-noirs* incorporated other genres (such as sci-fi in *Blade Runner*, a cyber gothicism in *The Matrix* [1999], the comic-book in *Sin City* [2005], and horror in *The Midnight Meat Train* [2008]) in order to expand the reach of *film noir* themes. This, in turn, creates the potential for an unmanageable number of films to be identified as exhibiting echoes of *film noir*. The visual style may develop and evolve, but the emotional outlooks and

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[124] Basil Smith, 'John Locke, Personal Identity and *Memento*' in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. by Mark T. Conard (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), p. 39.

[125] Andrew Spicer, 'Problems of Memory and Identity in Neo-Noir's Existentialist Antihero', in *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. by Mark T. Conard (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007), p. 60.

themes at the heart of *film noir* continue to exist in American film. Although I have only discussed American-made classic *films noir* and mostly American-made *neo-noirs*[126] it is important to recognize that many post-classic *films noir* have been created on both sides of the Atlantic. Spicer's list of many British *films noirs* and *neo-noirs* include classics such as *The Third Man* (1949), *Night and the City* (1950), *Get Carter* (1971), *The Krays* (1990) and *Shallow Grave* (1995),[127] and two of the 21ˢᵗ century *neo-noirs* cited by Nick James (see footnote 118) are non-American films: *Tell No One* (Ne le dis à personne [2006]) is a French film, and *Red Riding: The Year of Our Lord 1974* (2009) is a British film. This suggests that the *film noir* condition is not limited to American preoccupations alone, and that, instead, the existential pessimism at the heart of *film noir*, as Conard and Porifiro have described it, is of a wider interest to western society and to popular culture.

This point is of particular interest in regards to three poets I discuss in the next chapter. David Harsent was born in 1942, Paul Muldoon in 1951 and Deryn-Rees Jones in 1968. Like the *neo-noir* filmmakers, these poets would have had at their disposal a range of *film noir* themes (as well as other film themes and devices, not to mention the entire weight of popular culture) to draw upon and incorporate, either consciously or unconsciously, into their work, and in doing so create a poetic version of the hybrid formation common in postmodern film.

Conclusion: What is the *Poem Noir*?

How then, can the core narrative devices and emotional outlooks of *film noir* be applied to the identification, and subsequent creation, of the *poem noir* category? Firstly, no poem can ever replicate the experience of watching a *film noir*, or act in the same way as a film acts. Even though both work to create and link visual images, the fundamental difference lies in the mechanics of each approach and the tools used to produce the final outcome, namely the camera, in the case of film, a visual method based on indexical technology, and, in the case of the poem, words, an expressive convention employing a linguistic code. Secondly, I must avoid labelling as a *poem noir* any poem which is vaguely pessimistic or downbeat or one that parodies *film noir* by being unashamedly set in the *film noir* world, employing a hard-boiled clipped tone of voice. Although the three emotional states that I have explored in this chapter

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[126] Although the film was made in America, *Memento's* writer and director, Christopher Nolan, was born in England.

[127] Andrew Spicer lists these films amongst many more in his extensive list of British *films noir* and *neo-noirs* in *Film Noir* (Harlow; Essex, England, Pearson Education: 2002), p. 234–237

are not exclusive to *film noir*, it is the particular *film noir* representations of these emotional states that I use to inform my model for identifying *poems noir*:

1. Anxiety created through a usurping of power, border crossings into the past, unfamiliar political or social territory, or the impossibility or over-saturation of communication.

2. Pessimism delivered tonally or thematically as a result of alienation from the world, or to alienate the protagonist and viewer from the violent, dangerous and random world, or to shield the protagonist from past or present trauma. This might be exhibited by the use of indifferent and impersonal narration or clipped and economic language, and also through an air of detachment, conveyed through a use of an omnipresent, summative narrator.

3. Obsession that can drive a protagonist to become the agent of their own destruction, delivered either from narrative and character action or through *film noir's* cinematography of angular shots and shadowy sets, or storytelling devices such as flashback and the subjective camera.

Poems that use the logic of cause-and-effect to reach a clearly defined and positive goal whilst exhibiting no sense of anxiety, pessimism and obsession, or relying solely on parodying *film noir* should not be defined as *poems noir*. The *poem noir* should be dramatic and urgent. It might be written in the present tense, in keeping with the first-person narration of hard-boiled literature; in the imperative mode, as if providing a literary emulation of the subjective camera; or written as a direct address, as if emulating voice-over. The *poem noir* may accentuate the filmic, employing a close-up sensibility to highlight certain images, or create literary correlatives for edits. In the following chapter I provide close readings of three contemporary poems, and argue that these poems reflect the emotional states, narratives, motifs and tones expressed in the *films noir* and *neo-noirs* that I have offered here. I do not attempt to define a canon or movement of *noir* poets, but rather illustrate a current theme in contemporary poetry: a *noir* poetics.

Chapter 2: Introducing the *Poem Noir*

I shall first examine the presence of *film noir* anxiety in Deryn Rees-Jones' 2004 book-length poem, *Quiver*, and explore it as a type of *poem noir* that features a *film noir* narrative and a cinematic stylishness, and which is, in part, a detective story. Secondly I shall explore a tone of hard-boiled obsession in Paul Muldoon's 'Immram' (from his 1980 collection *Why Brownlee Left*), which, again, offers a variant of the detective story, borrowing the hard-boiled tone and clue-to-clue plot structure commonly found in the novels of Raymond Chandler and their film adaptations. And lastly I shall examine a tone of *film noir* pessimism and the loss of identity in David Harsent's 'Elsewhere', from his 2011 collection *Night*. In addition, I will consider how each poem echoes all three of these emotional states, paired with a use of *film noir*'s stylistic register and narrative techniques. Further, I shall make reference to conversations that I have had with Deryn Rees-Jones and David Harsent regarding *film noir* and their work.[128] In this chapter, I shall, again, make reference to the twenty-two *films noir* and three *neo-noirs* previously mentioned, with additional references to *Night and the City* (1950), and *neo-noirs Taxi Driver* (1976) and *Angel Heart* (1987), in order to further the parallels between *film noir* and the poems that I explore, and to demonstrate an application of the model for identifying *poems noir* that I compiled in the previous chapter.

Film Noir Anxiety in Deryn Rees-Jones' *Quiver*

Several *film noir* anxiety-producing factors are widely present in Deryn Rees-Jones' *Quiver* (2004), namely a lack of knowledge or control, border crossings, and the threat of oblivion. *Quiver* is told in the present tense from the first-person perspective. The sequence, at first, presents a murder mystery that works to create a 'detective experience' for the reader, who is invited to inhabit the world through the eyes of the speaker as she attempts to unravel this mystery.[129] *Quiver* is set in Liverpool, where Rees-Jones lives and works, and contains several characters who possess hidden pasts and auras of duplicity. Here, the city is seen mostly at night, during evening runs through graveyards, night-drives across the city, visits to abandoned warehouses, and a confrontation in Chinatown, an implicit allusion to Roman Polanski's 1974 *neo-noir* of that name.

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[128] Full ethical approval was granted on 5th June 2014 by Prof. Andy Gillespie on behalf of the Newcastle University Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, granting myself permission to contact and interview Deryn Rees-Jones, David Harsent and Paul Muldoon. Both Deryn Rees-Jones and David Harsent responded, giving me their consent and permission to use their responses within this thesis. Unfortunately I was unable to reach Paul Muldoon.

[129] Telotte, p. 18.

Although the murder mystery is at the heart of the narrative, several additional themes run throughout the sequence. One of these is authorship. Fay, the protagonist who narrates the sequence, is a poet suffering from writer's block. Amongst the sequence are several poems that are presented in italics to signal to the reader that they have been written by Fay. These poems do not move *Quiver*'s narrative forward, but instead work to illuminate Fay's state of mind and allegorize the events of the narrative. The implied reader is led to assume that Fay has written these poems during, and in reaction to, the events of the narrative. They are poetic representations of film's internal diegetic sound (sound that comes from a character's mind, such as an interior monologue), and take place in the privacy of Fay's mind or notebook. A second theme of genetics runs throughout. The dead woman whose body Fay discovers at the start of the sequence is later revealed to have a twin. Fay later discovers several connections between the twins, her geneticist husband, Will, and the chief villain of the narrative, Nate Devine. An accompanying storyline to this genetic strand is Fay's pregnancy, which offers an alternative view of the authorship theme, contrasting the birth of a poem with that of life itself.

Rees-Jones cites her influences for *Quiver* as a combination of detective literature by authors such as Raymond Chandler and Paul Auster, feminist detective literature by novelist Sara Paretsky, films including *M* (1931), the *films noir The Big Sleep* and *Sunset Boulevard*, and, although she claims she was unaware at the time of writing the book, some *neo-noir* films including Christopher Nolan's *Insomnia* (2002) and *Memento* (2000), and David Lynch's *Mullholland Drive* (2001), that left 'their scratchy marks' on her imagination.[130] The poem 'Clone', a key poem in the collection that explores the nature of influence and creativity, is a clone of Paul Muldoon's poem 'As' from his 2002 collection *Moy Sand and Gravel*. This represents one of her intentions for the book: to illustrate how women writers often employ an 'intertextual and performative strategy' as a way of subverting dominant modes and male-dominated literary canons in order to engage with both 'gender politics and the politics of that literary tradition in which – and against which – they write',[131] and in doing so, explore a feminist reinterpretation of the typically phallocentric detective narrative. She claims, in this sense, that the book was a 'feminist project', and that in writing it, she became engaged within a practice of 'overturning or reinventing those detective narratives but also recognizing the pleasure they bring'.[132] Zoë Brigley also claims that Rees-Jones'

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[130] By and large, Rees-Jones was not that familiar with classic *films noir*, and admitted to never having seen some of the classic archetypes that I have made reference to in this thesis, such as *Double Indemnity*, *Murder, My Sweet*, *The Killers*, and *Kiss Me Deadly*. Deryn Rees-Jones, Personal interview (by email), 10th June, 2014.

[131] Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005), p. 16–17.

[132] Deryn Rees-Jones, Personal interview (by email), 12th June, 2014.

intentions for *Quiver* were to 'explore the negative effects of being categorized in conventional identities' and how 'one might evade such groupings to undermine boundaries and exist in-between',[133] which also represents a further *noirish* angle: the anxieties produced by the search for and fracturing of identity that *Quiver*'s speaker, Fay, suffers are further illustrated by the text's assimilation of the classical detective narrative structure, and its quest to cross intertexual boundaries.[134] Although Rees-Jones claims that *film noir* was not a direct influence, she recognizes that the style, themes, and emotional concerns of *film noir* have found their way into the poems from a variety of sources, or from, as Naremore terms it, the 'noir mediascape'.[135] This also provides another understanding of *film noir*: as a phenomenon that is bound within a narrative of intertexuality, given the many influences of the original *films noir* of the 1940s and 1950s explored in the introduction, and the intertexuality at play within the later *neo-noirs* that incorporate many other styles and film genres, as explored in Chapter 1. By providing a close reading of certain poems from *Quiver*, chiefly 'The Cemetery', 'Quiver' and 'Promises to Keep', I will illustrate instances of *film noir* anxiety and *film noir's* cinematic visual style within *Quiver* whilst also making reference to other poems from the sequence.

The first poem, 'The Cemetery'*,* features a range of literary cinematic correlatives alongside *film noir* expressions of anxiety. The poem begins with a comparison between body and instrument (voice) that serves to introduce the reader to the speaker, Fay, who remains the reader's portal into *Quiver* throughout. Here, Fay is introduced as an individual aware of herself and her 'hard-earned place in the world'*,* with sufficient control of her own life to know when to put things 'on hold' in order to take a break and immerse herself in the act of running, which is also how the apocalyptic *Kiss Me Deadly* begins, with soon-to-be torture victim Christina running barefooted along a road.[136] In *Quiver*, Fay's control diminishes by the poem's end when Fay discovers the body of a woman she knew, which simultaneously disrupts the veneer of control she previously displayed, and also sends her spiralling into the events of the poem sequence. The poem's second stanza contains a quick succession of cuts, a montage of images in a graveyard:

> recording angels, bears, dogs, gnomes,
> a broken vase, a fading wreath, a votive candle

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[133] Zoë Brigley, 'Exile and Ecology: The Poetic Practice of Gwyneth Lewis, Pascale Petit and Deryn Rees-Jones' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2007), p. 213.

[134] Rees-Jones herself acknowledges an 'ongoing conversation between language and identity' in her work, as she is of Welsh lineage, although lives in England and speaks no Welsh. Deryn Rees-Jones, Personal interview (by email), 12th June, 2014.

[135] Naremore, p. 254.

[136] Deryn Rees-Jones, 'The Cemetery'*, Quiver* (Bridgend, Wales: Seren, 2004), p. 9.

snow's snuffed out, Our Lady of Suburbia,
a rosary entwined in sculpted fingers,
propped beside a smiling Buddha, a paper blue
chrysanthemum wilting in his hand.[137]

This fluidity of quick cuts, which takes the role of a list in the text, lends the poem an initial sense of urgency, as if something is being set up. The less important objects are given quick glances – 'bears, dogs, gnomes' – whereas others are afforded a deeper focus. 'Our Lady of Suburbia' and the 'Buddha' are both given specific actions. 'Our Lady of Suburbia' is in prayer with a rosary, whilst the Buddha's wilting chrysanthemum forms the antithesis: the failed prayer. This ominous imagery, at once gothic and religious, slows down the movement of the montage. Commas could be read as an analogy for edits, with speed indicated by the number of syllables between each comma. From a quick one-syllable list of 'bears, dogs, gnomes,' the number of syllables is gradually increased. 'A broken vase' and 'a fading wreath' each have four. The number then increases with 'a votive candle snow's snuffed out' and 'Our Lady of Suburbia' which both contain eight syllables, before the next three shots vary from eleven ('a rosary…'), to eight, ('propped beside…'), to thirteen ('a paper blue…'). An increase in syllables and line length forces the implied reader to linger, as if the duration of each shot has increased (and the editing pace correspondingly slowed), which allows time to read into and study these images, these continued and failed prayers, that act as a sign foretelling the dead body that Fay is about to find. The setting imbues the poem with the presence of death. There is past death (the gravestones), present death (the body), and the potential for future death (the fact that Fay is living).

The moment of the discovery of the body in the graveyard is illustrated formally with a line break to enact the moment of Fay's fall, and structurally through the lack of a main verb in the line where the body is revealed: 'ice keeping death alive, a woman's ruined body'. In the passage below, a verb is present in every line, and the lack of a main verb in the line cited above confirms the death; the body is subject only to description and not to any action as there is no life present, in contrast to the living presence of Faye:

the crunch of my footsteps on glistening paths,
rise up together, clash and unite,

when suddenly I stumble, hit the ground,
become myself stretched out among the graves,
the frost, a plot of orange dirt. Slumped beside me,
shouldered by a gravestone,

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[137] Ibid., p. 9–10.

ice keeping death alive, a woman's ruined body,
pierced with an arrow like a fallen bird.
What is it like to know death so slowly,
hair and fingernails still growing
like Lizzie Siddall's in the grave?
What is it like – the presence of absence –
the space you keep in that clenched right hand?[138]

The two questions that follow the simile comparing the 'ruined body' to the 'fallen bird' provide a typically *film noir* rhetorical labyrinth. Both are unanswerable, and imply that the mystery of the dead body is irresolvable, which serves to further heighten Fay's anxiety, and presents her lack of control over the situation, which she so assuredly possessed at the start of the poem. These are questions that Fay cannot hope to answer, which open imaginative black holes, and pull the carpet from under the reader. This lack of control is further realized in the early poem, 'Block', when it is revealed that Fay is a poet on leave from her university job and is suffering from writer's block. Here the reader learns that Fay has turned to 'those blue and yellow pills', suggesting that she has suffered from some sort of breakdown.[139] Further, her inability to write suggests a loss of identity, another common *film noir* theme, and in part, the sequence is her struggle to reclaim that identity and resume her writing. The fact that Fay has taken leave 'on Will's advice' places her in a position of dependency, and also confirms her lack of control.[140] This stanza is followed by the 'The Cemetery's' second clear cinematic moment, a flashback: a border crossing into the past. There is history between the living and the dead: 'The body I know from snapshots, old albums / carrying histories, other lives, other selves.'[141] This moment serves to increase Fay's anxiety by disrupting her authority over her own body as the discovery causes her to retch and throw up. As with *D.O.A.* and *Double Indemnity*, *films noir* which both start with the protagonist telling of a murder, the discovery of the body is the ignition point, the inciting incident for the poem, and for the entire sequence. Although 'The Cemetery' is unable to exactly mimic the film structure of *D.O.A.* or *Double Indemnity* (both function as film-length flashbacks with flashback footage comprising 95% and 89% of the duration of each film respectively), Fay's short flashback opens an opportunity for the poem to return briefly to the past, by offering a portal into Fay's memory – via the recognition of the body – before resuming her present course of action, having informed the reader of something she knows.[142]

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[138] Ibid., p. 10.
[139] Ibid., 'Block', p. 20.
[140] Ibid., p. 20.
[141] Ibid., 'The Cemetery', p. 10.
[142] *Double Indemnity*'s film time lasts for 102 minutes and 40 seconds, starting from the point when Walter Neff is seen in silhouette on screen on crutches as the credits begin, and a total of 91 minutes and 24 seconds of this

The flashbacks in *Quiver* are limited and do not function in the same way as flashbacks in film: the film archetype has the past introduced by way of narration by a character which becomes a voice-over as the story past begins to be shown.[143] *Quiver*'s structure, however, has more in common with *The Killers*. Here, each person whom insurance investigator Jim Riordan interviews serves to initiate a new flashback, each subsequent flashback providing the viewer with more information than the previous one, presenting another piece of the puzzle concerning the death of Ole 'Swede' Andreson. The four poems that are written by Fay in *Quiver* also provide a little more information to the reader about her predicament, although where these 'flashbacks', or alternative viewpoints, differ from *The Killers* is in their capacity to show the reader Fay's mental state as expressed directly by Fay, rather than by others. The first, 'Ghosts', claims '*The dead are with us still*', and is suggestive of her shock as she tries to comprehend the finding of Mara's body.[144] 'Liverpool Blues' again concerns Fay's attempt to make sense of the unfolding drama: '*A woman has been murdered, yet no one says a word*', but the poem is also telling of Fay's anxiety ('*The helicopter spotlights buzz us, lights come flooding in*') as well as her pessimism: '*We mouth our dreams in the telling dark, but nothing can be heard.*'[145] Like the structure of the flashbacks in *The Killers*, the percentage of *Quiver* that occurs within these four poems is the minority. In total, eleven flashbacks comprise 34% of the film time in *The Killers*, and the four poems written by Fay comprise 7% of *Quiver*.[146] But *Quiver*'s structure is *noirish* in its complexity like *The Killers* and in the way it uses these alternative poems to show the reader another perspective on Fay's split identity.

Aside from these *noirish* elements of plot and storytelling devices, several images in 'The Cemetery' play with *film noir*'s expressive lighting. 'As you travel through light and a briskness of shadow' suggests that a shadow is chasing Fay, ready to engulf her in the actions of the plot.[147] This closely resembles the particular use of shadow common in *film noir*: obscuring and challenging the identity of certain characters. Further nods towards film and *film noir* occur in the final stanza, as the speaker claims 'The movie I'm in is in black and

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film time functions as a flashback, resulting in 89% of the film told in flashback. Likewise, *D.O.A.* is also show primarily in flashback. With a film time of 82 minutes and 52 seconds, starting from the moment the cityscape is shown as the credits begin, a total of 78 minutes and 41 seconds make up the flashback, resulting in 95% of the film told in flashback.

[143] Such as in *Double Indemnity*, *Murder, My Sweet*, and *D.O.A.*

[144] Rees-Jones, 'Ghosts', p. 24. Italics in original.

[145] Ibid., 'Liverpool Blues', p. 27. Italics in original.

[146] *The Killers'* film time lasts for 98 minutes. In total 33 minutes and 5 seconds of the film is made up from eleven flashbacks. Four of *Quiver's* 56 poem sequence are the alternative poems written by Fay, which accounts for the 7%.

[147] Rees-Jones, 'The Cemetery', p. 9.

white' and when, later, 'the soundtrack arrests'.[148] The first cues a dreamlike state. On one level Fay seems to be having an out-of-body experience, but on another level it functions as a reference to the body of films most closely associated with a high use of black/white contrast – the *films noir* of the 1940s and 1950s – and implies that Fay seeks to detach herself from the present moment as it is a cause of anxiety. The second film reference, 'the soundtrack arrests', pulls Fay away from this dreamlike state or nostalgic gaze, from the shadow which is following her, from 'the presence of absence', death itself, and back into the present. The story-space noises with which Fay is familiar – 'the hum of cars', a blackbird's 'feathery throat' – become conspicuous by their absence as she notices a sudden 'absence of birdsong', further heightening the filmic sense of the poem since the noises appear to have been edited out.[149]

'The Cemetery' is a cinematic start to *Quiver*. It introduces a protagonist, a body, and provides us with a history ('*William and Mara. Mara and Will*') suggesting a possible motive that Fay might have for killing Mara, since it is later revealed that Mara was her husband's ex. This also invites the reader to question whether the protagonist is a reliable narrator, since she is emotionally compromised. In addition, the poem generates a cinematic sense visually. The concrete colours mentioned are blue, orange, black and white: the night-time colours of streetlights and headlights. The abstract colours – ivory key, light, shadow, blood, ash-pits and crow-dark – are all shades of the concrete colours. This all serves to furnish the world of 'The Cemetery' with artificial light, with winter and death. There is a hum of nearby cars, 'barbed wire and railing', the 'absence of birdsong', 'the moan of the thaw', all of which creates an atmosphere of threat, and adds to a sense of anxiety and entrapment.[150]

The presence of death underlines the sequence. The title of the second poem, 'Underworld', acts as a double meaning: this is both the underworld of hell and the criminal underworld, as the police 'ferry' Fay home after, the reader is led to assume, she has given a statement on the discovery of the body. She describes the moment as 'a taste of metal / like a coin placed under my tongue', evoking the method of payment to the ferryman Charon to allow passage across the River Styx.[151] The use of 'ferry' as the verb to describe how the policemen take Fay home also implies this: they are ferrymen, and the police car the ferry, which takes Fay further across the border into the *noirish* labyrinth of hell and of criminality. This is one of the first references to Dante's *Inferno* (1314) in *Quiver*, references that seek to

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[148] Ibid., p. 11.
[149] Ibid., p. 9–11.
[150] Ibid., p. 9–11.
[151] Ibid., 'Underworld', p. 12.

imbue the Liverpool of *Quiver* with a hellish undercurrent.[152] A later poem, 'Quiet City', written in terza rima like the *Inferno*, echoes the start of the *Inferno*: 'So here I am in the dark wood'.[153] Later still in the poem 'Limbo', Fay meets 'the living dead' at a piano warehouse, and for a while Fay and the reader are led to believe that Fay has met the ghost of the dead Mara, although at this point the reader is also led to believe that this is down to her medication, anxiety produced by her lack of control, and her restorative rituals as detective, the taking of pills and the retreat to her study to write the poems in italics.[154]

The title poem of the sequence, 'Quiver', is a re-examination of the Artemis and Actaeon myth.[155] The reinterpretation of the myth in this poem acts as a part allegory for the wider narrative in *Quiver*, and recurs several times. It also criticizes the androcentric telling of it, the classical hegemony of *film noir*, and redirects the gaze. Here Actaeon becomes a stag the first time he 'sees the body of a woman', implying that he reaches manhood at the point of his own destruction. The poem pokes fun at masculine identity, 'his rite of passage / daubed on his skin as if accidents with a razor / – the cheek-torn, cotton-woolly kind – / were all it took to make a man of him,' and has Artemis as the strong and in-control *femme fatale* type character who refuses 'to be naked for this man.'[156] 'Quiver' gives the power, where many *films noir* refuse, to the female character, who, in the tradition of the classical Hollywood narrative cause-and-effect structure, is justified in turning Actaeon into a stag because he has breached her privacy. Were this a classic *film noir*, Artemis would be likely to get her comeuppance like Phyllis Dietrichson in *Double Indemnity*, who is punished for her greed, or Stella in *Fallen Angel*, who is murdered half way through the film for having lived promiscuously and for stealing from her employer. 'Quiver' offers a further feminine take on the myth by naming Actaeon's hounds after historical and mythical women, 'Antigone and Clytemnestra, Penelope and Joan', to imply that they are all getting their own back on the male dominance that plagued their own lives and stories.[157] In this way 'Quiver' revises *film noir* by adapting its traditional 'male fantasy' perspective. As Place points out, women in *film noir* who refuse to be 'defined in relation to men' are seen 'as an attack on men's very existence' and are punished accordingly as in the examples above.[158] However, in 'Quiver', Artemis and the newly named hounds are liberated from this archetype, and triumph over

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[152] Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, of which *Inferno* is the first part, is thought to have been written between 1307 and 1321. Translator Mark Musa claims *Inferno* was completed in 1314. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy Volume 1: Inferno*, trans. by Mark Musa (Harmondsworth; Middlesex: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 43.
[153] Rees-Jones, 'Quiet City', p. 37.
[154] Ibid., 'Limbo', p. 45.
[155] In Greek mythology Artemis (Diana in the Roman version of the myth) was the goddess who turned the hunter Actaeon into a stag after he saw her bathing naked in the woods. His own hounds then tore him apart.
[156] Rees-Jones, 'Quiver', p. 29–30.
[157] Ibid., p. 33.
[158] Place, p. 35.

Actaeon – the representative of the seduced male protagonist – without facing the punishment that women traditionally face for such an act in traditional *films noir*.

'Quiver' further complicates this relationship and entangles the myth by adding a third party, another woman, Faith, Artemis' companion, who desires Actaeon and reverses the act of the gaze. Faith 'longs to push her breasts against his back' and 'rub peplon and chiton against [his] chest', and she, like Actaeon, is unafraid to stare: 'what she wanted / was to look at the man without fear or shame / with an image of herself with which to begin.' Although chaste (Artemis is goddess of chastity and motherhood, a contradiction Rees-Jones identifies as 'the double-voiced nature of her own creation', playing, too, into *film noir*'s often duplicitous nature), for Faith, 'chastity is a spiritual heist'.[159] Although it is never fully realized whether Faith actually exists, it is implied that Faith is another version of Artemis, her twin, like the dead Mara's twin, and can also be read as part of Fay's – the 'writer' of this poem's – own fractured identity. Rivalry between women in *film noir* is a common narrative thread. In *Raw Deal* Pat and Ann both vie for the affections of Joe, a recently escaped convict. Pat is the tortured lover who breaks Joe out of jail in order to run away with him to Panama, and Ann the legal caseworker who wishes to turn him from a life of crime. Conflict between the two women is caused by their clash over what they perceive to be best for Joe. In *Fallen Angel* conman Eric falls in love with the penniless and morally dubious Stella. To win her hand in marriage he concocts a plan to wed the virtuous and wealthy church organist, June, so that he can inherit her wealth. After Stella is murdered and Eric accused of her murder, June learns of Eric's deception, but forgives him even though Eric spent their wedding night with Stella, proving June's character more complicated than originally portrayed. In 'Quiver', rivals Artemis and Faith present the two sides to Artemis' 'double-voiced nature', her desire for chastity and her sexual desire. This is often the archetypal double-act of female protagonists in *film noir*. One plays the role of 'the dark lady, the spider woman, the evil seductress' (Pat in *Raw Deal* and Stella in *Fallen Angel*), and the other 'the virgin, the mother, the innocent, the redeemer' (Ann in *Raw Deal* and June in *Fallen Angel*).[160]

Given Fay's mental state at this stage in the sequence of *Quiver* (her reliance on pills and inability to write), her identity, like Artemis, is fragmented, which is a core cause of anxiety in the *neo-noirs* explored in the previous chapter, such as *Klute* and *Memento*, and offers further evidence of Fay's lack of control. 'Quiver' is also rife with anxiety due to the threat of oblivion. Actaeon faces his own oblivion, yet cannot avert his gaze as he is overcome by lust, even though he, and the reader, are informed that the 'desire that runs /

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[159] Rees-Jones, 'Quiver', p. 31–34.
[160] Place, p. 35.

between humans and gods / is always ill-fated.'[161] In keeping with *film noir* tradition, there is only one possible outcome: oblivion for Actaeon and vengeance for Artemis. 'Quiver' knowingly plays with the familiar double act of women in *film noir* but concludes by acknowledging that the women are perhaps the same person as Faith 'holds up a mirror to the goddess, / looks at herself, behind her, through it, / and on', suggesting a merging of the selves.[162] It explores what the later *neo-noirs* really began to explore at depth within female characters, such as Bree Daniels in *Klute*, or Frannie Avery in *In the Cut* (2003): they acknowledge a deeper psychological complexity, which had only originally been offered in male protagonists. 'Quiver' can therefore be regarded as a progressive *poem noir* that challenges the traditionally held phallocentric position of *film noir*.

As the sequence continues, the narrative thread becomes more entangled. Fay begins to see the dead Mara everywhere: Mara appears as 'grave as a kore' when Fay is looking through old photographs in 'Flashback';[163] she intimately imagines her husband with Mara in 'My Husband, Will'; she sees Mara as 'a Cheshire Cat which grins and disappears' in 'Wonderland';[164] she elegizes Mara in her poem 'Ghosts'; and she swears she sees her appear in her headlights in 'Ash Wednesday', which playfully hints at resurrection. Although these appearances of Mara are, at first, indicators of Fay's growing anxiety, they later become actual sightings, not of Mara, but of her twin, which re-establishes the importance of Rees-Jones' version of the Artemis and Actaeon myth with its addition of the character, Faith, and also presents a further anxiety over what is real and what is false. In 'A Second Sighting' Fay's 'heart does cartwheels down a thousand steps',[165] and in 'Chez Nous' the 'ghost' asks for Fay's help which 'floods the world with light.'[166] Later, Mara's twin is compared to Artemis in 'Second Look', the title of that poem forming another reference to Actaeon's fatal voyeurism, and, again, in 'Year of the Horse', where the showdown in Chinatown occurs, which is described as 'like something walking out of a myth / pulled from a vase in the British Museum', where Mara's twin shoots the geneticist, Nate Devine, with a bow and arrow, the weapon of choice for Artemis.[167]

A later poem, 'Promises to Keep', resonates with several other poems in the sequence which have, at their heart, an anxious tone manifested in narratives of being followed,

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161 Rees-Jones, 'Quiver', p. 30.
162 Ibid., p. 34.
163 Ibid., 'Flashback', p. 15.
164 Ibid., 'Wonderland', p. 23.
165 Ibid., 'A Second Sighting', p. 41.
166 Ibid., 'Chez Nous', p. 48.
167 Ibid., 'Year of the Horse', p. 79.

watched, or confronted.[168] A lack of control of the situation and the threat of oblivion are the key producers of anxiety in these poems. In 'Promises to Keep', just after she has met Mara's twin for the first time, Fay is almost the victim of a hit and run. Her reward for obtaining knowledge, which works to alleviate some of her anxiety, is to be punished with near-oblivion, which re-injects her with a dose of anxiety. The most *noir* aspects of this poem, though, are the literary correlatives for *film noir's* expressionist lighting. Phrases such as 'out of the nowhere darkness' or 'a shout of lights' seek to visually heighten the anxiety, and illuminate Fay's brush with death. The poem too, is full of oppressive and dramatic verbs: 'a balaclava'd face looms large', which causes Fay to 'throw' herself to a 'warehouse wall' as 'night reduces to a stab of pain', and the driver narrowly misses her but hits her car instead; the car spins 'as it carries a blow'. As all this happens Fay notices a 'fractured' line of graffiti on a nearby wall, a choice verb to describe her state of mind.[169] This creates an environment of tense and anxious action. A tense anxiety is further created in 'Tail', where a 'plainclothes policeman' follows Fay 'with uncertain eyes', suspecting her to be Mara's murderer.[170] In 'Night Drive II', Fay praises night as presenting 'a sense of departure',[171] and in 'A Visitation' Fay waits in her car 'in a patch of darkness', using the shadow to hide herself.[172] In both instances, Fay, like *film noir* protagonists, uses the night and its darkness to hide, to follow, or to watch, like the man in the white suit in *The Dark Corner*, who waits in shadowy doorways and beneath elevated railway tracks as he tails Bradford Gait, or Eric in *Fallen Angel,* as he uses the shadow to eavesdrop outside Stella's apartment.

What we can learn from these poems, and the sequence in general, is that a *poem noir* offers its reader a large dose of anxiety, which can be produced in a variety of ways. Formally, a *poem noir* might induce anxiety by subtly varying between the number of syllables between commas, as in 'The Cemetery', to create movement that varies in speed as a correlative for unsteady editing patterns in film. Visually, a poem's descriptions of light and shadow can imbue it with a *film noir* stylishness that mimics *film noir's* expressive lighting. Also, the choice of colours used can lend images a washed-out pessimistic tone, as in the example of the wintry descriptions of the graveyard in 'The Cemetery', replicate an experience of night-time, or lend images urgency, like in the poem 'Quiver', which uses variants for red – 'blood', 'brass', 'red-cheeked', 'plum' – in order to create a vivid and

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[168] It also deliberately resonates with Robert Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening' (1923), which also takes place at night, and features a weary traveller with 'promises to keep' and 'miles to go before [they] sleep'. Robert Frost, 'Stopping by Woods on A Snowy Evening', *Robert Frost: Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968 [1955]), p. 145.
[169] Rees-Jones, 'Promises to Keep', p. 53.
[170] Ibid., 'Tail', p. 21.
[171] Ibid., 'Night Drive II', p. 43.
[172] Ibid., 'A Visitation', p. 44.

violent atmosphere, fitting with the poem's subject.[173] Lastly, the content and action of the poem – the stripping of control in 'The Cemetery', the identity crisis in 'Quiver', the threat of oblivion in 'Promises to Keep', the theme of death that runs throughout the sequence, and Fay's imperative as detective to discover the truth – produce Oliver and Trigo's 'border anxiety': the crossing of borders into situations where the adverse becomes reality and initiates a crisis.[174] In the case of *Quiver*, it is the discovery of death that forces Fay to cross a border and consider her past, her husband's past, and her own identity.

As a final twist, which recalls and concludes the theme of authorship and writer's block, the implied reader is forced to consider whether the events of the sequence have happened at all, or whether the elaborate narrative has been constructed in order to relieve Fay of her writer's block and to reconnect her to her own fragmented sense of self. In one of the final poems, 'An Ending', Fay appears to take control of the narrative. Here, Mara's twin, who is dying after having been shot by the police after killing Nate, is described as on the run. Fay has Mara following her instructions, her authorial control, as she imagines: 'I'll let her go this far – past the Millennium arch', 'I'll leave her here: her breath coming fast but faint'.[175] As Mara's twin dies in the arms of a stranger, the poem pans to look out over the city from the viewpoint of 'a figure of Christ' who is 'embracing the theatres and the restaurants, / the students and the prostitutes' and even 'the skyline' and 'what is beyond', suggesting a conclusion where everything is put to right, overseen by a religious figure, a transcendental conclusion that translates to Fay having overcome her writer's block and regained the control of the life that she lost upon discovering the body, as well as the control over her anxiety, which was created by a combination of those two factors.[176] *Quiver* is an important addition to the *poem noir* category, not only for the reasons that I have discussed, but because its version of *film noir* is removed from its traditional male-centred arena through the use of a conflicted female protagonist, and written from a female perspective.

Hard-Boiled Obsession in 'Immram' by Paul Muldoon

An immram is defined as an Irish folk narrative in which 'travellers reach an otherworld supposedly in the islands of the Western ocean.'[177] Paul Muldoon's poem 'Immram' (1980)

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[173] Ibid., 'Quiver', p. 29-34.
[174] Oliver and Trigo, p. XV–XIX.
[175] Rees-Jones, 'An Ending', p. 81.
[176] Ibid., p. 81.
[177] James MacKillop, *A Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

trades on this Irish folk narrative, and recalls 'the ancient "Immram Mael Duin"'.[178] Instead of writing about the crossing of a sea, Muldoon's speaker in 'Immram' has already crossed the sea, and is searching for his father in the underbelly of a city. Existing scholarly readings of 'Immram' are primarily concerned with interpreting it as a critique of British colonialism, American capitalism and the Irish Troubles.[179] My reading will not attempt to dispute these accounts, nor define 'Immram' against them, but instead examine the poem as an intentional *film noir* parody filled with *film noir*'s key emotional outlooks, primarily obsession, which I have identified in the previous chapter.

The otherworld in Muldoon's immram, New York City, provides a typical *film noir* setting. Cities in *film noir* are often used to provide a busy environment to stimulate the anxiety, pessimism and obsession that characterizes *films noir*, within both characters and the viewer. For example, in *The Big Combo*, after an opening aerial pan of New York's skyline, a downwards tilt to street level introduces a busy street with throngs of people arriving at a boxing match, at once immersing the viewer in an otherworld, as well as in the confusion of the city and the violence they are about to view.[180] The act of tilting down from a skyline vantage also suggests a descent into an underworld, which is something I discuss in greater depth in the next section of this chapter. In *D.O.A.*, after Bigelow discovers he has only hours to live, and takes to running through the streets, San Francisco is shot to seem small, enclosed, and packed with people. In both examples, the city is used to reflect the mood and tone of the film, or a character's state of mind. In 'Immram' the city is also chosen for historical reasons, New York being tied to the history of Irish immigration, but also as an urban setting complete with bars, hotels and nightclubs, the common spaces of *film noir*, to more acutely parody the material.

'Immram' features several key sets where clues are found that lead to more clues: a clue in Foster's pool-hall 'in the shape of a sixteen-ounce billiard cue' that is wielded by a man who claims the speaker's father was 'an ass-hole' leads the speaker to a place called Paradise to enquire about his missing father from his suicidal mother.[181] A clue in Paradise

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[178] Allison Muri makes this connection in Allison Muri, 'A Pilgrim's Progress: Paul Muldoon's "Immram" as a Journey of Discovery, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 21, 2 (1995), 44–51 (p. 44). In the Immram Mael Duin, Mael Duin sought to avenge the murder of his father by visiting 'thirty-three islands' in search of his father's murderers with his group of seventeen men, plus his three brothers whom he was advised against taking. Mael Duin is thwarted because of the three extra men, and 'although the murderers are on the first island he fails to reach them because of the extra passengers'. Ultimately, Mael Duin is persuaded by 'the Hermit of Troy' to forgive the murderers. From Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009), p. 162–163.

[179] See Allison Muri's essay ('A Pilgrim's Progress: Paul Muldoon's "Immram" as a Journey of Discovery, *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 21, 2 (1995), 44–51) for the most comprehensive reading on this strand.

[180] Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 89.

[181] Paul Muldoon, 'Immram', *Poems 1968–1998* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 94.

leads to the Atlantic Club where his father had 'thrown a little crap';[182] the club to a car chase between the speaker and some hired thugs; then back to the speaker's 'ramshackle house',[183] which leads to the Park Hotel; then to an alleyway; then a church that operates as a front for a drug empire; then to the missing persons bureau; then back to the Park Hotel, and lastly back to Foster's pool-hall. Although no sea appears, a 'figurative sea' is crossed, as Allison Muri explains: the nightclub is called the Atlantic, and the speaker 'is "ferried" through an office building, "breast-strokes" through carpet and "surfaces" beside a "raft of a banquet table"' before reaching the Deep Water Baptist mission.[184] By using nouns and verbs associated with water, Muldoon implies that his 'Immram' still concerns a voyage across the sea, except that the sea here is a city.

Whilst not as visually *noir* as some of the other poems I discuss (arguably Muldoon is more interested in the workings of language), 'Immram' is nonetheless a *poem noir* for narrative reasons. The poem is narrated in the past continuous tense, recalling the story with dense and specific detail. The choice of the past continuous tense allows the poem to seem as though the story is still happening, or has only just immediately occurred. In one section 'Immram's' speaker visits his mother: 'My mother had just been fed by force, / A pint of lukewarm water through a rubber hose.'[185] Here, the emphasis on 'had just been fed' gives two impressions: firstly, that the speaker is telling the reader one part of a story that is still ongoing; or secondly, that it is being retold a long time after the event has happened. Where it differs, however, from narrated *films noir* with flashbacks recollected in an ongoing present, such as *Double Indemnity*, is in its linearity: even when events of the past are recounted, they are narrated in the past continuous tense (such as when the speaker presents his father's past: 'This is how it was. My father had been a mule. / He had flown down to Rio / Time and time again. But he courted disaster') as opposed to showing the reader a time previous to the present (for example, writing the example above in the present tense would enact a return to a time previous to the present) and then returning the viewer to the present continuous, as in *Double Indemnity*.[186] Although differing in its presentation of flashbacks from *film noir*, which, arguably, is unavoidable given the inability to directly translate film into literature and vice versa, 'Immram's' forward-moving narrative written in the past continuous tense lends the poem an obsessive tone, that, even during periods of reflection, shares *film noir's* relentless fatalism.

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[182] Ibid., p. 95.
[183] Ibid., p. 96.
[184] Muri, p. 44–46.
[185] Muldoon, p. 95.
[186] Ibid., p. 101.

One key narrative feature of the poem is its reliance on parody. The voice imitates the hard-boiled tone of a Raymond Chandler novel, a tone that is diligently recreated in film adaptations such as *The Big Sleep* and *Murder, My Sweet*. The speaker in 'Immram' often chips in with witticisms, observations and hard-boiled clichés that knowingly recreate the pessimistic tone of *film noir*'s detective characters. On entering the Atlantic Club, the speaker narrates: 'not the kind of place you took your wife / Unless she had it in mind to strip / Or you had a mind to put her up for sale.'[187] During a car chase, he observes, 'They were heading towards a grand slam. / Salami on rye. I was the salami'. Then, upon peering into the dead eyes of his assailants after they have crashed, he surmises 'How you must get all of wisdom / As you pass through a wind-shield.'[188] As discussed in the last chapter, these detached, somewhat pessimistic and bone-dry humorous observations are characteristic of *film noir*, and serve to distance the speaker from the violent and incoherent world they face. In 'Immram' they work to illustrate Muldoon's self-conscious awareness of speaking to poetry and detective fiction from within a poem that contains the structure of, and allusions to, typical hard-boiled fiction, such as novels by Chandler and Hammett. Whereas parody can often be seen as a negative term, denoting a 'ridiculing imitation', Linda Hutcheon claims that parody has become a form that 'allows an artist to speak *to* a discourse from *within* it, but without being totally recuperated by it', and recognizes it as a 'postmodern literary form' favoured by Irish writers, amongst others, 'who are marginalized by a dominant ideology', in order to say something against the dominant literary mode from within it.[189] In this sense Muldoon is parodying hard-boiled literature, not for comic effect (although he often achieves this too), but as a way of taking back the material, to use it against itself to say something new, and, in the case of 'Immram', to highlight the homelessness of his Irish descent. Throughout the poem Muldoon also includes various clichéd phrases: 'out of the blue', 'dressed to kill', 'the wild blue yonder', 'our days are numbered', 'mowing her meadow', all self-aware uses of cliché to further signify a move towards the territory of parody.[190]

Amongst this parodying of clichéd phrases and the typical hard-boiled tone of voice is a narrative of obsession. *Films noir* such as *The Big Sleep*, *D.O.A.* and *Night and the City* all contain obsessive characters questing for something out of reach. Marlowe, as a private eye, wants to find the missing Sean Regan in *The Big Sleep*, as he is hired to do, but only admits to

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[187] Ibid., p. 95.
[188] Ibid., p. 96.
[189] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmoderism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 35. Hutcheon terms writers who use parody as a literary strategy as an "ex-centric". Under this term, she includes Canadian, Irish, black, ethnic, gay and feminist writers, who are working within a 'predominantly white, heterosexual, male culture'.
[190] Muldoon, p. 94–102.

having developed a motive eight minutes before the end of film: when Vivian asks him why he is helping her family, he admits 'I guess I'm in love with you'. In *D.O.A.*, Bigelow longs to discover the identity of his poisoner before he finally dies. By contrast, the obsession that the protagonist in *Night and the City* exhibits manifests itself due to his internal ambition, as opposed to external forces: Harry Fabian longs to make something of himself, which he seeks to achieve in the form of financial success by way of a wrestling venture. Like *Night and the City*, 'Immram' is also concerned with a much less tangible outcome. The speaker may, on the surface, quest to find his father, but more importantly he is searching for traces of his own identity. However, where 'Immram' differs from *Night and the City* is that instead of naively maintaining a faith that financial success will arrive and throwing himself on the mercy of his ambition, as Fabian does in *Night and the City*, Muldoon's speaker in 'Immram' is both obsessed with and detached from his quest. He is obsessed in the sense that he is driven, like Fabian, to continue no matter what, and detached in the sense that his hard-boiled witty retorts and observations suggest a knowledge beyond his situation, a foreknowledge of failure, a pessimistic attitude towards his quest as if the outcome doesn't really matter. After all, what knowledge would the discovery of his father actually bring? The speaker, like Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*, never loses control. Even after the poem's ignition point, the incident with the cue in the pool hall, the speaker surmises 'I suppose that I should have called the cops / Or called it a day and gone home / and done myself, and you, a favour. / But I wanted to know more about my father',[191] admitting that the obsession is stronger than any potential danger. Further, when he wakes up in a 'steaming pile of trash', the speaker reports it without emotion or reflection, only as a matter of fact.[192]

In this way, 'Immram', as a *poem noir*, differs from *Quiver*, since it plays less with creating an anxious atmosphere, and more with the language and tone of the hard-boiled fiction on which *film noir* draws. For example, compare the two car chase scenes: *Quiver*'s 'Promises to Keep' is full of anxiety as the speaker, never in control, is almost the victim of a hit and run (as discussed in the previous section), whereas 'Immram's' speaker mocks his assailants, sidesteps them 'neatly as Salome', and jokes how they come up against each other 'Like a couple of turtles on their wedding-night.'[193] The speaker's lack of anxiety in the situation is aided perhaps by Muldoon's choice of the past continuous tense, since anxiety in *film noir* has usually subsided by the time characters recall events. For example, in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* Frank's voice-over throughout the film is detached, with a foreboding sense of what is yet to come. The reason for this, the viewer learns only three

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[191] Ibid., p. 94–95.
[192] Ibid., p. 98.
[193] Ibid., p. 96.

minutes and fifty-two seconds before the end of the film, is that the story has been told from his cell to a priest, as he awaits his execution. As 'Immram' is written in the past continuous tense, the speaker appears to possess an omnipresent knowledge about everything, from who is checking in at the Park Hotel ('Mr and Mrs Alfred Tennyson')[194] to the hierarchies of the drug industry, which he even compares to *The Tempest* (1610-11): 'But you know how over every Caliban / There's Ariel, and behind him, Prospero; / Everyone taking a cut.'[195] This detached but obsessive sense of knowledge presented in the past continuous lends the poem its pessimistic attitude, and shares traits with Phillip Marlowe's voice-over in *Murder, My Sweet*. Marlowe is the *film noir* archetypal detective, who is never deterred and rarely emotional, even in the face of danger, and when asked at the start of the film to lay the facts out straight, includes a raft of unimportant details as though he has all the time in the world.

'Immram' also shares with *film noir* the use of an outsider as a protagonist. In many *films noir*, the protagonist is confirmed as an outsider at the outset of the film. In *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Frank Chambers, a rootless outsider with "itchy feet", arrives at the Twin Oaks café in search of work, to find himself subject to the scrutiny of his future co-conspirator, Cora. In *Fallen Angel*, Eric Stanton, also rootless, arrives penniless at Pop's Eats, and finds himself subject to the suspicions of ex-cop Mark Judd. In both examples the outsider simultaneously attracts and courts danger, which is how 'Immram' also begins:

> I was fairly and squarely behind the eight
> That morning in Foster's pool-hall
> When it came to me out of the blue
> In the shape of a sixteen-ounce billiard cue
> That lent what he said some little weight.
> 'Your old man was an ass-hole.
> That makes an ass-hole out of you.'
> My grandfather hailed from New York State.
> My grandmother was part Cree.
> This must be some new strain in my pedigree.[196]

The speaker's voluntary presence in 'Foster's pool-hall' at that time courts the danger but also piques his curiosity. This outsider status also echoes the fact that the reader or viewer is also an outsider in the world that is about to unfold. By setting up the speaker's identity in definition against others, Muldoon gives the reader someone with whom to identify. This confirmation of the speaker as outsider is the occasion for the initial clue that drives the speaker on his quest.

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[194] Ibid., p. 97.
[195] Ibid., p. 99.
[196] Ibid., p. 94.

Much as in *The Big Sleep,* in 'Immram' the clues seem to appear out of the blue, the first here, rather wittily 'cued' by the speaker being struck with a 'billiard cue'. Muldoon acknowledges this with a witty aside to the reader protesting 'I am telling this exactly as it happened', which reaffirms the knowing sense of parody that the poem exploits.[197] In *The Big Sleep*, whenever clarity seems within reach, someone ends up dead, thereby providing another clue in the familiar cause-and-effect structure of Classical Hollywood narrative.[198] This is where 'Immram' differs from *The Big Sleep*: although, on one hand, 'Immram' continues in this cause-and-effect tradition, with clues appearing one-by-one, albeit a little less logically and a little more haphazardly, and not always entirely explained. Where, for example, does the 'mile-long white Cadillac' come from, that leads to the information that the speaker's father was a drug mule? On the other hand 'Immram' veers from this model by never having the clue-by-clue structure derived from a cause-and-effect logic reach a satisfying conclusion.[199]

The films analyzed in the previous chapter all have in common the element of an unexpected journey. Obviously each film approaches this unexpected journey in different ways, some in a more linear manner than others, and I should point out that this is not exclusive to *film noir*, but is, rather, a common staple of Hollywood storytelling. However, as I have argued, *films noir* break with Hollywood in numerous ways, one being the lack of happily resolved endings to these unexpected journeys, such as in *Scarlet Street* and *The Postman Always Ring Twice*. 'Immram' also follows this pattern. The poem operates in a circular fashion; by the poem's end no resolution is met. The father, the reason for the journey, is never found. The closest the speaker comes to finding anything by way of a patriarchal figure is a man in the penultimate stanza, found at the top of the Park Hotel, who is described as having 'the makings of a skeleton, / Naked but for a pair of draw-string shorts.' The figure demands 'banana-nut ice cream',[200] which Muri reads as symbolic of the patriarch's withered phallic power: indeed, for Muri a 'vision of crumbling patriarchy' characterizes the poem as the speaker attempts, from the outset, to escape the prophecy of the billiard player that suggests the speaker is an 'ass-hole' just like his father.[201] The obsessive quest that ultimately ends in failure, and the discovery of the decline of patriarchal strength, can also be read as a critique of *film noir*'s typically phallocentric worldview. Instead of

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[197] Ibid., p. 94.
[198] It happens three times: first bookseller Arthur Geiger, whom Marlowe is following, is found dead in his home. Then Joe Brody, just as he admits to blackmail, is shot and killed. Lastly, after Jones is poisoned and all leads to find Agnes, and thus the missing Regan, seem lost, by chance Agnes telephones the office in which Marlowe is standing.
[199] Ibid., p. 101.
[200] Ibid., p. 102.
[201] Muri, p. 49.

reimagining detective and *film noir* material as Rees-Jones does in *Quiver*, Muldoon's inclusion of the old man at the end of 'Immram' suggests perhaps the decline of the typically male-dominated *film noir* viewpoint through narrative imagery. Upon finding the withered figure that is not his father, the speaker gives up and returns to Foster's Pool Hall: having been made impotent by his discovery (or lack of one) he turns from obsessive to pessimist, having gained that world-weary nihilistic knowledge that characterizes many of the *film noir* detective characters.

The poem's form also mimics this circular, unresolved content. Each ten-line stanza offers a consistent rhyming structure following an *abcc abca dd* pattern, but this begins to change during the final two stanzas. The rhyme scheme for these two stanzas varies except for the couplet at the end, becoming *abcd abef gg* then *abcd ebfa gg* respectively. Although no narrative conclusion is met, the breaking of the rhyming structure is a symbolic attempt at a formal transcendence, and implies that the poem goes on regardless. The poem's formal qualities and its play with hard-boiled conventions suggest it be read as a *film noir* is *viewed*, to experience the emotional sense created through story-telling techniques and visual style, rather than to find out what happens at the end. Muldoon's speaker fits perfectly with Porfirio's model: the speaker is alienated from his surroundings as well as by his failed quest in 'a world devoid of meaning'.[202] Further, the speaker is attacked, beaten up, and dumped in an alleyway, actions that serve to highlight the futility of his alienating quest.

Common *film noir* images and characters also appear throughout the poem. A stripper, part *femme fatale*, is introduced wearing a 'low-cut sequined gown', and is later found dancing in front of 'an invited audience' on the top floor of the Park Hotel.[203] As in *D.O.A.*, the hapless hero of 'Immram' finds himself subject to the attention of hired muscle in stanza seven where a car chase occurs. As in *The Dark Corner*, the would-be private eye suddenly finds himself the hunted, and is not entirely sure why. Later, the speaker is drugged and revels in a dream sequence. He finds himself in the morgue that might have been the morgue 'Of all the cities in America' with its 'row upon row of sheeted cadavers.'[204] The labyrinthine effect this image creates, like looking in a mirror of a mirror, not only adds to the poem's circular effect, but is also reminiscent of the dream sequence in *Murder, My Sweet*, where Marlowe walks through an endless floating corridor of doors. 'Immram' shares with *film noir* the sense of nightmarish entrapment, which builds an anxiety that is driven by obsession for a quest that has no end. It is this lack of a conclusive ending, paired with an obsessive tone and the use of

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[202] Porfirio, p. 81.
[203] Muldoon, p. 95–98.
[204] Ibid., p. 98.

archetypal settings and events common in *film noir* that categorizes 'Immram' as a *poem noir* as opposed to an imitation that only parodies the hard-boiled tone of voice.

The Existential Pessimist in David Harsent's 'Elsewhere'

Like 'Immram', 'Elsewhere' (2011), by David Harsent, is concerned with journeying into an otherworld. In this poem, the speaker embarks on an imaginative journey into a dreamlike landscape following the departure of his wife. 'Elsewhere' starts with one of Porfirio's 'restorative rituals' and a chief pastime of the pessimistic *film noir* protagonist: downing a shot of gin 'as if there were a gun'[205] to his head in the first line of the poem.[206] As Porfirio rightly claims, the role of the 'restorative ritual' in *film noir* is to provide a temporary opportunity, in a bar or office retreat, for a character to attempt to make sense of a world from which they are alienated, or to further escape from their own alienation, which often leads to a deeper sense of entrapment.[207] In 'Elsewhere' it is a relationship that the speaker has become disenchanted with, and what follows is a descent into an underworld, as if by a drunk domestic Orpheus, except that this speaker is questing not to bring back his wife, but to experience the process of leaving her again in a sequence of encounters with characters who work to either jog his memory or impart some wisdom or anecdote that comments on his actions.

  In a June 2014 interview, Harsent stated that he was attracted to the narratives of British *films noir* (viewed at a local cinema as a child) that featured characters traversing 'dark places within themselves' in bars and nightclubs throughout the city, with names like 'The Pink Flamingo'.[208] A similar place appears in 'Elsewhere', and acts as a portal, a door into the darkness, that allows the speaker to begin his journey. An exploration of dark themes is a common feature in Harsent's work, which, in addition to eleven collections of poetry, includes eleven crime novels, six published under the pseudonym 'Jack Curtis', four as 'David Lawrence' and one as 'David Pascoe', as well as one literary novel, *From An Inland Sea* (1985) published under his real name. As mentioned earlier, his 2008 libretto for Harrison Birtwistle's *The Minotaur* also provides an example of a non-*noir noir*. Although set in ancient Crete, *The Minotaur* overlaps with *film noir*'s emotional territory and its recurring

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[205] David Harsent, 'Elsewhere', *Night* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 69.
[206] For example, in *Murder, My Sweet*, Marlowe unwraps a fresh bottle of whisky before his services have even been engaged by Moose Malloy, which initiates the film's main narrative thread. The drink acts as a coping tool, and an escape measure.
[207] Porfirio, p. 92–93.
[208] Unfortunately, Harsent didn't mention any specific titles. David Harsent, Personal Interview (in person), 26th June 2014.

theme of identity crises. Here, Harsent gives voice to the Minotaur by means of dreams and a mirror, where he is forced to confront himself, and his two split identities, the man and the beast, claiming, at one point, 'I look through the eyes of the beast to find the man', which could double up as the motive for protagonists in many *films noir*.[209] Like Gustafsson, Harsent is interested in what lies beneath the surface, not only of the city, as in Gustafsson's appraisal of *film noir*'s preference for dramatizing action at the fringes of an urban environment as representing disintegration, threat and transgression,[210] but also in what 'dark surge or pulse' lies beneath the surface of relationships and the quotidian, which Harsent explores in his collection *Marriage* (2002), and more theatrically in *Mr Punch* (1984). This, for Harsent, is the primary investigation of the '*noir* writer', who writes from a pessimistic 'sense of the inevitability of loss', and understands, as he puts it, that the world's 'default position is tragedy'.[211] 'Elsewhere' contains shades of all of these statements, starting with its domestic setting, the kitchen, before scratching away the surface to travel into an underworld, and embark upon a journey that reveals various aspects of the speaker's past from which he remains pessimistically alienated.

'Elsewhere' is not a detective story with the clue-to-clue structure of 'Immram': instead it is a reflective and self-orientated detection of the self. The clues here are dreamlike re-enactments of certain memories that seek to unearth feeling in the detached and pessimistic speaker. The otherworld entered here begins in the third stanza when the speaker makes his initial descent. The descent is both literal – the speaker sashays 'down a flight, then one flight more / and then, somehow, a third, as if some rough / logic could make the kitchen floor [his] roof'[212] – and metaphorical, a descent into a hellish environment where a barman pours a drink that 'takes all night to hit the glass', where the speaker's reflection in a mirror tears 'like tissues', where the music is 'soupy blues', and where 'natural light is urban twilight'. The journey involves encounters with a roster of unsavoury characters, from barflies to talking mannequins, and a 'skinny brindled dog' that functions as a Virgilian guide for Harsent's pilgrim.[213] In *films noir* this descent into a nightmarish otherworld is a dyed-in-the-wool tradition. For example, in the *neo-noir Angel Heart* (1987), the private investigator, Harry Angel, unknowingly investigates himself for his client, Louis Cyphre, a deliberate homophone of Lucifer. During the final credit sequence, Harry is shown descending, by elevator, into an implied hell, having had his soul reclaimed by Lucifer. The *neo-noir Se7en* (discussed in the previous chapter) also features a metaphorical journey into a nightmarish

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[209] David Harsent, *The Minotaur* (London: Boosey and Hawkes Music Publishers Ltd, 2008), p. 46.
[210] Gustafsson, p. 64.
[211] David Harsent, Personal Interview (in person), 26th June 2014.
[212] Harsent, 'Elsewhere', *Night* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p. 69.
[213] Ibid., p. 70–73.

otherworld by detective David Mills who ultimately executes the super-villain John Doe, who has decapitated Mills's wife as a result of the sin of envy and to force Mills to enact the sin of wrath. Valerie Allen draws further parallels between *Se7en* and that most famous poetic descent, the *Inferno*. She argues that detectives Mills and Somerset are versions of Dante and Virgil and that the hell into which they are travelling is the actual city (although in the *Inferno* Dante and Virgil do manage to leave hell).[214] In each Canto of the *Inferno*, Dante is met by a series of characters who bear a relation to his existence in the real world. From literary figures to politicians, everyone he meets imparts some knowledge about the nature of sin and morality. Although 'Elsewhere' mimics this device, it differs from the *Inferno* in the sense that, while Dante is clearly emotionally moved by his encounters, the anti-hero of 'Elsewhere's' narrative remains in a state of pessimistic detachment throughout.[215]

In the classic *films noir* of the 1941–1958 period, the descents are much less literal, but exist as interior, emotional journeys, such as Cross's becoming a murderer as a result of his sexual obsession for Kitty in *Scarlet Street*, or Bigelow's slide into a hell of anxiety having unknowingly drunk poison in *D.O.A. Film noir* and the *poem noir* both play with the descent into hell, along with mythological references, in order to emphasize the unchanging hopelessness of a situation. For example, after the speaker sleeps with a woman he meets on a beach, she 'slips back through a sudden break / in the mist' before he can catch 'her parting word'. Also, he sums himself up as the man 'whose purpose grew / from a gritty *Don't look back.*'[216] Both allude to the loss of Eurydice, and Orpheus' ill-fated quest to bring her back from the underworld.

In 'Elsewhere' the speaker operates as an omnipresent camera, moving freely from the concrete actions and the *mise-en-scène* of the present, to allusions to the speaker's past. Unlike Classical Hollywood narrative which, when it does use flashbacks, uses them to present memories recollected in an ongoing present,[217] 'Elsewhere' neither takes readers out of the present nor returns them to a past that happened before the poem's timeline, but, rather, re-enacts versions of past events during the continuous present of the speaker's journey. 'Elsewhere's' use of flashbacks has more in common with the *film noir Sunset Boulevard.*

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[214] Valerie Allen, '*Se7en*: Medieval Justice, Modern Justice', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 43, 6 (2010), 1150–1172 (p. 1154).

[215] For example, at the end of Canto V, Dante's senses are blurred by pity for two trapped lovers, which cause him to swoon and faint.

[216] Harsent, p. 84–85. Italics in original.

[217] Such as in *Casablanca*'s famous Paris flashback which occurs at 37 minutes and 20 seconds into film time (the time the film actually lasts) to show the audience the history of Rick and Ilsa's relationship in Paris. When story time (the weeks, months, years that are actually covered in the film) returns to the present, after the flashback has lasted 8 minutes and 18 seconds, time in the continuous present hasn't stood still, but moved on, and the audience now witness Rick drunk, still listening to Sam playing 'As Time Goes By'. During the flashback, although the audience are not shown it, Rick has clearly been drinking.

Their employment in this example suspends belief as the film is narrated entirely by a man already dead. When Joe Gillis's from-the-grave flashback ends, the viewer is returned to the exact point at which the narration of the past events began. This use of flashback provides an otherworldly point of view that is impossible and at the same time reaffirms *film noir*'s obsession with death and subversive storytelling techniques that parallel the fragmented identities of its protagonists. 'Elsewhere' continues the *film noir* tradition of pushing the boundaries of the flashback, in that its entire timeline is an imaginative scenario experienced only by its speaker as: as Sean O'Brien suggests, the poem is a 'near-epic dream vision'.[218] When the speaker initiates an event, or flashback, it works on an imaginative level as opposed to returning the reader to an event that has happened outside the forward-moving timeline. All flashbacks in 'Elsewhere' operate in a continuous present tense, as if the speaker of the poem is the camera, recording the events as they happen in his imagination.

Further evidence for 'Elsewhere's' filmic structure is evident in its organization. The poem is chiefly organized by scenes that move the action forwards. The speaker introduces the new location, as if indicating a literal cut to an establishing shot. From the kitchen at the start, the poem moves to 'the landing', to 'a grid of empty streets', to 'a cellar bar', to a 'two up, two down' terrace house, to 'the cobbled square', to the sea, to a beach, to 'alleys and backstreets', past 'junk shops', and to 'the Picture Drome' wherein a film within the poem begins to show a condensed version of the events so far, complete with its own 'time-lapse', montages and flashbacks. The poem is aware of its filmic devices and often narrates these scene changes using language such as 'that opens to', 'and takes me back', 'as we break from', 'everything dissolves' and 'fade to black' to initiate a change or cut.[219] These cuts, which are often indicated by short sentences, provide what Fiona Sampson calls 'a half-line unit' used to 'open action out of action'.[220] These 'half-line units', or cuts, supply the poem with momentum, and lend it a continuously forward momentum. The speaker, functioning as a subjective camera, records the present as he sees it, whilst commenting on it simultaneously. A further filmic style is conveyed in what Tijana Stojkovic calls 'spatial adverbial' phrases that indicate movement to locations. Phrasing apparatus, such as 'inside', 'outside', 'by the', 'past the', 'beyond the', for example, are seen as 'verbal equivalents of the physical movement of the camera', which suggests that when the poem uses these phrases, it is really announcing an edit to the reader. (However, Stojkovic conflates movement with edits: the two are very different. Camera movement relates to the perceptible movement of the camera,

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[218] Sean O'Brien, 'Night By Night: David Harsent', *Poetry Review*, 101, 2 (2011), 73–81 (p. 81).
[219] Harsent, p. 69–95.
[220] Fiona Sampson, *Beyond The Lyric: A Map of Cotemporary Poetry* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2012), p. 144.

while shooting, within one shot. An edit is the transition between one shot and another, and is not delivered by moving the camera *while* filming.) The excerpt below from 'Elsewhere' lists various places that commonly populate the *film noir* urban environment – hotels, bars, casinos – and the word 'past' could be read as an analogy for the initiation of a different shot, to act as one of Stojkovic's 'spatial adverbs' that relates to an edit from shot to shot rather than camera movement:[221]

> …past car-lots and workshops, past greasy spoons,
> past walk-up and rack-rent,
> past casinos and clubs and shebeens, past Mr Moon's
> Tattoo Shack, past day-for-night hotels, past-cash-
> on-the-nail, past rat-runs and bargain bazaars, arcades,
>
> dives and dumps, cross-cuts, bootleg cabs,
> the house of correction and the house of jades,
> fast food portals, a patch of green, or what was once
> green, its litter of cans and condoms and needles, past
> the damaged, the derelict, the up-for-grabs,
> past flea-pits and burn-outs, no entry, no refunds … [222]

Like 'Immram', 'Elsewhere' uses the urban environment to exhibit a *noirish* style by featuring the familiar *film noir* locations, and further to reproduce a sense of anxiety in the reader through its resistance to the use of full-stops, which implies that the scene taking place is one endless tracking shot, or a succession of shots rather than being subdivided into scenes. As was seen in *Quiver*, the number of syllables between each comma can be read as providing a literary correlative to the duration of a shot. In a further correspondence with film, the passage above from 'Elsewhere' shares contextual elements with the world of *neo-noir Taxi Driver*. The stills below, taken from six sequent shots and shown in the order of their appearance, exhibit the bars, hotels and arcades similar to those found in the passage above. The duration of the shots vary, corresponding to the variation in the number of syllables between each comma.

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[221] Tijana Stojkovic. 'Larkin in the Cinema: Dynamic Visualization in "Show Saturday" and "Here"', *English Studies*, 86, 4 (2005), 312–324 (p. 316).
[222] Harsent, p. 85.

Figure 2.1 (Shot A): *Taxi Driver* (1976). Bickle's taxi drives past a cinema, a bar, an arcade and a pornography shop.

Figure 2.2 (Shot B): *Taxi Driver* (1976). The rain-splashed back of Bickle's taxi.

Figure 2.3 (Shot C): *Taxi Driver* (1976). A close-up of the bonnet of Bickle's taxi.
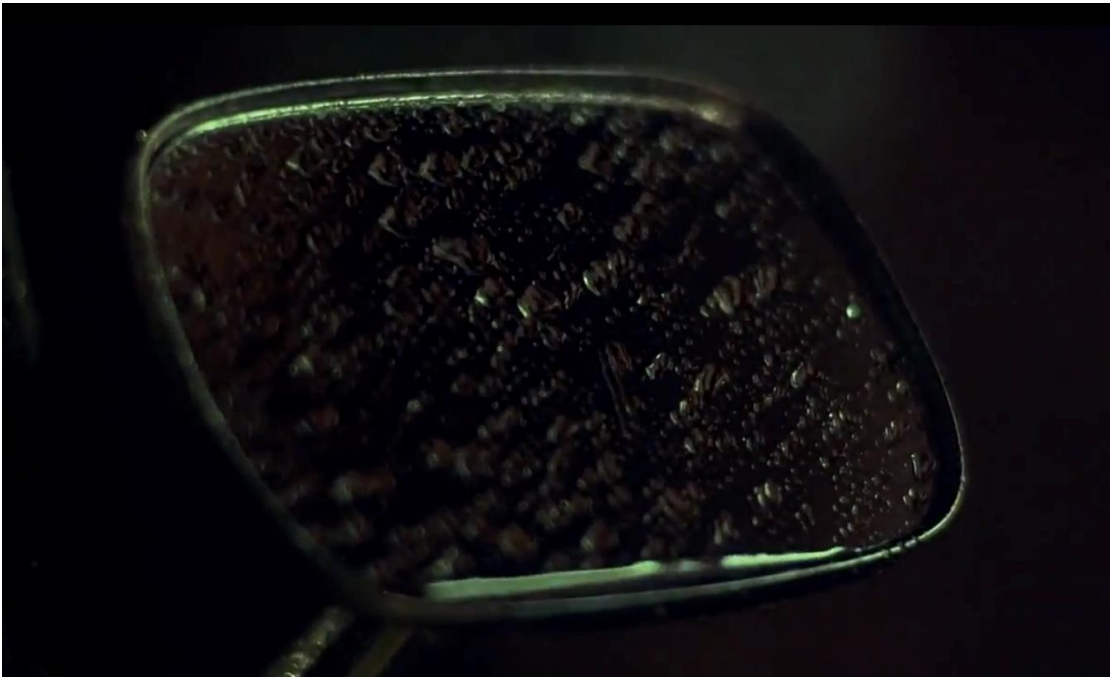

Figure 2.4 (Shot D): *Taxi Driver* (1976). A close-up of the taxi's wing mirror.

Figure 2.5 (Shot E): *Taxi Driver* (1976). **New York's Times Square seen from Bickle's rear-view mirror.**

Figure 2.6 (Shot F): *Taxi Driver* (1976). **The street during Bickle's voice-over.**

Shot A (shown in figure 2.1), which frames the front of Bickle's taxi as it passes a street, lasts for approximately 11.13 seconds, and features a similar array of places as in the passage cited from 'Elsewhere', such as arcades, bars, and pornography shops. Shot B (shown in figure 2.2), from the perspective of the back of the taxi, lasts for 1.44 seconds. Shot C (shown in figure 2.3), a close-up of the taxi's bonnet, lasts for 3.03 seconds, and shot D (shown in figure 2.4), a close up of the taxi's wing mirror, lasts for 3.33 seconds. Shots E and

F (shown in figures 2.5 and 2.6) reveal more of the city as if seen from Bickle's perspective. Shot E (figure 2.5), a shot of New York's Times Square, complete with its neon signs advertising products, hotels and bars, lasts for approximately 2.26 seconds, and shot F (figure 2.6), another pan of a street, which is accompanied by Bickle's speech that lists "all the animals [who] come out at night: whores, skunk pussies, buggers, queens, fairies, dopers, junkies, sick, venal", lasts for 12.35 seconds. Like the 'shots' in 'Elsewhere', as well as setting a familiar *film noir* urban scene, these shots vary in duration to help create an anxious atmosphere in keeping with the protagonist's state of mind. This imbues the environment with the possibility of violence, further stimulated by Bickle's anxious-yet-pessimistic voice-over commenting on how he wishes that "someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets". Aside from the literary correlatives between the length of these shots from *Taxi Driver* and the images listed in the passage above from 'Elsewhere', Bickle and the speaker in 'Elsewhere' share a nihilistic desire to lose themselves, without really knowing why, in an undesirable urban terrain. The speaker in 'Elsewhere' asks 'What is it, then, / that draws me down to the outskirts, that pushes me on / through alleys and backstreets'.[223] The speaker never answers this question, but instead names the places in the passage quoted above like a litany, further losing himself, as well as his identity, as he sinks further into the urban labyrinth.

One of the core themes in 'Elsewhere' is a loss of identity. The imaginative flashbacks throughout provide a surreal looking glass on the past that works to question or praise the speaker's motive. Moral confusion emerges, as the speaker finds only conflict between the encounters: none seem to move him towards any resolution. According to Oliver and Trigo, a *film noir* character's identity is often built in reaction to threats such as 'ambiguous borders … [,] feminine power in men, incomprehensible language in foreigners … [,] racial mixing and maternal sexuality,' and is formed as a defensive mechanism against such threats.[224] In 'Elsewhere', the speaker's identity is defined by his pessimistic attitude towards his present situation, which often recalls events from the past, and is involved in the crossing of ambiguous borders. In this sense, his identity crisis may be described as the result of a border crossing into the reconstructed past. Whereas in *Quiver*, Fay's border crossing, her finding of the dead body in 'The Cemetery', is a cause of anxiety, the crossing of borders in 'Elsewhere' creates pessimistic detachment. The speaker's ongoing separation from his own situation implies that he has reached a point past caring, or that he is suffering from some form of amnesia and simply doesn't remember, like Leonard Shelby in the *neo-noir Memento*, since

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[223] Ibid., p. 85.
[224] Oliver and Trigo, p. 211.

each encounter with the past seems only half-remembered, as if it might be a dream. The only certainty offered as to the speaker's identity is that he has left a once comfortable life, and that, in finding no answers on his voyage into the night, he finds his hand falling 'just short of the handle' to his front door at the poem's end, and chooses to go on searching for a meaning and identity, 'whatever the truth of it is',[225] that might not even exist. In this sense, his identity loses meaning as a result of his failed attempts to re-cross the border at the poem's end back into his home, and rejoin his previous life.

Each encounter, or flashback, serves to further tangle the labyrinth in which the speaker is seemingly by choice confined, and it is unclear whether he is masochistically immersing himself in this process, or whether he is trying to escape it. The action of trying to escape one's identity echoes Bailey's attempt to escape his criminal past in *Out of the Past* in order to protect his new flame, except in 'Elsewhere' the anti-hero has lost his motive. The speaker's attempts to escape may also suggest that he has something to hide, like Peter Cable in the anxious *neo-noir* thriller *Klute*, who is found to lead a 'Jekyll and Hyde existence' when it is discovered that he is a murderer of prostitutes. The speaker in 'Elsewhere' also leads a double life. On one hand he is still sitting in his kitchen drinking, and on the other he is wandering the streets of his imagination, meeting the many versions of himself: a barfly, a dog, a kitschy middle-class couple, a 'sad old sack' living on a beach, and 'The Fool' 'dancing a little dance of grief'.[226]

In contrast to *Scarlet Street*, where the viewer is shown the events that lead to Cross's state of pessimism at the end of the film, it is the events previous to the start of 'Elsewhere', re-imagined throughout the poem – for example, the middle-class couple, the mannequins, the woman on the beach – that have already helped to contribute to his loss of identity, and thus his lack of motive. 'Elsewhere' is a narrative in reaction to a life already lived. As in *Angel Heart*, the speaker seems unaware of his past, and each piece of the puzzle gradually reveals something of the past to the protagonist, the viewer and reader. In *Angel Heart* it is Harry Angel's crushing realization that he, in fact, is Johnny Favorite, the man he has been looking for. In 'Elsewhere', as I have discussed, it is the realization that each clue, each event in the imaginative space of the poem, only confirms a life with which the speaker once indentified, yet a life that the speaker neither recognizes nor ever claims as his own. At the poem's end, having almost been moved by 'a sudden wash / of music, *lachrimae*, heartache, the

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[225] Harsent, p. 95.
[226] Ibid., p. 80–86.

unstoppable bloodrush / that ought to draw [him] in', the speaker chooses to set out on the road again with 'no thought beyond the next step'.[227]

In 'Elsewhere', the space the speaker inhabits is a permanent prison, a perpetual elsewhere within which he appears willingly trapped. The title 'Elsewhere' refers to this loop of mental incarceration. Harsent describes it as 'a location where problems soon surrender / to geography, and history corrupts'.[228] This conceptual prison is at one point revealed to the speaker by one of the mannequins who come to life in an encounter mid-way through the poem:

> Are you proud of yourself, I wonder,
>
> having *just dropped everything,* having *turned*
> *your back,* having, *changed your life,* to be found
> facing the way you're facing and thinking the way
> you're thinking … [229]

This implies that the speaker's decision to leave his wife and descend into the underworld of his imagination has left him in exactly the same place he was in before, thus confirming an inevitable sense of doom. A comparable sense of entrapment and doom characterises *films noir* such as *D.O.A.* and *Double Indemnity* which both feature protagonists who are aware of their fates in advance. The speaker in 'Elsewhere' is likewise aware of his fate, and regards his situation with pessimism, content to follow a spindly dog through the history of his relationship. It is, as we have seen, a history he does not recognize, which is perhaps one reason for his lack of an emotional response to the various stimuli – be they verbal, material or sensual – and one reason for the continuous tonal pessimism found in these encounters.[230] In one section a barfly offers his own nugget of grim reflection: 'But more than anything, I envy this: the day you woke / to the knowledge that true sacrifice is gain / and junked the lot'. A woman in the same bar wants to know about 'the death / of the old without sight of the new' and praises him for his decision, as if she is a manifested creation of his subconscious, designed to work as a coping mechanism, claiming 'There's a dearth of men' like the speaker.[231] When the group of women appear as 'shopfront mannequins' – who, on one level, represent murdered women, figments of the speaker's desire, and past sexual conquests – one

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[227] Ibid., p. 95.
[228] Ibid., p. 76.
[229] Ibid., p. 77. Italics in original.
[230] As discussed in the previous chapter, tonal pessimism is indicative of the work of Chandler and Hammett, and is described, by Porfirio, as a 'salty clipped, no-nonsense tone' of speech. Characters such as Chandler's Marlowe or Hammett's Spade often possess a seen-it-all knowledge, which makes them appear both wise and detached.
[231] Ibid., p. 70–71.

of them, clearly invoking the image of his wife, claims 'You'll remember me' 'by a certain velvet gown / and tear-drop earrings to match a crystal-and-jet / choker'.[232] The fact that these women appear as mannequins further emphasizes his detachment from the real world, and reduces the speaker's wife to a commodity. The gown, earrings and choker are recurring items associated with the wife, and appear twice more before the poem's close, firstly in the room of a spaewife, and secondly in the real wife's bedroom. The wife is reduced to everything, as her spectre haunts him throughout the poem, as well as nothing, since she appears as a dummy and as a series of smells and objects. These imaginative flashbacks are always engaged through an external stimulus, be it a prop invested with emotional meaning, or as something more sensual, as something you catch a 'whiff of' that 'takes you back': 'cheap pomade', or 'a peal / of bells', or a radio tuned 'to something sweet and low'. [233] This implies that the imaginative flashbacks from which the speaker suffers throughout are actual recollections, albeit remembered dreamily and, perhaps, drunkenly, tinged with a hopeless nostalgia given their association with concrete and sensuous detail towards the relationship the speaker is losing, leaving or has already lost: ''Why is it' she asks, 'that memory never adapts / or softens or finds peace in forgiveness?''[234]

The many encounters reaffirm and trap the speaker in this loss, and he is neither reluctant to experience these encounters nor inclined to resist them. He simply accepts them as though by some masochistic logic they are his reward, or comeuppance, for leaving his wife. The tone of pessimism both self-harms and protects. The 'sad old sack' on the beach explains how he too once had 'money, the quiet life … the morning kiss' that was ruined by a lie, which preceded 'the long game that plays, always to lapse and loss.'[235] And again the film in the cinema which follows a man leaving after a night of passion is 'shaded by regret', 'through a lattice of hard / shadows' before 'he's lost to us'.[236] The speaker is powerless to stop the flood of memories arriving during each of these encounters, but remains resolutely pessimistic throughout by revealing no emotion. Each encounter operates as a justification for his actions. The speaker, fully aware of his fate like Bigelow and Neff, is undertaking this journey not to find the lost woman, but to leave the lost woman all over again, and linger obsessively in his own existential pessimism, as if this down-and-out confessional existence is his final judgment.

Even the poem's form serves as pathetic fallacy to this conclusion. In structure, the poem is obsessive. It features a remarkably sustained series of 107 alternately rhyming septets

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[232] Ibid., p. 75–76.
[233] Ibid., p. 73–76.
[234] Ibid., p. 77.
[235] Ibid., p. 81.
[236] Ibid., p. 87.

that mimic the obsessive nature of the speaker, and egg him on to continue his nostalgic binge, to linger in the leaving again. In *Laura* it is obsession that drives the plot too. Waldo Lyedecker's obsession with controlling Laura is what drives him to attempt to murder her, thus inciting the plot events of the film. In *Night and the City* it is Fabian's obsession with making money and creating a wrestling venture that drives the plot and leads to his downfall. Likewise, in *Fallen Angel* it is Judd's obsession with Stella and his inability to have her that provides the film with its real ignition point, her murder, and the accusation that Eric Stanton, also obsessed with Stella, murdered her. Without an obsessive formal structure 'Elsewhere' would also lack a driving force. 'Elsewhere's' final line ends where the poem started, with the 'sting of gin', as a further symbol of the speaker's trapped fate, and to indicate how the speaker still remains in a loop that could, theoretically, recur without end, dramatizing a nihilistic meaninglessness that underpins his existence.

Conclusion: Other *Poems Noir*

Poems by John Burnside, Ciaran Carson, Paul Farley, Sean O'Brien, Robin Robertson, Fiona Sampson, Michael Symmons Roberts, George Szirtes and Tamar Yoseloff also touch upon the emotional, cinematic and atmospheric material of *film noir*. John Burnside's short lyric poem 'Signal Stop, Near Horsley', from his first collection *Common Knowledge* (1991), features a girl in a 'dress of sleet and berries' whom the speaker glimpses 'near the crossing', 'gazing at the train', which suggests both an entrapment – the girl is stuck like Harsent's speaker in 'Elsewhere' – and that Burnside's speaker is also trapped in the same pessimistic, observational loop, doing the same thing each day. The poem is furnished with ghostly apparatus that conveys a translucency as if to imply that the speaker is passing into some otherworld – 'Smoke in the woods / like someone walking in a silent film' – that lends it an anxious tone, as if something is being set up.[237] In a later poem 'A Swimming Lesson' (1995) the speaker discovers a girl dead, drowned, who 'swam in the dark and light'.[238] Both poems offer a *noirish* fatalism.

Ciaran Carson's collection *For All We Know* (2008) tells the story of two lovers amidst the Cold War and the Irish Troubles, and of the male speaker's grief over the death of his partner. The collection is arranged into two sections, each with the same number of poems, with the same titles in the same order. The two sections mirror each other, commenting on memory's obsessive but imperfect nature, imbued with a *noirish* fatalistic

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[237] John Burnside, 'Signal Stop, Near Horsley', *Selected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), p. 7.
[238] John Burnside, 'A Swimming Lesson', *Selected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006), p. 21.

pessimism. The final poem of the second section, 'Zugzwang', ends: 'I return to the question of those staggered repeats / as my memories of you recede into the future.'[239] Although not a detective story in the way that *Quiver* is, *For All We Know* does contain a narrative that is told in a fragmented order, strewn with recurring props – an Omega watch, a Mont Blanc pen, perfume – that haunt the speaker. It also shares *Quiver*'s theme of authorship, as the speaker says in 'Zugzwang', the final poem of the first section, 'so I write these words to find out what will become of you, / whether you and I will be together in the future', as if to suggest the future can be changed through writing.[240]

Paul Farley's 'The Cellar' (2012) presents a different take on the *poem noir*. This poem, without narrative or character, presents a metaphysical consideration of the idea of a cellar that presents a descent where 'Below doesn't bear thinking about'. The poem is thematically *noir*, imbued with a *noirish* sense of pessimism: 'the dark and damp stay anchored here', as the poem, which functions like a camera, tilts further downwards into the dark history of the cellar where 'colour peters out and stone / begins.'[241] In Sean O'Brien's 'Acheron, Phlegethon, Styx' (2001), however, it is the underworld, and specifically the rivers of the underworld, that are leaking through into reality. This poem, which is often comic, reverses the descent: the *noirish* underworld seeping through serves to make a pessimistic comment: society has gone to hell, plumbers, used here as a signifier of class, have been pulled under 'for checking the flush'.[242] As Gustafsson explains, *film noir* is obsessed with an impulse to 'scratch off the reassuring surface', to take the lid off the works, and glimpse the 'anxieties and repressions' that leak through into the city, and into the lives of its characters. [243] The same is true of O'Brien's poem: the underworld is leaking through into reality and bringing with it a *noirish* anxiety. Other *poems noir* by O'Brien also work this way – such as 'Cities' (2001) and 'On The Toon' (2011) – and seek to take the lid off the works to expose further political and social anxieties.

Although lacking an urban setting, Robin Robertson's 'The Wood of Lost Things' (2010) contains a very *noirish* border crossing, where the speaker discovers 'a life's worth of women in the forest corridor' after walking, like Dante, deep into the woods. The poem is anxious about the past, and as in Harsent's 'Elsewhere', the past seems to enact itself in the forest, which might be an imaginative forest, and ends on a note of hopelessness since the

[239] Ciaran Carson, 'Zugzwang', *For All We Know* (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland: The Gallery Press, 2008), p. 111.
[240] Ibid., p. 59.
[241] Paul Farley, 'The Cellar', *The Dark Film* (Picador: London, 2012), p. 21.
[242] Sean O'Brien, 'Acheron, Phlegethon, Styx', *Downriver* (Picador: London, 2001), p. 3.
[243] Gustafsson, p. 60.

place where he has arrived, where 'the dead unbury themselves', is the speaker's home.[244] Other *poems noir* by Robertson would include 'Nightdriving' (2002), a short lyric *noir* dramatizing the anxieties of a night drive with *noirish* depictions of 'rifled dark', headlights that 'film the road' where 'the skid and slur of sodium / hangs, traced in the eyes'.[245] Fiona Sampson also uses driving at night to conjure a *noirish* atmosphere. In her poem 'Sonnet Three – The Night-Drive', it is the lyrical images that enact a hallucinatory descent into another world. 'The miles slide' and trees that flicker by become 'a dream / that brings you back to yourself / then lets you slip away' before 'the dashboard clock floats up through glass'.[246] Completing the trinity of night drives, Michael Symmons Roberts uses short sentences at the opening of 'Night Drive' (2008) to operate like establishing shots: 'A metropolis. / The dead hours. Air steams with sleepers.' The poem is filled with anxious images that suggest incarceration and surveillance: 'shop front mannequins' are 'held hostage by fluorescent hum', 'villas' and 'shanties' are 'under the eyes of high-rise cameras'. Lines such as these convey a sense that no escape is possible, that threat is ever-present.[247]

Tamar Yoseloff returns to the detective in her collection *Fetch* (2007). Here, she explores an appropriation of the male-dominated detective material in a similar way to Rees-Jones, where the poet seems to function as a detective. Throughout the collection, sections of the poem 'Fetch' appear sequentially and chart the progress of a version of the speaker, sent by the speaker, to follow a man. Like many *films noir*, the end is hopeless as the fetch, the speaker's doppelganger-meets-visual-representation-of-identity-fracture, falls for the speaker's ex, whom she is tailing, causing the speaker to end it 'on the edge of town / on the darkest night I can imagine' by writing the fetch into the path of a car.[248]

Some poems actively align themselves with *film noir* in their titles. (However, this does not automatically warrant a *poem noir* classification.) George Szirtes' poem 'Noir' (2004) uses terza rima to enact an unspooling, as though the lines of the poem are reels of film moving across a projector. The linking effect of the terza rima replicates camera movement, and helps the poem leak out its foreboding and anxious atmosphere where cars are 'waiting with lights on' and 'Boys stir in sleep / to the sounds of drumming that might be a handgun'. The poem also comments on *film noir*'s narrative complexity: 'The plot is too complex and runs too deep / for neat solutions'. Further, 'Noir' comments on *film noir*'s inherent anxiety over a lack of knowledge and its penchant for descents and labyrinthine tangles in claiming: 'There are secrets you keep / and secrets you don't yet know. There are

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[244] Robin Robertson, 'The Wood of Lost Things', *The Wrecking Light* (London: Picador, 2010), p. 67–69.
[245] Robin Robertson, 'Nightdriving', *Slow Air* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 10.
[246] Fiona Sampson, 'Sonnet Three – The Night-Drive', *Coleshill* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2013), p. 12.
[247] Michael Symmons Roberts, 'Night Drive', *The Half Healed* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2008), p. 34–35.
[248] Tamar Yoseloff, 'Fetch', *Fetch* (Great Wilbraham, Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2007), p. 61.

scars / below scars', inviting the reader to scratch the surface of a world. Although daylight will soon 'wipe the windscreens by the all-night bars', 'Noir' anxiously reminds the reader that 'shadows remain on the lung and the grille / of the sedan', and even goes as far as asking 'Why so anxious?'[249] Although similarly titled to signify an engagement with *film noir*, Luke Kennard's poem 'Film Noir' (2007) works in contrast to Szirtes' poem, in that it clearly parodies *film noir* for comic effect, and as such, under this reading model, cannot be classified as a *poem noir*, as it does not exhibit a sense of *film noir*'s anxiety, obsession or pessimism, like Szirtes' 'Noir', but borrows *noirish* props and material – 'Broken shadows through Venetian blinds', 'the wild applause of rain' – to make an intelligent and satirical statement on *film noir*'s seriousness, and on the seriousness of acting. Kennard's poem is funny and ironic – 'Hey, buddy, want to come check out the darkness / I just excavated?' 'Nobody takes their tears more seriously / Than a man who never cries' – and illustrates that using *film noir*'s typical furniture does not necessarily make a poem a *poem noir*.[250]

Although my focus in this thesis has been on contemporary British and Irish poetry, there are also American poets whose work I do not have space to go into here, who occasionally find themselves in *film noir* territory. Examples would include work by August Kleinzahler, such as 'Vancouver' (2008) and 'Noir' (2008) for their downbeat, rained-on, neon-lit, portraits of American urban life, and Charles Simic's 'Private Eye' (2000) which also functions as a metaphor for writing, with the writer/PI character claiming 'I'm not closing up till he breaks', suggesting that the case in the poem, like work on an actual poem, needs all night to reveal its secrets.[251]

As I have demonstrated, the three *poems noir* that I have explored in depth – *Quiver*, 'Immram', and 'Elsewhere' – although containing many similarities, present three different types of *poem noir*. *Quiver*, whilst opening a space in which to speak about other themes such as the nature of creativity, cloning, and intertextuality, demonstrates a poetic equivalent of the detective story told in a cinematic and *noirish* style, full of anxious character action, and typical *film noir* locations. 'Immram' is obsessive through its use of form and its speaker's actions, and presents a subversive parody of the hard-boiled material, but is underpinned by a *noirish* sense of pessimism highlighted by the cyclical and inconclusive ending that elevates it from a position of imitation. And finally, 'Elsewhere', a thoroughly pessimistic but imaginative *poem noir* that makes full use of *film noir*'s theme of the descent into a nightmarish otherworld, also shares cinematic correlatives, and is obsessive in its use of form.

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[249] George Szirtes, 'Noir', *Reel* (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2004), p. 25.
[250] Luke Kennard, 'Film Noir', *The Harbour Beyond The Movie* (Great Wilbraham: Salt Publishing, 2007), p. 3–5.
[251] Charles Simic, 'Private Eye', *Jackstraws* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 8.

These three poems, along with the wider body of work that I have identified in this conclusion, form a large enough body of evidence to conclude that the *poem noir* exists as an active mode within contemporary British and Irish poetry.

Conclusion: A *Film Noir* Ars Poetica

The majority of the *poems noir* identified in Chapter 2 were either published post-9/11 or after the financial crisis that led to economic downturn in 2007 and 2008.[252] Given the fact that the majority of the publishers of these examples are classified as mainstream publishers of contemporary poetry, it is reasonable to suggest that there is a taste amongst both editors and the public for material that reflects darker themes.[253] James Naremore's concept of the '*noir* mediascape' suggests that *film noir* has become a collection of motifs and scenarios 'that circulate through all the information technologies'.[254] Wheeler Winston Dixon similarly suggests that 'this is the age of *film noir*', claiming that the key thematic concerns of the original cycle of *films noir* – 'hopelessness, failure, deceit and betrayal'[255] – are still concerns to a twenty-first century audience and are stimulated by media as various as Facebook, which offers 'the illusion of community', and reality television shows which promote identity makeovers, such as the US series *Extreme Makeover* (2002–2007). The latter, according to Winston Dixon, provides the participant with a mirage of an 'idealized existence', a fake identity constructed to hide the actual and often depressing reality.[256] As I have shown, this re-invention of one's identity is attempted by many *film noir* protagonists, such as Bailey in *Out of the Past* and Neff in *Double Indemnity*. It is also the quest of the speaker in Harsent's 'Elsewhere', who is unknowingly trying to discover the meaning of his life. Winston Dixon further suggests that even the news in a post-9/11 world, 'dealing in paranoia, fear, and obsessive speculation', has become a construct of *film noir*.[257] The themes of anxiety, obsession and pessimism are very much evident in more recent *neo-noirs* such as *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *Drive* (2011), and are also present in recent television programmes such as *Luther* (2010–2015), *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) and Danish TV thriller *The Killing* (2007–2012). In *A Companion to Film Noir*, Spicer and Hanson also acknowledge two new areas previously untouched by *film noir* scholarship – radio *noir* and graphic novels – validating this broadening of the themes of *film noir* beyond traditional cinematic representations. This further supports Winston Dixon and Naremore's claim that the core outlooks of *film noir* are

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[252] All examples of the *poem noir* that I have given, apart from Paul Muldoon's 'Immram' and John Burnside's 'Signal Stop, Near Horsley' were published between 2001 and 2012.

[253] Of the twelve British and Irish poets I consider here as authors of *poems noir*, three are published by Picador, part of Pan Macmillan, two by Jonathan Cape and one by Chatto & Windus, both part of The Random House group, two by independent giants Faber and Faber, one by the independent publisher, Bloodaxe Books, although still regarded as one of the mainstream publishers of contemporary poetry, and three by smaller independent publishers: Gallery Press, Seren, and Salt Publishing. All, however, are regarded as mainstream publishers of contemporary poetry.

[254] Naremore, p. 255.

[255] Winston Dixon, p. 1.

[256] Ibid., p. 153–155.

[257] Ibid., p. 157–158.

not just restricted to the classic 1941–1958 period, and not even just to film, but border on the ubiquity of *film noir* explored in the introduction to this thesis, and in the work of Porfirio and Conard, who explore *film noir* as a way of viewing the world.

The poems in *The Knowledge* were written in response to this '*noir* mediascape', and in tandem with the research and the writing of this critical thesis.[258] My initial inspiration included the style and narratives of the films themselves. Broadly speaking, the way *film noir*'s expressive lighting and its creation of shadow is used to obscure identities, provides a visual metaphor for a conflicted ethics. To create intrigue, it conjures a powerful poeticism that deals in the withholding of information, whilst suggesting that the truth is available if one only turns on a light, or digs a little deeper. Scenes such as the motel scene in *Scarlet Street*, where Cross attempts suicide whilst his room alternates from light to dark, or the death of Jardine in *The Dark Corner*, where two men fight between light and shadow, or in the sewer chase scene towards the end of *The Third Man*, where the increasing number of men bringing torchlight into the sewer restricts Harry Lime's movement amongst the shadows, highlight powerful examples of *film noir*'s poetic use of lighting. Later *neo-noirs* have provided more narrative-based inspiration. Harry Angel's unknowing investigation of himself in *Angel Heart*, the Dantesque descent of Mills and Somerset in *Se7en* through endless rain into transient, private, and precarious spaces that dramatically affect their personal lives, and the endless quest enacted by Shelby to remember and return to a past that might not have existed in *Memento*, have inspired ways to approach the writing of poems as investigations of the self, that can take place in public, private, and industrial spaces of a *terrain vague*.[259] After lifelong exposure to a wealth of *noirish* material from throughout the '*noir* mediascape', it became clear that this material could provide an emotional and stylistic register through which to filter my own experience.[260]

Following the first definition of *film noir* outlined in my introduction, poems such as 'Dark Heat', 'Hallmark Hotel, Carlisle', 'Seaside *Noir*' and 'Blackspot', attempt to portray the typical *film noir* emotional traits within typically *noirish* scenarios: the possibility of violence in ordinary domestic settings (*Double Indemnity* and 'Dark Heat'), sexual tension in bars (*D.O.A.*, *The Killers* and 'Hallmark Hotel, Carlisle'), locations that claim the lives of newly arrived outsiders (*The Postman Always Rings Twice* and 'Seaside *Noir*'), and anxious fatal night drives (*Kiss Me Deadly* and 'Blackspot'). Others, such as 'The Third Men', 'Discourse on *Noir*', 'The Eleven Percent' and 'A Withdrawal', seek to comment on critical

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[258] Naremore, p. 255.
[259] Gustafsson describes *terrain vague* as 'a marginal space' that is 'within and outside the system'. *Terrain vague* spaces include wastelands, 'piers, docks and marshes' (p. 56).
[260] Naremore, p. 255.

aspects of *film noir*. 'The Third Men', for example, attempts to convey a sense of anxiety over whether *film noir* can be seen as a truer artistic expression than Classical Hollywood films. 'A Withdrawal' pays homage to Auster's suggestion that the writer and detective are similar, and features an imagined conference between the poet and famous literary detectives. Lastly, 'The Eleven Percent' uses a fact discovered during the research to explore a pessimistic attitude towards the condition of living in the past. The majority of the collection draws more on the second definition of *film noir*, as a way in which to view the world, and attempts to exhibit the emotional traits of *film noir* in poems about memory and place in varying ways, outside *film noir*'s typical archetypes.

A primary theme that emerges in *The Knowledge* is an expression of disquiet and pessimism over a sense of displacement. Displacement from home is explored in poems that excavate particular memories to dramatize change ('The Corbets Tey Road Phone Box', 'Dead Fox Blues'), or through imaginative scenarios, or a combination of both ('Returning from the North', 'The Cabin'), to dramatize emotional responses that explore the dislocation from a sense of home. In 'Hansard' I attempt to show my father's employment as a printing apprentice in the 1960s alongside my recollection of these events in the present day, to talk about the inability to write about the truly dead, a process which Peter Barry calls 'double visioning': 'the attainment of a multi-layered chronological perspective which typically superimposes one historical period upon another, so that the viewed entity becomes radically trans-historical.'[261] Michael Donaghy's 'Smith' (1988), 'The Excuse' and 'Black Ice and Rain' (2000) which play with flashbacks in a *noirish* manner ('Black Ice and Rain' features a bookended flashback similar to *films noir Double Indemnity* and *D.O.A.*, whilst containing flashbacks developing out of other flashbacks like in *The Locket*), have further influenced the structure of poems including 'Hansard', 'The Corbets Tey Phone Box' and 'The Race'. Donaghy's poems provided a *noirish* model for writing poems that provide a sense, like many *films noir*, that a separation from the past is impossible.[262]

In other poems a change in social class as a result of education and evolving social circumstances is explored to highlight displacement ('Blood', 'The Knowledge', 'Blackbird in a Rowan Tree', 'The Edge of Campus', 'Old Spitalfields Market'), whilst others seek to explore displacement through a consideration of the way memory works ('Camphor', 'In medias res', 'The Eleven Percent'). Various poems interrogate and look beneath the surface of the kind of public and transient spaces that feature in *films noir* to explore the state of the nation ('To a B Road Lay-By', 'The Underpass', 'The Closed Road', 'Pillbox'). These were

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[261] Peter Barry, *Contemporary British Poetry and the City* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 46.
[262] Michael Donaghy, *Collected Poems* (London: Picador, 2009), p. 15, 75 and 121.

inspired by Derek Mahon's 'A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford' (1975), which uses a single location that exists, seemingly, outside of time, to transport the reader through a pastoral of decay and of political change.[263] Sean O'Brien's 'The Allotment' (1987), which demonstrates a way to employ shifts in time to recreate a particular location in two different periods of time whilst also managing to comment on class, politics and the state of the nation in an unsentimental way, also inspired these poems. [264] Both Mahon's and O'Brien's work have demonstrated ways in which to write about events of the past within the dramatic, present event of the poem.

A final strand of poems take the waking dream style of Harsent's 'Elsewhere' as inspiration to explore *film noir*'s 'preoccupation with fantasies, dream states, schizophrenia, unconscious and repressed desires' ('Baptism by Fire', 'The Fire Door', 'The Speed of Sound', 'Charon, Re-Employed' and 'Addendum').[265] In these poems displacement is explored less literally, and descents more imaginatively. Overall, what I hope unifies the collection and aligns it with *film noir* and the *poem noir* is its combination of *film noir*'s cinematic stylishness, its penchant for moving around in time through the use of flashback to convey anxieties over a fragmented identity, and the manifestation of varying traces of anxiety, obsession and pessimism. As a whole, the collection attempts to enact the *poem noir*'s true *ars poetica*, an excavation of secrets, either to learn about the self or to acquire new understanding, which results in a descent from which there is no return.

In conclusion I would like to suggest that the process of writing poetry in general involves the *poem noir*'s urge to excavate. In his essay 'Feeling into Words' (1974), Seamus Heaney claims that one of the many roles of poetry is a 'revelation of the self to the self'. Although Heaney is not a *noir* writer, I use his words to illustrate that the quest for 'revelations of the self to the self' is apparent in my three examples of the *poem noir*.[266] In *Quiver*, 'Immram', and 'Elsewhere' the speakers are attempting to uncover a revelation that enables them to break 'the skin on the pool'[267] of themselves, and cross over into some other realm of knowledge. In *film noir*, as in the *poem noir*, this urge to find a revelation of the self also occurs. The revelation the protagonist experiences in *film noir* is often fatal, or fatal in the sense that it causes them to reassess their identity. This is also true of the *poem noir*. In 'Elsewhere' the speaker is continuously confronted with revelations that concern his identity

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[263] Derek Mahon, *New Collected Poems* (Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath, Ireland: The Gallery Press, 2011), p. 81.

[264] Sean O'Brien, *Collected Poems* (London: Picador, 2012), p. 64.

[265] Spicer, p. 68.

[266] Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words' in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971–2001* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 14.

[267] Ibid., 19.

from the various characters in the poem, but fails to make any meaning of it, which causes him to continue on the same nostalgic and pessimistic path. 'Immram' shares 'Elsewhere's' failure. The revelation that the speaker encounters is that there is no revelation, and he returns to Foster's Pool Hall. Although *Quiver* slightly differs in that the case is solved, Fay is still driven by the same urge to excavate, to find a revelation, as the *film noir* protagonist and the speaker in 'Immram' and 'Elsewhere'.

What this demonstrates is that *film noir* and poetry are connected by a mutual desire to excavate, to see below the surface, and locate something hidden, whether material or internal. This conclusion is in agreement with Winston Dixon's claim that *film noir* is often engaged in layering worlds, and that 'behind the façade, there always lurks another world',[268] a idea further illustrated by Gustafsson's notion of "the lid" and "the works",[269] and lastly by Auster's idea that the writer and detective are both engaged in a process of making connections, of finding and making sense of revelations. The feeling that there is something to discover holds, for the poet and the *film noir* protagonist, 'both promise and danger'.[270] The crossed borders present anxieties over possible annihilation. The uncoverings of repressed memories or desires take the form of new obsessions. And the discovery of a hard pessimistic truth, that there might be nothing down there, is the risk taken by the *noir* protagonist and the *poem noir*, as well as the poet.

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[268] Winston Dixon, p. 3.
[269] Gustafsson, p. 52.
[270] Winston Dixon, p. 3.

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