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# The Crime of the Sign: Dashiell Hammett's Detective Fiction

CARL D. MALMGREN

Hammett took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley.

—Raymond Chandler 234

In 1941 Howard Haycraft wrote a literary history called *Murder for Pleasure: The Life and Times of the Detective Story*. In it he celebrated what he termed the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, and he singled out certain people as masters of the “classic detective story”—Christie, Sayers, and Bentley, among others. In December 1944, in an essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* called “The Simple Art of Murder,” Raymond Chandler issued a broadside against Haycraft’s primarily British tradition. This narrative form, Chandler claimed, fails to provide, among other things, “lively characters, sharp dialogue, a sense of pace and an acute use of observed detail” (225). The murders in these stories are implausibly motivated, the plots completely artificial, and the characters pathetically two-dimensional, “puppets and cardboard lovers and papier mâché villains and detectives of exquisite and impossible gentility” (232). The authors of this fiction are ignorant of the “facts of life” (228), “too little aware of what goes on in the world” (231).

As the last quotes suggest, Chandler is accusing the writers of Haycraft’s Golden Age of failing to be true to the real world: “if the writers of this fiction wrote about the kind of murders that happen,” he says, “they would also have to write about the authentic flavor of life as it is lived” (231). Chandler goes on to single out Dashiell Hammett as the person who rescued the genre by bringing it back to the real world. Hammett, he says, “tried to write realistic mystery fiction” (233).

John Cawelti, a leading critic of detective fiction, qualifies Chandler’s

claims, insisting that Hammett's novels are not necessarily more realistic. Rather, they "embody a powerful vision of life in the hard-boiled detective formula" (163). Another critic remarks that Hammett "adapted to the genre a new and more exciting set of literary conventions better suited to the time and place" (Porter 130). While I grant that Chandler's arguments are partisan and naive, and that Hammett's "realism" is every bit as conventional as Christie's,<sup>1</sup> I would like to take Chandler at his word and to investigate the "real world" of Hammett's fiction and, by extension, the world of American detective fiction. By looking closely at Hammett's fiction, especially *Red Harvest*, his first novel (1929), I propose to demonstrate that his "powerful vision of life" derives in large part from his subversion of basic frames of intelligibility, including the frame that allows the art of fiction, language itself.

Chandler uses the synecdoche "mean streets" to define Hammett's world, and various critics have characterized those streets in some detail.<sup>2</sup> The world "implied in Hammett's works, and fully articulated in Chandler and MacDonald," says George Grella, "is an urban chaos, devoid of spiritual and moral values, pervaded by viciousness and random savagery" (110). The world of *Red Harvest* is representative. The novel takes place in a western mining town named Personville, which has been owned for 40 years by an industrial capitalist: "Elihu Willson was Personville, and he was almost the whole state" (9). Willson controls congressmen, city officials, and the police, but at the opening of the novel, his control of the town is in jeopardy. In order to break a strike by the mineworkers, he called in thugs connected with the mob. After brutally suppressing the strike, the gangsters refused to leave and took over the town, occupying its offices and businesses. At the time of the Continental Op's arrival, an uneasy peace prevails in a thoroughly corrupt town, as rival gangster factions run different operations. The police are bought off casually; they even supply getaway cars for criminals. At one point in the narrative, criminals are let out of jail in order to commit a midday bank robbery; they later use their incarceration as an unimpeachable alibi. In short, the world of the novel is thoroughly dishonest. As one critic notes, "In *Red Harvest* we never meet an honest businessman or an honest policeman, and the only lawyer is a blackmailer" (Bentley 67).

When the Op first strolls about the city, he says "most of its builders had gone in for gaudiness" (3-4). The Op chooses an appropriate noun to describe the world of detective fiction, a world where a cheap and thin veneer of glamour conceals a shabby or seedy reality, where "a gleaming and deceptive facade" hides "empty modernity, corruption, and death" (Cawelti 141). In order to strip away this facade, we need to look back at Chandler's description of realism in detective fiction:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the fingerman for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising. (236)

In the “real world” of Hammett’s fiction, gangsters wield political power, people are not what they pretend to be, justice is not served, and law and order are polite fictions. “It is not a very fragrant world,” Chandler notes in an understatement, “but it is the world you live in” (236).

As Chandler’s description makes clear, one of most salient characteristics of this world is the chasm between appearance and reality, a chasm exacerbated by wholesale role-playing and pretense. In a rare moment of honesty, Brigid O’Shaughnassey tells Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, “I’m not at all the sort of person I pretend to be” (55). For once she is telling the truth, but using it to serve a lie. The point is that her line could be spoken by most of Hammett’s characters. In *Red Harvest*, for example, Chief of Police Noonan adopts a bluff and hearty role with the Op; he’s always glad to see the Op (92) and continually expresses concern about his welfare (62) even while he is engineering two attempts to assassinate him. The Op himself carries a walletful of false IDs. Trying to pick up information after arriving in Personville, the Op runs into union boss Bill Quint and plays the garrulous stranger:

I dug out my card case and ran through the collection of credentials I had picked up here and there by one means or another. The red card was the one I wanted. It identified me as Henry F. Neill, A. B. seaman, member in good standing of the Industrial Workers of the World. There wasn’t a word of truth in it. (7)

The Op, blatantly masquerading as A(ble) B(odied) seaman, is indeed the ABC man, able to construct an identity made of letters in a moment. The Op argues that role-playing is required in his profession, that it enables him to get the job done. But the impersonations of detective fiction are not only ubiquitous and overdone; they can also be entirely gratuitous. The first sentence of the Hammett short story “They Can Only Hang You Once,” for example, is: “Samuel Spade said, ‘My name is Ronald Ames.’” This entry line is entirely appropriate, since everyone else in the story is acting, but

there is little reason for Spade's misrepresentation, since no one in the house he is calling on knows who he is.

One of the most egregious examples of misleading appearances occurs in "The House in Turk Street." While conducting a routine investigation, the Op encounters a sweet old couple, the Quarres. The Op soon figures out that this couple knows nothing about his case, but he lingers in the homey atmosphere. It turns out, of course, that the couple are ringleaders of a criminal gang (not in any way connected to the Op's investigation), and the next thing the Op feels is a gun pressed against his neck. The woman's last appearance in the story, just before she catches a hailstorm of bullets, highlights the gap between appearance and reality:

I looked at the old woman again, and found little of the friendly fragile one who had poured tea and chatted about the neighbors. This was a witch if there ever was one—a witch of the blackest, most malignant sort. Her faded eyes were sharp with ferocity, her withered lips were taut in a wolfish snarl, and her thin body fairly quivered with hate. (106)

The same kind of metamorphosis occurs in the first part of *The Dain Curse*, when Alice Dain Leggatt is transformed, in an instant, from "Betty Crocker" to "Ma Barker." With radical transformations such as these, Hammett begins to call into question the idea that most things are what they seem to be. In Hammett that is just not the case, and naively succumbing to such commonsensical ideas can be downright dangerous.

In fact, the Op inhabits a world so histrionic, so unstable, so fluid that role-playing sometimes creates a kind of flickering half-reality. False appearances manufacture unreal realities. A case in point is the notorious seduction scene in "The Girl with the Silver Eyes," in which the eponymous character tries to persuade the Op not to take her to jail:

"Little fat detective whose name I don't know"—her voice had a tired huskiness in it, and a tired mockery—"you think that I am playing a part, don't you? You think that I am playing for liberty. Perhaps I am."

She continues in this vein, reciting the story of her lurid sexual past, teasing the Op, all the while undermining his firm purchase on the situation: "But because you do none of these things, because you are a wooden block of a man," she wheedles, "I find myself wanting you. Would I tell you this, little fat detective, if I were playing a game?" (*Continental Op* 148–50). That final question, balanced between mockery and self-conscious surrender, acts out the ontological precariousness of the Op's world. When she falls into his arms at the end of the siren song, no one—Op, girl, reader—can be sure if

she is acting or not. The Op is forced to impose a kind of certainty on the situation by insisting that everything she has told him is a lie and by trying, almost hysterically, to punch holes in her story.

The same kind of ontological confusion occurs again and again between Brigid O'Shaughnassey and Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. Early on she makes the following "confession" to Sam Spade during a harsh grilling: "Oh, I'm so tired," she blurts out, "so tired of it all, of myself, of lying, and thinking up lies, and of not knowing what is a lie and what is the truth" (89). There is just no way to tell if this too is part of her act, her ongoing seduction of Spade, but it works, because she reaches out to touch Spade and they fall into bed together. Analyzing the final encounter between Spade and O'Shaughnassey, Robert Shulman notes, "He acts as if he cares for her; she acts as if she cares for him. To an extent both are acting, telling stories to each other, but to an extent they may also be in love" (409). In a world of nonstop role-playing, it is often impossible to distinguish between acting and being. This confusion of appearance and reality opens up in Hammett's world a zone of cognitive indeterminacy.

Throughout Hammett's fiction runs the fear that nothing can be taken at face value, nothing is what it appears to be—a fear that culminates in a suspicion not only of individual people but also of the social order itself. In *Red Harvest*, Hammett gives full play to this suspicion. The mean streets of Personville are the stage for a massive fiction, where gangsters masquerade as businessmen, capitalists contract with criminals, and no one can tell the difference between them. The arrival of the Op can be seen as the addition of another player, someone ready to ad-lib his own script.

#### CHANDLER'S KNIGHT AND HAMMETT'S OPERATIVE

But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything.

—Raymond Chandler 237

As noted above, Chandler praised Hammett for getting it right, for bringing detective fiction back to the "real world." But Chandler and other detective writers who followed Hammett were not entirely comfortable with Hammett's "dark, unstable world" (Shulman 405), a world in which all values seem undermined, a world apparently without center or anchor. Chandler himself found a way to counterbalance the situation, to reground the world of detective fiction: in his fiction, the detective is heroized, converted into a latter-day knight (Marlowe = Mallory), a locus of value. Chandler's

knight is “a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world” (Chandler 237). Chandler’s detective serves as lawmaker, supplying his anarchic world with a valid code of behavior, creating a kind of “absolute value” (Knight 287). Detective fiction after Chandler follows his lead, articulates an ethos of the individual, the private “I,” and reinforces a popular American view, namely that justice finally depends more on the individual than on society.

At first look Hammett’s detective seems to fit in with this scheme. In all the stories featuring him, he remains nameless, simply “the Continental Operative,” an agent wholly identified with his agency: “When I say *me*,” he tells Elihu Willson, “I mean the Continental” (41). The Operative is, his “name” tells us, simply his function, a worker, with “no commitment, personal or social, beyond the accomplishment of his job” (Willett 11). A basic part of that function is to adhere to his agency’s code, which stipulates, for one thing, that agents cannot profit from their cases. Near the beginning of *Red Harvest*, Willson tries to buy the Op off; the Op rebuffs him, citing the Continental’s rules against taking bonuses or rewards (59). In another story, the detective articulates his basic credo to a client:

Now I’m a detective because I happen to like the work. . . . And liking work makes you want to do it as well as you can. Otherwise there’d be no sense to it. That’s the fix I am in. I don’t know anything else, don’t enjoy anything else, don’t want to know or enjoy anything else. You can’t weigh that against any sum of money.

(*Big Knockover* 50–51)

Since the Op remains completely silent about his private life, he apparently has no life outside his work. The nearest thing to a personal relationship for the Op involves the father figure he serves, the Old Man, the head of the agency, whose “fifty years of sleuthing had left him without any feelings at all on any subject” (*Big Knockover* 99). The Operative is thus detached, principled, dedicated—in short, the perfect professional.

Only not in “Poisonville.” Near the end of the novel, the Op makes a rambling confession to Dinah Brand: “Poisonville is right. It’s poisoned me” (145). Something does happen to the usually unflappable Op in the town; he does become infected, caught up in its schemes and practices. In Personville, violence is the basic means to selfish ends, and its inhabitants play out the Hobbesian war of all against all (Marcus 19). The Op manipulates and exacerbates this state of affairs, time and again “just stirring things up” (79, 178). In so doing, he becomes an active, involved, interested participant in the “red harvest” and thereby relinquishes his claim as locus of

value.<sup>3</sup> “Cleaning up the town” becomes for him a euphemism for systematically eliminating its various players. The Op “declares war on Poisonville” (62), and his intervention results in a full-scale shooting war that ends only when all the major players, except Willson and the Op, are eliminated.

Since the Op is solely concerned with “cleaning up the town,” he “is quickly drawn into the expanding circle of violence in Personville and eventually becomes himself an agent of this violence” (Gregory 37). But this is not the full measure of the extent to which Personville has infected the Op. He does not simply participate in the wholesale slaughter; he masterminds it. He sets up the relatively innocent prize-fighter Ike Bush and then makes no comment at all when Ike gets a knife in the neck. Working with Sheriff Noonan, he fingers Whisper Thaler for Noonan’s brother’s murder even though he knows Whisper is innocent, and even though Noonan has double-crossed him and tried to murder him twice. Supposedly acting as peacemaker at the council of war, the Op goads the participants into a subsequent orgy of bloodletting. Several hours later, when he wakes up with his hand on an icpick sticking in the heart of the woman he is supposedly emotionally involved with, the Op methodically cleans up all traces of himself and walks out of the door.

Inevitably the question becomes how to account for the Op’s active role in the bloodletting that he catalyzes in Personville. He himself tries to point the finger elsewhere, suggesting in one place that Dinah Brand is responsible; she has been “stirring up murderous notions” in her boyfriends, including apparently the Op (147). In general, though, he lays it off on the gap between theory and practice: “It’s right enough for the Agency to have rules and regulations,” he tells his coworker Mickey Linehan, “but when you’re out on a job you’ve got to do it the best way you can” (109). Where the job is concerned, the end, no matter how suspect, justifies the means, no matter how bloody.

A more compelling explanation of the Op’s participation in the red harvest has been offered by Sinda Gregory, who holds the “system” responsible. By insisting on the “moral neutrality” that produces efficiency and gets the job done, the Continental Detective Agency inevitably dehumanizes its agents, turns them into mere operatives:

Although the Op seems most disturbed by his failure to live up to his code, clearly what Hammett finds more dangerous is the code itself, which allows men to subordinate moral responsibility to an allegiance to an abstract, self-devised system. . . . The Op depends on the strictness of his code to rationalize his actions and emotionless responses to situations; by obeying rules and regulations, he is freed



from moral responsibilities and ethical choices that inevitably arise with any complex dilemma. (54)

Gregory's strong reading thus indicts the agency itself, and by extension the system that produced the agency, for "its refusal to consider human morality or man's responsibility to others" (55). Such a reading, however, tends to exculpate the Op, who becomes a cog in the works, simply carrying out his assignment. And as Christopher Bentley points out, it also misreads the true nature of the Op's professionalism and whitewashes his relation to the agency: The Op's "loyalty to his employers and to his work has no moral dimension, and is merely pride in a job that gives meaning to his life, providing acceptable outlets for his violence and need for power" (56). For the Op, a job is just that.

Gregory's reading does not finally explain the excessiveness of the Op's behavior, the blood lust that consumes him. The Op himself suggests that there is a more personal motive here—namely, revenge. He has been forced to declare war to get back at the "fat chief of police" who "tried to assassinate" him, not once but twice (60, see also 62–63). But as Robert Edenbaum notes, "the Op's own explanation of his motives . . . is not particularly convincing" (90). For one thing, this supposedly personal motive leads to highly impersonal behaviors. If the Op is simply trying to get even, then he goes about it in a coldly calculated, indirect way, much of the time conspiring with the chief of police, the very man he wants revenge on. At the same time he implicates relatively innocent bystanders such as Ike Bush. And he continues his war even after the chief's death.

In general, these explanations fail to satisfy. As Bentley concludes, "the Op's motives remain fundamentally unclear" (62). Indeed, most of the Op's behavior is ultimately unfathomable. There are no motives, public or private, social or antisocial, to explain what happens to him. Nor should this surprise readers. Gregory is right to argue that with the Op, Hammett has given us "a character whose motives, actions, and values are as complex and ambiguous as the world in which he operates" (48). That world is mean and unpredictable, and there is no satisfactory explanation for its "ethical unintelligibility" (Marcus 14). The same kind of unintelligibility characterizes the Op's entire stay in "Poisonville." We don't know how to react to what he's doing while he's doing it, or what he has "accomplished" when he's done, when control of the town reverts to Willson because the Op has eliminated all of Willson's rivals. The Op comes to town to perform an operation, to rid the body social of its disease. Trying to get something done, he works by expedience; the Operative becomes the operator. Later he is infected by a kind of blood lust, becoming "blood simple" (146). The Op-

erative becomes the operated, a bloodthirsty machine. In Hammett's fallen world, we all fall down. But as the slide in signifiers above suggests—from operative to operator to operated—that lapsarian state affects language as well.

### HAMMETT'S MEAN-INGLESS STREETS

The realist in murder writes of a world . . . where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising.

—Raymond Chandler 236

Hammett makes it clear in *Red Harvest* that the acts of social rupture he is recording have begun to affect the sign, creating a rift between signifier and signified. At one point in the narrative Dinah Brand urges the Op not to mention killing, because she is afraid of the word. The Op chides her for the childishness that makes her confuse words with deeds: "You think if nothing's said about it, maybe none of the God only knows how many people in town who might want to will kill you. That's silly" (148). Unlike Dinah Brand, most of the other people in the Op's world labor under no such misconception. They are very much aware that Personville's lawlessness infects language itself, with the result that most speech acts are highly suspect.

They are aware, for example, that there is no necessary correspondence between words and deeds. The most typical action in *Red Harvest* is the double-cross, to say one thing and do something else. Sheriff Noonan spends much of the novel double-crossing Whisper Thaler. Dinah Brand systematically double-crosses most of her admirers. In this world basic words no longer mean what they used to. Promises are made and routinely broken; truces are called only to be violated. Waving the white flag of surrender, Pete the Finn emerges from his wrecked headquarters, hands on head. The sender has faith in his sign; the receiver ignores it. Pete the Finn is greeted by an insult, four bullets in the face and body, and laughter from an onlooker (182). These and other crimes go unsolved or unpunished, in large part because all the perpetrators have alibis, which they invent casually and trade freely. Whisper Thaler has a group of hoods who regularly provide him with an alibi. Reno Starkey gives the Op an alibi for a crime that he himself has committed, the murder of Dinah Brand.

In Personville everyone has a story and seems anxious to share it with the Op. Unfortunately for the Op, most of these stories are misrepresentations or even complete fabrications. At one point the Op abruptly breaks

off an interview because he knows his informant would only lie to him (28). After boozily rehearsing the history of her relation with Donald Willson, Dinah Brand challenges the Op to figure out "which part of the story I told you is true" (37). The Op himself is confident that "I looked most honest when I was lying" (156). In passages of dialogue, he sometimes replaces the tag "I said" with "I lied," as if to show that while he carries on his masquerade in Personville he is at least playing square with the readers.

As the above quotes suggest, the Op frequently makes references to the acts of storytelling and conversation, to saying and meaning. *Red Harvest* is a talky novel, composed in great part of dialogue, much of which is metalinguistic; it talks about talk itself. "You talked too much, son," the Op says, when he fingers the bank clerk Albury for the murder of Donald Willson: "That's a way you amateur criminals have. You've always got to overdo the frank and open business" (55). When ex-cop McSwain offers to do "things" to move the operation along, the Op asks bluntly, "You want stool-pigeon for me?" McSwain shoots back, "There's no sense in a man picking out the worst name he can find for everything" (89). It's appropriate that the mayhem in the novel ends with the Op listening to the last of the gangsters, Reno Starkey, "talk himself to death" (198).

In a world of nonstop talkers, the Op himself is a man of few words; his partner sarcastically complains, "You're going to ruin yourself some time telling people too much" (194). The Op also has a keen ear for linguistic mumbo jumbo or rhetorical gas, a talent he uses most frequently with Elihu Willson, the client continually manipulating words to get what he wants. The following exchange between the two is typical:

"You're a great talker," [Willson] said. "I know that. A two-fisted, you-be-damned man with your words. But have you got anything else? Have you got the guts to match your gall? Or is it just the language you've got?"

There was no use in trying to get along with the old boy. I scowled and reminded him:

"Didn't I tell you not to bother me unless you wanted to talk sense for a change?"

"You did, my lad." There was a foolish sort of triumph in his voice. "And I'll talk you your sense. I want a man to clean this pig-sty of a poisonville for me, to smoke out the rats, little and big. It's a man's job. Are you a man?"

"What's the use of getting poetic about it?" I growled. "If you've got a fairly honest piece of work to be done in my line, and you want to pay a decent price, maybe I'll take it on. But a lot of foolishness about smoking rats and pig-pens doesn't mean anything to me."

“All right. I want Personville emptied of its crooks and grafters. Is that plain enough language for you?” (39)

Even at the end of this exchange, Willson is only apparently using “plain language” since he obviously exempts himself from his charge, and he is the biggest crook of all. Later the Op responds in a similar no-nonsense way to the pontifications of the shyster lawyer Charles Proctor Dawn.

But even the Op succumbs to the linguistic evasions that affect discourse in Personville. The Op describes the aftermath of a particularly bloody evening as follows: “I felt so much like a native that even the memory of my very un-nice part in the boiling didn’t keep me from getting twelve solid end-to-end hours of sleep” (108). Here the Op goes “native” and uses euphemistic language of the clumsiest kind—“my very un-nice part”—to gloss over his involvement in the massacre. When he later tells Mickey Linehan that in Personville the end justifies the means, his line of argument is undercut by Linehan’s response, itself an example of the plain talking that the Op supposedly values: “What kind of crimes have you got for us to pull?” (109–10). And the Op’s multiple attempts to excuse his actions in the city finally seem “overcooked.” Regardless of whom or what he is blaming—the woman Dinah Brand; Noonan, the chief of police; the assignment; the “damned burg” (142)—his protestations come across as self-serving, suspect, themselves products of the rhetorical effluence that infects Personville.

At one point Dinah Brand equates language with money, insisting that the latter is the only language she speaks (31). Brand’s throw-away line actually passes over a profound resemblance. Jean-Joseph Goux remarks that money metaphors haunt discussions of language and “betray an awareness, as yet veiled and embryonic, of the correspondence between the mode of economic exchange and the mode of signifying exchange” (96). Both money and words, Goux argues, are abstract “general equivalents” with no necessary connection to the values (economic or semantic) that they substitute for. Under the system of capitalism, money is the privileged medium of exchange, and “commodities are universally evaluated only through the detour of *specie*—that is, through signs, masks, representations” (38). In the world of the 1920s, where the U.S. Treasury is printing more and more greenbacks, each of which is, as a result, more abstracted from the real labor-value it supposedly represents, this kind of *specie*, paper money, would be revealing its specious nature. Brand may prefer money to language, but in Hammett’s world both of them are undergoing an extended period of inflation that undermines their value. It’s all paper money and paper language.<sup>4</sup>

Critics have noted that Hammett’s is a disturbing world in which behav-

ior is unpredictable, motivation obscure, and evaluation suspect. But equally disturbing is the fact that language has succumbed to a process of erosion, that the lack of motivation has begun to infect the words we speak. Words are becoming arbitrary counters whose real value is unknown. Language, like behavior, begins to reveal its arbitrary nature. The basis of Hammett's unsettling power lies in the fact that he records a historical process of uncoupling, the unzipping of the relation between outer signs and inner meanings, between words and deeds—in short, between the signifier and the signified. Hammett's world is in the process of losing the consolation, certitude, or stability provided by grounds. This subversion of foundations lies at the heart of Hammett's detective fiction, informing the cognitive, ethical, and linguistic unintelligibility that characterizes it.

Chandler claims that Hammett's brand of detective fiction provides better models of the world, that it faces up to and records "the seamy side of things" (234). But that unsavory world, we have seen, is one in which there is no stable or secure relation between signifiers and signifieds. Hammett is finally much more skeptical than Chandler about the ability of language to reflect reality, to capture reality in a satisfactory way; and he makes that skepticism clear in *Red Harvest*. The experiences recorded in Hammett's detective fiction inevitably subvert the whole idea of valid models, insofar as a model is itself a sign vehicle presupposing a motivated relation between signifier and signified. The vision of his detective fiction, in other words, undermines the reality claims of its proponents. What Hammett's fiction finally records is not the "real world" but rather the beginning of the fall of language from motivation to nonmotivation, from identity to difference, from presence to absence.

But even in Hammett there is resistance to this lapsarian state. When Dinah Brand asks the Op why he didn't eliminate Whisper Thaler when he had the chance, his reply is curious: "'Sorry,' I said, *meaning it*" (148, emphasis added). That the Op is sorry that he did not cold-bloodedly murder someone reveals much about his state of mind. But, the dialogue tag insists, he is *truly* sorry. In *Red Harvest* readers are immersed in a world in which honesty can never be taken for granted, in which the enunciation goes to some lengths to inform them that something is true, that something is finally "meant." But that enunciation exists, in the form of the novel itself. When the case is over, the Op submits to the agency a doctored report, full of lies: "I spent most of my week in Ogden trying to fix up my reports so they would not read as if I had broken as many Agency rules, state laws and human bones as I had" (198). He may lie to the Old Man; he doesn't lie to the reader. His narrative can be seen as a last-ditch attempt to "come clean"

in the cleaning-up process—not to erase the red stain but to acknowledge his complicity with it.

Narrating his story for the reader, the Op implicitly promises to tell all. In so doing he establishes a convention that detective fiction picks up on, a commitment to the truth of the enunciation. The narrator of detective fiction cannot and does not break faith with the reader because his narration is the last, best, and only ground. This is finally why, for those who come after Hammett, that narration and the voice that renders it become so important; they represent an affirmation of signification, an assertion of mastery and control over a world otherwise unanchored. For Chandler and others, the style (of the enunciation) is indeed the man. Hammett, for his part, is true enough to his vision to call a spade a spade and show just what that means to the ground(s) we tend to take for granted.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Barzun and Taylor say: “There is no warrant for the commonly held belief that the tough detective tale yields a greater truth than the gentler classical form and marks a forward step toward the ‘real novel’” (9). They go on to enumerate (and make fun of) the conventions and motifs of detective fiction (9–11). For an extended discussion of the difference between Hammett’s *detective* fiction and Christie’s *mystery* fiction, see Malmgren.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Cawelti, esp. 139–61, and Grella.

<sup>3</sup> Metress says: “While it is true that Chandler, Spillane, MacDonald, and others influenced by Hammett have each embraced to some extent an ethos of rugged individualism, Hammett’s fiction does not support such a doctrine” (243).

<sup>4</sup> For a skeptical view of language and communication in *The Maltese Falcon*, see Hall.

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