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Sun, sea and sexual deviance: the British noir thriller of the long 1930s

> From London in the thirties we used to roar down to the coast in fast sports cars, or if we were hard up, ten bob would buy a week-end return. The main rendezvous was the Star of Brunswick pub in Hove, outside which Rolls-Royces, Daimlers and MGs were parked far up the street. There was also the New Pier Tavern, long since gone, with its noisy honky-tonk piano, thick atmosphere of tobacco and sprinkling of red-coated, pink-faced guardsmen, and sailors from Portsmouth. [. . .] In 1935 and 1936 the annexe to the Old Ship Hotel was always full. Few chauffeurs used it, but at week-ends the cubicle bedrooms were packed.[1]
>
> – John Montgomery, *Gay News*, 1973

While the noir thriller is typically conceived of as an American genre, it has been suggested that a case might be made for a seminal British noir which, while perhaps neither so coherent nor so prolific as its American cousin, had nonetheless 'its own energies and distinctiveness, providing a vehicle for the exploration of the social and sexual discontents that bubbled under the surface of British life'.[2] Such a case is yet to emerge. A genre characterised, from its accepted roots in 1930s hard-boiled fiction, by its urban locale, the noir thriller presents a city divided as much by knowledge as by wealth, a spatial contrast that augments 'the thriller's central sense of a double world, at once poetic and prosaic, mysterious and mundane'.[3] The city's constituent spaces function as physical manifestations of epistemological and socio-economic inequalities, but also as sites of overlap, facilitating 'promiscuous interactions among the city's diverse strangers' in a permissive environment that finds 'the inscribed boundaries between the races, sexes, and classes dissolved'.[4] Given the fundamental role of the metropolis to the genre, I would suggest that the 'energies and distinctiveness' of a peculiarly British noir might depend upon – and be best understood through – a uniquely British spatial correlative to the depression-era urban wasteland of American noir. A similarly doubled wold, with – as John Montgomery's memories of the queer

haunts of 1930s Brighton suggest – its own unique sites, 'the British seaside resort has been a distinct and distinctive entity'[5] throughout the twentieth century, and an awareness of its narrative function is, I believe, crucial to any account of the social and psycho-sexual tensions that energise two British noir thrillers of the long 1930s – Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* (1938) and Patrick Hamilton's *Hangover Square* (1941).

The term 'noir thriller' is adopted here in order to couple Martin Rubin's characterisation of the thriller as 'a *quantitative* as well as a qualitative concept'[6] with Lee Horsley's account of noir as a distinct set of intensifying narrative strategies. For Rubin, the thriller is an aesthetic of excess, an accumulation of conflicting and contradictory properties which, tellingly, finds its spatial analogue amidst the attractions of the pleasure-beach: 'Just as a roller coaster makes us laugh *and* scream, the thriller often works to double emotions, feelings, sensations: humour *and* suspense, fear *and* excitement, pleasure *and* pain'.[7] It is a parallel exploited to dizzying effect by the sensational ghost-train sequence that frames Fred Hale's murder in John Boulting's film adaptation of *Brighton Rock* (1947). What pervades the thriller is thus a 'sense of being carried away, of surrendering oneself. Control-vulnerability is a central dialectic of the thriller, closely related to sadism-masochism.'[8] Literary noir accentuates and complicates these characteristics through its deployment of narrative strategies that privilege characterisation as a mode of social critique. Yet what follows is not simply an exercise in literary typology: neither *Brighton Rock* nor *Hangover Square* are typical noir thrillers, but I locate both novels within this tradition in order to facilitate an exploration of how they participate not only thematically but *structurally* in what Lara Feigel identifies as a '1930s [. . .] art of excess, situated at the seaside'.[9]

This art exceeded its temporal limits no less than any others, tales of sex and violence at the 1930s British coast emerging well into the 1940s and beyond. Indeed, as has been suggested by Janet Montefiore, a fuller account of 1930s literature might be achieved by including, alongside those texts completed and published between 1930 and 1939, those which 'shift the definition of "thirties writing" from "writing in the thirties" to "writing about the thirties"'[10] by dint of both being – in terms of content – and yet not being – in terms of dissemination – *of* the 1930s. Extending what Marina MacKay terms 'the concept of aboutness'[11] in this way allows us to consider Greene's *Brighton Rock* (set, written and published in the 1930s) alongside Hamilton's *Hangover Square*, which, like Julian Maclaren-Ross's *Of Love and Hunger* (1947), 'dates back to [. . .] pre-war days on the south coast' and thus 'belongs to a recognisable genre of thirties fiction'[12] despite being published in the 1940s. The same is true of the screenplay of *Brighton Rock* and its final realisation in 1947. As Montefiore notes: 'To read the literature of and about

the 1930s in terms of *memory* – as opposed to the more conventional emphasis on *witness* – thus inevitably blurs the neat traditional boundaries of that decade'.[13] The prewar British seaside would loom large in the memories of Greene and Hamilton long beyond these traditional boundaries, Hamilton returning to it for the setting of *The West Pier* (1951), whilst Greene, many years later, would recall of 1930s Brighton: 'No city before the war, not London, Paris or Oxford, had such a hold on my affections'.[14]

He would also complain of the obliviousness of commentators to the realities of coastal life: 'Some critics have referred to a strange violent "seedy" region of the mind [. . .] which they call Greeneland, and I have sometimes wondered whether they go round the world blinkered'.[15] For, while he grudgingly admitted that 'the setting of *Brighton Rock* may in part belong to an imaginary geographic region',[16] the novel's noir world is as much a product of observation as imagination, Greene depicting a resort such as that outlined by historian John Walton, characterised no less by 'alternative versions of seaside experience'[17] than by more selective, picture-postcard versions:

> The [. . .] earthy seediness of the less glamorous levels of the entertainment industry; the violence of gangs and protection rackets in places where a high throughput of visitors seeking services on or beyond the fringes has established lucrative and tempting markets for the providers; the poverty amidst plenty endured by those for whom seaside employment is intermittent, unorganised, patronage-dependent and ill-paid . . .[18]

This double world offered Greene and Hamilton 'a setting where [. . .] the genteel, controlled, symmetrical front of the resort finds itself invaded by the disorder, untidiness and misrule of the back'.[19] In so doing, it provided a spatial realisation of the noir protagonist's fragile psyche, a physical manifestation of 'the violence and savagery lurking beneath a seeming peace'.[20]

It is a striking parallel that critics have been hesitant in drawing. Horsley does note the liminal nature of noir subjectivity, describing characters analogous to Greene's Pinkie Brown and Hamilton's George Harvey Bone as 'men who cross over into a zone in which normal civilised inhibitions no longer apply.'[21] For Horsley, however, this crossing is ostensibly figurative, as her characterisation of the danger-zone as 'the "other side" of a boundary'[22] implies, her punctuation emphasising the metaphorical status of these spatial terms. She makes no attempt to map the mental topography of these peculiarly British protagonists onto the peculiarly British physical topography they inhabit. Conversely, while Feigel identifies the 'madness of the coast'[23] in the 1930s, she never explicitly aligns the possibilities of coastal geography with

those of the individual psyche. Yet these very possibilities derive from 'the consensually liminal nature of the seaside as "place on the margin," where land and sea meet',[24] and those who are figuratively marginalised find themselves literally on the edge. Here, 'the usual constraints on behaviour are suspended, however provisionally, to give a broader acceptability to or at least tolerance of, variety of sexual partners and practices, or unscheduled bodily exposure, or drink-fuelled raucousness, ribaldry or indelicacy, or the consumption of greasy food with the fingers in the public street'.[25]

The seaside resort renders literal the spatial metaphor, putting 'the "civilising process" temporarily in reverse' and invoking 'the spirit of carnival, in the sense of upturning the social order and celebrating the rude, the excessive, the anarchic, the hidden and the gross',[26] potentially as dangerous as it is pleasurable. And yet, this potential for danger has, historically, been limited by self-regulation, Walton arguing that 'people brought their own internal controls and assumptions about proper behaviour with them [. . .] but the seaside provided a changed register of expectations, freer but still bounded by wider notions of respectability and propriety'.[27] *Brighton Rock* and *Hangover Square* chart the failures of such regulation, illustrating the consequences should these 'internal controls' be either untaught or suspended. Their noir protagonists not only occupy or frequent the liminal space of the 1930s seaside, they are also liminal subjects, figures in transition, psychologically and developmentally 'betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life'.[28] This is complicated, I would argue, by the fact that, while the transition from a liminal to a socially stable state conventionally depends upon the subject's renewed adherence to behavioural norms, the solutions offered by Greene and Hamilton are in fact characterised by non-normative sexuality. It has been asserted that, in Greene's thrillers, it is not only the criminal but 'even at times the socially inept or untutored' individual who proves 'inimical to the group's common good',[29] a claim that registers in the ill-fated relationship between protagonist and society a specifically *pedagogic* failure. It is this failure, in the face of the educative possibilities of the permissive seaside setting, that prevents both Greene's and Hamilton's protagonists from achieving social stability: since, as Kaye Mitchell argues, the 'masculine genres' of popular fiction, including the thriller, 'suggest that masculinity is something that has to be learnt'[30] rather than conferred, a failure in education represents a bar to manhood. Greene asserts: 'The Pinkies are the real Peter Pans – doomed to be juvenile for a lifetime'.[31] While he goes on to explain the consequences of such a fate, he leaves its causes for us to infer.

For *the* Pinkie, it is the loss of gang-leader Kite as his mentor that interrupts and arrests his transition from boyhood to manhood. The pair's first meeting, of which we learn only latterly, marks a pivotal stage in the boy's development. Lying alone on his bed at No. 63 soon after his wedding, Pinkie recalls:

> This was the place he had come to after Kite had picked him up – he had been coughing on the Palace Pier in the bitter cold, listening to the violin wailing behind the glass. Kite had given him a cup of hot coffee and brought him here – God knows why – perhaps because he was out and wasn't down, perhaps because a man like Kite needed a little sentiment like a tart who keeps a Pekinese. Kite had opened the door of No. 63 and the first thing he'd seen was Dallow embracing Judy on the stairs and the first thing he had smelt was Frank's iron in the basement.[32]

Separated from his social context – from the heteronormative order of a home in the tellingly named Paradise Place – Pinkie's liminality is symbolised spatially by his position on the pier, a precarious venue 'betwixt and between' land and sea. Occupying its planks 'in the bitter cold', he is peculiarly out of sync with the seasonal cycle of seaside life, reflecting his suspension between states. An enigmatic figure, Kite is conspicuously absent from, but nonetheless central to, the lives of two Greene protagonists, Raven of the earlier *A Gun for Sale* (1936) admitting to the murder for which Pinkie seeks vengeance. Yet it is possible to build a picture of his relationship with Pinkie through Greene's evocation of what Eve Sedgwick terms 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically'.[33] Indeed, Kite's is an identity born of ellipsis, of a single, tantalising 'gap' within Raven's narrative, as he declares: '"No one will hear any more about Kite. But if I was to tell you –" he ran away from the revelation.'[34] This curtailment is replicated in the pauses that sandwich the 'God knows why' of Pinkie's musings, pauses which invite speculation, for what Raven will not 'tell' is everywhere implicit.

The encounter on the pier is itself telling, Greene's vocabulary – Pinkie recalls being 'picked up' by Kite – suggesting that the elder man's 'sentiment' is sexually motivated, 'to pick up' being synonymous with 'to engage the sexual services of, to proposition' in British slang. Indeed, earlier in *Brighton Rock* marked-man Fred Hale seeks a woman to shield him from Pinkie's gang, consoling himself with the thought that 'there must be hundreds waiting to be picked up on a Whitsun holiday' (p.10), while the phrase recurs in *Hangover Square* as Netta Longdon explains the stranger who has unexpectedly crashed George's weekend alone with her in Brighton: 'We just picked him up. We all got blind at lunch-time and just picked him up.'[35] There is no ambiguity here, George realising, as he overhears the pair enter a hotel room together: 'There must have been an understanding between them from the beginning' (p.157). The site of Kite's meeting with Pinkie is equally suggestive. Hamilton would term Brighton's West Pier 'a sex battleship'[36] in his 1951 thriller, declaring it

'intimately and intricately connected with the entire ritual of "getting off"'.[37] An epithet as accurately applied to the Palace Pier – the destination sought by Hale and Ida Arnold, the site of Pinkie's first 'date' with Rose Wilson – within the context of Kite's encounter with Pinkie, it resonates with the queer connotations of cruising. Pinkie's subsequent comparison of the gang-leader to 'a tart' supports this queer reading, not only suggesting a lapse in gender, but denoting deviant sexuality. This combines, on the pair's arrival at No. 63, with the gender role reversal implicit in Judy cheating on her husband as he does the ironing, to frame No. 63 as a heterotopia, a Foucauldian 'counter-site' or 'effectively enacted utopia' at once within and beyond the sites of a given culture, in which they 'are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'.[38] As such, it is a microcosm of 1930s Brighton itself, a town 'on the margins of the orderly sphere of "good governance" which reigned over other parts of the nation'[39] and thus, as Montgomery's recollections demonstrate, permissive of and 'even *conducive* [. . .] to lapses in normative behaviour'.[40]

A 'heterotopia of deviation'[41] in Michel Foucault's terms, No. 63 is occupied by and open only to those willing to privilege the demands of homosociality, to maintain the fluency between the poles of what Sedgwick terms 'the continuum [. . .] extending over the erotic, social, familial, economic and political realms [. . .] of male homosocial and homosexual bonds'.[42] To put it another way, under Kite, the continuum that Sedgwick identifies between 'men loving men' and 'men promoting the interests of men'[43] is less radically disrupted at No. 63 than elsewhere. It is no coincidence that Pinkie is stirred to reminiscence as he lies on his bed – Kite's bed, since 'they had all had tiny rooms but Kite, and he had inherited that' (p.127) – the bedroom serving as the epicentre of a heterotopia within which the erotic and educative functions of mentorship are thus reconciled. Pinkie's capacity for 'sensual rage' (p.53) clearly predates his initiation into Kite's world, but it is an impotent rage, its vehicles but 'nails and splinters' (p.54), until that point. No. 63 allows him the liberty to express his sadistic tendencies, Kite serving as mentor and conduit but also as authoritarian, a guard against the most dangerous ambiguities of this liberty. The sadomasochistic potentialities inherent in this paradoxical relationship are implicit in Pinkie's understanding of sex and violence not only as protocols that must be learned, each inextricable from the other and from the attainment of manhood, but as *pedagogical tools* in and of themselves, a vocabulary of pedagogy persisting throughout the novel to illustrate the rupture of Kite's removal.

Without Kite, No. 63 – and, indeed, Brighton – loses its 'precise and determined function'[44] as educative heterotopia, Rose's entry into the house marking the incursion of heteronormativity: 'Everything had been of a piece: nothing had really changed [. . .] until *she* came and altered everything' (p.238). Faced with consummating the marriage, Pinkie actively *avoids* the

house, with 'the sense of playing truant from his proper work – he should be at school, but he hadn't learned his lesson' (p.194). And, while he experiences a temporary sense of empowerment in the fumbled act itself, envisioning himself as master to Rose's neophyte – reiterating that they have committed a mortal sin, he glances 'at the made bed as if he contemplated a repetition of the act there and then – to thrust the lesson home' (p.232) – he finds himself ultimately suspended in liminal unknowing: 'He had thought he'd learned everything, but he was back now in his state of appalled ignorance' (p.235). Pinkie's reliance upon Kite is demonstrative of what John Kucich terms a central 'paradox of sadomasochism, in which the cruelty of an omnipotent figure [. . .] can be both an expression of domination and a narcissistically reparative gift of safety, love, and attachment',[45] a fact registered in Greene's extension of the scholastic simile to explain Pinkie's turn towards Dallow after Kite's death: 'He felt as a physically weak but cunning schoolboy feels who has attached to himself in an indiscriminating fidelity the strongest boy in the school. "You mug," he said and pinched Dallow's arm. It was almost like affection' (p.61). Yet, as this example and the later post-coital scene with Rose imply, Pinkie's behaviour is also a means by which he might identify with Kite's status. 'Kite had died,' Pinkie reflects, 'but he had prolonged Kite's existence – not touching liquor, biting his nails in the Kite way' (p.238), and this, in the absence of a restraining hand, adds to his menace. Such scenes demonstrate how the 'complex dynamics of identification and vicarious empowerment that sadomasochism makes possible'[46] enact the dialectic of control and vulnerability that Rubin deems typical of the thriller, its tidal rhythms serving as the structuring principle of British seaside noir.

Oscillating between city and shore, *Hangover Square* makes overt this tidal structure, explicitly aligning what George terms 'his "dead" moods' (p.15) – the periods of psychic dislocation during which he is at once at his most dangerous and his most vulnerable – with the excesses permitted by the liminal seaside locale. From the first, George's precarious mental state is reflected in his physical location, the novel opening as he realises 'he was walking along the cliff at Hunstanton, on Christmas afternoon, and the thing had happened again. [. . .] On his left, down below, lay the vast grey sweep of the Wash under the sombre sky of Christmas afternoon: on his right the scrappy villas in the unfinished muddy roads' (pp.16–17). Positioning his protagonist not only at the margin of land and sea but also at 'the turn of the year' (p.19) – and the temporal rupture of what would prove a 'prolonged 1939'[47] at that – Hamilton drives home the precariousness attendant upon George's schizophrenia by taking as objective correlative a liminal site familiar from Greene's noir landscape: 'The little pier, completely deserted, jutted out into the sea, its silhouette shaking against the grey waves, as though it trembled with cold but intended to stay where it was to demonstrate some principle' (p.20). George's

dreamlike state, in which there is 'no sensation, no pleasure or pain' (p.17) – no internal controls analogous to those that regulate Walton's well-adjusted day-trippers – recedes only as he moves inland, crossing a clearly demarcated boundary: 'it had happened again [. . .] as he carried his bag [. . .] along the platform of the little seaside terminus. It had happened at the barrier, as he offered his ticket to be clipped by the man' (p.20).

While George is more lucid in the periods between his 'dead' moods, he is no more socially adept. A figure living a half-life – an 'only half-conscious volition' (p.103) motivating his actions; no more than 'half a mind' (p.244) to do anything – he is the 'inept or untutored' other, his development, despite his thirty-four years, arrested 'betwixt and between' boyhood and manhood, as much as a result of an educative failure as of his pre-existing mental condition. Hamilton, like Greene, adopts the scholastic simile to suggest this rupture, George behaving 'like a little boy saying his lesson' (p.66) in his interactions with Netta, while the stranger with whom she wrecks George's plans in Brighton is figured as 'the school-bully' (p.150). The comparison is developed in a brief but poignant episode in the novel's Eighth Part, in which an outside observer is introduced for a single chapter, with no other purpose than to accentuate George's boy-like qualities. The newcomer, a 'young man of eighteen of the name of John Halliwell' (p.205), is fascinated by Netta's circle and, 'impressed merely by their age and maturity' (p.206), experiences 'much the same sensations, half-hating, half-admiring, as a new boy at a public school might feel on observing the antics of the "bloods"' (p.207). Unexpectedly encountering George alone, he sees a chance to 'establish contact as a whole with this most intriguing senior-form in the school of life' (p.208). He is disappointed. While the pair hit it off, Halliwell is disconcerted by George's 'naive, simple, subdued tone' (p.208), the man appearing to him strangely 'like a child' (p.208): 'He had expected to have talked with someone older, harder, more mature than himself, but young as he was, he had a feeling of having talked to someone younger, less hard, and though more knowledgeable even less mature than himself' (p.211). For George as for Pinkie this developmental arrest results from the sudden withdrawal of homosocial mentorship.

George is freed from the strictures of normative behaviour on his departure from formal education, in what, with hindsight, the shrewd and sensitive Johnnie Littlejohn terms the 'release from meaningless discipline', and 'the prospect of earthly pleasures and an independent existence' (p.97). George is characteristically slow to test his freedom, the realisation that 'life was opening out and wasn't school any more' (p.56) coming to him only latterly, under the supervision of mentor Bob Barton: Bob 'had given him the strength and vision to make the mental leap. [. . .] But all that was gone [. . .] for good, and he would never feel like that again' (p.56). A figure, like Kite, most notable for his physical absence from the narrative, Bob wields a 'curious influence' over

George, Johnnie recollecting: 'Whenever they were together George had been [. . .] more alive, talkative, confident, happy' (p.99). The relationship between the pair, though seemingly more benign than that between Kite and Pinkie, is characterised nonetheless by a dynamics of identification and vicarious empowerment, George having 'sunned himself in the friendship which Bob had generously yet unthinkingly bestowed' (p.99). It is precisely the unthinking generosity of Bob's tutelage that leaves George vulnerable in its wake, Johnnie reflecting, 'Bob had unwittingly done George a very bad service, indeed a permanent damage perhaps, by going to America like that' (p.99). George is left, to all appearances, 'too simple and direct in a hard and complicated world' (p.99) peopled by more mercenary characters than Bob's.

Without Bob, George's need for validation leaves him open to abuses by Netta, 'devoid of amiability and generosity' (p.44). A sadistic femme fatale 'encouraged in her insolence, hardness and tyranny by the power of her beauty and the slavishness in others it inspired' (p.74), Netta makes a 'slave' (p.47) of George where Bob made a student. The risks of exposing so willing a subservience to those of an exploitative nature surface regularly in the petty cruelties of George and Netta's London routine, but they acquire a peculiar intensity in Brighton – Hamilton's 'London-by-the-Sea' (p.141) – since, with 'the structuring elements of everyday life removed or destabilised and the primacy of enjoyment and adventurousness in Brighton, the bases on which judgements could be formed were eroded: people would spend more, more impulsively and take more risk'.[48] The prospect of a weekend with Netta in 'a seaside town with a reputation' (p.139) certainly overrules George's better judgement, his doubts: 'Was she, perhaps, just a common little schemer playing him up just to get some money out of him?' (p.139). Pushing the idea aside, he reflects with an ominousness patent, apparently, only to the reader: 'The point was [. . .] she had promised to stay in Brighton with him alone [. . .] and [. . .] anything might happen' (p.140). The trip is envisioned as a re-enactment through which George might emulate his former mentor, choosing 'to stay at the Little Castle [. . .] because this was where he had stayed with Bob Barton in the Bob Barton days' (p.142). But these are *not* the Bob Barton days, and without him, Brighton is 'no good' (p.245). The anticipated pleasures of a permissive heterotopia turn to dust as George is subjected to the humiliation of entertaining Netta in company with London-crony Peter and 'a nasty-looking piece of work' (p.150) they have picked up in transit. Forced to endure the 'torture' (p.173) of listening as Netta and her 'pick-up' have sex next-door, Hamilton's emasculated protagonist is driven from the hotel to walk the rain-soaked seafront, hit as he leaves by the 'snap in his head' (p.161) that marks the onset of a 'bout of "dead" moods, the worst he had ever had' (p.214).

George's 'exposure' (p.165) at Brighton – to the elements as much as to the 'strain and horror' (p.214) of Netta's unbridled brutality – incapacitates him physically as well as mentally, resulting in influenza. But in doing so, it also offers an alternative to his spiralling sexual obsession. Michael Walker, outlining noir character-types, highlights 'the domestic woman: a wife or girlfriend who is in opposition to the femme fatale, associated with the home and offering the hero love, understanding and nurturing'.[49] Hamilton, I would argue, at once adopts and queers this trope, setting Johnnie in opposition to Netta as a means by which George might progress to a socially stable state. An old friend reunited with George shortly before the Brighton fiasco by a chance encounter in Soho, Johnnie nurses George through his sickness: 'Johnnie was the only one who came to see him: he [. . .] came every night until he was up again' (pp.214–15). Moreover, he not only offers understanding, suggesting George leave his lodgings to escape Netta's hold, he also proposes a viable alternative: 'You'd better come and live with me' (p.217). For Johnnie, the continuum between 'men loving men' and 'men promoting the interests of men' is uninterrupted, his 'desire to set up house' (p.219) with George positioning him as the domestic other of Walker's generic triangle, in which sex alone is dangerous and destructive, while love is potentially reparative – opening George's eyes to 'sources of intimacy' (p.121) beyond Netta, Johnnie's continued presence proves 'a healing thought' (p.122).

Pulled between Netta and Johnnie, George is eventually drawn back into the danger-zone, travelling to Brighton under the misapprehension that Netta and Johnnie are there together. Hamilton demarcates the spatial boundary beyond which he cannot guarantee his protagonist's safety or his agency: 'Approaching Brighton in the darkness the train slowed down, hesitated, seemed to be feeling its way before risking itself in a dangerous area, and then lolloped oilily and methodically forward' (p.246). George's suspicions apparently confirmed, he is again driven onto the seafront in the rain, determined to 'run away, though there was nowhere to run to, and no one to whom he could run' (p.250). Turning up a side street – away from the margin – he encounters Johnnie:

> Johnnie came up to him, a look of concern on his face. 'What's the matter, old boy?' he said. 'Is anything the matter?'
>
> And Johnnie put out his hands, and touched him, held him. 'What's the matter, old boy?' he said.
>
> He knew at once he was going to cry. It was the firm touch of his old friend's hand, the sincere, concerned face, the old voice, calling him 'old boy' in the old way.
>
> 'Oh, Johnnie, *Johnnie!*' he said, and began to cry. 'Johnnie . . .'

Johnnie held him closer, drew him into the wall, hid him, like a mother with a child, from passers-by. 'What's the matter, old boy?' he said. (p.251)

In the novel's only scene of physical intimacy, Brighton's permissive atmosphere finally works to George's advantage, the sight of two men embracing at length in the shadows drawing little attention. Johnnie's 'firm touch' and deepening embrace solidify his role as a source of unwavering, yet unobtrusive, homosocial support, George registering only after several minutes that 'Johnnie still held him' (p.252). Hamilton's comparison of Johnnie to 'a mother with a child' suggests an innate investment, on Johnnie's part, in George's future, implicitly characterising his support as recuperative in the short term, but also developmental in the long: if, as George believes, 'the Johnnies' of the world are 'in one level of life – he in another' (p.249), a queer union with Johnnie beyond Brighton might enable him to pass from one status to the other, achieving a mature masculinity.

In positioning Johnnie as a redemptive figure, Hamilton subverts the ideological charge of Walker's generic triangle. Stability, Hamilton implies, lies not in privileging heteronormativity – union with the domestic woman – over non-normative desire – sexual obsession with the femme fatale – but in recognising that the qualities associated with the domestic woman might be found elsewhere. Like Walker, Frank Krutnik suggests that the noir thriller bolsters heteronormativity, arguing that masculinity in these narratives must be 'consolidated and perpetually protected against various forms of deviance'[50] and yet this is not the sense we derive from *Hangover Square*, in which Johnnie's queer attachment to George – itself deviant by the standards of 1930s Britain – is offered as a protection against a corrupting heterosexual other. In *Brighton Rock* too, heteronormativity is rejected as a means of achieving a secure adult masculinity, Pinkie's marriage figuring as 'a trap' (p.189) which binds him in ignorance, since it binds him both to Rose – a child herself, 'green' (p.53) and thus of no educative value – and to Brighton. In a world after Kite, a world in which to have 'moved on' is to have 'grown up' (p.174), the potential for growth and stability might be glimpsed only beyond the margin, in the homosocial cooperative of Spicer's symbolically described Nottingham retreat, 'the "Blue Anchor" in Union Street. A free house' (p.102).

If the British seaside resort is frequently figured as a 'timeless'[51] space, its clock would appear to have stopped, for many, on or around 1 September 1939. Its physical development, much like that of London's Soho, 'halted and fossilised'[52] by the outbreak of war, the interwar seaside continued to hold sway over the imaginations of a group of writers – among them Greene and Hamilton, but also George Orwell, Julian Maclaren-Ross and others – relegated to the capital's pubs by wartime restrictions on coastal access, their

memories prolonging a 1930s literature of the seaside well into the 1950s. Indeed, the elasticity of 'public memory' itself, increased, as David Trotter has demonstrated, by the 'overwhelming'[53] effect of both new and newly durable media in the interwar years ensured that – through, for example, documentary films such as Marion Grierson's *Beside the Seaside* (1935) and J.B. Holmes's *The Way to the Sea* (1936) – the experiences of a permissive prewar locale were available to anyone wishing to situate their own work within the context of a peculiarly British noir. A double world of promiscuous encounters between strangers and friends, the heterotopic potentialities of the seaside town, even in their very frustration, render the early British noir thriller far more sexually subversive than its American cousin.

Notes

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1   John Montgomery, 'The Turn of the Tide in Brighton', *Gay News*, 6 September 1973, 9.
2   Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir* (Harlow: Pearson, 2002), 175.
3   Martin Rubin, *Thrillers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 22.
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