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Hardboiled Aesthetics:
High Art and Modes of Excess in the American Detective Novel

By

Adeline Dan-Anh Tran

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Comparative Literature

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Dorothy Hale, Chair
Professor Karl Britto
Professor Barbara Spackman
Professor Mark Goble

Summer 2016

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Abstract

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Hardboiled Aesthetics: High Art and Modes of Excess in the American Detective Novel argues that 1940s American detective fiction fetishizes the work of art more perversely and self-consciously than high modernist texts. Since the early twentieth century, the modernist novel has defined its aesthetic project as a retreat from or resistance to mass culture, creating what Andreas Huyssen has called the "Great Divide." Yet one of the central ambiguities of high modernism is its strange fascination with the low. The modernist novel displays an obsession with "the masses" even as it attempts to use this "vulgarity" to elevate its own aesthetic status. If modernism abandons the field of high art production to study "low life," then it is surprising to find that the representation of high aestheticism surfaces with greatest frequency in one of the most "vulgar" forms of mass fiction: the American hardboiled novel. Beginning with the debates surrounding the Aesthetic Movement, between figures like Oscar Wilde and Henry James, *Hardboiled Aesthetics* examines how certain hardboiled writers, such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Vera Caspary, attempt to distance themselves from commercial modes of production by drawing on *fin de siècle* European aestheticism in order to legitimize the artistic merit of the detective novel. I define the "hardboiled aesthetic" of the American detective novel as a constant fluctuation between moments of excess and attempts to contain that excessiveness.

Hardboiled Aesthetics traces how cultural constructions of high aestheticism are mobilized and reconstituted in the American detective novel to produce an aesthetics that is refined yet hardboiled and masculine, elevated yet still faithful to the demands of its mass readers. I study how the signature type of the Aesthetic Movement, the highbrow aesthete, is transported from the decadent milieu of 1890s Europe to the consumerist society of 1940s America. I begin first by comparing the excessive aestheticism of S. S. Van Dine's "Philo Vance" novels to the sparse minimalism in Dashiell Hammett's hardboiled fiction. I argue that Van Dine consciously models his American detective as a European aesthete in order to showcase his own aesthetic knowledge. However, his excessive didacticism goes against his aesthetic goals, producing a narrative that becomes increasingly contrived and formulaic. Considered the innovator of the hardboiled style, Dashiell Hammett approaches the writing of detective fiction from what could be called an anti-aesthetic position. Through his construction of the detective as both anti-aesthete and anti-consumer, Hammett provides a new criterion for evaluating artistic value that replaces the "feminine" excesses of Van Dine's decadent aestheticism with an emphasis on "manly" minimalism. In contrast to Hammett's turn to minimalism as a reaction against commodification, Raymond Chandler attempts to project the novel as a source of aesthetic value through his portrayal of detective Philip Marlowe as a hybrid "hardboiled aesthete"

figure who is both tough yet refined. My second chapter argues that Marlowe's ornate descriptions of art objects and rooms stem from Chandler's fascination with Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*, which is itself a criticism of the "aesthetic craze" of collecting that Oscar Wilde initiated in America at the turn of the century. Although Chandler's room descriptions often impede the plot, I argue that these excessive narrative digressions in fact allow Chandler to experiment with and expand the generic limits of the detective novel.

My third chapter examines how the hardboiled style, so powerfully cultivated in the commodified detective novel, comes to inform the modernist novel's high style. For Ernest Hemingway, the pursuit of formal restraint represents a desire to re-masculinize novelistic aesthetics, a project which James M. Cain also adopts in his hardboiled writing. However, Cain's representation of aestheticism and masculinity produces an opposite aesthetic style – that of velocity and excess – to express the tensions that Hemingway attempts to manage through minimalism. Addressing the fact that the detective novel is a predominantly masculine genre, my final chapter turns to Vera Caspary's efforts in her novel *Laura* to reimagine the masculinist aesthetics of writers like Cain from a distinctly female perspective. Building on Walter Benjamin's theories on public and private spaces, I argue that Laura's individuality cannot be decoded from her personal possessions, thus allowing her to counteract the proprietary (male) desire to own and display her as an object of consumption. Laura affirms her female selfhood in terms of a negative capability, an excess that cannot be fully rendered by stylistic forms of representation.

To Dorothy Hale
for believing in this project.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation could not have been completed without the support and encouragement of my mentors and colleagues. First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor, Dorothy Hale, to whom this dissertation owes a great deal. I began working with Dori during my senior year as an undergraduate at Berkeley, and in the ten years since, Dori has been unfailingly generous with her time and attention. Her confidence in my abilities motivated me to work harder when I didn't think I could, and her enthusiasm for my project refueled my own energy when I thought I had run out. I dedicate my dissertation to Dori for helping me see my project through from "germ" to completion. I am also very grateful for the invaluable insights of my committee members: Karl Britto, whose suggestions made this a much better dissertation than it might otherwise have been; Barbara Spackman, who provided indispensible feedback during each stage of the writing process; and Mark Goble, who pointed me in the right direction whenever I was stuck.

I count myself incredibly fortunate to have friends who made time to read and talk about my work, even (and especially) when I was struggling through my ideas. Jessica Crewe helped me to find my own argument innumerable times; I am always humbled by her willingness and eagerness to listen. Wendy Xin is my favorite plotter, and my life has been made richer by our conversations. Celine Piser has been my partner in teaching and in so many other undertakings. Warm thanks to my friends in Dori's dissertation group: Juliana Chow, whose thoughtfulness touched me in so many ways; Manya Lempert, whose excitement was contagious; and Eaming Wu, whose questions helped me to refine the claims I was making. I would also like to thank Berkeley's SMART Program for providing support for my archival research at the Raymond Chandler Papers at UCLA. In particular, I would like to thank Jacob Gerstel, who not only assisted me in the grueling task of sorting through Chandler's manuscripts and letters at UCLA, but also made our time spent in the archives far more enjoyable. Suzanne Scala spent brunches outlining chapter ideas with me on paper napkins. Callie Maidhof helped balance my work demands with delightful Sunday dinners. My dear friends Ellen Li and Keith Enright have rooted for me every step of the way; their friendship means the world to me.

Finally, I will always be indebted to my parents, without whose love and support I would not be where I am today; to Rick Debus, who is part of the family; and to my sister, Andrina, who never ceases to inspire and amaze me.

INTRODUCTION

> "What does it mean to 'possess culture'? What might it look like to possess culture—cultural capital—in the form of the novel? Alternatively, what would it mean to think of the novel as offering a kind of imaginary social space […] where one could *enter into* culture?"
>
> —Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art*

In Raymond Chandler's 1939 novel *The Big Sleep*, hardboiled detective Philip Marlowe is hired to track down the rare book dealer Arthur Geiger, who is involved in a blackmail scheme. When Marlowe questions Agnes, the clerk at Geiger's bookstore ("*Rare Books and De Luxe Editions*"), he moves effortlessly between his usual tough talk and the polite, lofty speech of a cultivated aesthete:

> I had my horn-rimmed sunglasses on. I put my voice high and let a bird twitter in it. "Would you happen to have a Ben Hur 1860?"
>
> She didn't say: "Huh?" but she wanted to. She smiled bleakly. "A first edition?"
>
> "Third," I said. "The one with the erratum on page 116."
>
> "I'm afraid not—at the moment."
>
> "How about a Chevalier Audubon 1840—the full set, of course?"
>
> "Er—not at the moment," she purred harshly. Her smile was now hanging by its teeth and eyebrows and wondering what it would hit when it dropped.
>
> "You *do* sell books?" I said in my polite falsetto.
>
> She looked me over. No smile now. Eyes medium to hard. Pose very straight and stiff. She waved silver fingernails at the glassed-in shelves. "What do they look like—grapefruit?" she enquired tartly.
>
> "Oh, that sort of thing hardly interests me, you know. Probably has duplicate sets of steel engravings, tuppence colored and a penny plain. The usual vulgarity. No. I'm sorry. No."
>
> "I see." She tried to jack the smile back up on her face. She was as sore as an alderman with the mumps. "Perhaps Mr. Geiger—but he's not in at the moment." Her eyes studied me carefully. She knew as much about rare books as I knew about handling a flea circus. (*BS* 24)[1]

In this scene, we might understand Marlowe's conversation with Agnes either as a sort of coming out of the aesthetic closet or as a kind of drag performance, a moment in which he openly assumes the role of aesthete—a role that seems simultaneously to require a shift in Marlowe's performance of gender, sexuality, and class. The scene is further complicated, of course, by the fact that the success of Marlowe's attempt to discover the truth (that Geiger's bookstore is a front for pornography) is dependent on the falseness of his performance as aesthete (in that the editions he asks for don't really exist), a falseness that in turn depends on the validity of his knowledge of rare books (he *knows* that

[1] I will be abbreviating Chandler's *The Big Sleep* as *BS*.

they don't exist). Marlowe plays with categories of social identity that relate to what I will call the "hardboiled aesthetics" of the American detective novel from the 1920s to the 1950s. My dissertation will examine how the figure of the aesthete sheds light on three interrelated issues that concerned hardboiled writers: 1) their effort to create a social space of critique, 2) their struggle to locate authenticity in a mass market, and 3) their desire to create an aesthetics of style that would elevate the hardboiled novel to high art.

In Marlowe's interaction with Agnes, the ease with which he is able to pose as an aesthete suggests both the fluidity and the instability of gender, sexual, and class positions in Chandler's novel. Merely by donning "horn-rimmed sunglasses" and making erudite (but false) references to a Ben Hur 1860 and a full set of Chevalier Audubon 1840, Marlowe appears to successfully convince Agnes of his authentic knowledge of rare books. His transformation from a tough, lowbrow, working-class detective to an effeminate, highbrow, upper-class aesthete is so complete that Marlowe is even able to alter his voice, speaking in a high "polite falsetto" and letting a "bird twitter in it." His vocal performance of queerness is, however, contrasted with his internal narration, which retains its usual tone of hardboiled terseness: "No smile now. Eyes medium to hard. Pose very straight and stiff." Marlowe's ability to cross social, gender, and class boundaries suggests that these positions are not as fixed as they might appear to be. The fluidity of these categories poses the greatest threat to Marlowe's masculinity when he adopts the homosexual pose of an aesthete, but his performance of queerness still perpetuates gender and sexual stereotypes as part of the hardboiled novel's larger effort to reaffirm male toughness. The tension between Marlowe's outward flamboyance and his inner restraint thus perfectly encapsulates what I see as the hardboiled aesthetic of the American detective novel: a constant fluctuation between moments of excess and attempts to contain that excessiveness.

The question of excess has historically been linked to the figure of the aesthete, an issue which I will address later in the introduction, but this problem of proliferation is also a symptom of the mass market. Marlowe himself comments on the dangers of commodification when he expresses disdain for the mass-produced "duplicate sets of steel engravings, tuppence colored and a penny plain. The usual vulgarity." His contempt for "tuppence colored and a penny plain" refers to toy theatre kits that were first popularized in early nineteenth-century Victorian England and sold as replicas of popular London plays. Characters and scenery were drawn in miniature and engraved onto sheets, each costing twopence for a single hand-colored print, and a penny for a plain black-and-white print that buyers could color themselves. As the toy theatre dwindled in popularity, the prints declined in quality as manufacturers sought more cost-effective methods of production. By the 1930s, when Marlowe condemns the "vulgarity" of manufactured goods, these toy theatres were no longer reproduced from hand-engraved copper-plates, but were sold as less expensive lithographs. The gap separating rarefied art from cheap reproductions—what Andreas Huyssen has called more generally the "great divide" (PG) between high and mass culture—is of course epitomized by the fact that Geiger's antique bookshop is a cover for his more lucrative business as a lending library for mass-produced porn. Marlowe's profession as a detective allows him to bridge this "divide" between the high and the low, providing him access to all the different social spheres in Los Angeles, from the exclusive casinos frequented by the wealthy upper-class to the shabby studio apartments of working-class models struggling to break into Hollywood. My dissertation thus attends to the various social types (both highbrow and lowbrow) that populate the aesthetic space of the novel, as well as the objects (rare and commercial) that furnish those spaces.

The disparity between the supposed rarity of Geiger's antique books and the easy abundance of commercial porn speaks to the final issue that my dissertation addresses more generally: how the hardboiled aesthetic pertains to questions of style within a mass genre that seems unconcerned with stylistic motivations. Marlowe's narration embodies the expected masculine terseness typically associated with hardboiled style, which I will discuss in more detail later in this introduction, but

Chandler is also famous for his unusual and excessive use of simile and metaphor. We witness Chandler's flamboyant similes in his descriptions of Agnes: Marlowe observes sarcastically that she "was as sore as an alderman with the mumps" and "knew as much about rare books as I knew about handling a flea circus." But the most outlandish metaphor in this passage is Marlowe's observation that Agnes's smile "was now hanging by its teeth and eyebrows and wondering what it would hit when it dropped." The striking and exaggerated image of Agnes's smile appearing to teeter as if on a precipice captures the very quality of what I see as the hardboiled aesthetic, a mode of writing that is excessive in its restraint, that is at once controlled yet uncontained.

In suggesting that hardboiled writers attempt to create an aesthetics of style that would distinguish their work from the literary marketplace, I want to argue primarily that American detective fiction appeals to the field of high art production more insistently and self-consciously than high modernist texts. To make this argument, I would like to turn to Mark McGurl's definition of the art-novel. In *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction After Henry James*, McGurl associates the modernist movement in literature with a desire to elevate the literary text over and above the artifacts of mass culture. For McGurl, the art-novel represents "some form of retreat from, or resistance to, mass culture on the part of professional or cultural elites" (3). McGurl astutely observes that the rise of the modernist art-novel entails "a moment of maximum collision of aesthetics and its indistinct, unlovely other in literature, the shapelessly dialogic genre that speaks for the 'shapeless mass of the many'" (4). He suggests that the central question behind the mystery of this cultural form is: "How and why is it that a project of aesthetic elevation, associated with high demands for readerly intellection, is so tightly braided with a fascination with various forms of stupidity and social simplicity, or 'low life'?" (6). If modernism deploys the arena of high art to study "low life," then it is surprising to find that the representation of high aestheticism surfaces with greatest frequency in one of the most "vulgar" forms of mass fiction: the hardboiled novel. Taking my cue from McGurl's excellent formulation of modernist aesthetics, I want to pose the inverse question with regard to the mass genre of American detective fiction: How and why is it that the "lowbrow" hardboiled novel, with its emphasis on proletarian values and pragmatic toughness, is so intimately invested in questions of high art and so overly populated by highbrow aesthetes, connoisseurs, and collectors? Why does the hardboiled novel fetishize the work of art in such obvious, and almost perverse, terms? To answer these questions, I examine how certain hardboiled writers, such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Vera Caspary, attempt to distance themselves from commercial modes of production by drawing on the aesthete figure, specifically, and *fin de siècle* European aestheticism, more generally, in their effort to legitimize the artistic merit of the detective novel.

"Too much": A Brief History of the Aesthete

The plethora of terms so often used to describe male characters in the genre of American hardboiled detective fiction—gritty, cynical, stoic, laconic—may strike us now as a clichéd form of overcompensation for the 'crisis of masculinity' that marked the interwar period from roughly the 1920s through the '40s and early '50s. As Christopher Breu has theorized in *Hard-Boiled Masculinities*, the emergence of the hardboiled male in the twenties was an attempt to redefine manhood in reaction to a postwar anxiety concerning the shift in gender roles and the difficult period of adjustment for men returning from the front. At midcentury, "manhood was no longer a moral quality," Breu writes, "but a physical attribute; it was to be proven on the playing field, in the bar, in the bedroom, in the streets, and on the factory floor" (6). The one characteristic thought to be shared by heroes and villains alike is that of toughness. Any survey of the predominant character types of hardboiled

fiction—which features a pantheon of stock male types, like the G-Man or T-Man, the hit-man, the finger-man, the con-man, the big-time racketeer, the small-time chiseler, the hood, the boxer, the public detective and the private dick—confirms this emphasis on an unambiguous heteromasculinity. Amidst this manly crowd, the figure of the highbrow aesthete is rarely emphasized by critics, yet no less integral to any discussion of hardboiled masculinity.

For the 1930s and '40s, the aesthete is an anachronistic figure, a nineteenth-century European dandy type transplanted into the urban landscape of American consumerism and mass production. He often goes by an exotic or effeminate-sounding name such as Joel Cairo, Hardy Cathcart, Anthony Jardine, Lindsey Marriot, Jules Amthor, or Waldo Lydecker. Never without a carnation in his buttonhole, he bears remarkable similarities to European decadent literary characters like Jean des Esseintes and Dorian Gray. In New York set novels like *Laura* and *Bedelia*, the aesthete is usually a member of the 'Park Avenue crowd,' either some kind of artist, art dealer, or art critic who prides himself on his exquisite taste and vast cultural capital. When the location is Los Angeles or San Francisco, in novels like *The Maltese Falcon, In a Lonely Place, The Big Sleep* or *Farewell, My Lovely*, the aesthete is an eccentric art connoisseur, thespian, screenwriter, or just a *nouveau riche* playboy whose hedonistic lifestyle is set amidst the lavishly tacky backdrop of Hollywood. Despite the differences that separate these various aesthetic types (aesthete, connoisseur, artist, art critic, collector), hardboiled writers have a tendency to reduce these social types into the same category of morally questionable members of society, existing on the opposite end of the spectrum from the hardboiled detective.

In order to understand how the aesthete figure is transported from the aesthetic milieu of *fin de siècle* 1890s Europe to the consumerist society of 1940s America, it would be important to recall perhaps the most famous aesthete in cultural history, Oscar Wilde. In 1882, the principles of the Aesthetic Movement in Europe crossed the Atlantic and took root in America when Wilde toured the continent to give lectures on aestheticism, beauty, and the decorative arts. This speaking tour was a defining moment in late-nineteenth-century transatlantic literary culture, what Jonathan Freedman describes as a "tour de force of showmanship […] that touched down in thirty states, covered approximately fifteen thousand miles, generated more than five hundred newspapers and magazine articles, […] and, when it was all over, made [Wilde] the second-most-famous Briton in America, behind only Queen Victoria" (14). Hailed as The Ambassador of Aestheticism, The Aesthetic Bard, and The Apostle of Art, Wilde preached a new religion of beauty that captured the creative energies of thousands of Americans. The three lectures in his repertoire, "The English Renaissance," "The Decorative Arts," and "The House Beautiful," addressed his proclaimed mission "to make this artistic movement the basis for a new civilization" (92). Wilde had planned on delivering his lectures for a period of four months, but Wilde himself was so popular that the tour extended to almost a year, with the Irishman crisscrossing almost the entire continental United States. Known for his dazzling wit, humorous one-liners and epigrams, and flamboyant attire, he became a sensation to Americans, many of whom had never heard of aestheticism before. While he was often parodied and mocked by American journalists, Wilde was seldom out of the newspapers for long. Wilde knew, however, that he was playing up a part, and used the American tour as a tool to promote himself and his own work. In this regard, Wilde's marketing was a success, and he left for England at the end of 1882 as the most famous aesthete known in America, launching an aesthetic craze in virtually every American household. As Mary Blanchard has noted, "the broad popular appeal of the new emphasis on art and beauty represents an important aspect of American aestheticism [that] distinguishes it from the somewhat earlier aesthetic movement in England. In the United States, aesthetic style was far more extensive and pervasive through all regions and all classes than previous accounts have suggested" (xiii).

For the purposes of my project, what I want to draw attention to is how Wilde's public persona as an aesthete becomes entangled in the larger question of excess. Wilde consciously exaggerated his image in public, loudly declaring that "nothing succeeds like excess," but his excessive

lifestyle was often the object of ridicule. In *The Uses of Excess in Visual and Material Culture*, Julia Skelly describes one of the many caricatures of Wilde lampooning his aesthetic theories and apparent effeminacy. In a caricature by John Swain entitled *Guys of the Period* portraying thirteen male figures of satire, Wilde is depicted as tall and slim, wearing a long black coat and top hat, admiring a sunflower that nearly towers over him. Most significantly, Wilde is identified as "The Too Too Guy." Skelly convincingly suggests that "to identify Wilde as 'The Too Too Guy' in 1881 also anticipated the way that Wilde would be framed as the quintessential man of excess later in the century. Individuals identified as excessive, both past and present, are often described as 'too much': too visible, too sexual too loud; they drink too much, eat too much, smoke too much, talk too much" (140). Critics of the Aestheticism Movement have tended to associate its valorization of *l'art pour l'art* with problems of excess: of moral and spiritual depravity, sexual perversity, and artificiality taken to extremes. In *Degeneration* (1892), to name the most vitriolic example, Max Nordau uses the term "degeneracy" to describe the deterioration of *fin de siècle* society, which he ties directly to the excessive growth of urban centers and the rapid rise of commodity culture.

In addition, the figure of the aesthete has historically been connected to a variety of non-normative identities. When Wilde was charged with "gross indecencies" in his 1895 trials, his sentencing seemed to confirm the public's perception of aestheticism as a euphemism for homosexuality. Similar to his nineteenth-century predecessor, the aesthete in American hardboiled fiction is typically placed into a category of "women, artistic intellectuals, and vaguely homosexual characters" (Naremore 222), all of whom serve as foils to the tough hardboiled hero.[2] Two of Clifton Webb's performances from the 1940s (as the affected art critic Waldo Lydecker in *Laura*, and as the cuckolded art dealer Hardy Cathcart in *The Dark Corner*) epitomize this contrast in the American imaginary between the murderous aesthete, on the one hand, and the lowbrow detective who thwarts him.[3] This clash between well-to-do aesthetes and working-class private dicks usually takes place in what Richard Dyer calls "the luxury milieu" (18). For example, the 1944 film noir *Laura* opens with a tracking shot of Waldo Lydecker's extravagant Manhattan penthouse, in which is displayed an antique Oriental statue, wall-mounted ceramic masks, a baroque grandfather clock, and overly fussy *objets d'art* neatly arranged in glass cabinets. The camera follows detective Mark McPherson as he inspects the room, carelessly handling a porcelain figurine and provoking Waldo's stern warning, "Careful there. That stuff is priceless." Numerous allusions to Waldo's latent homosexuality had to be removed before shooting began, but the set directions for this opening scene still include the description: "The

---

[2] In *More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts*, James Naremore discusses the veiled moments of homosexual or homoerotic tensions in hardboiled fiction and film noir: "The novels of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler were filled with latently homosexual situations (such as the odd relationship between Philip Marlowe and "Red" Norgaard in *Farewell, My Lovely*), and veiled stereotypes of gays were everywhere apparent in the crime pictures derived from those novels. In *The Maltese Falcon,* for example, the band of criminals is rather like a gay family, and in *The Big Sleep*, Humphrey Bogart imitates a lisping bibliophile. In many films, such as *The Big Heat*, the villain was a homosexual type, though he was never openly acknowledged as such. One of the most curious instances of Hollywood's attempt to conceal the obvious is *Laura*, an unusually feminist narrative for its day, which casts Clifton Webb as a Wildean aesthete named Waldo Lydecker, but which asks us to view the character as a murderously jealous heterosexual who suffers from a kind of Pygmalion complex. Here and in several other important noirs, a covert homophobia is linked with a populist attitude toward social class: the villainous Lydecker is depicted as a parasitic dandy, in contrast to the more proletarian tough guy who is the hero of the narrative" (222). In Chapter 4, I will be discussing Vera Caspary's novel *Laura* and her portrayal of Waldo Lydecker as a Wildean aesthete.

[3] In his article, "Homosexuality and Film Noir," Richard Dyer cites the film *Laura* to describe the common link made between corrupt women and queer men: "The gay men and the femmes fatales share the same decor. Women can be legitimately identified with luxury, with obsessions with beauty and appearance — Laura herself is the epitome of all that is alluring in such a world. Men who are associated with it, however, be they gay (Waldo) or gigolos (Shelby), are weak, villainous or depraved (or all three)" (120).

camera pans the room. It is exquisite. Too exquisite for a man."[4] Within the hardboiled tradition, gayness is thus closely associated with the traditional *fin de siècle* connotations of feminine excessiveness. The notion that Waldo's furnishings would be "too exquisite" for a "real" man attests to the distinction that the hardboiled tradition attempts to maintain between feminine artifice and masculine authenticity. In Erin Smith's analysis of gender politics in *Hardboiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*, the problem of authenticity raised by hardboiled fiction is inseparable from the problem of maleness in the age of mass consumption. Similarly, Breu is also concerned with how hardboiled texts attempt to recover an authentic male voice in the wake of a feminized consumer culture.[5] Breu's focus on the relationship between hardboiled masculinity and ideas about race in America during this period are outside the scope of my project; however, his definition of the hardboiled male serves as a useful counterpoint to my understanding of the aesthete. Breu describes the hardboiled male as "characterized by a tough, shell-like exterior, a prophylactic toughness that was organized around the rigorous suppression of affect and was mirrored by his detached, laconic utterances and his instrumentalized, seemingly amoral actions" (1). My dissertation examines how that the hardboiled detective becomes a corrective to the artificial excessiveness of the aesthete. More generally, I argue that hardboiled style offers a new form of aesthetics through which to address the excesses of the mass market.

Authenticity in the Mass Market: Defining Hardboiled Style

The central question that plagued American hardboiled writers was how to achieve authenticity in a marketplace oversaturated by mass-produced, formulaic texts. In order to theorize how authenticity operates in the context of consumer culture, I would like to turn to Erik Dussere's examination of postwar America as an era in which the "assertion of and desire for an American authenticity [is] imagined as the opposite of a mainstream American identity that has become indistinguishable from consumerism" (5). In *America is Elsewhere: The Noir Tradition in the Age of Consumer Culture*, Dussere argues that *noir* becomes the critical response to the crisis that American identity has become synonymous with consumerism: "Being an American meant being a consumer" (14). Confronted by the loss of originality that emerges in the age of machines and mass production, *noir* novelists saw their assertion of authenticity as "a response to social anxieties about being inauthentic, the fear that one is not an original but rather a copy of the norm dictated by social forces" (8). In an effort to locate authenticity, *noir* offers a privileged site of investigation because:

> […] it consistently creates the effect of authenticity through its gritty-realist aesthetic, its claim to a cynical debunking, and its project of unmasking what it sees as the petty lies […] But in doing so, it makes the gap between authenticity and authenticity effects visible; its authenticity-based opposition to consumer culture emerges in the form of films and novels that are

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[4] For more on the homosexual undertones of the film *Laura*, see Vito Russo *The Celluloid Closet, Homosexuality in Movies,* 1987, pp 46-47.

[5] In *Hard-boiled Masculinities*, Breu uses the term "cultural fantasy" to refer to a space where representations are both imagined and read as imaginary. These representations reveal a cultural anxiety toward masculinity in America's interwar years This crisis in masculinity is partially attenuated, Breu argues, through a complex appropriation and transformation of racist discourse. Breu delineates the ways in which the adoption of racist codes of violence, sexuality, and psychological distancing informs the construction of masculinity.

> conscious of their status as commodities but that nonetheless attempt to take a critical posture toward the system of commodification. (5)

For Dussere, the prevalence of consumer culture in postwar America gives rise to an environment in which the authentic America is "elsewhere," not represented by any actual physical space. In his formulation of how *noir* embodies this confrontation between consumer culture and authentic American identity, Dussere is primarily invested in examining spaces of commerce such as the gas station and the supermarket. This is where my project diverges from that of Dussere in that I am invested not in mainstream commercial spaces, but rather in the rarified artistic milieu of aesthetes and art objects, and how this aestheticized space relates to questions of *style*. Whereas Dussere is interested in how authenticity is represented as a *national* anxiety in noir texts, I want to trace the *aesthetic* anxiety that hardboiled writers faced in their search for authenticity.

In his conception of authenticity, Dussere chooses to use the term *noir* to encompass hardboiled fiction of the 1920s through the 1940s, film noir of the '40s and '50s, conspiracy movies of the '60s and '70s, the novels of Thomas Pynchon, and the genre of cyberpunk. *Noir* is thus used loosely to refer to a wide range of narratives and films, but I want to limit my definition specifically to the term "hardboiled," rather than *noir*, in order to emphasize the "hard" grittiness and terseness that is associated with the writing style that emerged in the 1920s and flourished through the '50s. As many critics have already theorized, the prose style of hardboiled writers is an insistently masculine one. Inseparable from issues of class and gender, hardboiled novels conceive of the upper class, to which the aesthete belongs, as representing style without integrity. Reacting against what he sees as the feminized excesses of the wealthy elite, the hardboiled working-class detective adheres to a tough masculine worldview that is grounded in authentic experience. What I find to be of particular interest is the clash between the terse masculine detective and the effusive feminized aesthete, and what happens on the level of style when hardboiled narration is forced to confront unstable moments of excess.

Dussere addresses the question of excess when he employs the term "noir aesthetic," but his project does not offer any theorization of an aesthetics of *style*, or provide any formal reading of hardboiled writing. In his introduction, Dussere provides an excellent analysis of the differences between Dashiell Hammett's and Raymond Chandler's approaches to rendering authenticity through hardboiled style. Dussere argues that Hammett's prose is more focused on a "search for a style that is stripped of sentiment. For Hammett, realism is the vehicle for a series of self-conscious attempts to render the world in a radically objective way. Employing a cinematic outsider's view, accumulating detail without employing metaphor, and eschewing psychological insight, his novels aspire to render the world as a fragmented and depthless panorama in which nothing has an underlying meaning and nothing can represent anything else" (17). By contrast, Chandler's representation of authenticity is most clearly on display in his famous use of similes: "The metaphors Chandler employs are so excessive in their construction and their frequency that they appear at times to be camping, self-consciously inviting the reader to see them as 'too much.' Thus while the Chandlerian simile creates the effect of authenticity, it also renders visible the process of creating that effect, the 'effect-ness' involved in the linguistic construction of authenticity" (21). While I am much indebted to Dussere's astute observations on the performative excesses of Chandler's metaphorical constructions, I find that Dussere does not sufficiently apply his definition of the "noir aesthetic" to a sustained enquiry into the formal aspects of the hardboiled novel.

My project therefore intends to offer a more rigorous examination of the formal aesthetics of the American hardboiled novel as it relates to issues of class, gender, and mass culture. To trace the importation of the aesthete and European aestheticism to American soil, I begin first by comparing the excessive aestheticism of S. S. Van Dine's "Philo Vance" novels to the sparse minimalism in

Dashiell Hammett's hardboiled fiction. Although Van Dine and Hammett published contemporaneously during the 1920s and 30s, they approached the writing of detective fiction from diametrically opposed positions. As a former art critic and an avid follower of Oscar Wilde's commitment to high art, Van Dine aspired to transport aestheticism's maxim, "Art for art's sake," to the United States. However, unable to secure a wide American readership for his publications on aesthetic theory, Van Dine reluctantly turned to the writing of detective fiction, a popular genre which he had previously disparaged in his early essays as art critic. Finding himself in the compromised position of promoting aesthetic ideals through forms of mass entertainment, Van Dine attempts to recuperate the "vulgar" status of the detective novel by treating it didactically as a vehicle through which to educate American readers on principles of high art. Modeling his novels after the classic British tradition of "Golden Age" detective fiction, known for its emphasis on rational puzzle-solving, Van Dine fashions his detective Philo Vance in the guise of a wealthy aristocrat who possesses an extensive knowledge of art and solves crimes merely as a pastime. As the leading connoisseur in New York, Vance is able to categorize a multitude of facts and clues into a single cohesive narrative, a skill which participates in what Van Dine sees as the larger function of the detective novel itself to organize all the various subplots such that every piece fits together to form a unified storyline. Ironically, however, Van Dine's self-conscious effort to legitimize the detective novel by showcasing his own aesthetic connoisseurship works against his artistic goals: his excessive didacticism produces a narrative that becomes increasingly contrived and formulaic. As a result, Van Dine's style succumbs, I argue, to the mechanical process of merely arranging facts in a predictable pattern, becoming infinitely repeatable and reproducible.

Responding directly to the overly constructed plots of the classic tradition of detective fiction, Dashiell Hammett inaugurates a new form for the American detective novel by exposing the fraught relationship between aesthetic authority and positions of class and gender. Considered the innovator of the hardboiled style, Hammett envisions the detective as both anti-aesthete and anti-consumer, a corrective for what he saw as the inauthenticity of the connoisseur. For an American readership that had tired of Vance's elitism and infallible expertise, the working class background of Hammett's detectives held greater mass appeal. In Hammett's novels, aesthetic refinement becomes negatively associated with upper-class privilege and feminized excess: the connoisseur is stereotyped as effeminate, ineffectual, and ultimately unknowledgeable about the harsh realities of the world. In the midst of a disordered society, the hardboiled detective emerges as the only figure capable of fully comprehending the randomness and unpredictability of life. Calling into question the reliability of objective knowledge, the hardboiled detective is self-sufficient, cynical, and of course, hyper-masculine. The bareness of Hammett's prose becomes a reflection of the detective's masculine "no nonsense" toughness. This is not to say, however, that Hammett's minimalism involves a rejection of details. Hammett's prose exhibits the same attention to trivial details as Van Dine's, but Hammett is not motivated by the desire to categorize these details into a stable, unified whole. Rather, Hammett's plots refuse to cohere and remain stubbornly fragmented. This lack of closure is ultimately what allows Hammett's novels to resist falling into the predictable generic patterns to which Van Dine's works fell prey. What becomes reproducible, then, is hardboiled style: Hammett's chaotic plotting reflects the excessive arbitrariness of life, but this unpredictability is countered by the hardboiled hero's pragmatism and his honest "tough talk."

Whereas Hammett throws into question all forms of knowing, his contemporary and successor Raymond Chandler distinguishes knowing and appreciating aesthetic value from the corruption of buying and having. The gendered distinctions that Hammett establishes between the masculine detective and the effeminate aesthete become blurred in Chandler's hardboiled novels. My second chapter examines how Chandler positions his detective Philip Marlowe in relation to aesthetic connoisseurship; but unlike Hammett, Chandler creates a hybrid American social type in the form of

the "hardboiled aesthete." Marlowe's refined sense of taste does not reflect poorly on his masculinity because he consciously rejects all forms of ownership, a commentary on his class (he cannot afford expensive things), his gender (a "real" man owns only the bare necessities), and his identity (his possessions do not define his sense of self). In his portrayal of Marlowe as a hybrid figure, Chandler draws inspiration from a rather unexpected literary source: the realist fiction of Henry James, specifically his novel *The Spoils of Poynton*. I examine the significance of Chandler's preference for this novel by showing how *The Spoils of Poynton* represents James's criticism of Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Movement. Reacting against the *fin de siècle* decorating craze, James felt that the ethical and cultural value of the art object was being threatened by over-consumption, a sentiment which provided a likely model for Chandler's own distaste for the decadent consumerism of 1940s Los Angeles. Exhibiting a Jamesian conviction that aesthetic appreciation is opposed to material possession, Marlowe pays a surprising amount of attention to art objects and interior decoration, but lives in sparse surroundings. On the level of style, Chandler's ornate descriptions of décor frequently get in the way of plot. I argue, however, that these digressions allow Chandler to perform acts of stylistic control by expanding the formal restraints of the hardboiled detective novel to encompass unexpected (but aesthetically necessary) moments of excess.

The kind of stylistic excess that we encounter in Chandler reaches a new level of expression in the works of hardboiled writer James M. Cain, who explores the gender anxieties of aestheticism more explicitly than any of the writers previously discussed. Although Cain's novels generally feature the gruesome murders typically found in hardboiled fiction, none of his works center on the figure of the detective. In fact, Cain adamantly rejected the label of hardboiled writer, but the famous velocity of his prose represents the extent to which the hardboiled style, so powerfully cultivated in the commodified form of detective fiction, comes to inform the American modern novel's high art ambitions. My third chapter reads Cain's *Serenade* as a meditation on the social factors shaping novelistic aesthetics for the American writer. The leading male character in *Serenade* is no longer even a hybrid Marlowesque hardboiled aesthete, but rather transforms into an actual artist (a high opera singer) who struggles to find an authentic masculine voice in a commodified market. For Cain, the constitutive tension between lowbrow entertainment and high aestheticism that characterizes the American modern novel is enacted in his juxtaposition of the Hollywood film industry and the operatic stage. I establish that Cain treats the male voice as a physical object that functions simultaneously as a commodity (through its deployment in Hollywood musicals) and as a work of art (in its performance of high opera), a gesture which reflects the hardboiled novel's own desire to exist as both commodity and art object. Most significantly, Cain's hardboiled artist struggles with his own sexuality, refusing for most of the novel to acknowledge the interdependence between his queerness and his artistic production. In his representation of gender fluidity, Cain thus makes explicit what is only hinted at in the works of Hammett and Chandler, that the greatest risk aestheticism poses to the hardboiled artist is that he will "turn gay." The yoking together of hardboiled style and gender anxieties finds its precedence in the famous masculine prose of Ernest Hemingway. For Hemingway, the pursuit of formal restraint represents a desire to re-masculinize novelistic aesthetics through an emphasis on action and emotional control as indices of heteromasculinity. But whereas Hemingway attempts to keep hints of queerness at bay in order to impose a code of heteronormativity, Cain brings these concerns to the very forefront by exposing queerness as intricately tied to artistic genius. Cain's analysis of the social and gender complications of aestheticism is in keeping with Hemingway, but interestingly produces an opposite aesthetic style – that of velocity and excess – to express the tensions that Hemingway attempts to manage through minimalism. In *Serenade*, Cain's plot becomes so exaggerated and excessive that the novel goes beyond the limits of the hardboiled category, generating an aesthetic authenticity based not on a "real" masculine identity but on pure style.

Addressing the fact that the hardboiled novel belongs to a predominantly masculine genre, my final chapter turns to Vera Caspary's efforts to locate a female novelistic aesthetics not merely within a commodified but also a frequently misogynistic genre. In her representation of female identity in a male, consumer-driven world, Caspary structures her most well-known novel *Laura* through a series of first-person narrators, each of whom represent a specific social and class type: the cultured, feminized connoisseur Waldo Lydecker; the working-class, hardboiled detective Mark McPherson; the upper-class playboy Shelby Carpenter; and the *femme fatale* murder victim Laura Hunt, who, in a sudden twist of events, becomes the key murder suspect. Similar to Chandler, Caspary distinguishes authentic identity formation as separate from ownership and possession: objects may stand as symbols of social and class status, but never as tokens of personal identity. I examine Caspary's construction of objects and interiors by looking at Walter Benjamin's notion that the rise of the "big city" destroys the ability of the individual to leave traces on the environment. Benjamin argues that the individual retreats to the private sphere, where he can "embed" himself and protect his possessions from the commercial market economy. In *Laura*, personal possessions serve as contested sites of ownership and control, whereby the process of identity formation is based on who owns what. I argue that, contrary to Benjamin's claim that objects retain "traces" of their owners, Laura's belongings tend to scatter and obscure identity, rather than crystallize it. By using multiple first-person narrators in *Laura*, Caspary is further able to show, through the contrasting voice and style of each character, how Laura's identity is fragmented by the different male perspectives that objectify her. These various male voices (connoisseur, detective, playboy) not only compete for narrative authority, but are also placed in opposition to the female voice of Laura, whose first-person narrative is one of the rare instances in hardboiled fiction that a female character is given a voice. Caspary thus attempts to create a female aesthetics by positing Laura's subjectivity as indecipherable and thus immune to the commodifying (male) impulses that seek to fix her as an object of consumption. I ultimately argue that Caspary uses the detective novel to present female individuality as a collective identity that is defined negatively by the way it escapes male objectification. In her narrative, Laura does not attempt to express her own unique personality, but rather affirms her selfhood in terms of a negative capability, an excess that cannot be fully rendered by stylistic forms of representation.

In my study of these hardboiled writers, I ultimately want to redefine hardboiled style as something vastly more unstable and mutable than the bare, tightly controlled mode of expression through which it has always been defined. Rather, I conceive of the hardboiled aesthetic as a stylistic mode that is strikingly paradoxical in the way it simultaneously resists and embraces excesses.

CHAPTER ONE

"Manufactured details":
Forgers and Connoisseurs in S. S. Van Dine and Dashiell Hammett

> "The art connoisseur resembles the detective who discovers the perpetrator of a crime (or the artist behind a painting) on the basis of evidence that is imperceptible to most people."
>
> —Carlo Ginzburg, *"Clues"*

> "You always think you know what you're doing, but you're too slick for your own good, and some day you're going to find out."
>
> —Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*

In his frequently cited essay "The Simple Art of Murder," Raymond Chandler makes a case for the artistic merits of the American hardboiled detective novel by distinguishing it from the English classic tradition of detective writing inspired by Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. In his essay, Chandler laments that "two-thirds or three-quarters of all the detective stories published still adhere to the formula the giants of this era created, perfected, polished and sold to the world as problems in logic and deduction" (*EN* 980).[6] This "arid formula" of deductive reasoning leads to the production of what Chandler sees as "utterly unreal and mechanical fiction" (*EN* 987). As critics like George Grella and Charles Rzepka have already argued, classic detection belongs to the comedy of manners in which each character has an established place in a social hierarchy and only the criminal has broken ranks. The classic detective's job is therefore to restore order to an otherwise stable and well-regulated society. By contrast, the American hardboiled novel unfolds in a world on the verge of chaos and disintegration. Rzekpa describes the hardboiled world as one that is:

> polluted by self-interest and full of challenges and snares, in which no one is to be trusted and all must be tested. […] The 'tough stance' of hard-boiled detection is accordingly both cynical and sentimental, […] and quintessentially American in its idealization of personal autonomy in the face of shadowy coercive forces. […] Lacking the respect for 'tradition' and 'history' that helped motivate his Golden Age English counterpart to defend an idealized prewar way of life, the American tough-guy detective knew he could count on only one thing: himself. (180)

For Chandler, the primary difference between classic and hardboiled detective stories lies in their contrasting treatment and representation of knowledge. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale categorizes classic detective fiction as "the epistemological genre *par excellence*" (147), a genre that poses questions about the limitations of knowledge. Detective fiction revolves around problems of

[6] I will be abbreviating Chandler's *Stories and Early Novels* as *EN*.

accessibility and circulation of knowledge between characters competing for the truth. The clearest unit of information in detective fiction is, of course, the clue: an object or occurrence that provides critical information toward solving the mystery. The classic detective figure is the master interpreter of clues, with the observational skills, knowledge base, and imagination to identify and analyze information that others overlook. Implicit in Chandler's critique of classic Golden Age detective fiction is the discrepancy between the detective's extensive knowledge of esoteric topics and his ignorance of the way the "real" world actually works: "The master of rare knowledge is living psychologically in the age of the hoop skirt. If you know all you should know about ceramics and Egyptian needlework, you don't know anything at all about the police" (*EN* 980). Chandler sees the classic detective as vastly out of touch with reality, and the classic detective writer as equally unattuned to writing about the "authentic flavor of life as it is lived" (*EN* 986). For Chandler, the key failing of classic detective fiction is the way in which details exist only to be itemized as potential clues: "There is a very simple statement to be made about all these stories: they do not really come off intellectually as problems, and they do not come off artistically as fiction. They are too contrived, and too little aware of what goes on in the world. … [The poor writer] thinks a complicated murder scheme which baffles the lazy reader, who won't be bothered itemizing the details, will also baffle the police, whose business is with details" (*EN* 986). Whereas Chandler is critical of the tendency of classic detective writers to accumulate details seemingly for no purpose other than to baffle the reader, he sings the praises Dashiell Hammett for writing the first detective stories that "were not an exhausting concatenation of insignificant clues" (*EN* 990). In Chandler's eyes, Hammett's hardboiled novels revolutionized American detective fiction because they were "made up out of real things. […] He wrote at first (and almost to the end) for people with a sharp, aggressive attitude to life. They were not afraid of the seamy side of things; they lived there. Violence did not dismay them; it was right down their street" (*EN* 988). Most importantly, the new hardboiled detective is neither a well-bred aristocratic gentleman nor an infallible expert in arcane fields of study; rather, he is a working-class, street-smart tough guy who spends the majority of any investigation simply trying to understand what is going on. His masculine toughness gives him the edge to solve cases and replaces the fussiness of the classic detective, whose knowledge of subjects like "Egyptian needlework" becomes coded as feminine and weak.

Chandler's essay describes a key turning point in the literary history of American detective fiction, a moment in which America experienced an unsettled period of increased urbanization and mass consumption that made it difficult for detective writers working in a popular genre to produce "serious" artistic work. The shift in popularity from the classic to the hardboiled detective figure is, I believe, a reflection of the changing social, class, and gender concerns that writers faced during this period. Building on Chandler's observation that these two traditions of detective writing offer opposing representations of knowledge, I want to position the detective in relation to another figure known for his epistemological skill: the connoisseur. The similarities between the detective and the connoisseur have been theorized in Carlo Ginzburg's "Clues: Roots of a Scientific Paradigm." Ginzburg turns first to Giovanni Morelli's treatise on art and connoisseurship *Italian Painters*, which conceives of connoisseurship as the treatment of trivial details as essential. Applying Morelli's method to detection, Ginzburg then argues that "the art connoisseur resembles the detective who discovers the perpetrator of a crime (or the artist behind a painting) on the basis of evidence that is imperceptible to most people" (98). Acknowledging that Edgar Wind and Enrico Castelnuovo are the first to compare Morelli's method to that of Sherlock Holmes, Ginzburg shows how the detective novel lends itself well to the tropes of connoisseurship because it belongs to the genre most preoccupied with forms of investigation and ways of knowing and perceiving. Etymologically, the word "connoisseur" stems from the Latin *cognoscere*, to investigate or examine, and the French *connaitre*, to know. Connoisseurship is therefore intimately linked to knowledge. The skills required of the

connoisseur to look beyond surface appearances to determine an artwork's authenticity are the same as those employed by the detective to solve a mystery. Ginzburg explains that in Morelli's formulation, "an artist's personal instinct for form will appear at its purest in the least significant parts of his work because they are the least labored" (98). Similarly, for the detective, the clues that appear to be the most inconsequential often become the very details that betray the identity of the criminal.

Both the detective and the connoisseur therefore stand as social types who are skilled at perceiving minute details and distinguishing between important facts and misleading evidence. The representation of such details – the collection of "insignificant clues" that Chandler abhors and the "imperceptible" evidence that only a Morellian connoisseur would notice – is the primary focus of this chapter. I want to suggest that with the rise of the literary mass market, American detective writers concerned with questions of authorship and authenticity turned to connoisseurship as a response to the skepticism surrounding objective aesthetic value. In order to understand the tensions that led to the shift from classic to hardboiled detective fiction, I study two contemporaneous American writers who took opposing approaches to the representation of connoisseurship: S. S. Van Dine, who Americanizes the classic British tradition of rational puzzle-solving mysteries, and Dashiell Hammett, who creates the hardboiled tradition in direct response to his British predecessors.

Van Dine transports the classic tradition of detective fiction to American soil through his highly popular detective, Philo Vance, who is specifically modeled after the esoteric gentleman sleuth. I want to argue, however, that what separates Vance from his British predecessors is the extent to which he makes the detective synonymous with the connoisseur. Philo Vance's expertise is both extensive and his authority unchallenged because his gaze is capable of immediately distinguishing real clues from "fake" ones. Objects may be deceptive in Van Dine's novels, but Vance is never deceived by them. Van Dine's detective novels thus operate on a relatively stable epistemological base. More importantly for the purposes of this chapter, Van Dine also clearly valorizes Vance's art connoisseurship as the primary method through which Vance interprets the murder scene. Vance's methodology is perfectly encapsulated in *The Canary Murder Case* (1927), the second novel in the Philo Vance series that launched Van Dine's career as one of the most successful detective writers in America at that time. Based on the 1923 killing of actress Dorothy King, popularly dubbed the "Broadway Butterfly," *Canary Murder Case* begins when the beautiful Margaret Odell, a singer and dancer famously known as "The Canary," is found brutally murdered, her apartment ransacked and her jewelry stolen. Sergeant Earnest Heath of the New York police believes that the murder is an open-and-shut case of a burglary attempt gone wrong. But when Philo Vance is called upon to examine the scene of the crime, he immediately eliminates robbery as a possible motive. The contents of Miss Odell's rooms have been overturned in an apparent search and her contorted body is outstretched on the davenport. As Vance surveys the general disarray of upended furniture and scattered objects – a disarray that is described in elaborate and painstaking detail, complete with a visual floor plan of Miss Odell's apartment on West Seventy-First Street – his glance falls on a jewel case of sheet metal with a circular inset lock that appears to have been pried open by a cast iron poker. This jewel box leads Vance to determine that the "*mise en scene* has been staged" (245) and that the robbery is merely a "manufactured detail" (246).[7] Drawing from his expertise as an art connoisseur, Vance concludes that, "aesthetically speaking, [the crime] has all the earmarks of a *tour de force*. Vulgarly speaking, it's a fake" (244).

Vance's ability to pinpoint the jewel box as the "one genuine note in an otherwise spurious performance" (245) underscores the epistemological task of the detective in solving the murder. What is particularly striking about Vance's reading is his emphasis on the *aesthetics* of the crime scene. Vance

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[7] References to Van Dine's novels *The Benson Murder Case, The Canary Murder Case, The Bishop Murder Case,* and *The Scarab Murder Case* are included in the collection *Philo Vance: Four Complete Novels*.

does not merely interpret the clues in the room with a detached forensic eye. He equates the crime scene to a work of art, implying that the criminal is an artist (or more accurately, a forger) who attempts to create a *tour de force* that ultimately fails to come off as authentic. With the trained eye of a Morellian connoisseur, Vance is able to read the surplus of clues in Miss Odell's apartment and pinpoint the one "fake" detail that escapes the police's notice and betrays the criminal's forgery. In other words, Van Dine explicitly shows that Vance's skill as a connoisseur is the determining factor that allows him to detect successfully. By merging the literary social type of the connoisseur with that of the detective, Van Dine thus uses Vance as a didactic tool to valorize the merits of connoisseurship and establish the detective novel as the genre *par excellence* of connoisseurship. However, in his attempt to showcase his own knowledge of aesthetics, Van Dine treats the detective novel in the same way that Vance curates his art collection. On the level of style, Van Dine packs his novels with an excess of details and clues both to heighten Vance's problem-solving prowess and to structure the novel itself as a kind of art collection, consisting of disparate plotlines that eventually cohere into a unified narrative. But Van Dine's obsession with presenting each detail as a significant and necessary part of the whole storyline ultimately goes against his own artistic goals: his novels become overly constructed and generic because these details exceed their operative function as clues and do not get fully absorbed into the unity of the detective plot.

If we go along with Chandler's argument that the novels produced by classic detective writers like Vane Dine fail to "come off artistically" because of their artificial plotlines, then we must now move to the figure that Chandler claims eliminated the mindless "concatenation of insignificant clues" which had thus far defined the genre. Traditionally regarded as the initiator of the hardboiled style that emerged in the 1920s and dominated the '30s and '40s, Dashiell Hammett heralds a new form of American detective writing that developed as a direct reaction against its transatlantic predecessor. As the American public grew more distrustful of the social elite, Van Dine's popularity in America declined. Vance loses his authority as a connoisseur-detective figure and his cultured mannerisms would eventually become a source of ridicule, leading Ogden Nash to write, "Philo Vance needs a kick in the pance," and Chandler to declare Vance "the most asinine character in detective fiction." Writing in the same period as Van Dine, Hammett introduced the figure of the hardboiled detective, whose proletarian values appeared more quintessentially American than the British elitism of Vance. In *Murder for Pleasure*, Howard Haycraft emphasizes the revolutionary nature of Hammett's break from traditional expectations of the detective genre: "Hammett's lean, dynamic, unsentimental narratives created a definitely *American style*, quite separate […] from the accepted English pattern" (169). Unlike Van Dine's formulation of Vance as the American version of the classic well-educated, upper-class British detective, Hammett's private eye belongs to the working class and does not rely on esoteric learning to solve cases, sharing with "American popular culture in general the […] distrust of intellectuals and experts" (Porter 166). Rejecting the unrealistic nature of the overly elaborate plotting of Golden Age detective fiction, Hammett produced a new literary aesthetics within the detective genre that emphasized simplicity and masculine hardness. In *Pursuit of Crime*, Porter writes that we witness in Hammett's hard prose: "the implied preference for directness over formality, lower-class speech over upper, popular over high culture, American forthrightness over English gentility. The language chosen is a mode of address, a style of self-presentation, and an affirmation of American manliness" (139). In the tough talk of his hardboiled detectives, Hammett finds what Porter describes as "the last refuge of truth in America" (143). Embodying the harshness of truth, Hammett's private dicks offer a new version of self-sufficiency based not on expertise, but on what William Marling calls "mental and emotional smoothness" (140). Marling argues that this slickness and its costs constitute the center of Hammett's innovations in *The Maltese Falcon*: "True smoothness must be interior as well as exterior: its manifestations are coolness, skepticism, feigned comprehension, suspension of judgment, a sense of humor" (140). For Hammett, the hardboiled detective's slickness exists in a

dialectical relationship with his epistemological authority: when Sam Spade is *too* smooth, he is in fact *more* likely to expose the *gaps* in his knowledge, or as his secretary Effie Perine chides, "You always think you know what you're doing, but you're too slick for your own good, and some day you're going to find out." However, Spade's mental coolness under pressure is what enables him to cope with the unexpected circumstances that life continually throws at him.

Although Hammett shares Van Dine's concern about the commodification of art, he consciously rejects the British tradition of detective fiction in order to envision a disordered world in which knowledge is limited and connoisseurship cannot provide the stability needed to restore order. Perhaps the most famous example in detective fiction of an art object that turns out to be a fake is the jewel-encrusted Maltese falcon. In *The Maltese Falcon*, published two years after Van Dine's *The Canary Murder Case*, Sam Spade becomes embroiled in a search for an ancient relic in the form of a bird with rare jewels that have been coated over with black enamel to hide their true value. However, unlike Vance's successful resolution of the Odell murder, Spade is not only duped by the fake copy of the statuette, but the real Maltese falcon never even makes an appearance in the novel. In contrast to Vance's epistemological stability, Spade does not have complete access to the forms of knowledge that would allow him to resolve a case perfectly: objects and clues no longer establish and secure identity, but rather render it uncertain, even mistaken.

Hammett does recreate the connoisseur figure in the character of Casper Gutman, a crooked art collector who has dedicated his life to tracking down the elusive black bird. On the surface, Gutman appears to be the quintessential connoisseur with expert knowledge of the bird's history and authenticity. But when the novel reveals that the falcon is a fake, Gutman's seemingly stable knowledge base crumbles and he falls to the position of a *failed* connoisseur, suggesting that Hammett is critical of those who pretend to possess totalizing knowledge. I want to argue that Hammett reproduces the social type of the connoisseur precisely in order to undercut the principles of knowledge that this literary figure represents. By exposing the limitations of knowledge, in general, and of connoisseurship, in particular, Hammett portrays a world in which crimes cannot be resolved, where secrets remain obscure and characters know only that they have incomplete gaps in their own knowledge. What Hammett offers in place of the failed connoisseur is the hardboiled detective who may not know what to make of every single clue, but understands and accepts his own subjective and incomplete access to knowledge. His awareness of his own fallibility in fact puts him in a better position than the connoisseur to handle the unpredictability of life. On the level of style, Hammett reflects the hardboiled detective's epistemological uncertainty by creating a fragmented plotline that does not resolve itself into a unified narrative. Hammett attends to the same level of detail as Van Dine, but these clues ultimately fail to cohere and exist mainly to emphasize their lack of connectedness.

Mark McGurl is the first critic to put the detective fiction of Van Dine in conversation with that of Hammett in order to highlight the "double-faced quality" (159) of attempting to create high art within a mass genre. McGurl uses Van Dine's writing career as an instructive set up for an examination of Hammett because "it makes clear how strong were the taboos against crossing the 'Great Divide' between high and mass culture in the early-twentieth century and how predictably they were violated" (159). Similar to McGurl, I also find that the way in which Van Dine addresses his anxieties as a detective writer serves as a useful counterpoint to Hammett's approach to writing. What distinguishes my pairing of Van Dine and Hammett from McGurl's is that I examine their works specifically through the figure of the connoisseur and his relation to knowledge and facts. In comparing these writers' opposing views of connoisseurship, I look at their representation of details in order to suggest that Van Dine and Hammett tackle the question of authenticity and authority as a twofold problem: first, on the epistemological level of the narrative, how do the characters sort through the excess of clues at hand to determine which facts are true and which are false; and second,

on the formal level of the novel itself, is it possible for the detective novel to be regarded as an authentic work of art in a literary market oversaturated with mass-produced fiction. The greatest deterrent that has prevented the detective novel from being regarded as "serious" literature – and, conversely, the main guarantee of its commercial success – has been its status as an endlessly reproducible commodity. With regard to the question of form, then, the act of "manufacturing details" participates in a process of mechanical reproduction whereby an original work of art can be replicated and substituted by copies. This chapter examines those moments of excess in Van Dine and Hammett in which the detective novel either unwittingly fails to incorporate extraneous details or openly refuses to do so.

"Aesthetic deductions"

In his autobiographical essay "I Used to Be a Highbrow, and Look at Me Now" (1929), Van Dine, writing under his real name Willard Huntington Wright, elaborates on the tension between high and low forms of art. His biographer John Loughery speculates that the essay was written in part as an attempt to convince the intellectual crowd at *The Smart Set* that he had carried his high art ambitions over to the mass market. Van Dine's effort to justify the merits of detective genre articulates what Brooks Hefner calls the "brow anxieties of the modernist era" (32). Throughout his life, Van Dine would struggle to reconcile his former career as an art critic with his later, more successful, stint as a popular detective writer. Many years before his creation of the Philo Vance series, Van Dine began his professional writing career as literary editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, frequently publishing scathing reviews that denounced romance and detective fiction as commercial trash. In 1913, Van Dine served as editor-in-chief of the intellectual literary journal *The Smart Set*, an American literary magazine designed to provide intellectual material that would promote the social values of New York's social elite. Published from 1900 to 1930 with the subtitle "The Magazine of Cleverness," *The Smart Set* propelled Van Dine into the elite avant-garde cultural circles of pre-World-War-I New York. Although only lasting a single year, Van Dine's tenure as editor-in-chief marked a period of artistic prosperity for *The Smart Set*. Due to his interest in unconventional literary styles, Van Dine steered the magazine toward featuring more experimental and avant-garde literary works by authors such as Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence, Exra Pound, William Butler Yeats, and Ford Madox Ford. In these early days of his writing career, Van Dine also displayed an avid fascination with Oscar Wilde, publishing numerous essays on aesthetics, many of which referred to Wilde's principles on art. For instance, in his essay published in *West Coast Magazine*, Van Dine discusses the relationship between aesthetics and morality, a topic on which Wilde was of course a frequent commenter:

> [T]o call an artist immoral is quite irrelevant. An artist could not be immoral. […] Not possessing a moral sense, the true artist is incapable of creating moral art, and, conversely, of creating immoral art. […] No one who understands the principles of art will ever talk of immoral art. There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral painting. A painting is either well done or poorly done. (292)

Van Dine's language in this essay is almost identical to Wilde's Preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which famously states: "There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all" (2). Wilde's investment in high art clearly influenced Van Dine's intellectual and artistic aspirations. Van Dine even contemplated writing a biography on Wilde, but instead published a treatise on aesthetics, *The Creative Will* (1916), which garnered little commercial success at

the time of its publication. His debut novel *The Man of Promise*, released the same year, was also a complete flop. Desperate for financial security, Van Dine turned to writing in a more popular vein despite his deep scorn for the commercial novelist, whom he described as anyone who published with the intention of making money by appealing to the low tastes of the masses. "Mystery yarns are at best sad affairs," Van Dine insisted, because they appeal to "people of inferior intelligence and faulty education" (*West Coast* 56). Before he ventured into detective writing, Van Dine had complained that, "when an author has been so unfortunate as to write a popular novel, it is a difficult thing to live down the reputation. Personally I have no sympathy with such a person, for there are few punishments too severe for a popular novel writer" (Loughery 180). However, despite his reservations about writing within the popular genre of detective fiction, Van Dine was clearly pleased once he had secured his reputation as a bestselling detective writer. For a time, Van Dine even considered working in Hollywood, but could never decide if he was "selling out to a new, tawdry, popular medium or engaged in an artistic pursuit connected to a splendid art form still in its infancy" (Loughery 157).

McGurl observes that, regardless of his financial success as a detective writer, Van Dine still considered his detective writing as "commercial trash that, while it could wistfully *represent*, could not *exemplify* the lofty intellectual aspirations of art" (162). While I agree with McGurl's point, I would like to suggest that even though Van Dine's novels could never themselves fully embody his aesthetic ideal, the "wistful representation" of high art within his novels is a topic worthy of examination. It is in fact remarkable that the dominant thematic content of Van Dine's works constantly features issues of art and connoisseurship. Although Van Dine never fully reconciles himself to writing commercial fiction, he does find a space in detective writing to explore the aesthetic concerns that had fascinated him in his early years. Having failed to find an audience with his essays on aesthetics, Van Dine instead used the Philo Vance novels to put forward a different aesthetic criterion for the detective novel by formulating the detective figure as, first and foremost, a connoisseur of the arts. In his biography on Van Dine, Loughery suggests that through his creation of Philo Vance as a connoisseur, Van Dine "had reverted to the still earlier, more deeply felt influence on his intellectual life: to his beloved Oscar Wilde and a concocted world of fable, elegance, and patrician disdain. No doubt Wilde would have recognized a kindred spirit in Philo Vance" (188).

Before the appearance of Philo Vance, the linking together of the connoisseur figure with the detective is not without precedent. Representing the literary social type of the gentleman or aristocratic detective, Sherlock Holmes serves as the model for British classic detective fiction of the 1920s and 30s.[8] Doyle presents Holmes as the coldly analytical detective, able to discern the psychology and occupations of strangers from physical signs. What is less widely discussed is that Holmes also has much in common with the *fin de siècle* aesthetes and connoisseurs of his day. Conan Doyle describes Holmes as a "connoisseur of crime," and the art that stimulates Holmes' intellectual curiosity is the art of crime. Richard Hill notes in passing that Holmes resembles a Wildean aesthete: "This languid, violin-playing, cocaine-addicted intellectual […] could have been one of Dorian Gray's circle" (22). Similarly, Ernst Bloch states that Holmes "evinces a clearly artistic air, with his careless division of the day, much *l'art pour l'art* in the muddle of his bachelor flat on Baker Street, his tobacco stored in Persian slippers held to the wall by an even more exotic dagger" (250). Several decades after the appearance of Holmes, British novelist Dorothy Sayers introduces the aristocratic detective Lord Peter Wimsey, whose hobby of collecting rare *incunabula* positions him as another connoisseur-detective type. In *Whose Body?* (1923), Wimsey pushes the connection between connoisseurship and crime by further suggesting that a criminal capable of "real, artistic, finished stuff" is a "poet of crime" (20). For

[8] The linking together of aesthetics, connoisseurship and crime also appears in Thomas De Quincey's 1827 essay, "On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts," which puts forward an aesthetic appreciation of murder. Similarly, Oscar Wilde would later write his own commentary on the art of murder in "Pen, Pencil, and Poison" (1891).

Sayers, not only is the detective a connoisseur of art and crime, but the criminal is also presented as an artist whose crimes replicate the art-for-art's sake immorality.[9] Following in the footsteps of his British predecessors, Van Dine's Philo Vance is similarly characterized as an independently wealthy amateur detective, free to study crime as a hobby away from the demands of labor and commodification. Educated at Oxford, he speaks in the affected tone of an upper-class Englishman, regularly referring to his acquaintances as "old dear" or "old thing," and punctuating every sentence with "d' ye see" or "don't y'know." But what separates Vance from his British counterparts is the extent to which Van Dine consciously emphasizes that Vance succeeds as a detective primarily because of his skill as a connoisseur. With his fake British accent and affected mannerisms, Vance is almost an exaggerated caricature of the classic puzzle-solving detective.

In *The Benson Murder Case* (1926), Philo Vance is introduced as "New York's leading *flâneur* and art connoisseur" (15). Van Dine conflates the various related social types of the artist figure in his formulation of Vance as a highbrow detective: Vance possesses the refined taste of the aesthete, the detached yet penetrating gaze of the *flâneur*, and the totalizing knowledge of the connoisseur. The novel opens with Vance returning home from attending a "preview of Vollard's collection of Cézanne watercolors at the Kessler galleries" (11). The narrator enters the living room to find Vance "sitting in a large armchair, attired in a surah silk dressing gown and gray suede slippers, with Vollard's book on Cezanne open across his knees" (11), a pose which calls to mind decadent aesthetes like Des Esseintes and Dorian Gray. In fact, Vance is frequently described in language that evokes popular characterizations of a Wildean aesthete: the young aristocrat speaks "languidly" (15), "lazily contemplates" the affairs of the day, displays a "frivolous outward attitude" (527) toward visitors, and considers himself "debonair, whimsical, and superficially cynical—an amateur of the arts, and with only an impersonal concern in serious social and moral problems" (527). District Attorney John Markham mockingly addresses Vance as "you orchid" (16), imploring him not to wear "[his] green carnation" (17) to the crime scene. Drawing further upon the floral, florid overtones typically associated with decadent aesthetes, Markham even implores Vance not to antagonize Sergeant Heath and to "emulate the modest violet," which provokes Vance's flippant remark that he prefers "the blushing rose" (18). These characterizations also reproduce the gender stereotypes traditionally associated with the aesthete or connoisseur figure, who is often coded as foppish, feminized, and fussy.

As a connoisseur, Vance's greatest passion is, predictably, art collecting. The narrator tells us that Vance is "an authority on Japanese and Chinese prints; he knew tapestries and ceramics; and once I heard him give an impromptu *causerie* to a few guests on Tanagra figurines […] Vance had sufficient means to indulge his instinct for collecting, and possessed a fine assortment of pictures and *objets d'art*" (11). Not only is his art connoisseurship never in question, Vance also takes part in the material acquisition of art through his collecting. It is important to remember that Vance belongs to the upper class, a member of the American aristocracy with "sufficient means" to purchase art objects that appeal to his fine sense of taste. But within the context of a rapidly expanding commodity culture, the relationship between collector and commodity is a dangerous one. The pressure of the marketplace on the status of art raises questions of whether material possession contaminates "good taste" and true artistic appreciation. The collector therefore emerges, according to Allan Hepburn, "as a cultural inevitability: an expert who distinguishes the authentic from the fake and buys accordingly. It is neither

[9] In his essay "The Hard-Boiled Novel," Sean McCann explains that the British classic detective novel "put a premium on the specialized knowledge and brilliant ratiocination of an eccentric detective. In the most extreme version of the form, the detective was arch and refined, the story took place in the isolated world of the sybaritic leisure class, and the plot was built around the detective's effort to solve the puzzle of the murderer's elaborate schemes" (43). I argue that while Van Dine follows this model very closely, Hammett takes great pains to avoid the stable epistemological world of classic detection.

a moral nor a rational category; rather, taste mystifies and justifies commercial activity" (27). In *The Benson Murder Case*, the narrator is thus careful to note that Vance's material possession of objects is in no way vulgar, but rather an extension of a higher philosophical and artistic attitude:

> His collection was heterogeneous only in its superficial characteristics: every piece he owned embodied some principle of form or line that related it all to the others. […] Vance's catholicity of taste in art was remarkable. His collection was as varied as that of a museum. It embraced a black-figured amphora by Amasis, a proto-Corinthian vase in the Ægean style, Koubatcha and Rhodian plates, Athenian pottery, a sixteenth-century Italian holywater stoup of rock crystal, pewter of the Tudor period (several pieces bearing the double-rose hallmark), a bronze plaque by Cellini, a triptych of Limoges enamel, a Spanish retable of an alterpiece by Vallfogona, several Etruscan bronzes, an Indian Greco Buddhist, a statuette of the Goddess Kuan Yin from the Ming Dynasty, a number of very fine Renaissance woodcuts, and several specimens of Byzantine, Carolingian, and early French ivory carvings. (12)

By presenting Vance as a collector who creates unity out of disparities, Van Dine applies the connoisseur's superior organizing abilities to the detective's task of reconstructing a murder. But what is most striking about this description is the detailed list of Vance's assorted *objets d'art*, which resembles the type of ekphrastic descriptions that appear in *fin de siècle* decadent texts. Van Dine's fascination with Wildean decadence becomes even more exaggerated when he focuses more specifically on describing a single artifact. In *The Scarab Murder Case*, for instance, Van Dine's description of an ornate Egyptian dagger is an extensive contemplation of the object's intricate beauty: "It was a beautiful and interesting piece of workmanship. Its handle was ornamented with decorations of granulated gold and with stripes of cloisonné and semi-precious stones—amethysts, turquoises, garnets, carnelians, and tiny cuttings of obsidian, chalcedony and felspar. The haft was surmounted with a lotiform knob of rock crystal, and at the hilt was a chair-scroll design in gold wire. The blade was of hardened gold adorned with shallow central grooves ending with an engraved palmette decoration" (629). Van Dine's detailed list of semi-precious stones functions in the same way as ekphrastic descriptions in decadent texts, recalling the jewel-encrusted shell of the tortoise in Huysmans's *A Rebours* or Dorian Gray's collection of gems in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[10] When Dorian Gray becomes absorbed in reading a "novel without a plot," presumably *A Rebours*, he describes perfectly the prose style of decadent novels: "The style in which it was written was that curious jewelled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of *argot* and of archaisms, of technical expressions and of elaborate paraphrases, that characterizes the work of some of the finest artists of the French school of *Symbolistes*" (139). Drawing from this decadent tradition, Vance reveals his expertise by showcasing his knowledge of rare artifacts, thus allowing Van Dine to emphasize the detective's

[10] Van Dine's ekphrastic description of the dagger contains the same stylistic attention to details found in decadent texts. For instance, in *A Rebours*, the description of Des Esseintes's decoration of a turtle's shell uses specialized language about precious stones: "Finally he settled on stones whose hues would supplement each other—the hyacinth of Compostella, mahogany red; the aquamarine, sea green; the balsas ruby, vinegar rose; the Sudermania ruby, pale slate-colour, Their comparatively feeble play of colours would suffice to light up the deadness of the dull, grey shell, while leaving its full value to the brilliant bouquet of jewelled blossoms" (42). Similarly, Wilde would draw on Huysmans's "jewelled style" (139) to characterize Dorian Gray's study of his jewel collection, which included "the olive-green chrysoberyl that turns red by lamplight, the cymophane with its wirelike line of silver, the pistachio-coloured peridot, rose-pink and wine-yellow topazes, carbuncles of fiery scarlet with tremulous, four-rayed stars, flame-red cinnamon- stones, orange and violet spinels, and amethysts with their alternate layers of ruby and sapphire. […] He procured from Amsterdam three emeralds of extraordinary size and richness of colour, and had a turquoise de la vieille roche that was the envy of all the connoisseurs" (150).

mastery of connoisseurship. But the excessiveness of these descriptions will pose stylistic problems for Van Dine's novelistic goals, a problem that I will discuss at the end of this section.

Given Van Dine's interest in detail and his background in art criticism, it is highly likely that he would have been familiar with Morelli's study of connoisseurship, *Italian Painters*. In fact, I would argue that Van Dine quite explicitly models Vance's expertise in aesthetics after Morelli's connoisseur. In *Italian Painters*, Morelli opens rhetorically with a somewhat imprecise definition of the connoisseur: "What is an art connoisseur after all but one who understands art" (5). Staging a dialogue between a Russian tourist visiting Florence and an Italian native well-versed in theories of connoisseurship, Morelli proposes that the true connoisseur conducts a serious and meticulous examination of art through systematic methods of perception. According to Morelli's approach to connoisseurship, negligible details are the most essential to determining authorship. Morelli defines connoisseurs as those with the "natural capacity" to "discern in the features, in the form and movement of the hand, in the pose of the figure—in short, in the whole outward frame—the deeper qualities of the mind; while the other class of observers, even should they happen to notice these particulars, would look upon them as meaningless" (45). In other words, connoisseurs are capable of identifying an artwork's authenticity by paying attention to an artist's small idiosyncrasies – the shape of a fingernail or the curve of an earlobe – that an imitator or forger would overlook. These seemingly insignificant details represent the moments when the artist lets himself go, and therefore become the most characteristic signs of the artist's individuality.[11]

Just like Morelli's unnamed Italian, Vance applies his connoisseurship to detect art forgeries by focusing on imperceptible details. In *The Benson Murder Case*, for instance, the narrator explains that Sergeant Heath is highly critical of Vance's idiosyncratic method of interpreting the evidence surrounding Benson's mysterious death. Putting into practice a Morellian attention to seemingly irrelevant details, Vance contends that "there is an abundance of evidence pointing elsewhere. You simply have failed to see it," to which Heath angrily challenges Vance to produce a single clue to support his suppositions. Vance accepts the challenge primarily because it appeals to his artistic sense: "It [the case] presents the same diff'culties as the *Concert Champetre* affair—a question of disputed authority, as it were" (61). Here, the narrator includes a footnote to explain Vance's reference: "For years the famous *Concert Champetre* in the Louvre was officially attributed to Titian. Vance, however, took it upon himself to convince the Curator, M. Lepellier, that it was a Giorgione, with the result that the painting is now credited to that artist" (61). Vance is therefore presented as the connoisseur *par excellence* due to his unrivaled ability to detect forgeries that other art experts have failed to notice. Similarly, in *Italian Painters*, Morelli's Italian connoisseur also calls attention to how often artwork is misidentified, proposing a very specific method through which to "distinguish the genuine works of the great masters from those of their pupils and imitators, or even from their copies" (23). For Van Dine, the art connoisseur occupies the crucial position of detecting and exposing forgeries, a practice that becomes increasingly necessary in a consumerist culture in which reproductions are not infrequently being passed off as the real thing.

In her study of forgery in nineteenth-century Victorian literature and culture, Sara Malton has argued that within the context of mass culture and an emerging modernity, notions such as originality and authenticity grew increasingly precarious. In Victorian society, as Malton presents it, the transition from tangible property ownership to intangible capital contributed to the "often troubling unreliability of representations of value" (4). Representations of value were no longer reliable indicators of history or identity, of authenticity or the content of one's moral character. Malton argues that Victorian

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[11] As Edgar Wind explains, "our inadvertent little gestures reveal our character far more authentically than any formal posture that we may carefully prepare" (Ginzburg 98). For more on the Freudian reading of the Morellian method, see Ginzburg's "Clues: Roots of a Scientific Paradigm."

literature represents identity as a text that can be read and forged, thus reflecting the era's anxieties about the unreliability of representations.[12] Malton's theorization of forgery as a threat against one's ability to acquire knowledge of cultural and individual history through visual signs is especially relevant in the genre of detective fiction, which relies on the detective's capacity for interpreting visual clues to construct a narrative of events. The measure of the detective's success in solving a case depends on his ability to decipher between the significant "real" detail and the misleading "fake" detail. Forgery in the form of faked evidence thus disrupts potential sites of knowledge and destabilizes individual identity. In Van Dine's approach to the portrayal of Vance as a masterful reader of visual signs, the various themes of forgery, connoisseurship, aesthetics, identity, and crime become entirely encapsulated in Vance's tendency to use "artistic analogies" (45) in his interpretation of crimes.

In *The Benson Murder Case*, Vance specifically draws a connection between the art connoisseur who identifies forgeries and the detective who analyzes a crime scene. Vance explains to District Attorney Markham that art experts can easily identify Rubens painting because "no one but Rubens could have painted it. It bears the indelible print of his personality and genius – and his alone" (43). A "truly profound art expert" judges pictures by "studying the creative personality revealed in the picture's conception and execution" to determine whether "this work of art embod[ies] the qualities of form and technique and mental attitude that made up the genius—namely, the personality—of Rubens, or Michelangelo, or Veronese, or Titian, or Tintoretto, or whoever may be the artist to whom the work has been tentatively credited" (45). Vance suggests here that an art expert who seeks to "authenticate" a painting acquires knowledge about the work of art through visual signs that "embody" the "creative personality" of the artist (45). Vance then connects art to crime by saying that crimes possess all the "basic factors of a work of art—approach, conception, technique, imagination, attack, method, and organization" (57). A carefully planned murder is as much a "direct expression" of the criminal as is a painting of the artist, and "therein lies the one great possibility of detection. Just as an expert aesthetician can analyze a picture and tell you who painted it, or the personality and temp'rament of the person who painted it, so can the expert psychologist analyze a crime and tell you who committed it" (57). Within this rubric of knowledge claims, the "possibility of detection" that ultimately betrays the criminal places Vance in the privileged position of being the only one with the epistemological skill to separate forged details from original ones.

Philo Vance's analysis of a particular crime takes the form of an "aesthetic hypothesis" (178). In *The Canary Murder Case*, Vance's knowledge of art forgeries appears to operate on two interrelated levels: on the one hand, Vance appeals to a Romantic notion of the originality of art, and on the other, Vance proposes an inverted formulation of Morelli's artistic hypothesis in the identification of forgeries. His interpretation hinges on the premise that, just like a forged work of art, the individual details of the crime are too well crafted, too lacking in true artistic spontaneity, to be entirely convincing:

> Every genuine work of art has a quality which the critics call *élan*—namely, enthusiasm and spontaneity. A copy, or imitation, lacks that distinguishing characteristic; it's too perfect, too carefully done, too exact […] it is not a genuine and sincere crime—that is to say, an original—but only a sophisticated, self-conscious and clever imitation, done by a skilled copyist. I grant you it is correct and typical in every detail. But just there is where it fails, don't y' know. Its

[12] Malton argues that in a Victorian text like *Jekyll and Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson "blurs the distinction between the real and the counterfeit," but in the more extreme case of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, "identity is purely image" (134). In Malton's words, Dorian Gray projects his image onto the world as "a genuine fake" and an "authentic forgery" (136). As a result, Dorian's "forged" version of his true self becomes the only visible commodity that the public can imitate, which ultimately invalidates the relevancy of the original.

> technic is too good, its craftsmanship too perfect. The ensemble, as it were, is not convincing—it lacks *élan*. (244)

In his reading of the crime scene, Vance initially measures the authenticity of a crime by its "genuineness" and "sincerity." While Vance uses sincerity as a critical category by which to separate an original from a merely "clever" imitation, the most important distinguishing factor between originals and forgeries is the question of *élan*. According to Jessica Millen, originality arose as a central aesthetic virtue during the Romantic period through the idea of *creatio*, which refers to the "creation of something from nothing" (8).[13] In other words, artists create works of art either from within themselves or from an intangible force that works through them. For Wordsworth, poetry is the "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," which suggests that the sole source of creative originality is the poet himself. As such, *creatio* is produced neither through hard work nor acquired skill, but rather through an unconscious force that gives rise to a work free of any artificial or borrowed elements. The ability to achieve *creatio* is the mark of a true artistic genius, whose originality is a natural, unlearned gift that allows him spontaneously to produce something from nothing. This Romantic ideal of creative originality is echoed in the language Vance uses to describe a "skilled copyist" as being too "self-conscious." Vance explains that in an original "flaws don't matter," but a copyist is too "intent on getting all the details correct" (244), and therefore wouldn't dare to include any flaws. The forger works with "a self-consciousness and a meticulous care which the artist, in the throes of creative labor, never exhibits" (244).

While Vance's theory carries undertones of the Romantic ideal of art and originality, his emphasis on the forger's "self-consciousness" also calls to mind Morelli's theorization of the importance of the artist's "unconscious" in the identification of forgeries. Van Dine's formulation of Vance's methodology can be interpreted, I argue, as an inversion of Morelli's artistic premise. As Ginzburg has noted:

> Morelli set out to identify, within a culturally conditioned system of signs such as the pictorial, those which appeared to be involuntary, as is the case with symptoms (and the majority of clues). And in these involuntary signs, in the 'material trifles' – a calligrapher might call them 'flourishes' – comparable to 'favorite words and phrases' which 'most people introduce into their speaking and writing unintentionally, often without realizing it,' Morelli recognized the surest clue to an artist's identity. (118)

If Morelli posits that the artist's unconscious flourishes is the key site of authentification, then for Van Dine, it is the forger's unawareness of his own self-consciousness that ultimately betrays him. In his reading of Morelli's focus on "involuntary signs" of the artist, Ginzburg also draws a connection to Freud's psychoanalytic method of interpretation, which is "based on discarded information, on marginal data, considered in some way significant. By this method, details usually considered of little importance, even trivial or 'minor,' provided the key for approaching higher aspects of the human spirit" (101). Van Dine's narrator often describes Vance's talent for solving crimes by reference his ability to understand the psychology of the criminal. Applying this Morellian theory to the Odell murder, Vance recognizes that the "conscious effort" of the criminal to make the crime scene look flawless is precisely what gives him away: The crime is too perfect and "therein lies the irresistible inference of its having been carefully premeditated and planned. To use an art term, it is a tickled-up crime. Therefore, its conception was not spontaneous. [. . .] And yet, don't y' know, I can't point out

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[13] For more on the history of aesthetic sincerity, see Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971.

any specific flaw; for its great flaw lies in its being flawless. And nothing flawless, my dear fellow, is natural or genuine" (245). These flawed moments seem to operate according to those instances when, for Morelli, "the control of the artist, who was tied to a cultural tradition, relaxed and yielded to purely individual touches 'which escaped without his being aware'" (Ginzburg 101). If the forger's work is flawless, however, this begs the question of how Vance is able to decipher that it's fake. This would seem to imply that an authentic work would be in some sense "flawed" because the artist isn't concerned with getting "all the details right." Vance himself admits that, "Even enlightened scions of the law, I fancy, are aware that there is bad drawing in Botticelli and disproportions in Rubens, what? In an original, d' ye see, such flaws don't matter. But an imitator never puts 'em in: he doesn't dare" (245). Vance's theory here suggests that copyist is too focused on the technical "skill" of his piece, but if true genius and originality cannot be cultivated from mere skill, then how would *flaws* reveal artistic perfection and authenticity? How is it possible to identify the essence of artistic individuality through elements that exist outside of the conscious control of the artist himself?

Interestingly, Vance skips over this aesthetic dilemma. Despite his ability to recognize artistic authenticity, Vance does not himself produce works of artistic genius: he occupies the position of an art *connoisseur*. In his essay "The Clinical Children" (1910) published for *West Coast Magazine* years before the appearance of the first Philo Vance novel, Van Dine discusses in detail the distinction between an artist and a connoisseur:

> A connoisseur is not an artist; he is a mathematician and arrives at his conclusions concerning pictures by the application of formulas. A connoisseur may not appreciate pictures; he rarely does. His name expresses the matter—a "knower." He knows pictures and admires them externally. That is all. I cannot call this understanding and appreciating art. His pleasure is wholly mental, not esthetic. His is the pleasure of an entomologist analyzing a bug. (522)

There is an uneasy split here between the Romantic spontaneity and originality of the artist and the "emotionless," calculated skill of the art connoisseur. If the connoisseur cannot produce original artwork, is he more closely aligned with the forger? Neither have artistic genius due to their lack of artistic spontaneity and their dependence on formulas and knowledge. Similarly in the *The Canary Murder Case*, the narrator describes Vance's interest in art collecting as a "purely intellectual enthusiasm" (175):

> He was not emotionless, but his emotions were, in the main, intellectual. He was often criticized for his asceticism, yet I have seen him exhibit rare bursts of enthusiasm for an aesthetic or psychological problem. However, he gave the impression of remaining remote from all mundane matters; and, in truth, he looked upon life like a dispassionate and impersonal spectator at a play, secretly amused and debonairly cynical at the meaningless futility of it all. Withal, he had a mind avid for knowledge, and few details of the human comedy that came within his sphere of vision escaped him. (175)

By characterizing Vance as an "intellectual" with a "mind avid for knowledge," Van Dine elevates connoisseurship as the primary method by which to assess aesthetic merit. Even though Vance does not produce original artwork, his ability to discern forgeries through a Morellian focus on imperceptible details places him on par with a true artist. Although Van Dine appears to distinguish the social types of the connoisseur, the artist, and the writer, I would in fact argue that he conflates these figures by treating them synonymously to elevate his own position as a writer (and former art critic and connoisseur).

The danger, however, of conflating the connoisseur with the detective is that the plot becomes a vehicle only for Vance to reveal the vast extent of his esoteric knowledge. Similar to Vance's capacity as art collector to bring together disparate elements to achieve a unified collection, Van Dine also conceives of narrative structure in terms of how well the various elements of the story hang together. In 1927, after the publication of his first Philo Vance novel, Van Dine specifically addresses this idea in his anthology, "The Great Detective Stories," which he published under his legal name despite the fact that he was still keeping his identity as detective writer a secret. In this anthology, Van Dine argues the "craftsmanship" of the detective story is a matter of how well the material "fits together":

> the task confronting the writer of detective fiction is again the same confronting the cross-word-puzzle manufacturer—namely, the working of familiar materials into a difficult riddle. The skill of a detective story's craftsmanship is revealed in the way these materials are fitted together, the subtlety with which the clues are presented, and the legitimate manner in which the final solution is withheld. (40)

Van Dine acknowledges that while the content of a detective story is "familiar," a skilled writer "reworks" in it in a more complex or "difficult" way. Writing a detective story is less a matter of creating wholly original material and more a matter of repeating recognizable patterns that highlight how well-integrated each piece is within the larger puzzle. Van Dine goes on to suggest that the "outstanding characteristic of the detective novel [is] its unity of mood" (41). Van Dine believes that the distinctive feature of the detective story is its unity of form, a unity which offers him a means to negotiate the divide between real and commodified art. In his desire to create order out of disunity or chaos, Van Dine intentionally draws attention to how well-constructed his detective stories are. Ironically, however, the more constructed the plot, the more artificial the story becomes, a complaint that Chandler would lodge against the lack of realism of classic detective writing. What Van Dine sees as a "subtle" presentation of clues that "legitimately" withholds the final solution, Chandler describes as a "dreary routine" that at its worst produces "dishonest" art.

I have thus far argued that Van Dine represents the most extreme iteration of the British tradition of the classic "puzzle-solving" detective mystery. His most constructed plotline is epitomized in *The Greene Murder Case* (1928), which focuses on the successive murders of four members of the wealthy and contentious Greene family. In an attempt to make sense of the four crimes, Vance proposes to give Markham an "aesthetic lecture on composition" on the fundamental differences between a painting and a photograph:

> [...] the one is arranged, composed, organized; the other is merely the haphazard impression of a scene, or a segment of reality, just as it exists in nature. In short, the one has form; the other is chaotic. When a true artist paints a picture, d' ye see, he arranges all the masses and lines to accord with his preconceived idea of composition—that is, he bends everything in the picture to a basic design; and he also eliminates any objects or details that go contr'ry to, or detract from, that design. Thus he achieves a homogeneity of form, so to speak. Every object in the picture is put there for a definite purpose, and is set in a certain position to accord with the underlying structural pattern. There are no irrelevancies, no unrelated details, no detached objects, no arbitr'ry arrangement of values. All the forms and lines are interdependent; every object—indeed, every brush stroke—takes its exact place in the pattern and fulfills a given function. The picture, in fine, is a unity. (*Greene* 315)

The way Vance describes the artistic composition of a painting exactly parallels the manner in which he approaches his art collecting: the artist (or the collector) achieves a unity of form by bringing

together objects that will complement each other to create an "arranged, composed, organized" design.[14] The narrator discusses Vance's art collecting habits using almost identical terms: "His collection was heterogeneous only in its superficial characteristics: every piece he owned embodied some principle of form or line that related it all to the others. One who knew art could feel the unity and consistency in all the items with which he surrounded himself, however widely separate they were in point of time or *métier* or surface appeal" (244). Moreover, Vance's description of the aesthetic composition of a painting perfectly describes the structure of the detective novel itself: Van Dine attempts to give "form" to the novel by treating it as a painting in which every detail – "all the masses and lines" – adhere to a basic design. Just as every brush stroke in a painting "fulfills a given function," so too every clue in the detective novel exists for a "definite purpose" and takes its "exact place in the pattern." Van Dine clearly sets up the detective novel as a work of art, a kind of written painting that follows a "preconceived idea of composition" in its accumulation of interdependent details. Each object and clue is therefore necessary to the "underlying structural pattern" of the novel as a whole. We witness here a conflation of multiple forms of artistic production: from the connoisseur's curated art collection to the artist's perfectly composed painting to the detective writer's well-crafted narrative puzzle, each mode geared toward the same aesthetic goal of achieving a "homogeneity of form."

After this lengthy and overly elaborate aesthetic explanation, which understandably annoys Markham, Vance concludes that the Greene case is "a painting, not a photograph," which leads Vance to insist that they must "find the generating line of the design, and then relate the subsidi'ry forms of the pattern to it" (*Greene* 318). When Markham bemoans that life isn't as "simple as [his] aesthetic theories," Vance retorts that "It's dashed simpler. […] The mere mechanism of a camera can record life; but only a highly developed creative intelligence, with a profound philosophic insight, can produce a work of art" (*Greene* 328). Van Dine again privileges the detective as a figure whose "creative intelligence" is comparable to that of an artistic genius, but it is also clear that Vance's aesthetic lecture is merely a vehicle through which Van Dine can showcase his own connoisseurship. Vance then gives Markham an absurdly long list of *ninety-seven* facts from the Greene case that the narrative provides for us in itemized form, a list which the narrator has conveniently preserved in its original form and has now reproduced for us verbatim. The list is separated into four categories, but for obvious reasons, I have not included the individual items contained under each fact:

"General Facts": Facts 1-9
"First Crime": Facts 10-32
"Second Crime": Facts 33-47
"Third Crime": Facts 48-59
"Fourth Crime": Facts 60-72
"Distributable Facts": Facts 73-97

The narrator informs us that Vance's itemized list is incredibly "far-reaching in its effects. Indeed, it was the instrument by means of which the Greene case was solved" (*Greene* 320). What this list ultimately reveals is Van Dine's desire to present the detective novel as a form in which all knowledge

[14] Interestingly, Van Dine's conception of art and nature also echoes Oscar Wilde's famous formulation in *Decay of Lying* that "life imitates art far more than art imitates life." In their Platonic dialogue on aesthetics, Vivian and Cyril discuss how the study of art reveals nature's "lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition." Furthermore, Vivian suggests that "Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment." Given Van Dine's lifelong interest in Wilde's works, it is not surprising that Vance would conceive of the composition of criminal cases in such aesthetically Wildean terms.

can be organized, categorized, and totalized. In what the novel intends us to view as a feat of organizational mastery, Vance arranges every single fact on the Green case in chronological order, even though we have already witnessed each of these events in the previous chapters. This list, in theory, should allow us to track the various interrelated plotlines, from the first crime all the way to the fourth crime, that run throughout the novel. Moreover, each itemized fact contains a clue that should also, in theory, lead to another set of clues that will ultimately produce the mystery's final solution. However, this list of facts far exceeds its operative function as a template of clues. The excessiveness of this list reveals how individual details are not fully integrated back into the unity of the detective plot, but rather seem like excrescences. In terms of narrative structure, the catalogue of ninety-seven facts in a "list" format is clunky at best, and completely devoid of artistic form at worst. Van Dine claims that his integrated plots – his lists of facts and his detailed descriptions of objects and clues – represent an attempt to give details a framework in which everything has a meaning in relation to everything else. In this sense, Van Dine is enacting on a stylistic level the notion that a painting is composed of interrelated details. Ironically, however, Van Dine fails to realize that the "homogeneity of form" which he so desires also produces the very kind of uniformity that defines commodified art. Indeed, Van Dine's self-conscious concern with aesthetic value—his desire to show off his own connoisseurship—works against his own artistic goals. This mechanical listing of facts, along with his laborious descriptions of details and clues, ironically produces detective fiction that is generic and easily reproducible.

If Van Dine seems unaware that his listing of details backfires, what is perhaps even more fascinating is that in his description of the aesthetic merits of a painting, he goes on to argue that the key failing of a photograph is its inclusion of extraneous details. I want to suggest that in this description, Van Dine's critique of the photograph's "haphazard" composition sounds eerily close to what his rival, Dashiell Hammett, sought to produce in his hardboiled fiction:

> A photograph includes *details that have no meaning*, variations of light and shade that are harmonically false, textures that create false notes, *lines that are discords, masses that are out of place*. The camera, d' ye see, is *deucedly forthright*—it *records whatever is before it, irrespective of art values*. The inevitable result is that a photograph *lacks organization and unity*; its composition is, at best, primitive and obvious. And it is *full of irrelevant factors*—of *objects which have neither meaning nor purpose*. There is no uniformity of conception in it. It is *haphazard, heterogeneous, aimless, and amorphous*— just as is nature. (*Greene* 316, emphasis added)

Van Dine's analysis of the photograph's disorganized composition can be read, I argue, as an encapsulation of Hammett's stylistic approach to the detective novel. Though worded in slightly extreme terms, the emphasis here on the photograph's "forthrightness," on its accurate "recording" of "whatever is before it," sounds strikingly similar to the gritty realism typically associated with the hardboiled genre. Van Dine's dismissal of the photograph's "irrelevant details" – of the discordant lines and the "masses that are out of place" – in fact reflects the way in which Hammett's novels tend to be structured. In the following section, I will examine how Hammett is driven by the opposite desire of Van Dine to reveal the folly of attempting to construct cohesive narratives and create order out of chaos. If Van Dine measures novelistic smoothness by how well individual pieces fit together, Hammett emphasizes that his narrative lacks unity and cohesion precisely because life itself is random and unpredictable. Hammett presents a world in which objects are deceptive and "details have no meaning" because the world is "haphazard, heterogeneous, aimless, and amorphous."

"Damned if I know"

In *The Maltese Falcon*, Hammett's hardboiled detective Sam Spade is so far removed from the figure of the connoisseur that he is unafraid to acknowledge when he fails to piece together the facts, frequently exclaiming "Damned if I know" (95) in response to seemingly unsolvable cases. Spade's awareness of his own epistemological uncertainty is the root of Hammett's hardboiled aesthetic. Hammett's world is one in which "no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practicing" (Chandler *EN* 991). In the face of such chaos, Spade is constantly forced to confront the impossibility of totalizing knowledge. Not only does Sam Spade spend much of the novel struggling to uncover the truth of the falcon's history, but Casper Gutman, the villainous art connoisseur who considers himself the leading authority on the falcon, also proves to be grossly misinformed about the real facts. If Van Dine uses Vance to make the connoisseur synonymous with the detective in their shared claim to epistemological authority, Hammett is driven by the opposite desire to show that neither the detective nor the connoisseur has access to any objective truth about the falcon. Hammett simultaneously rejects the classic characterization of the detective as an all-knowing problem-solver while also drawing on the literary, social type of the connoisseur precisely in order to debunk this figure's claim to total knowledge. I want to argue that Hammett presents a new aesthetics for the detective novel that replaces Van Dine's stable model of knowing with a chaotic worldview in which access to accurate knowledge is uncertain at best, and impossible, at worst. In studying Hammett's hardboiled aesthetic, I want to attend to the same forms of excess that I examined in Van Dine's writing. Whereas Vance's excessive lists of details lead to a formulaic construction of the detective novel, I argue that Hammett's stylistic use of details is intended to emphasize the random, fragmentary nature of the world.

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Hammett's hardboiled prose inaugurated an entirely new mode of detective writing. Hammett discusses his aspiration to produce high art through detective fiction in a letter to his editor Blanche Knopf: "I'm one of the few … people moderately literate who take the detective story seriously. I don't mean that I necessarily take my own or anybody else's seriously—but the detective story as a form. Some day some body's going to make 'literature' of it, … and I'm selfish enough to have my hopes, however slight the evident justification may be" (Johnson 53). We can observe Hammett's distinctive hardboiled style in the opening paragraph of *The Maltese Falcon*, in which Spade is described entirely in terms of sharp angles: his "jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller, v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v *motif* was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from creases above a hooked nose" (3). Hammett is meticulous in his selection of details to describe Spade's face; however, unlike the unifying impulses found in Van Dine, the different components of Spade's portrait – from his jaw to his chin to his mouth to his nostrils to his eyes to his brows and finally to his nose – do not seem to cohere into a single image of his face. The hard edges seem to further fragment Spade's face into distinct parts, disassembling the whole into separate pieces. The surplus of details in this passage aggressively pulls apart Spade's face into a series of sharp V's. Even in his description of Spade's rival Casper Gutman, Hammett similarly provides a lengthy physical depiction of the villainous connoisseur in which the same details are repeated seemingly for no other purpose than added emphasis:

> The fat man was flabbily fat with bulbous pink cheeks and lips and chins and neck, with a great soft egg of a belly that was all his torso, and pendant cones for arms and legs. As he advanced to meet Spade all his bulbs rose and shook and fell separately with each step, in the

> manner of clustered soap-bubbles not yet released from the pipe through which they had been blown. His eyes, made small by fat puffs around them, were dark and sleek. (104)

The surplus of synonymous for Gutman's rotundity is astounding: the "fat man" is "flabbily flat" with "fat puffs" around his eyes, with a frame so "bulbous" that "all the bulbs" rise and shake when he walks. In this comically exaggerated re-envisioning of the decadent Wildean aesthete, Hammett clearly intends to portray Gutman's "soft egg of a belly" as the inverse image of Sam Spade's lean hardboiled edges. The most vivid detail in this passage is Hammett's comparison of Gutman's movements to "clustered soap-bubbles not yet released from the pipe through which they had been blown." The globular shape of soap-bubbles is indeed an apt simile for Gutman's roundness, but what is particularly distinct about Hammett's simile is the subtle hint that these bubbles could pop at any moment with just the slightest pressure. Gutman's large frame may appear to be a reflection of the considerable weight that he carries as the novel's villain, but his authority, as we will see, rests on precarious grounds.

The contrasting physiques of Spade and Gutman are also reflected in their opposing manners of speech. Gutman's rotundity can be seen as a physical expression of his excessively affected manner of speaking, whereas Spade's bodily leanness mimics his terse "straight talk." Gutman's speech consists predominantly of witty aphorisms, not unlike Wildean epigrams, in which he makes broad knowledge claims that are intended to demonstrate his superior wisdom. In his study of epigrammatic speech in Wilde and Chandler, Len Gutkin broadly defines epigrammatic speech as "any instance of condensed, memorable, or witty dialogue" that the speaker uses to jockey for social dominance. What is particularly fascinating about Gutman's form of speech is the way in which he positions himself as a figure of unquestionable authority. For instance, in the following selection of aphorisms, Gutman returns repeatedly to the same rhetorical construction of different measures of trustworthiness:

> I distrust a man that says when. If he's got to be careful not to drink too much it's because he's not to be trusted when he does. (105)
>
> I distrust a close-mouthed man. He generally picks the wrong time to talk and says the wrong things. Talking's something you can't do judiciously unless you keep in practice. (105)
>
> I don't trust a man that says he's not [looking out for himself]. And the man that's telling the truth when he says he's not I distrust most of all, because he's an ass and an ass that's going contrary to the laws of nature. (106)

Gutman's aphoristic mode of speech presents him as having superior mental reasoning. In other words, he projects himself as the only figure with totalizing knowledge, in the same way that Vance appears as figure who knows everything. The narrative therefore appears to set Gutman up as the only character who knows what the bird really is, or as he puts it, "I'm the only one in the whole wide sweet world who does [know]" (108). Hammett structures *The Maltese Falcon* according to the battle between Gutman and Spade to attain complete knowledge, and therefore sole possession, of the falcon: in Spade's words, "You know what it is. I know where it is" (109). Although Gutman intends for his aphorisms to bestow words of wisdom to those around him, the novel ultimately reveals that the excessiveness to his rhetorical speech in fact contains hints of artificiality and untrustworthiness.

In contrast to Gutman's roundabout, aphoristic speech, Spade's voice reflects Hammett's own mode of hardboiled writing. Spade is straightforward, laconic, and aggressively masculine. In one of several confrontations with Joel Cairo, Spade directly comments on his preference for terseness:

> Spade made an impatient gesture with head and hands. "What in hell else could I do? I thought you'd see that. If you pick a fight with her, or let her pick one with you, I've got to throw in with her. I don't know where the damned bird is. You don't. She does. How in hell are we going to get it if I don't play along with her?"
>
> Cairo hesitated, said dubiously: " You have always, I must say, a smooth explanation ready."
>
> Spade scowled. "What do you want me to do? Learn to stutter?" (96)

Unlike Gutman's verbosity, Spade's speech is both concise and deeply rational, attributes that manifest in his simple declaration, "I don't know where the damned bird is. You don't. She does." His use of informal slang confirms his position as a working-class tough guy, a position that is contrasted by Cairo's cultivated, effeminate appearance. Suspicious of and likely intimidated by Spade's verbal smoothness, Cairo insinuates that Spade's "smooth explanation" is a rhetorical ploy to hide the truth. Spade of course does not appreciate the insinuation, and his sarcastic suggestion that he should "learn to stutter" epitomizes the hardboiled detective's prioritization of plain, honest talk.

In its most exaggerated form, Hammett's crisp hardboiled style becomes so simplified that it verges on fragmentation. Early in the novel, for instance, Spade walks to an all-night drug-store to telephone his secretary Effie Perine. In a moment that typifies the hardboiled tone of masculine restraint, Spade breaks the news (not at all gently) to Effie that his partner Miles Archer has been killed:

> "Precious," he said into it a little while after he had given a number, "Miles has been shot. . . . Yes, he's dead. . . . Now don't get excited. . . . Yes. . . . You'll have to break it to Iva. . . . No, I'm damned if I will. You've got to do it. . . . That's a good girl. . . . And keep her away from the office. . . . Tell her I'll see her—uh—some time. . . .Yes but don't tie me up to anything. . . . That's the stuff. You're an angel. 'Bye." (16)

In this fragmented phone conversation, we can only hear Spade's side of the exchange. The elliptical nature of the dialogue (which literally uses ellipses to indicate the pauses when Effie is speaking on the other line) enacts Spade's mental and emotional detachment. His tone is almost curt in its abrupt announcement that, "Miles has been shot. … Yes he's dead." Spade again uses everyday slang ("Damned if I will") to assert his masculine authority, which verges on sexist condescension in the way he addresses Effie as "precious," "good girl," and "angel." Finally, Spade's detachment is encapsulated in his insistence that Effie not "tie [him] up to anything." Spade's desire to remain autonomous and free of any attachments speaks to the larger dynamics of the novel itself, which revolves around a single object that dictates the lives of nearly all the characters.

I want to examine the significance of this object, the coveted Maltese falcon, from two interrelated points: first, Hammett accentuates the mystery behind the falcon by accumulating an excess of historical facts surrounding the bird's true authenticity; this proliferation of details does not, however, lead to a complete account of its history, but rather emphasizes the fragmentary nature of all aspects of life. And second, although most of the characters in the novel are driven by the need to possess this rare falcon, Spade emerges as the only character who ultimately escapes the controlling dynamics of ownership. These additional forces of possession and ownership function very differently in Hammett than in Van Dine: as a wealthy aristocrat, Vance owns whatever suits his fancy because he lives in a socially stable world of class privilege; the characters in *The Maltese Falcon*, however, must constantly vie for possessions since no one can be trusted and even objects themselves are deceptive. When forgeries or criminals disrupt the status quo in Van Dine's novels, Vance is always able to restore the equilibrium. But in Hammett's novels, chaos and competition are the driving social and

economic forces. The only rational response is that of the hardboiled detective, who recognizes that possessions ultimately amount to nothing and the only thing he can count on is himself.

When Spade asks, "What's this bird, this falcon, that everybody's all steamed up about?" (86), he receives a characteristically vague answer from Brigid O'Shaughnessy—"a black figure, as you know, smooth and shiny" (87). This search for the bird's true identity and worth is the central question driving the plot of *The Maltese Falcon*. The obsessive search for the falcon begins with the mystery of its identity. Critics tend to read the Maltese falcon as a kind of iconic symbol.[15] Irving Malin describes the falcon as "the deity of the mysterious world," arguing that "the more we learn about it the more mysterious it becomes" (106) until its mystery is revealed to be an "untruth." Applying a semiotic reading to the novel, Douglas Torgerson builds on this idea of the falcon's general "untruth" by suggesting that the falcon is an "ambivalent figure" that is "both doubled and internally split" (203). This doubling emerges only in the final chapters of the novel when Gutman shaves away the enameled exterior of the bird to reveal its leaden core. Expecting to encounter a jeweled, golden interior, Gutman announces with dismay that "it's a fake," that the true falcon has been replaced by a bogus double. Until this point, the black exterior has been presented as a disguise to hide the real value, the underlying truth, of the bird. Moreover, it is assumed that only those who had *knowledge* of the falcon's historical past are able to look past its misleading surface appearance to recognize its internal worth. Gutman's possession of the falcon is therefore dependent on no one else knowing about what lies beneath its enameled surface. However, when the falcon turns out to be a forgery, the epistemological claims of which the characters have been so certain become emptied of validity. The true identity of the falcon thus evades detection due to the limitations and inaccessibility of accurate knowledge. In the following pages, I want to examine how Hammett accrues an excess of facts and clues surrounding the bird, details which, in the end, prove to be entirely false.

Not surprisingly, in Gutman's description of the history of the rare bird, he places a strong emphasis on "facts" and "knowledge." Although Gutman positions himself as the leading connoisseur on the falcon's true identity, the narrative constantly undercuts his claim to totalizing knowledge. To fully understand the intricacies of Hammett's attempt to destabilize the possibility of total knowledge and thereby debunk the figure of the connoisseur, it is necessary to track in detail what each character claims to know (and not know) about the falcon. Gutman begins by explaining to Spade that the "foot-high jeweled bird [was] made by Turkish slaves" (125). In 1530, Holy Roman Emperor Charles V grants Malta to a knightly order known as the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, one of the most powerful military institutions in the history of Christendom. In return, Emperor Charles asks for a tribute of one falcon each year. Instead of a mere live bird, the order sends Emperor Charles a "glorious golden falcon encrusted from head to foot with the finest jewels in their coffers. […] These are facts, historical facts, not schoolbook history, not Mr. Wells's history, but history nevertheless" (124). Gutman goes on to assure Spade that the historical "archives" of the Order are still at Malta, not "intact" but still containing "no less than three references that can't be to anything else but this jeweled falcon" (124). To further reassure Spade of the falcon's identity, Gutman lists two more texts: J. Delaville Le Roulx's *Les Archives de l'Order de Saint-Jean*, which contains an "oblique" reference to the bird, and Paoli's *Dell'origine ed instituto del sacro military ordine*, which has a "clear and unmistakable statement of the facts" (124). Gutman claims that the bird never made it to Emperor Charles because the pirate Barbarossa stole it and took it to Algiers: "That's a fact. That's a fact that the French historian Pierre Dan put in one of his letters from Algiers" (125). Gutman's insistence on the factual validity of his information becomes the measure of authenticity of the bird: it must exist because so

15 For additional analyses on the falcon's symbolism, see Thompson, G. *Hammett's Moral Vision*. San Francisco: Vince Emery Productions, 2007; and R. H. Miller. "Hammett's Physical Falcon, or What Exactly Did the Emperor Give?" *Studies in Popular Culture*. vol. 21, no. 2 (Oct 1998), pp. 45-52.

many people have referenced it. Spade of course sends his secretary Effie Perine to fact-check Gutman's account with her uncle, who is conveniently a historian and manages to verify at least the plausibility of the bird's existence (133, 139).

As his narrative continues, Gutman's certainty shades over into speculation. He speculates that during the Carlist War in France in the 1840s, a Carlist:

> […] *must have* brought it with him, but, whoever he was, it's *likely* he *knew nothing* about its real value. It had been—*no doubt* as a precaution during the Carlist trouble in Spain—painted or enameled over to look like *nothing more* than a fairly interesting black statuette. And in the *disguise*, sir, it was, you might say, kicked around Paris for seventy years by private owners and dealers *too stupid to see* what it was under the skin. (126, emphasis added)

Gutman's language here calls attention to the subtle gradations of knowledge (or lack thereof) associated with the falcon. Knowledge becomes a site of contestation between who knows what: the Carlist "*likely* knew nothing" and the private dealers who were "*too* stupid" to know. Eventually, the falcon's identity is brought to light when, in 1911, the Greek dealer, Charilaos Konstantinides finds the jeweled bird: "No thickness of enamel could *conceal* value from his eyes and nose. […] Charilaos was the man who traced most of its history and who identified it as what it actually was. I [Gutman] got wind of it and finally forced most of the history out of him" (126). Knowledge is presented as chain of information that passes from person to person. The acquisition of this information comes in part by chance (Gutman happens to "get wind" of the falcon's existence), and in part, through violence (Gutman "forces" the falcon's history from Chariloas).

Knowledge of the bird's worth is of course not merely based on aesthetic grounds of its jeweled beauty. While Gutman is characterized as a connoisseur who understands the beauty of the falcon, he is also motivated by monetary greed. Gutman continues to explain to Spade that Charilaos was in no hurry to "convert his find into money. He knew that—enormous as its intrinsic value was—a far higher, a terrific, price could be obtained for it once its authenticity was established *beyond doubt*" (126). Here, the bird's essence, its "intrinsic" worth, is presented as its exchange value in terms of how much money it will bring. To keep the bird safe, Charilaos had re-enameled the bird; it is, however, stolen from him: "I didn't believe anybody else knew what it was. […] the thief had simply taken the bird along with the rest of his plunder, not knowing what it was. Because I assure you that a thief who knew its real value would not burden himself with anything else" (127). Again, the emphasis here on the accessibility of knowledge is what allowed for possession of the bird: Gutman is convinced that the thief simply could not have been aware of its "real value." Gutman then traces the bird to a Constantinople suburb, at the home of Russian general Kemidov, who Gutman claims also "didn't know a thing about it. It was nothing but a black enameled figure to him" (127). The entire success of Gutman's plan to acquire the falcon depends on Kemidov knowing "nothing" about the black bird's real history.

The recurring question of how much the bird is worth highlights the characters' desire to possess the falcon in order to convert it into money. However, as McGurl argues, the "falcon's very pricelessness suggests that its value, if realized, would transcend the logic of exchange" (713). Hence, when Spade asks Gutman what the "maximum" price of the statue might be, Gutman "refuses to guess" because he "doesn't know. There's no telling how high it could go, sir, and that's the one and only truth about it" (130). Strangely, it becomes impossible to attribute a stable monetary value to the fetishized falcon. Its monetary value is so great that, on the one hand, no one can accurately estimate it, and on the other, its status as a "floating" currency is dependent on desire and knowledge of its identity.

If knowledge of the falcon's identity is the prerequisite for possession of the bird, who then can claim rightful ownership of it? Spade believes that the bird belongs to no one, but Gutman argues that "you might say it belonged to the King of Spain, but I don't see how you can honestly grant anybody else clear title to it—except by right of possession. An article of that value that has passed from hand to hand by such means is clearly the property of whoever can get hold of it" (128). Gutman's description of the history of the falcon in terms of its "passing from hand to hand" encapsulates the complex interrelationship between knowledge, identity, and possession in Hammett's novel. Only those who know of the falcon's identity have the "right of possession," simply because they were able to "get hold of it." Property becomes purely a question of whoever is *physically holding* the bird at a given point in history. Interestingly, the notion of having a "clear title" to the bird highlights a dual problem with the grail-like quest for the statue: first, the "title" to or ownership over the falcon is anything but "clear," and second, the bird's "title," its identifying label as the real Maltese falcon, is of course false.

The fact that the falcon passes from "hand to hand" participates in a larger pattern of hand motifs that recur throughout the novel. Torgerson has astutely observed that Hammett's repeated focus on hand gestures points to a "figure of force that presses in upon this world, to a figure that is paradoxically both outside and inside this world, constitutive of it as its organizing force" (206). When Gutman finally gets his hands on the rare bird, he seeks to confirm its authenticity by scraping away black enamel from the base and "exposing blackened metal beneath" and the "soft grey sheen of lead" (202). In the ensuing confusion over the fake bird, Cairo blames Gutman for tipping his hand in his attempt to buy the falcon from Kemidov, thereby leading the general to uncover the bird's real worth and replace it with a substitute. Gutman concedes that Kemidov has gotten the upper hand, so to speak, admitting that "yes, that is the Russian's hand, there's no doubt of it" (202). In this epistemological battle over who knows more, Kemidov has "no doubt" fooled Gutman and his gang. In a masterful reading of this climactic final scene, Torgerson points out that, "In this mystery, all the elaborate guises and deceptions, all the actions […], all the crimes and investigations occur in a space that has been organised by an invisible act of deception, a sleight of hand making its effects felt at a distance. Everyone has been misdirected by the unseen manoeuvres of the Russian's hand" (208).

To build on Torgerson's reading, I want to further argue that the motif of hands epitomizes the constantly fluctuating relationship between knowledge and possession. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the scene in which Spade holds, for the first time, the sought-after falcon with his own two hands:

> His fingers tore the wad apart and then he had the foot-high figure of a bird, black as coal and shiny where its polish was not dulled by wood-dust and fragments of excelsior.
>
> Spade laughed. He put a hand down on the bird. His wide-spread fingers had ownership in their curving. He put his other arm around Effie Perine and crushed her body against his. "We've got the damned thing, angel," he said.
>
> "Ouch!" she said, "you're hurting me."
>
> He took his arm away from her, picked the black bird up in both hands, and shook it to dislodge clinging excelsior. Then he stepped back holding it up in front of him and blew dust off it, regarding it triumphantly.
>
> Effie Perine made a horrified face and screamed, pointing at his feet.
>
> He looked down at his feet. His last backward step had brought his left food into contact with the dead man's hand, pinching a quarter-inch of flesh at a side of the palm between heel and floor. Spade jerked his foot away from the hand. (159)

This scene stages a literal passing of the falcon from the dead man's hand to Spade's hand. Reading this scene with the knowledge that the bird is a fake sheds an interesting light on the question of what constitutes true "right of possession." Spade clearly believes that he is in full possession of the real bird: his fingers have "ownership in their curving" and he declares triumphantly to Effie that "we've *got* the damned thing." Gutman defines possession of the falcon as "the property of whoever can *get hold* of it," and Spade is undoubtedly "holding" the black bird in "both hands." To what extent, then, is possession based on knowledge and what kind of information determines ownership? This scene presents a moment of *false* ownership, but Spade doesn't *know* yet that the falcon is a fake. Does his later knowledge of the fake falcon's true identity invalidate this earlier scene of triumphant possession? This scene also underscores the violence entailed in an act of possession. Spade is so enthralled to have the bird in his possession that he fails to realize he is stepping on the dead man's upturned hand. This moment of violence parallels the violent history of the bird itself. According to Gutman's historical account, the original golden falcon was already a substitute for the live bird that Emperor Charles demanded. What Gutman of course passes over in his attempt to demystify the falcon's identity is the fact that it is a product of slave labor. The Order had looted the Sarcens and taken "spoils of gems, precious metals, silks, ivories—the cream of the cream of the East. That is history, sir" (124). In turn, these precious gems are encrusted onto the golden bird, which becomes a symbol of the Order's wealth, power and domination over an entire civilization. As Torgerson puts it, "the true Maltese falcon in its outwardly glorious appearance does not reveal, but instead conceals, its history as a record of pain and misery" (212). What is interesting is the *fake* falcon wields an immeasurable degree of power in the novel as long as its identity as a forgery remains *unknown*. Similar to the way in which Gutman ignores the labor behind the creation of the real falcon, a forgery "invalidates the necessity of labor, generating money not from 'authentic work,' but simply from nothing" (Malton 13). Although the fake falcon has no coherent identity or integral worth, it gains value based on its *appearance* as the real bird.

Knowledge thus seems to work in opposing directions. On the one hand, the *fake* falcon is valuable based on the knowledge of the existence of the real bird. On the other, as soon *real* knowledge of the falcon's fake status is revealed, its value becomes meaningless. Knowledge simultaneously conceals and reveals identity, bestowing and destroying value. In contrast to Van Dine's desire for unity based on an aesthetics of knowledge, Hammett ultimately refuses to present a stable, unified epistemological base. The falcon turns out not to be an accurate register of worth; and the fact that the real falcon never appears seems to confirm the irrelevance of the original itself. As Aviva Briefel has noted, "the moment the fatal word 'forgery' is pronounced [the artwork's] defects start into prominence… and we actually see the object as less and less beautiful" (176). Similarly, Dennis Dutton argues that, "When we learn that the kind of achievement an art object involves has been radically misrepresented to us, it is not as though we have learned a new fact about some familiar object of aesthetic attention. To the contrary, insofar as its position as a work of art is concerned, it is no longer the same object" (176). Briefel's conception of the diminishing beauty of the forgery (despite the fact that the object has not lost its original beauty) and Dutton's argument that the misrepresented object suddenly appears to no longer be the same object can be applied in interesting ways to Hammett's forged Maltese falcon. When Gutman finally holds the coveted bird in his hands, he cries out in triumph, "It's it" (201). In this moment, the pronoun "it" of course refers to the same subject, the real falcon. However, as soon as Gutman realizes that the bird is a forgery, the construction "it's it" acquires new meaning. The first "it" refers to the fake bird, whereas the second "it" refers to the real bird (if it indeed even exists). By using the same pronoun to refer to two essentially different objects, Hammett enacts a complete breakdown of knowledge in which even the syntactic structure of the sentence itself does not hold up and ultimately refers to nothing.

Beyond the fact that the value of the falcon has completely changed, what this exposure of falcon additionally reveals is Gutman's utter failure as a connoisseur to accurately identify the falcon's worth. When the bird is discovered to be a fake, Cairo violently lashes out at Gutman: "You bungled it! […] You and your stupid attempt to buy it from him! You fat fool! You let him know it was valuable and he found out how valuable and made a duplicate for us! No wonder we had so little trouble stealing it! No wonder he was so willing to send me off around the world looking for it! You imbecile! You bloated idiot!" (202). This tirade against Gutman's stupidity and lack of foresight shows that despite his claims to total knowledge, Gutman in fact knows no more than the rest of the characters. More generally, Gutman's failure suggests that the figure of the connoisseur has no authority within this social world.

Even Spade himself, despite his rejection of connoisseurship, still never succeeds entirely. For all his slickness and hardboiled smoothness, he has even less access to a totalizing grasp of the situation. If we return to the scene of Spade's possession of the falcon, this moment appears to be the only time in the novel when Spade finally has the upper hand: he is in sole possession of the one art object that everyone has been after. But just a few chapters later, this moment of triumph is rendered completely false. Spade's temporary possession of the falcon would initially seem to place him in the same failed position as Gutman. However, whereas Gutman reacts to the fake falcon by announcing his return to Constantinople to resume his hopeless quest, Spade reaffirms his cynical detachment by deciding to turn Brigid in for the murder of Miles. The hardboiled detective thus emerges as the only figure who understands and accepts the brutality and randomness of life. We can see this most clearly in Spade's fascination with the story of Flitcraft, which comes closest to symbolizing Hammett's aesthetic philosophy. Flitcraft was a real-estate agent who mysteriously abandoned his life after almost being killed by a falling lead beam: "The life he knew was a clean orderly sane responsible affair. Now a falling beam had shown him that life was fundamentally none of these things. […] What disturbed him was the discovering that in sensibly ordering his affairs he had got out of step, and not into step, with life" (64). Flitcraft's rejection of an orderly life represents Hammett's own aesthetic approach to the novel in that his narratives are also not structured according to a well-ordered plotline.

The detective novel is centered on the process of reconstructing an event that has already taken place outside of the narrative frame and is therefore motivated by the narrative desire to find out "what happens next." Van Dine answers this narrative drive by presenting a story that is as perfectly constructed as possible. His novels become closed systems in which the restricted narrative economy can be summed up in a list of itemized facts, all relevant and important to the narrative whole. While his didacticism and excessive attention to clues end up going against his own artistic ambitions, Van Dine nonetheless operates under the belief that if his novels provide enough details, the result will be a complete picture. Hammett, on the other hand, creates a narrative in which the more the characters attempt to re(construct) the story of the falcon, the more they expose their ignorance. Hammett's novel produces a dismantling of reality through its conscious refusal to resolve its excessive facts into a neatly arranged pattern. I argue that Hammett ultimately presents a new aesthetics for the detective novel in which the unpredictability of life is countered only by the hardboiled detective's autonomy and detachment. Because Spade expects the unexpected, he is never surprised by random falling beams.

CHAPTER TWO

"In and out of rooms":
Décor and Plotting in Raymond Chandler

> "An affair with Raymond Chandler, what a joy! Not because of the mangled bodies and the marinated cops and hints of eccentric sex, but because of his interest in furniture. He knew that furniture could breathe, could feel, not as we do but in a way more muffled, like the world *upholstery*, with its overtones of mustiness and dust, its bouquet of sunlight on aging cloth or of scuffed leather on the backs and seats of sleazy office chairs."
>
> —Margaret Atwood

Whereas Hammett's pragmatic, masculine Sam Spade stands as a corrective to Van Dine's refined, effeminate Philo Vance, Raymond Chandler's detective Philip Marlowe is a surprising amalgamation of these two opposing figures. In this chapter, I argue that while Chandler also positions the American detective in relation to aesthetics and connoisseurship, he forges a new hybrid social type in the form of the "hardboiled aesthete." Like Hammett, Chandler creates an American hero defined by his autonomy and individuality. Philip Marlowe is often said to represent the quintessentially stoic or chivalric private detective. Marlowe smokes Camels and enjoys his whiskey. He is a loner who lives according to fixed principles, and who works in unembellished surroundings, with "the five green filing cases, the shabby rust-red rug, the half-dusted furniture, and the not too clean net curtains" (*BS* 271), representing the extent of his office décor. Nonetheless, in spite of his hardboiled exterior, Marlowe has a discerning eye for beauty and a cultivated sense of taste that seems to mirror Vance's expertise in art. He is both tough and refined, contemptuous of aesthetes yet appreciative of fine art. While operating within the constraints of the detective genre, Marlowe's first-person narration constantly digresses into extensive descriptions of interior and exterior spaces that go well beyond the bare necessities of scene-setting. Readers of detective fiction who come to Chandler expecting another fast-paced hardboiled story are thus frequently surprised by Marlowe's attunement to art objects, architectural styles, and trends in fashion and interior decoration. Even those most critical of Chandler's sloppy plots cannot ignore his ability to create vivid backdrops. Chandler's "talent is visual and external," writes one reviewer, "He is under the restriction of the visual, and the unseen remains unsaid. But what Chandler does see, he says brilliantly. If he cannot fill in his characters, he can certainly fill in the walls behind them. Out of his catalogue descriptions, his inventories and lists, he makes an atmosphere that has more tension and excitement than his brittle plots" (Craig 195).

Although Marlowe's aesthetic sensibility constantly results in endless professions of his own personal taste, his knowledge of aesthetic value is not a function of class, but rather an extension of

his individuality. Unlike Vance's aristocratic background and unlimited income, Marlowe shares the same working-class status as Spade and is deeply suspicious of the social elite. But his familiarity with esoteric knowledge creates certain glaring contradictions, leading one critic to suggest that Marlowe "simply knows too much for a detective. […] Marlowe discourses on or refers to the Dalai Lama, St. Swinthin's Day, Electra complexes, chenille, point lace, pewter, Roman senators, Hessian leather, griffins, gimbals, arabesques, gems, French drip coffee, Richelieu, frozen capital, Pierrot girls, and Cremona violins" (Marling 93). This extensive list would seem to suggest that Marlowe displays the same level of expertise and connoisseurship as Vance. However, whereas Van Dine valorizes a totalizing system of knowledge and Hammett rejects all forms of knowing, Chandler is careful to distinguish knowing and appreciating aesthetic value from the corruption of buying and having. In spite of his refined taste, Marlowe maintains his autonomy and his hardboiled masculinity by consciously renouncing all forms of ownership, a renouncement that speaks to his class (he never buys expensive things, even if he could afford them), his gender (a "real" man needs only the bare essentials to survive), and his identity (his possessions do not reflect or define his sense of self). To describe Marlowe's hybrid status, I use the term "hardboiled aesthete" to refer to the tough guy attitude that he inherits from Spade, as well as to emphasize that while he recognizes aesthetic value (as an aesthete would), his knowledge is never complete (he is not a connoisseur of Vance's caliber, nor would he want to be).

Chandler's complicated relationship toward aesthetics, as well as his distaste for materialism, is, first and foremost, a reflection of the rapidly changing socio-economic environment and rise of mass culture in early-twentieth-century America. Los Angeles, the setting for all of Chandler's detective novels, experienced an unprecedented population explosion and industrial growth in the 1920s and '30s. When Chandler first arrived in 1912, L.A. County was home to 500,000 residents, but by the time he stopped working for the Dabney Oil Company two decades later to start writing detective fiction, the population had reached 2.2 million. Frederic Jameson describes postwar L. A. as "a kind of microcosm and forecast of the country as a whole: a new centerless city, in which the various classes have lost touch with each other because each is isolated in his own geographical compartment" (69). Jameson explains that, unlike the clearly-structured, vertical hierarchy of the nineteenth-century European apartment building portrayed in novels like Zola's *Pot-Bouille*, with the wealthy inhabitants on the lower floors and the working class segregated to the top floors, Los Angeles "spread[s] out horizontally, a flowing apart of the elements of the social structure" (69). Due to the commercial sprawl of the new urban metropolis, the detective emerges as the only figure with access to all the "separate and isolated parts" (Jameson 69) of the city and the ability to connect these disparate spaces together.

The post-industrial Los Angeles of Chandler's novels appears primarily as a city corrupted by an excessive consumerism and saturated with mass advertisement. Chandler expresses his disgust of marketing strategies based on selling and packaging "newness" as the measure of a product's desirability: "We live in an economy of overproduction and fantastic advertisement campaigns are waged to make us think that anything six months old belongs with the Pharaohs" (*Letters* 450). According to Jameson, the rise in advertising during this period allowed new objects to be exposed quickly and easily to the public through "around-the-clock stimuli" (78). As a result, an artificial need is created in consumers to purchase an object less for its inherent worth than for the symbolic satisfaction that comes with owning and displaying that object. Labels and brand-names become markers of wealth and social standing, and the value of commercialized products is thus determined both by their relation to the consumer (not to the maker), and their ability to elevate the owner's status. With the proliferation of commodities in the mass market, Chandler is concerned that the "semi-literate" reading public will be unable to distinguish quality over mere quantity, and complains that "it is obvious that what is called 'significant literature' will only be sold to this public by exactly

the same methods as are used to sell toothpaste, cathartics and automobiles" (*LN* 69).[16] Chandler fears that the "high velocity" at which so-called "art" is being published, coupled with the growing number of mass readers, has "merely increased the adeptness with which substitutes can be packaged and produced" (*LN* 978). Given Chandler's distaste toward American consumerism, it is therefore not surprising that he would emphasize Marlowe's outright rejection of materialism.

While it is not difficult to trace Marlowe's anti-consumerism back to Chandler's personal concerns about the mass market, what is less obvious is the source of Chandler's inspiration for his portrayal of Marlowe's aesthetic taste. I want to suggest that his interest in aestheticism originates from two sources: his early days working as a writer in Europe, and his lifelong fascination with the realist fiction of Henry James. When he first started reading and studying detective fiction, Chandler was already well into his forties, and like his contemporaries Van Dine and Hammett, always somewhat embarrassed of earning a living in pulp literature. His literary career was not launched, as one might assume, in the United States with the publication of his first short story in *Black Mask*, but rather began in Edwardian England roughly twenty years earlier. In 1895, at the age of seven, Chandler moved from Chicago to London, where he would later enter the Dulwich College Preparatory School to be educated in classic literature and raised on Latin and Greek. These early formative years in England ensured that Chandler would remain an Anglophile even after thirty years of living in America. At seventeen, Chandler spent six months in Paris, learning French and leading a bohemian life on the Boulevard Saint Michel before moving to Munich to study German for the civil service exams. Three years later, in 1908, Chandler began his writing career as R. T. Chandler, at one point working as a reviewer for *The Academy*, a literary journal in London which was then owned by Oscar Wilde's lover, Lord Alfred Douglas. It was also around this time that Chandler heard George Bernard Shaw lecture in London on the "art for art's sake" movement.

The irony of Chandler's first years as a young writer is that he practiced precisely what he later preached against. On the one hand, he held an antagonistic relationship to high culture and overly-refined literature. For instance, in his 1911 essay "The Literary Fop," he mercilessly attacks the cleverness of decadent writing. Describing the figure of the literary fop as "the product of refined idleness," Chandler pokes fun at his life of superficial pleasure that allows him to "loll in rose-gardens and toy with Watteau fans" (*LN* 62). Chandler goes on to complain that literary fops have even gone so far as to turn "art into a matter of formulas," since "being without any true originality, they make some unneeded refinement their substitute, offering half-tones instead of colours, forms instead of ideas, verbiage instead of words, and moods instead of theories" (*LN* 64). Despite its harsh criticism of affected writing, however, this essay is itself written in what Chandler later admits is "an intolerable preciousness of style" (*Letters* 171). Looking back at this time when he "was an elegant young thing" in England, Chandler would describe the essays he wrote for *The Academy* as a "frustrated attempt to be brilliant about nothing" (*Letters* 36). Moreover, during this first venture into a literary career, Chandler was also, by his own admission, a second-rate poet writing the same kind of pretentious drivel that he would mock in his later years. It is somewhat hard to believe that the same author of *The Long Goodbye* could have composed such mannered romantic poetry, as "A Lament for Youth" or "The Bed of Roses." In many ways, Chandler's early obsession with clever decadent writing mirrors Van Dine's fascination with Wilde and British aestheticism; but unlike Van Dine who carried his love of Wilde into his detective writing, Chandler would outgrow this "arty and intellectual phase" (*Letters* 151) by the time he created Philip Marlowe.

When Chandler began writing detective fiction, instead of returning to the decadent texts that occupied his youth, he drew inspiration from French and English realist literature, particularly the

[16] References to Chandler's *Later Novels and Other Writings* will be abbreviated as *LN*.

works of James. In a letter to his publisher dated December 4th, 1949, Raymond Chandler lists that such works as "*Carmen* as Merimée wrote it, *Hérodias*, *Un Coeur Simple*, *The Captain's Doll*, *The Spoils of Poynton*, *Madame Bovary*, [and] *The Wings of the Dove* [...], these are all perfect" (*Letters* 204). While it may seem natural for a rising detective novelist to regard Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* or *Un Coeur Simple* as "classics that […] do something that will never be done as well again" (*Letters* 205), it is unusual to find Henry James's relatively minor novel *The Spoils of Poynton* included in such a list. In his introduction to *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950), Chandler again mentions his admiration not only for Henry James but also for this particular novel, asserting that "it is a good deal more than unlikely that any writer now living will produce … a more graceful and elegant evocation than *The Spoils of Poynton*" (*LN* 1019). Although critics have agreed on the peers and contemporaries within the genre of detective fiction that influenced Chandler's writing, no sustained attention has been given to this particular list. More specifically, Chandler's abiding interest in Henry James, whom he affectionately calls "my revered HJ" (*Letters* 47) in his letters to his editor, is acknowledged only in passing, if at all. What is most striking about Chandler's list of influences is of course his repeated praise of James's 1897 novel, *The Spoils of Poynton*. Generally regarded as one of James's lesser works, *The Spoils of Poynton* centers around an ethical struggle over the ownership of the valuable artifacts housed at Poynton. The significance of Chandler's preference for this particular novel offers, I argue, the most suggestive way of understanding Chandler's portrayal of Marlowe as a hardboiled aesthete.

Marlowe steps away from his role as hardboiled detective and adopts the position of aesthete whenever he walks into a room and comments on his surroundings. In the same vein as Van Dine's descriptions of Vance's art collection and Hammett's detailed attention to Spade's face, Chandler also devotes copious time and space in his novels to itemizing furniture, drapery, ceramics, lighting, and every other aspect of interior decoration imaginable. Marlowe's aesthetic taste, in and of itself, is not necessarily as out-of-place in a hardboiled detective novel as one would initially assume. The Greek word *aesthesis* means perception, so in the primary sense of the term, to be aesthetic is to be perceptive. In this respect, all detectives are aesthetes. However, Marlowe's aesthetic observations have a tendency to go against the standard conventions of the detective genre whenever his room descriptions directly interfere with the unfolding of the murder storyline. Chandler admits that when he first started writing detective fiction, he had absolutely no talent for it. "I couldn't get characters in and out of rooms," he writes, "They lost their hats and so did I" (*Letters* 187). This remark not only hints at the excessive amount of attention that Chandler pays to rooms and interior decoration, but also alludes to his unusual writing process. Using a method he called "cannibalizing," Chandler would mine his early short stories, previously published in pulp magazines like *Black Mask*, for material to piece together into novel-length works. Whole descriptions of rooms are thus lifted almost word for word from his early short stories and inserted piecemeal into his later novels. In fact, rather than reducing the number of rooms through which his characters have to navigate, Chandler adds even more descriptions of objects and interiors. It seems, then, that the characters in his later fiction have even more trouble getting "in and out of rooms" than ever before.

In the previous chapter, I argue that whereas Van Dine's extensive listing of details attempts (but fails) to integrate everything back into the plotline, Hammett's descriptions consciously disassembles details into fragmentary parts that refuse to cohere into a larger image. The function of Chandler's room description falls somewhere in between these two narrative extremes. On the level of style, Chandler's ornate descriptions of décor tend to sidetrack or halt the forward movement of the plot. I argue, however, that these digressions or forestallings allow Chandler to expand the formal restraints of the hardboiled detective novel. By taking detours from the storyline to attend to the beauty of a particular room, Chandler uses these descriptive acts to perform moments of stylistic control through an incorporation of excessive (but aesthetically significant) details. Sharing Hammett's disregard for a cohesive, tightly contained plotline, Chandler structures his novels not according to a

trail of clues, but through a series of room descriptions that produce an aesthetic consistency akin to Van Dine's ideal of narrative unity without relying on contrived puzzle-solving strategies. In order to understand Chandler's motivation to aestheticize the American detective novel through his use of description, I want to begin by examining how James stages the aesthetic and moral debate surrounding the art objects in *The Spoils of Poynton* and why this novel would resonate so strongly with Chandler's own representation of décor in his hardboiled fiction.

"the gem of the collection"

When critics discuss James's relationship to aestheticism during the age of consumption, they tend to focus on works featuring art collectors like Count Camillo in "The Last of the Valerii," or aesthete figures such as Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* and Gabriel Nash in *The Tragic Muse*. It is thus rare for *The Spoils of Poynton* to enter the discussion, even though it was written at a pivotal moment in James's career after his failure on the stage. With the success of Wilde's *An Ideal Husband* still on his mind, James set out to write *The Spoils of Poynton* as his answer to both the threat of commodification and the valorization of the *l'art pour l'art* slogan extolled by the Aesthetic Movement. The working title for *The Spoils of Poynton* was initially *The House Beautiful*, which James borrowed from the popular series of lectures that Wilde gave in America on the cultivation of the aesthetic lifestyle through interior design. However, even though this Wildean title places *The Spoils of Poynton* within the discourse of interior decorating, James's foregrounding of rooms and art objects is used not to promote but to critique the aesthetic craze of *fin de siècle* decadence. Distinguishing aesthetic appreciation from what he sees as the moral corruption of ownership, James is invested in questioning the moral stakes involved in securing ownership of the art objects at Poynton. I show that James's treatment of objects in relation to questions of possession and consumerism becomes the template for Chandler's own rejection of ownership and mass consumption in his detective fiction.

In his study of James's position in relation to Wildean aestheticism, Freedman suggests that it is no coincidence that the American response to the British aesthetic craze focused on the reform of interior decoration: "The increasing wealth of the upper and upper-middle classes, the decline of republican ideals in the aftermath of the Civil War, the ebbing of the fear of luxury evident earlier in the century, and the continuing power of the cult of domesticity combined to create a wide-scale assent to the proposition that the 'House Beautiful' was something to be avidly sought and painstakingly created, that the home itself could and should be seen as a work of art" (106). During the last three decades of the nineteenth century, the increasing circulation and availability of art objects for mass consumption transformed the ideology and practice of aesthetic appreciation, giving rise to a new passion for collecting. Within the American context, Daniel Horowitz identifies a major shift "from the world of the producer based on the values of self-denial and achievement, to a consumer culture that emphasized immediate satisfaction and the fulfillment of the self through gratification and indulgence" (xxvii). As cheap art objects became more accessible to the public, the process of selecting, acquiring, and displaying art functioned as a way to demonstrate aesthetic refinement and social distinction. The turn-of-the-century thus experienced a craze for interior decoration as the rising middle class took advantage of the new purchasing power made possible by industrialization. In his most recent book, Simone Francescato notes that reactions were mixed among artists and intellectuals on this new democratization of art: "Some, for instance, deplored the negative effects of consumption as bringing about a degeneration to the field of the arts, and reaffirmed the traditional elitist character of artistic production and appreciation; others instead embraced consumption as a possible new way for the masses not only to gain access to and enjoy the existing masterpieces, but also to produce new

forms of art" (12). James's attitude toward the rise of commodity culture fell much closer to the former group than the latter. In his essay "The Future of the Novel" (1899), James complains that "the flood [of novels] at present swells and swells, threatening the whole field of letters, as would often seem, with submersion. …The book, in the Anglo-Saxon world, is almost everywhere, and it is in the form of the voluminous prose fable that we see it penetrate easiest and farthest. Penetration appears really to be directly aided by mere mass and bulk" (*Art* 242). By the time consumerism reaches its height in 1930s America, Chandler predicts with dread that "it won't be long now until somebody invents a machine to write novels" (*Letters* 72). James was highly contemptuous of modern readers who placed too much importance on the ending of a story. In "The Art of Fiction," James disapproves of how "many people […] read novels as an exercise in skipping" (*Criticism* 168). Such readers assume that a good novel "depends on a 'happy ending'" and want the story to be so "full of incident […] that [they] shall wish to jump ahead, to see who was the mysterious stranger, and if the stolen will was ever found, and shall not be distracted from this pleasure by any tiresome analysis or 'description'"(*Criticism* 168). The process of reading is merely an "exercise" in reaching the sought-after conclusion: "The 'ending' of a novel is, for many persons, like that of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices." These readers not only regard the "artist in fiction" as a "meddler" who interferes with their desire for dessert, but would also "all agree that the 'artistic' idea" is "host[ile] to a happy ending" and "might even, in some cases, render any ending at all impossible" (*Criticism* 168). To defend against this modern tendency to read only for the ending, James seems to allude here to the possibility that the "artistic" novel would compensate for these distasteful mass reading habits by omitting the ending that the story seems to be moving toward, a suggestion which would anticipate Chandler's remark that the ideal mystery story would be missing an ending.

Alarmed by the growth of mass-produced books and an undiscerning reading public for whom "taste is but an obscure, confused, immediate instinct" (*Criticism* 243), James consciously set himself in opposition to commodity culture, particularly to the commodification of art and literature. His concern that the turn-of-the-century novel was in crisis due to what he called the "vulgarisation of literature" (*Criticism* 245) led to subsequent efforts to elevate the novel to the status of high art by emphasizing a more concentrated unity in narrative form.[17] In his *Prefaces* to the New York edition of his works (1907-9), James criticizes the "loose baggy monsters" of the nineteenth-century and calls for a stricter formal economy of the novel that would produce a more aesthetically satisfying "tight place" (*Art* 82). One of James's most famous metaphors for achieving this tighter novelistic structure can be located in his spatialized house of fiction. Unlike Poe's architectural metaphor of plot as a building with no misplaced bricks, James's house of fiction is based not on plot, but on point of view. In the house of fiction, each observer stands behind a window "watching the same show, but one seeing

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[17] Despite James's outspoken criticism of mass culture, there has been a tendency among critics to argue that James in fact drew much of his aesthetic material from commodity consumption. For instance, Jean-Christophe Agnew has argued in his influential account of James's "consuming vision" that the economic processes of possession, acquisition, and commodification lie at the very center of James's aesthetic. Agnew does, however, risk conflating the aesthetic object with the commodity by viewing James's work as wholly complicit in the culture of consumption from which it claims to recoil. In response to Agnew, Richard Adams and Bill Brown have suggested that while James recognized literature as unavoidably implicated in commodity culture, he also sought to counteract what he saw as the dangers of commodification by using his novels as a way to reform mass culture. Richard Adams argues that James presents the market economy in terms of stability and permanence, instead of fluidity and exchangeability (see "The Proprietary Vision of Henry James," American Literature 71, 1999), while Bill Brown uses the figure of the collector to suggest that commodities can offer intimacy between people rather than lead to social alienation (see "A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature," Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). See also: Thomas Otten's *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006; and Bradford A. Booth's "Henry James and the Economic Motif," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 8, 1953.

more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white" (*Art* 46). For James, every point of view is unique and interesting when it offers "a direct impression of life" (*Criticism* 170). Since life is "all inclusion and confusion," James sees art as "all discrimination and selection" (*Spoils* 23) and the artist's task is therefore to impose a compositional form that confines and delimits the "splendid waste" of life. Arguing that the art of the novel is the "search for form," James rejects first-person narration, which he felt was "foredoomed to looseness" (*Art* 320), in favor of third-person narration because, as Dorothy Hale elaborates, the latter "promotes the illusion of formal integrity and representational economy. Third-person narration avoids the first-person narrator's unanchored commentary upon the story world by making such descriptions functions of the story world itself: background descriptions or exposition thus unites form and content by carrying the added value of character revelation" (25). James's preference for third-person narration thus allowed him to make the novel appear more formally composed and the "added value of character revelation" further enabled James to meet his final requirement for the composition of the novel: "that it be sincere" (*Criticism* 182). By insisting on the "sublime economy of art," James ultimately hoped to defend against the "flood" of mass-produced novels through a more disciplined conception of the novel as an aesthetic form.

In his Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, James discusses the early "germ" of his story, saying that "one thing was 'in it' […]: The sharp light it might project on that most modern of our current passions, the fierce appetite for the upholsterer's and joiner's and brazier's work, the chairs and tables, the cabinets and presses, the material odds and ends, of the more labouring ages" (26). James's use of the word "labouring" here suggests that he is making a distinction between pre- and post-industrial modes of production. According to David Lodge, as "industrial techniques of mass-production made domestic furnishings and ornaments cheaply and plentifully available, the upper-classes could only demonstrate their superior status in this sphere in two ways – either by conspicuous consumption of the products of the new technology, or by collecting artefacts of pre-industrial times, and preferably, foreign countries" (14). In *The Spoils of Poynton*, Mona Brigstock's cheap "household art" (224) at Waterbath embodies the former mode of display through conspicuous consumption, whereas Mrs. Gereth's tasteful décor at Poynton represents the latter, more refined, form of acquisition through art collecting. James thus directly addresses "that most modern of our current passions," the collecting of antiques and works of art from "more labouring ages," by staging *Spoils* as a morally-charged struggle for the ownership of Mrs. Gereth's valuable possessions. In response to the collecting mania of the *fin de siècle* period, James presents Mrs. Gereth as an aesthetic genius yet ultimately demonstrates that her amassing of *objets* is just as problematic as Mona's blind consumerism. Even James's decision to change the title of the novel from *House Beautiful* to *The Spoils of Poynton* signals a shift in focus from the *aesthetics* of interior decoration to the *moral* struggle for possession of the objets d'art.

In his Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, James writes that he had originally intended to use the objects of Poynton as the center of consciousness for the novel before realizing that space would not permit this since the things are not "directly articulate." Instead, the novel is told through the consciousness of Fleda Vetch, the only character with an "irrepressible appreciation" (31) for both the aesthetic and the moral worth of the objets d'art at Poynton. Apart from a few brief visits to London and various train stations, spatial movement in the novel is mostly confined to the domestic spheres of four distinct houses: Waterbath, Poynton, Ricks, and West Kensington. The novel opens with the "imbecilities of decoration" and "esthetic misery" (35) of Waterbath, home to the wealthy, but philistinic Brigstocks. Mrs. Gereth recognizes that with access to such material as Waterbath, she would have "struck the [right] note" and produced a harmony of sounds by taking "the fine hint of nature." But so little have the Brigstocks listened to nature that Mrs. Gereth expects "the nightingales [to] sing out of tune" (35). James presents the Brigstocks' poor taste as a direct product of commodity culture:

> The house was bad in all conscience, but it might have passed if they had only let it alone. This saving mercy was beyond them; they had smothered it with trumpery ornament and scrapbook art, with strange excrescences and bunch draperies, with gimcracks that might have been keepsakes for maid-servants and nondescript conveniences that might have been prizes for the blind. (37-38)

The description of Waterbath should recall Thorstein Veblen's influential text, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), in which he first coined and critiqued conspicuous consumption. For Veblen, the study of the leisure class is above all a study of waste: individuals acquire and maintain their social positions by openly displaying what they can afford to waste. In the case of the Brigstocks, there is a harsh condemnation of objects that are showy but worthless (the "trumperies," "gimcracks," and modern "conveniences") as well as those that are superfluous or excessive (the "excrescences" and "bunch" draperies). Moreover, the "varnish, something advertised and smelly, with which everything was smeared" (38) is clearly presented as a product of post-industrial technology, emphasizing how the Brigstocks' habit of "smothering" Waterbath arises from their excessive consumerism. It is even possible to hear hints of Philip Marlowe's voice in this description of the decorative failings of the Brigstocks, not only in the gruff alliterations – the excrescences, the gimcracks, the bunchiness of the draperies – but even in the rather Chandleresque wisecrack that closes the description (the "prizes for the blind"). Mrs. Gereth's greatest worry is of course the prospect of the "horrors [the Brigstocks] would perpetrate" (45) if Poynton fell into their possession. Fleda imagines Mona installing a winter garden, "something glazed and piped, on iron pillars, with untidy plants and cane sofas; a shiny excrescence on the noble face of Poynton" (55), while Mrs. Gereth pictures the Brigstocks replacing her carefully collected objets d'art with "pieces answerable to some vulgar modern notion of the "handy." Above all she saw in advance […] the abominations they would mix up with them – the maddening relics of Waterbath, the little brackets and pink vases, the sweepings of bazaars, the family photographs and illuminated texts, the 'household art' and household piety of Mona's hideous home" (45). The key failing of the Brigstocks' decorating practices resides in the fact that the objects they collect are primarily mass-produced rather than handcrafted. More generally, the danger that the Brigstocks' cheaply-made objects will contaminate the beauty of Poynton corresponds to what James saw as the larger threat of the commodification of art. The vulgar "household art" of Waterbath thus leads Mrs. Gereth to bemoan the fact that "the world is full of cheap gimcracks of this awful age, and they're thrust at one at every turn" (53), a lament that reflects James' own concern that the "mass and bulk" of commodified art will destroy everything of true aesthetic worth.

After the itemized description of Waterbath, we would expect similar attention to be given to Poynton, but, as many critics have noted, apart from a few specified objects such as the Maltese cross, the art objects at Poynton remain noticeably obscure, and James is "distinctly weak about the specifications of one of the most beautiful houses in England" (Tintner 440). Bill Brown points out that the things at Poynton hardly appear in the novel's visual register.[18] Poynton is awash in overarching characterization, but its decor is "a matter of aura, not artifacts" (Brown 226). In contrast to the cheap, mass-produced gimcracks at Waterbath, the *objets d'art* at Poynton are handcrafted by artisans from foreign countries:

[18] For a different reading of the non-visual register of *Spoils*, see Thomas Otten's "*The Spoils of Poynton* and the Properties of Touch," which offers a tactile examination of *Spoils* to show how the novel repeatedly focuses on the sense of touch, rather than vision, and how objects are described in relation to the hand.

> It [Poynton] was written in great syllables of colour and form, the tongues of other countries and the hands of rare artists. It was all France and Italy with their ages composed to rest. […] Mrs. Gereth left [Fleda] to finger fondly the brasses that Louis Quinze might have thumbed, to sit with Venetian velvets just held in a loving palm, to hang over cases of enamel and pass and repass before cabinets. There were not many pictures – the panels and the stuffs were themselves the picture; and in all the great wainscoted house there was not an inch of pasted paper. (48)

To return to James's description in the Preface of the collector's "fierce appetite" for works of art from "more labouring ages," we can see that in this first description of Poynton, Mrs. Gereth displays an appreciation for pre-industrial, handmade relics. The word "written" is an obvious pun on ekphrasis, the writing down of visual artworks, except that James resists describing these individual items, and instead skims vaguely over Poynton's various surfaces, evoking a rich atmosphere of wrought metals and lush fabrics. His use of alliteration throughout the passage ("finger fondly," "Venetian velvet," "pass and repass") provides an additional aural dimension to the description, calling our attention away from the purely visual by suggesting that Poynton's "thick, coloured air" cannot be pinned down to any single identifiable object. The general effect of this obscuring of specific objects is to prohibit access to the physicality of things, which implies that the aura of Poynton can only be generated through non-visual senses, through "suggestion rather than enumeration" (Brown 226). To counteract the over-aestheticizing tendency of decadent novels, James draws on the aesthete's love of surfaces while simultaneously refusing to provide any particularized details: we are not told the precise color of the Venetian velvet, or the degree of opacity of the enamel cases, or whether the tint of the brasses is warm or cool. Such details would of course be essential to decadent novels, but James carefully avoids reducing the objects at Poynton to their mere physical attributes and, by doing so, rejects the cataloguing impulse of decadent novels.

The clearest indication of James's departure from the extreme aestheticism of *fin de siècle* decadence can be found in his contrasting portrayals of Mrs. Gereth and Fleda. James expresses his approval of Mrs. Gereth's skill for interior decoration by presenting her as a "wonder-working wizard, with a command … of good material" (80) and an aesthetic sensibility equal in refinement to that of Des Esseintes and Dorian Gray. There is no question that Mrs. Gereth's selective collecting of pre-industrial art objects is far superior to the Brigstocks' vulgar purchasing of mass-produced trumperies. However, as previously mentioned, despite Mrs. Gereth's "genius for composition" (85), James shows that her "disproportionate passion" (33) for collecting reduces her to "an immoral woman" (84). Because she values her possessions so exclusively on aesthetic grounds, her passion is removed from the moral context on which beauty is properly dependent: "The truth simply was that all Mrs. Gereth's scruples were on one side and that her ruling passion had in a manner despoiled her of her humanity" (58). Mrs. Gereth's lack of humanity represents what James saw more generally as the moral shortcomings of the collecting mania of the *fin de siècle* period, and Fleda thus comes much closer to embodying James's ideal of aesthetic taste and moral sense. Fleda most clearly differentiates herself from Mrs. Gereth with respect to the aesthetic and moral changes that take place at Ricks, home of Mrs. Gereth's deceased aunt. Over the course of the novel, the objects at Poynton move in and out of Ricks, and the moral values associated with the ownership of the possessions consequently undergo radical shifts. The spatial reversals at Ricks consist of three distinct stages: initially, Ricks holds all the maiden-aunt's modest possessions; then, in a melodramatic turn of events, the original contents of Ricks are stored away and replaced by the objets d'art of Poynton; and finally, Mrs. Gereth's precious collection is returned to Poynton and the aunt's belongings are restored to Ricks. At each phase, Fleda alone is able to perceive the shifting moral tensions that Mrs. Gereth either overlooks or entirely dismisses.

In its original state, Ricks is decorated with the maiden-aunt's eclectic belongings, which Mrs. Gereth considers to be "too suburban" and aesthetically inferior to the beauty of Poynton. Despite the aunt's ugly floral wallpaper and hideous iron pots painted in white, Fleda is nonetheless able to appreciate Ricks on more compassionate terms. Rather than focusing on the materiality of the objects, Fleda notices that the collection at Ricks evokes the aunt's unique personality: "The more she looked about the surer she felt of the character of the maiden-aunt, the sense of whose dim presence urged her to pacification: the maiden-aunt had been a dear; she should have adored the maiden-aunt" (68). Fleda's "fineness" (224) is measured here by her ability to recognize that not only have the objects been "lovingly" collected in a way not entirely dissimilar to the works at Poynton, but more importantly, they also reveal the "sensitive" nature of the aunt, whom Fleda comes to empathize with deeply. The use of living space to reflect character looks ahead to Chandler, who will frequently use his room descriptions as a device for Marlowe to assess an individual's nature through his or her belongings.

Fleda's moral sensitivity is further tested when Mrs. Gereth later moves a large number of the finest pieces from Poynton to Ricks, and Fleda is forced to reevaluate her position in relation to the spoils. At first glance, Fleda finds that Ricks has been "dressed at the expense of Poynton" (80). The despoiled space of Ricks has "come indeed to a question of 'sides'" (81): Fleda must choose either to praise Mrs. Gereth's "sense of style" (48), thereby placing herself "loyally on [Mrs. Gereth's] side," or to condemn her on moral grounds by refusing to acknowledge the beauty of Ricks' usurped treasures and validate Mrs. Gereth's "theft" (80). Fleda wavers between wanting to express a genuine appreciation for her friend's art of composition and secretly recoiling from the immoral status Ricks now bears. When Fleda reflects on the moral implications of her engagement with the dishonored space of Poynton, it becomes apparent that her appreciation of Ricks' "triumph of taste" is qualified by her awareness of the wrongness of Mrs. Gereth's acquisition:

> She couldn't care for such things when they came to her in such ways; there was a wrong about them all that turned them into ugliness. In the watches of the night she saw Poynton dishonoured; she had cherished it as a happy whole … and the parts of it now around her seemed to suffer like chopped limbs. To lie there in the stillness was partly to listen for some soft low plaint from them. (85)

The beauty of Poynton immediately turns to ugliness the moment the objects are immorally appropriated to the space of Ricks. In this scene, Fleda can almost literally *hear* the rueful objections of the displaced artifacts, which brings us back to the etymological definition of ekphrasis as a kind of "speaking out." Although James avoids using the literary device of ekphrasis to describe the art objects at Poynton, he never fully abandons his original intention to have the objects as his centers of consciousness because we find that throughout the novel they constantly have "things to say" (31). Their speech can thus be read as a form of ekphrasis in its strictest etymological sense, and if the objects are "speaking out," the implication then is that aesthetic appreciation is a function of *listening*. In the case of Mrs. Gereth, her genius for composition is based on her ability to listen to the "wondrous" speech of her prized collection, but her sensitivity to objects operates purely on an aesthetic level. Mrs. Gereth's selective collecting has turned into hoarding, which James sees as no less vulgar than the Brigstocks' conspicuous consumption. Fleda, on the other hand, is more concerned with the "soft low plaint" of the objects and with the fact that any "trace" of the maiden-aunt has now been "exterminated" or silenced (85). James seems to be suggesting here that true aesthetic appreciation necessitates a kind of *moral* listening. Fleda possesses a fuller understanding than Mrs. Gereth of what an aesthetic sensibility should entail because she recognizes that the artistic value of the objects cannot be divorced from their moral context.

In the final phase of spatial reversal at Ricks, Mrs. Gereth is forced to return the spoils to Poynton and retrieve the maiden-aunt's possessions to refurnish the now bare Ricks. James treats the objects and the maiden-aunt as synonymous entities by showing that Mrs. Gereth had "simply fished her out again" and after carefully selecting and rearranging the objects to her own taste, had "made a delight of her [the maiden-aunt]" (202). Mrs. Gereth is, however, "all unwitting" (202) of the wonder she has wrought, which allows Fleda to demonstrate the extent of her "fineness" when she asks Mrs. Gereth, "Ah the little melancholy tender tell-tale things: how can they *not* speak to you and find a way to your heart? It's not the great chorus of Poynton; but you're not, I'm sure, either so proud or so broken as to be reached by nothing but that. This is a voice so gentle, so human, so feminine – a faint faraway voice with the little quaver of a heart-beat" (202). Mrs. Gereth's aesthetic refinement has no referent to any basis of morality precisely because she fails to hear that "faint faraway voice." She may "listen unawares" to the objects on an aesthetic level, but she still refers to the aunt's possessions as "wretched things," calling the maiden-aunt "that stupid starved old woman" (202). Fleda, however, comes to the conclusion that "there's something here that will never be in the inventory! […] If there were more [objects] there would be too many to convey the impression in which half the beauty resides – the impression somehow of something dreamed and missed, something reduced, relinquished, resigned: the poetry, as it were, of something sensibly *gone*" (202). The emphasis here on the "impression" of something *absent* seems to stand as James's response to the tendency of decadent novels to over-describe art objects: the beauty of Ricks resides in an indefinable "something" that has been "relinquished" and is now "sensibly *gone*." The italicization of "gone" brings us finally to the surprising ending of the novel, when Fleda journeys to Poynton to retrieve the "gem of the collection," only to discover that the house is on fire. In a daze, she asks the porter at the station, "Poynton's *gone*?" (213), and the novel concludes with Fleda returning to Ricks empty-handed, the "gem" of Poynton presumably lost to the flames.

It is hard not to read the destruction of the gem by fire as a pun on Walter Pater's famous injunction "to burn always with this hard gemlike flame," which became the leading image associated with the Aesthetic Movement. The fire has been given much critical attention, and is generally read as James' way of calling attention to the fact that the objects are never fully given to us in visually descriptive terms. Moreover, the fact that the objects are consumed by the fire seems to be a play on the Latin verb *consumere*, 'to destroy or devour.' It is clear that James regards mass consumption as a swallowing up of the object, but he also feels that aesthetic appreciation in the form of over-collecting or hoarding also results in the 'consumption' or symbolic destruction of the object. The "gem of the collection" is most often interpreted to be the Maltese cross, which is the only object at Poynton that is described in any kind of detail:

> That description, though technically incorrect, had always been applied at Poynton to a small but marvelous crucifix of ivory, a masterpiece of delicacy, of expression and of the great Spanish period, the existence and precarious accessibility of which she had heard of at Malta, years before, by an odd and romantic chance – a clue followed through mazes of secrecy till the treasure was at least unearthed. (82)

We are given a number of specific visual details about the crucifix – that it is small in size, made of ivory, and delicate in construction – but this description is by no means exhaustive. Indeed, the second half of the description enshrouds the object in an air of secret mystery: we have no knowledge of where exactly the crucifix was unearthed or how many hands it passed through before eventually making its way to Poynton. The fact that this gem is destroyed just moments before Fleda arrives to claim it underlines James's ultimate refusal to allow an aesthetic object to be acquired by immoral means. Interestingly, we are never told which specific objects perish in the fire, and this withholding of

ekphrastic description at such a crucial moment in the novel would seem to epitomize James's dual rejection of both the commodifying impulse that arose from consumer culture and the collecting mania of *fin de siècle* aestheticism.

"the bed of Procrustes"

As I have attempted to show, in his portrayal of objects in *The Spoils of Poynton,* James separates aesthetic appreciation from the moral corruption that comes with ownership. I want to argue in this section that, in his detective writing, Chandler's own view of aestheticism and mass consumption is filtered specifically through his admiration for this particular James novel. Although Chandler's approach to writing is not as nuanced as James's, his desire to raise the status of the detective novel to an aesthetic form is, in many ways, very Jamesian. For James, the art of the novel resides in the "tightness" of its formal composition and therefore requires a careful selection and restriction of the vast material offered by Life. Chandler, on the other hand, is writing within the already prescriptive genre of detective fiction, and is therefore faced with a different set of concerns than James. Rather than imposing form by "drawing" a "circle" around his material (as James would have done), Chandler elevates the detective novel by looking for ways to "*exceed* the limits of the formula without destroying it" (*LN* 1018, emphasis added). In other words, Chandler sees the conventional form of the detective story as artifice, rather than art, and feels compelled to work *outside* the limitations of his genre in order to produce a more artistic kind of detective writing that would "exhaust the possibilities of its form" (*LN* 1019). Chandler explains that, despite its "crude aspect" and formulaic requirements of the detective genre, he was initially drawn to the "forceful and honest" (*LN* 1040) writing style that appeared in pulp magazines like the *Black Mask*. Chandler worries that in the age of commodification the average detective novel "has learned nothing and forgotten nothing [from its British predecessors]. It is the story you will find almost any week in the big shiny magazines, handsomely illustrated, and paying due deference to virginal love and the right kind of luxury goods. […] There are more frozen daiquiris and stingers ordered, and fewer glasses of crusty old port; more clothes by *Vogue,* and décors by the *House Beautiful*, more chic, but not more truth" (*LN* 985). Convinced that the average detective novel's chief failing is its inclusion of more commodities but not more truth, Chandler expresses the same kind of repulsion toward commodity culture that motivated James to change the title of his manuscript from *House Beautiful* to *The Spoils of Poynton*. Evoking James's imperative that a story must be "genuine [and] sincere" (*Criticism* 45), Chandler declares that "honesty is an art" (*LN* 985), even more so in a genre that had been traditionally defined as the "art of framing lies" (Sayers 411). This honesty emerges primarily through Chandler's portrayal of Marlowe as a hardboiled detective who lives according to a strict moral code, a characterization that I will discuss at the end of this chapter.

I want to examine Chandler's attempts to elevate the detective form to high art by asking two interrelated questions: first, how does his representation of Marlowe's refined sense of taste function in a world oversaturated by commercial goods; and second, how does Chandler attempt to distinguish his own novels from the literary mass market. As the only figure with access to all classes of society, Marlowe moves easily in and out of dingy apartment buildings and ritzy nightclubs, dilapidated offices and plush mansions, commenting on the décor each time he enters a new space. His descriptions of rooms allow the reader to ascertain the individuality of a character through his possessions. Moreover, because Chandler's novels are all written Marlowe's limited perspective of first-person narration, these room descriptions are filtered through the eyes of Marlowe, which means that we learn just as much about Marlowe himself as we do about the person to whom the furnishings belong. However, Marlowe distances himself from the characters to whom these objects belong by exhibiting a Jamesian

conviction that ownership is immoral: his taste may be aesthetically refined, but he never purchases any of the objects he admires. In terms of style, Chandler attempts to distance his work from the formulaic fiction published in the mass market by using Marlowe's room descriptions to incorporate what he felt was aesthetically necessary to giving the detective novel an artistic form.

To begin first with Chandler's characterization of Marlowe as a hardboiled aesthete, I suggest that Marlowe's specialized knowledge functions both as a reflection of his own personal taste and as a sign of his ability to navigate successfully through the over-commodified landscape of 1930s Los Angeles. In the first instance, Chandler jokes that Marlowe's taste is a mixture of the high and the low: "Mr. P. Marlowe, a simple alcoholic vulgarian who never sleeps with his clients while on duty, is trying to go refined on me" and soon "he will demand spats and a monocle and start collecting old pewter" (*Letters* 43). In much the same way that an interior decorator might decide a particular piece of ornament is '*de trop*,' Marlowe's personal taste often leads him to find a given design *too* this or *too* that. At General Sternwood's mansion in *The Big Sleep*, Vivian's bedroom is, he tells us, "too big, the ceiling was too high, the doors were too tall" (*BS* 15). In *The Lady in the Lake*, when Marlowe and Degarmo pay a visit to Kingsley at the Bryson Tower, they enter "through a Moorish archway, and over a lobby that was too big and a carpet that was too blue" (*LN* 173). In *The Little Sister,* Marlowe describes the Garland Home of Peace, run by Dr. Vincent Lagardie, as "a big white colonial mansion with a portico which was roofed and much too small for the house" (*LN* 285). Much later in the same work, as he looks over Miss Gonzales's room at the Chateau Bercy Apartments, he remarks on her "false fireplace with gas logs, and enough chairs and tables and lamps, but not too many" (*LN* 407), a reaction which recalls his impression of Joe Brody's room in *The Big Sleep*, "a cheerful room with good furniture and not too much of it" (67).[19] Marlowe's ability to judge exactly when something is "too much" emphasizes the extent of his aesthetic attunement to what constitutes tasteful décor. In descriptions such as these, Edward Thorpe is right to point out Marlowe's "acute awareness of the difference between expensive good taste and vulgar luxury" (18), however, his readings of Marlowe's disapproval often mistake an aesthetic for a moral condemnation of conspicuous consumption. While Marlowe certainly expresses his disapproval of consumerism (an issue which we will turn to next), his preference for understated décor over gaudy displays of wealth is too often misread as an indication of his lack of interest in aesthetics in general. In other words, critics tend to overlook the fact that Marlowe's descriptions are as much expressions of aesthetic taste as they are moral judgments. Moreover, we will see that, like James, Chandler considers aesthetic and moral viewing as necessarily interdependent activities.

In addition to revealing Marlowe's aesthetically refined taste, these spatial descriptions also signal his mastery over the sprawling urban landscape of 1930s L.A. It is safe to say that Marlowe does not set foot in a single mansion, apartment, or office, or drive through a single neighborhood of Los Angeles, without revealing some form of aesthetic knowledge about pre- and post-industrial styles and modes of production. For instance, in *Farewell, My Lovely*, when Marlowe tells us that he drives "past the Georgian-Colonial vogue, now old hat, past the handsome modernistic buildings in which the Hollywood flesh-peddlers never stop talking money" (*BS* 318), we become aware, first of all, that Marlowe himself is aware that there was a Georgian-Colonial vogue, second, that he knows enough about architecture to identify this style when he sees it, and lastly, that he keeps up with architectural trends enough to know that the Georgian-Colonial style, once in vogue, is no longer so. Marlowe is also able to differentiate between the outdated Georgian-Colonial style and the "modernistic"

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[19] Even before his creation of Marlowe as the quintessential private detective, Chandler uses "too much" in one of his earliest short stories, "Nevada Gas," to say that the Metropole hotel "had too much oily dark wood paneling, too many chipped gilt mirrors. Too much smoke hung below its low beamed lobby ceiling and too many grifters bummed around in its worn leather rockers" (*Stories* 105).

buildings, which are described as "handsome," a rare occurrence since Marlowe tends to associate the modernistic with vulgar taste. Jameson has further argued that, in a post-industrial city where mass-produced commodities have become the norm, Chandler's task as the author, "is to make an inventory of these objects, to demonstrate, by the fulness [sic] of his catalogue, how completely he knows his way around the world of machines and machine products, and it is in this sense that Chandler's descriptions of furniture […] will function: as a naming, a sign of expertise and know-how" (79). Marlowe's observations of rooms and their furnishings provide the clearest indication that Chandler's distaste for American consumerism is filtered specifically through James's negative portrayal of the *fin de siècle* commodifying impulse in *The Spoils of Poynton*. The distinction that James makes between the antiques of "more labouring ages" and the "cheap gimcracks" of post-industrial society is the same marker in Marlowe's criteria for judging the aesthetic and moral worth of the objects he sees in other characters' homes. For instance, when searching the bedroom of Bill Chess, in *The Lady in the Lake*, Marlowe notices an "imitation leather trinket box with an assortment of gaudy costume jewelry" (*LN* 65). This minor detail not only reveals Marlowe's ability to tell apart real and fake leather, but also underlines his dislike of cheap imitation goods. Marlowe also exhibits a keen sense of decorative cliché when he pays a visit to Mavis Weld in *The Little Sister* and is surprised to see "an old black chipped Steinway and for once no Spanish shawl on it" (*LN* 260). Chandler again hints at the level of expertise implied in the fact that Marlowe is familiar with the common trend of placing shawls on pianos. And in *The High Window*, Marlowe regards the wastefulness of Mrs. Murdock's wealthy home as evidence of her corrupt lifestyle: "An old musty, fusty, narrow-minded, clean and bitter room. It didn't look as if anybody ever sat in it or would ever want to. Marble-topped tables with crooked legs, gilt clocks, pieces of small statuary in two colors of marble. A lot of junk that would take a week to dust. A lot of money, and all wasted" (*BS* 447). Mrs. Murdock's living room flaunts all the signs of conspicuous consumption, and Marlowe does not hide his disapproval of her vulgar display of spending money for its own sake.

The critical eye that Marlowe turns to Vivian Sternwood's bedroom in *The Big Sleep* offers another telling indication that Chandler's moral condemnation of commodification parallels that of James in *The Spoils of Poynton*. When Marlowe enters Vivian's room, he notes that "there were full-length mirrors and crystal doodads all over the place. The ivory furniture had chromium on it, and the enormous ivory drapes lay tumbled on the white carpet a yard from the windows. The white made the ivory look dirty and the ivory made the white look bled out" (*BS* 15). Used as a protective and decorative coating for cars, hardware and furniture, chromium was usually applied through a process called electroplating as early as 1848, but only became widespread with the development of an improved process in 1924. Since chromium is known for its luster when polished, Vivian's chromium-coated furniture can be read as a modernized version of the "acres of varnish" smeared over every surface of Waterbath. As mentioned earlier, Chandler cannibalized his early short stories to write his later novels, and this description of Vivian's room first appeared as Mrs. O'Mara's bedroom in Chandler's 1936 short story, "The Curtain": "This room had a white carpet from wall to wall. Ivory drapes of immense height lay tumbled casually on the white carpet inside the many windows" (*Stories* 96). In its original version, the detective Carmady exhibits a decorator's eye for tonal effects, but there is very little to suggest that he is critical of Mrs. O'Mara's décor since the description is neutral in tone. But when Chandler rewrites the scene for *The Big Sleep*, he inserts a much more moralizing judgment of Vivian's consumerism. The additional detail of the "crystal doodads" evokes the same frivolous ornamentation as the Brigstock's "trumperies," and to complete this image of vulgar luxury, Vivian is stretched out on a "modernistic chaise-longue" (*BS* 96), displaying her shapely legs in an attempt to seduce Marlowe. The combination of white and ivory no longer produces tonal variety, but instead carries an undertone of moral corruption since the ivory makes the white look "dirty" while the white, in turn, makes the ivory appear "bled out." By novel's end, we learn that Vivian has been covering up

her sister's murder, so this early description of her pretentious room becomes symbolic of her hiding of the dirty truth. Just as the furniture in *The Spoils of Poynton* function as a reflection of their owners' personalities, so too is Marlowe able to assess Vivian's character through her possessions.

The worst of the upper-class houses is undoubtedly Harlan Potter's mansion, which Marlowe describes in *The Long Goodbye* as an "idiotic hunk of architecture" (*LN* 605):

> It was the damndest-looking house I ever saw. It was a square gray box three stories high, with a mansard roof, steeply sloped and broken by twenty or thirty double dormer windows with a lot of wedding cake decoration around them and between them. The entrance had double stone pillars on each side but the cream of the joint was an outside spiral staircase with a stone railing […].
>
> The motor yard was paved with stone. […] The driveway was lined with a cypress hedge trimmed round. There were all sorts of ornamental trees in dumps here and there and they didn't look like California trees. Imported stuff. Whoever built that place was trying to drag the Atlantic seaboard over the Rockies. He was trying hard, but he hadn't made it. (*LN* 605)

Marlowe's ability to identify, at first glance, the roof design as mansard and the windows as dormer-style demonstrates his familiarity with architectural terminology. The Potters' excessive display of wealth performs the same kind of mass consumerism that we witnessed with the Brigstocks' in *The Spoils of Poynton*. The imported ornamental trees scattered in clumps along the driveway recall the Waterbath conservatory with its tacky "tropical trees" and "stuffed cockatoo" (55). And the "wedding cake decoration" plastered on the façade of the Potter mansion is reminiscent of the winter garden, "something glazed and piped," that Mona plans to install at Poynton. Marlowe's chief critique of Potter residence is its artificiality, a flaw which he takes to mean that the owner is concealing deeper moral failings. But it is important to keep in mind that Marlowe's ability to immediately identify the signs of conspicuous consumption is an indication not merely of his refined taste, but also of his own complicity within consumer culture.

Despite his constant interactions with the upper classes and their vulgar displays of conspicuous consumption, Marlowe does encounter tastefully-decorated houses and we are frequently exposed to his sense of the 'nice room,' a refrain that recurs often in Marlowe's experience. In *Farewell, My Lovely*, when Anne Riordan shows Marlowe into her apartment, he decides that: "It was a nice room. It would be a nice room to wear slippers in" (*BS* 355). Marlowe associates Anne's good taste with comfort and a lack of pretense, an assessment which recalls an earlier moment in the same novel, when Marlowe enters the Grayle residence: "It was a nice room with large chesterfields and lounging chairs done in pale yellow leather […] There was comfort, space, coziness, a dash of the very modern and dash of the very old" (*BS* 301). Here, the modern is surprisingly not synonymous with vulgarity, and Mrs. Grayle succeeds in striking the right balance between the new and the old to create a space of "comfort and coziness." In *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe's search for Vivian Sternwood takes him to Eddie Mars' casino, which is probably the nicest of the "nice rooms":

> The room had been a ballroom once and Eddie Mars had changed it only as much as his business compelled him. No chromium glitter, no indirect lighting from behind angular cornices, no fused glass pictures, or chairs in violent leather and polished metal tubing, none of the pseudomodernistic circus of the typical Hollywood night trap. The light was from heavy crystal chandeliers and the rose-damask panels of the wall were still the same rose damask, a little faded by time and darkened by dust, that had been matched long ago against the parquetry floor, of which only a small glass-smooth space in front of the little Mexican

> orchestra showed bare. The rest was covered by a heavy old-rose carpeting that must have cost plenty. . . . It was still a beautiful room. (*BS* 116)

Located in West Hollywood, Eddie's nightclub is noteworthy to Marlowe for *not* being the "typical Hollywood night trap." What Marlowe appreciates most about Eddie's decorating decisions is that he "had left the outside much as he had found it, instead of making it over to look like an MGM set" (*BS* 112). We have seen this room before in Chandler's 1934 pulp story "Finger Man," where Marlowe's early prototype, detective Mallory, goes to Canales's nightclub and notes of the ballroom: "The big, old-fashioned room had been a ballroom in the days when Las Olindas was thirty miles by water from San Angelo, and that was the only way anyone went to it. It was still a beautiful room, with damask panels and crystal chandeliers" (*Stories* 99). Chandler expands this brief description of Canales's club into a much more detailed commentary in *The Big Sleep* on the aesthetic value of pre-industrial décor. Marlowe tends to associate surface coatings with Hollywood superficiality, but unlike Vivian's chromium-glazed furniture or the Brigstocks' acres of smeared varnish, Eddie's establishment has nothing shiny, smelly, or advertised: no "*chromium* glitter," "*fused* glass pictures," or "*polished* metal tubing" disrupt the beauty of the room. In Eddie's office, Marlowe further observes that the "dark sheenless desk didn't belong in the room, but neither did anything made after 1900" (*BS* 112), the keyword here being of course "sheenless." Marlowe's attention to the old-fashioned quality of the nightclub – that it had "once" been a ballroom with damask walls "faded by time" and matched "long ago" to the parquetry floor – seems to recall Mrs. Gereth's passion for antiques from "more labouring ages." In fact, in one of James's early descriptions of Poynton, we watch as Mrs. Gereth examines "the old golds and brasses, old ivories and bronzes, the fresh old tapestries and deep old damasks" (71), a description which suggests that Marlowe shares an appreciation with Mrs. Gereth for damask. In the same way that James's repetition of the word "old" valorizes older modes of production, Chandler also privileges a pre-1900s aesthetics by insisting that the damask is "*still* the same rose damask" and that the casino is, on the whole, "*still* a beautiful room." The greatest irony of Chandler's praise of Eddie's nightclub is that it belongs to perhaps the most corrupt character in *The Big Sleep*. Eddie is involved either directly or indirectly in almost all the murders committed in the novel and yet is never punished for a single crime. Generally speaking, the rooms in Chandler's novels function as extensions or reflections of their owners' personalities, but in this case, Eddie's good taste directly clashes with his immoral lifestyle. This contradiction brings us to the ironic character portrayal of Harlan Potter in *The Long Goodbye*.

As his last complete novel, *The Long Goodbye* offers Chandler's most fully-articulated stance against twentieth-century commodity culture. In his most ironic turn, Chandler uses Harlan Potter, the corrupt multimillionaire newspaper publisher, as his mouthpiece for the moral decline of society brought about by mass production, a critique that could easily have been written by James himself. Arguably Chandler's most Jamesian figure (if only in this one particular scene), Potter delivers a lengthy speech that encapsulates the central difficulty in all of Chandler's works, namely, the detrimental effect of commodity culture on an individual's private moral life:

> There's a peculiar thing about money. … In large quantities it tends to have a life of its own, even a conscience of its own. The power of money becomes very difficult to control. Man has always been a venal animal. The growth of populations, the huge costs of wars, the incessant pressure of confiscatory taxation – all these things make him more and more venal. … In our time we have seen a shocking decline in both public and private morals. You can't expect quality from people whose lives are a subjection to a lack of quality. You can't have quality with mass production. You don't want it because it lasts too long. So you substitute styling, which is a commercial swindle intended to produce artificial obsolescence. Mass production

> couldn't sell its goods next year unless it made what it sold this year look unfashionable a year from now. We have the whitest kitchens and the most shining bathrooms in the world. But in the lovely white kitchen the average American housewife can't produce a meal fit to eat, and the lovely shining bathroom is mostly a receptacle for deodorants, laxatives, sleeping pills, and the products of that confidence racket called the cosmetic industry. We make the finest packages in the world, Mr. Marlowe. The stuff inside is mostly junk. (*LN* 612)

In this passage, Potter describes what is known as planned or 'built-in' obsolescence, a policy of designing a product with limited usefulness so that it will become obsolete, unfashionable, or no longer functional after an allotted period of time. Artificial obsolescence thus has obvious benefits for the producer because the consumer feels under constant pressure to purchase the "newest" products available on the market. The origins of planned obsolescence date back to 1932 with Bernard London's pamphlet *Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence*, which argued for a government imposition of obsolescence on consumer goods in order to stimulate and perpetuate consumption. Along the same lines, Chandler uses Potter to voice his belief that mass production replaces real quality with a kind of false "styling," a term that can be traced to the 1930s American industrial designer George Nelson, who wrote that "design... is an attempt to make a contribution through change. When no contribution is made or can be made, the only process available for giving the illusion of change is 'styling!'" (Packard 59). As one of the most iconic modernist furniture designers in the early twentieth century, Nelson is advocating for what Potter considers a "commercial swindle" by changing the styling (rather than improving the quality) of products to encourage consumers to purchase the most up-to-date commodities. While Potter's views certainly align with Marlowe's own distaste toward 1930s consumerism, Chandler complicates his attack on mass production by presenting Marlowe as somewhat critical of Potter's retreat from public life: "You don't like the way the world is going so you use what power you have to close off a private corner to live in as near as possible to the way you remember people lived fifty years ago before the age of mass production" (613). On the one hand, Marlowe's comment sounds strikingly Jamesian in the sense that Marlowe longs for a pre-industrial society when objects were still handcrafted and personal privacy was still valued. But on the other hand, Marlowe chides Potter for using his wealth and power to preserve his own privacy and exempt himself from fulfilling his moral obligations to society.

Taken together, Chandler's countless room descriptions function as a measure of Marlowe's taste and as a vehicle through which to extol the Jamesian view that possession of commercial goods (even of art objects) is both vulgar and morally suspect. On the level of style, these rooms also serve another important aesthetic function in terms of narrative structure: Chandler prioritizes these descriptions over and above the generic concerns of plot. The disparagement of Chandler's plots is a common practice among his peers and critics within the detective genre. Chandler equated plot with an oppressive teleology where the structure of the novel was overly dependent on the requirements of the ending. "The ideal mystery," in Chandler's eyes, "was one you would read if the ending was missing" (*Trouble* viii). Not only is it surprising that a writer of detective fiction would eschew plot, but such a statement would also seem to go against the very definition of what constitutes the detective genre, arguably the most plot-driven and teleological of all narrative prose genres. Jameson has described the detective story as being "purposeful" in that nothing happens that is not related in some way to the murder (86). The centrality of plot in detective fiction has drawn many comparisons back to Aristotle's privileging of plot over character in his discussion on classical tragedy in the *Poetics*. For Aristotle, bad plots are those in which the actions "succeed one another without probable or necessary sequence" and thus lack "natural continuity," whereas the successful plot is "the structural union of the parts being such that, if any one of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed or

disturbed" (x).[20] Aristotle's emphasis on the unity of plot has led writers and critics alike to suggest that the detective novel consists of the same self-determining beginning and prearranged conclusion upon which Aristotle insisted. For instance, Edgar Allan Poe describes the tightly-knit structure of the detective story using Aristotle's notion of "structural union" to define plot as "that in which no part can be displaced without ruin to the whole. It may be described as a building so dependently constructed, that to change the position of a single brick is to overthrow the entire fabric" (Parks 42). Poe's architectural metaphor for plot further echoes the Aristotelian idea of "natural continuity" in that, for Poe, a successful plot is accomplished only by having the end always in sight and thus building all actions toward the final resolution: "Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its *dénouement* before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the *dénouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention"("Philosophy" 1375).

Given that the genre of detective fiction is defined primarily by its drive for closure, Chandler's admission that "plot as such merely bores [him]" (*Letters* 169) sounds particularly astonishing. His dismissal of plots and endings begs the question of whether any novel could rightly be called a detective story if it lacked a conclusion, if the mystery were left unresolved. Although Chandler recognized the necessity of operating within the literary conventions of his genre, even a cursory glance at his correspondence would reveal his loathing of "the artificial pattern required by the plot" (*LN* 987) and his disinterest in constructing a coherent, cohesive plotline. For instance, when correspondent H. R. Harwood writes to Chandler asking for advice in methods of plotting, Chandler apologetically replies that he would be of no help because he never plotted anything on paper (*Letters* 279). Unlike most writers who "think up a plot with an intriguing situation and then proceed to fit characters into it," Chandler explained that he did all his plotting in his head, which resulted in "some oddities of construction" (*Letters* 87) that he would struggle with throughout his career. Recognizing that it was always "plot difficulty that held [him] up," Chandler explained to his publisher that his challenge as a writer stemmed from his reluctance to "discard anything. [...] I simply would not plot far enough ahead. I'd write something I liked and then I would have a hell of a time making it fit into the structure" (*Letters* 307). Chandler's inability to discard anything would likely meet with both Aristotle's and Poe's disapproval. Unlike Poe's conception of plot as a dependently-constructed "building" with no misplaced or extraneous bricks, Chandler emphasizes the importance of structural union not through the manipulation of plot, but rather though what he calls "peripheral writing, which cannot be cut without destroying the whole effect of a book" (*Letters* 307). In other words, for Chandler, the structuring mechanism behind his own novels is not an Aristotelian unity of plot, but rather a kind of marginal writing that paradoxically cannot be removed without ruining the "whole effect."

Chandler thus conceives of novelistic structure as something flexible and elastic since he is always "trying to stretch [the formula of the detective story], trying to get in bits of peripheral writing which were not necessary but which [he] felt would" give the story a "kind of richness of texture" (*Letters* 87). Interestingly, Chandler's subordination of plot to these "bits of peripheral writing" often produced what he described as a "bed of Procrustes" (*Letters* 175). The Greek god Procrustes, whose name means "he who stretches," would invite passersby to spend the night in his iron bed. Using his smith's hammer, Procrustes would then proceed to stretch his guests in order to make them fit the length of his bed. Chandler's reference to the "bed of Procrustes" is thus a particularly fitting symbol

[20] From Dorothy Sayers's 1935 lecture at Oxford entitled "Aristotle on Detective Fiction," in which she argues that the form of the detective story adheres closely to Aristotle's description of the structure of classical tragedy as having a beginning, middle and end. Similarly, for Jacques Barzun, the detective story "is an art of symmetry, it seeks the appearance of logical necessity, like classical tragedy" (see "Detection and the Literary Art," 148).

for his own tendency to "stretch" the structure of his novels to fit in what Poe would consider to be unnecessary bricks. Moreover, Chandler's habit of structuring his novels not around plot but around his "peripheral writing" is, I argue, part of a larger effort to elevate the status of the detective novel to high art. Recognizing that the reading public "is intellectually adolescent at best," Chandler sought both to satisfy the demands of the "semi-literate public" while at the same time "giv[ing] them some intellectual and artistic overtones which that public does not seek or demand" (*Letters* 269). The "artistic overtones" that I want to focus on are those Procrustean moments in Chandler's novels when we witness a kind of excessive writing that at times works against plot, yet is still necessary, in Chandler's view, to the overall structure.

At first glance, then, Chandler's fondness for "peripheral writing" might seem doomed to the same looseness that James abhorred in nineteenth-century novels, but Chandler in fact saw his "Procrustean bed" as essentially Jamesian in spirit. In fact, Chandler even cites James to justify his "peripheral writing" as the aesthetic essence of a work, as that which "cannot be cut without destroying the whole effect. You couldn't cut Proust or Henry James for example, because the things you would be apt to cut would be the things that make these men worth reading" (*Letters* 307). It is important to note, however, that despite Chandler's frequent descriptive digressions, his "peripheral writing" does not produce endless proliferations of ekphrastic description (as one would find in decadent novels), but rather remains contained within the delimited space of a few paragraphs since Chandler could deviate only so far from the demands of his genre. Although Chandler never specifies exactly what constitutes "peripheral writing," he tellingly describes himself as a writer who "falls in love with a scene or a character or a background or an atmosphere" (*Letters* 451). Given his love for background, the "bits of peripheral writing" that he packs into the structure of his novels are typically, I argue, the arrested moments of observation we previously examined in which Marlowe enters a room and describes it in detail.

In more conventional detective stories, the emphasis on plot requires all parts of the novel to contribute directly to the forward momentum of the storyline, hence any scenic descriptions are acceptable only insofar as they serve to establish clues for the reader. Not surprisingly, Van Dine published the most systematic warning against including superfluous descriptions of background in detective stories. Given his investment in creating a well-integrated plotline, Van Dine stipulates as the sixteenth rule in his essay "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stores" that "the detective 'novel' must be just that, no side issues of 'literary dallying' or 'atmospheric preoccupations.' These devices interfere with the purpose of detective fiction, 'which is to state a problem, analyze it' and solve it." Van Dine's insistence on the idea that "atmospheric preoccupations" impede the teleology of the plot is similarly echoed by Somerset Maugham, who carried on a brief correspondence with Chandler and in fact consulted Chandler for advice while writing his 1952 essay, "The Decline and Fall of the Detective Story." In this essay, Maugham offers strategies for what he believes makes for the most successful detective story, which he confines to its classical British form. Like Van Dine, Maugham also believes that "fine writing" is out of place within the genre of detective fiction: "We do not want a purple passage to distract us when we hanker to know the meaning of that bruise on the butler's chin, nor do we want a description of scenery when the only thing that matters to us is to decide exactly how long it takes us to walk from the boat-house [...] to the gamekeeper's cottage" (109). Emphasizing plot over description, Maugham argues that scene settings should therefore "be short and should be used with the one and only purpose of getting on with the story" (111).

It is significant that Maugham's cautioning against purple prose is limited to the British novel of classic detection because later in the same essay, he observes that American hardboiled detective writers focus their attention as much on developing character and style as on plot. Maugham then singles out Chandler as the most effective at the method of descriptive writing:

> When Marlow [sic], his [Chandler's] detective, enters a room or an office we are told concisely, but in detail, precisely what furniture is in it, what pictures hang on the walls and what rugs lie on the floor. We are impressed by the detective's power of observation. It is done as neatly as a playwright [...] describes for his director the scene and furnishings of each act of his play. The device cleverly gives the perspicacious reader an indication of the sort of person and the circumstances the detective is likely to encounter. When you know a man's surroundings you already know something about the man. (120)

Maugham is certainly right to notice Chandler's unusual treatment of rooms, but he overlooks the fact that Chandler's descriptions do not function merely as a device to indicate the type of situation the detective is likely to encounter. Chandler's rooms in fact do the very thing that Maugham had deplored just a few pages earlier: they get in the way of the plot and prevent us from "getting on with the story." Even at the very end of his writing career, Chandler still spends more time on perfecting his room descriptions, than on developing his plotlines. For example, Chandler tells his publisher that he had devised neither the plot nor the murder for his eighth novel, *The Poodle Springs Story*, which was never completed. But what Chandler had already composed was an "exact, detailed description" (*Letters* 479) of the over-decorated house in Palm Springs rented out to a Linda Loring, who Chandler envisioned as Philip Marlowe's wife. This "detailed description" is, to be exact, a sprawling 533-word, 6-paragraph tour of Linda's house from the living room to the bathroom to the interior patio to the main bedroom to the guest room and finally to the kitchen. In addition to knowing precisely what Linda's house would look like, Chandler also adds that Marlowe would despise it. Chandler clearly never outgrows his obsession with rooms, and his tendency to prioritize scenic descriptions over plot development suggests that it is the rooms themselves that provide, quite literally, the structural framework for the novel.

I argue that Chandler's use of "peripheral writing" to forestall the forward drive of the plot represents his desire to expand the generic limits of writing in a mass genre. As stated before, Chandler is famous for his illogical storylines. The convoluted plot of *The Big Sleep*, in particular, has been a frequent source of frustration among critics. Not only are the multiple subplots difficult to follow, but Chandler himself spends minimal effort in keeping track of who killed whom, and for what reason. In a humorous anecdote about the production of the 1946 film noir *The Big Sleep*, director Howard Hawks approached Chandler to ask, "Who killed Owen Taylor?" to which Chandler replied, "I don't know." Chandler's response highlights what I see as his unconventional approach to the construction of plot and the 'scene of the crime.' In *The Big Sleep*, the first murder occurs in Chapter 6 at the home of Arthur Gwynn Geiger, a rare books collector who runs an illegal pornography racket. Marlowe is staking out Geiger's house when he hears a woman's scream followed by three gunshots and the sound of retreating footsteps. Marlowe breaks into Geiger's house and charges into the living room, and the chapter closes with the sentence: "Neither of the two people in the room paid any attention to the way I came in, although only one of them was dead" (*BS* 30). In a more traditional detective novel, we might expect the following chapter to open with a description of the murder scene, identifying the corpse and laying out potential clues. However, the opening paragraph of Chapter 7 makes no reference to the dead body just mentioned in the last sentence of Chapter 6. Instead, Chandler begins Chapter 7 with an elaborate description of Geiger's house that postpones the actual moment of revealing who the murdered body is:

> It was a wide room, the whole width of the house. It had a low beamed ceiling and brown plaster walls decked out with strips of Chinese embroidery and Chinese and Japanese prints in grained wood frames. There were low bookshelves, there was a thick pinkish Chinese rug in which a gopher could have spent a week without showing his nose above the nap. There were

> floor cushions, bits of odd silk tossed around, as if whoever lived there had to have a piece he could reach out and thumb. There was a broad low divan of old rose tapestry. It had a wad of clothes on it, including lilac-colored silk underwear. There was a big carved lamp on a pedestal, two other standing lamps with jade-green shades and long tassels. There was a black desk with carved gargoyles at the corners and behind it a yellow satin cushion on a polished black chair with carved arms and back. The room contained an odd assortment of odors, of which the most emphatic at the moment seemed to be the pungent aftermath of cordite and the sickish aroma of ether. (*BS* 30)[21]

This device of interrupting an action sequence with a lengthy ekphrasis is common in Chandler.[22] In general, Chandler's ekphrasis functions to produce suspense, and we certainly experience a sense of foreboding in the final sentence of the paragraph with its description of the various sickly odors hovering in the room. However, the first seven sentences of this opening paragraph carry little to no suspense at all. Given that this room is the 'scene of the crime,' Chandler focuses his entire attention not on the murdered body, but rather on the room itself. Following this description, Chandler spends three paragraphs describing Carmen Sternwood, who we learn is one of the other two people in the room. It is not until the fifth paragraph of the chapter that the corpse is finally identified as Geiger. The three paragraphs focusing on Carmen are in keeping with the build-up of suspense since she is at the center of the bribery scheme that gets Geiger shot. This delay in answering the basic yet crucial question of 'Who was killed?' seems, then, to be intentional on Chandler's part. But what makes this postponement so jarring is the fact that the opening ekphrasis seems to exist outside of the plot of the murder since the room is not described in relation to the dead body. When Marlowe finally examines Geiger's corpse, he focuses primarily on Geiger's clothing: his Chinese slippers with thick felt soles, his black satin pajamas, and his Chinese embroidered coat, the front of which is covered in blood. As for cause of death, Marlowe tells us that, "At a glance none of the three shots I heard had missed" (*BS* 31). This is the only information we receive about the state of Geiger's corpse, a brief passing remark that sums up Marlowe's disinterested, rather callous outlook on death.

In more conventional detective stories, the dead body is typically the privileged site of signification, while the objects in the room are presented almost exclusively in terms of how they directly relate to the corpse as possible clues. In *The Big Sleep*, however, Geiger's murdered corpse occupies a de-privileged position due to Marlowe's prioritized attention to the room not as a *crime scene*, but simply as a *room*. The objects in the room do not function as signs or clues that Marlowe must interpret in order to reconstruct the narrative of Geiger's murder. In other words, Marlowe's glance around the room is not one of deduction, but rather of aesthetic appreciation, or more accurately, of *negative* aesthetic appreciation. James's description of Poynton very likely influenced Chandler's depiction of Geiger's room in that the small detail of the brasses Louis Quinze might have "thumbed" is uncannily similar to the description of Geiger's bits of odd silk tossed around as if whoever lived

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[21] This description first appears as Steiner's room in Chandler's short story, "Killer in the Rain" (Jan 1935): "That room reached all he way across the front of the house and had a low, beamed ceiling, walls painted brown. Strips of tapestry hung all around the walls. Books filled the shelves. There was a thick pinkish rug on which some light fell from two standing lamps with pale green shades. In the middle of the rug was a big, low desk and a black chair with a yellow satin cushion at it. There were books all over the desk." (8) Later in the same story, Chandler writes that, "the place looked decadent and off-color by daylight. It still stank of the ether" (*Stories* 25).

[22] In Greek, *ecphrasis* means "to speak out," and the OED provides a now archaic definition, from 1715, for ekphrasis as "a plain declaration or interpretation of a thing," and a second reference, from 1814, when the word has shifted to mean "characterized by florid effeminacies of style." Though neither of these definitions accurately reflects the current usage of the term within literary criticism, when taken together, they offer a suggestive way of understanding how descriptions work in Chandler.

there wanted to have a piece he could reach out and "thumb." But unlike Fleda's admiration of Poynton's beauty, Marlowe is appalled by the room's tackiness. He alternates between a homophobic revulsion at the campy décor and a detailed cataloguing of Geiger's collections. Note the wordy specificity and the level of expertise implied in Marlowe's distinguishing between the Chinese and Japanese prints. Much of the content in this ekphrastic description can be traced back to the *fin de siècle* decadent novel. The exotic prints and jade-green lamps, the satin cushions and bits of silk tossed about to be "thumbed," these could all easily be found in the rooms of decadent characters like Huysmans's Des Esseintes and Wilde's Dorian Gray. For this reason, the experience of reading *Big Sleep* is often like reading two novels at once: a talkative, fast-paced detective story and a decadent novel (along the lines of *A Rebours* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*) whose plot consists of a series of aesthetic experiences undergone by an artistically-refined protagonist.

In the opening chapter of Huysmans's *A Rebours*, the narrator tells us that Des Esseintes frequently invited his mistresses to his elaborately-decorated boudoir, where "amid dainty carved furniture of the light-yellow camphor-wood of Japan, under a sort of tent of pink Indian satin, the flesh tints borrowed a soft, warm glow from the artfully disposed lights sifting down through the rich material" (9). The emphasis here on Oriental exoticism, soft tints, and carved furniture is strikingly similar to Chandler's description in *The Big Sleep*, and even the odors pervading Geiger's room seem to echo the "aromatic odours given off by the Oriental wood of the furniture" (9) in Des Esseintes's Parisian boudoir. Des Esseintes' love for sensuous surfaces is also shared by another famous aesthete, Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, who is inspired by a "poisonous yellow book" (often interpreted to be *À Rebours*) and embarks on his own series of sensual experiments. Over the course of a year, Dorian proceeds to accumulate "the most exquisite specimens he could find in textile and embroidered work, getting the dainty Delhi muslins, [...], the Dacca gauzes, [...], elaborate yellow Chinese hangings; books bound in tawny satins or fair silks, [...], Sicilian brocades, and stiff Spanish velvets; Georgian work with its gilt coins, and Japanese *Foukousas* with their green-toned golds and their marvelously-plumaged birds" (153). This tendency to employ detailed, technical vocabulary has led certain critics to condemn decadent novels as stylistically weak or diseased. Most famously, Max Nordau uses the term "degeneracy" to describe the deterioration of *fin de siècle* decadent society, citing both Huysmans and Wilde as key examples of this corruption. Of *A Rebours*, Nordau complains that Huysmans's "drivel about tea, liqueurs and perfumes" (305) is made up of "empty phrases" ransacked from technical dictionaries, a criticism which seems to recall the etymology of ekphrasis as "florid effeminacies of style." Although the ekphrastic descriptions in *Big Sleep* are not nearly as technical as what we find in *A Rebours* or *Dorian Gray*, Chandler's characterization of Geiger as an aesthete – with his silk underwear and embroidered coat, his floor cushions and tapestry-covered divan – appears to borrow from the decadent motif of exotic textiles and furniture.

In decadent novels, ekphrastic description replaces the teleological demands of plot. In the case of Huysmans, the narrative structure of *A Rebours* is composed of an accumulation of detail upon detail: each chapter takes up a new interest, but none seem to advance the novel toward to a final goal. The plot of the novel does not culminate in Des Esseintes' personal growth, but rather unfolds as a series of unproductive experiments that ultimately lead to his physical deterioration. In the scene of Geiger's murder, Chandler's use of decadent motifs, in a sense, mimics the total erasure of plot in a decadent novel by temporarily postponing the forward momentum of the plot. This is not to say that Chandler's ekphrasis results in a disintegration of narrative plot in the same way as *A Rebours*. But the postponement of the basic news of Geiger's death does violate the plot conventions within the detective genre. Consider Chandler's use of chapter breaks to structure how the action sequence unfolds: as we have seen above, between the last paragraph of Chapter 6 when Marlowe discovers the dead body and the fifth paragraph of Chapter 7 when the murdered body is identified as Geiger's, Chandler inserts a lengthy, seemingly superfluous, ekphrastic aside. In other words, Chandler is quite

literally stretching the structural framework of the novel to fit in his room descriptions. This is precisely the kind of peripheral writing which Chandler believed would give his novels that "rich texture" that the reader doesn't expect. Geiger's room description is a perfect example of the Procrustean excess that results from Chandler's lack of investment in plot: rather than moving on to what Poe would likely consider the next necessary plot development (in this case, identifying the body), Chandler instead pauses to give the scene "artistic overtones." This aestheticizing tendency appears throughout *Big Sleep*, as well as his other works, and Chandler would argue that these are the very moments that cannot be removed without ruining the overall effect of the novel.

Chandler clearly turned to decadent literature for material to furnish his crime scenes, but I do not intend to suggest that he subscribed to the "art for art's sake" principles of these *fin de siècle* writers. I would argue that Chandler's articulation of Marlowe's aesthetic taste is in fact not at all aligned with decadent writers like Wilde. On the contrary, Marlowe's distaste toward Geiger's opulent living room indicates that he is critical of what he sees as Geiger's morally corrupt decadent lifestyle. For instance, Chandler's image of the gopher burrowing in the nap of Geiger's "thick pinkish Chinese rug," is reminiscent of Des Esseintes's unfortunate experiment with the turtle. Before leaving Paris for Fontenay, Des Esseintes stops to admire the beauty of an "Oriental carpet with iridescent gleams of colour" (39). It then occurs to him that he should set a turtle on the carpet so that, as it moved about, the deep tints of its shell would accentuate the tones of the carpet. Once the turtle is brought home, however, the "raw-sienna tone of the shell dimmed the sheen of the carpet instead of bringing out the tints" (40). Des Esseintes resolves this "absolute incompatibility of tones" (40) by first glazing the turtle's shell with gold and then encrusting it with precious stones and jewels. Although Des Esseintes is ultimately pleased with the result, the turtle does not meet a happy fate: unable to support the weight of its heavily decorated shell, it dies by day's end. The turtle's death ultimately underlines what many anti-decadents considered to be the perversity of extreme aestheticism. The danger of Des Esseintes's valorization of the turtle's aesthetic value is not merely that it leads nowhere, but that it culminates in crime and immorality. The corrupting consequence of excessive aestheticizing is what Chandler appears to be critical of in his portrayal of aesthetes in his own work. When Marlowe revisits Geiger's house the next morning, he is repulsed by the extravagant décor: "The place was horrible by daylight. The Chinese junk on the walls, the rug, the fussy lamps, the teakwood stuff, the sticky riot of colors, the totem pole, the flagon of ether and laudanum – all this in the day had a stealthy nastiness" (*BS* 55). Paradoxically, Chandler employs decadent motifs to set his novel in an aestheticized milieu, creating a moment of Procrustean excess that strives to reach the realm of high art. Yet at the same time, he also criticizes the tendency of decadent novels to *over* aestheticize, to privilege art at the expense of morality, a decidedly Jamesian view. What prevents these moments of excess from turning into a fussy, feminized decadent novel is the hardboiled attitude of Marlowe's narration.

The moralizing tone that accompanies Marlowe's aesthetic observations must be read in terms of Chandler's characterization of the hardboiled detective as a modern-day knight. Marlowe is highly protective of his own privacy, as we see in *The Big Sleep* when he throws Carmen Sternwood out of his apartment, on the grounds that "this was the room I had to live in. It was all I had in the way of a home. In it was everything that was mine, that had any association for me, any past, anything that took the place of a family. Not much; a few books, pictures, radio, chessmen, old letters, stuff like that. Such as they were they had all my memories. I couldn't stand her in that room any longer" (*BS* 135). Marlowe evinces yet again the Jamesian view that objects are a reflection of one's inner morality: the few objects that Marlowe owns carry personal meaning for him and Carmen's presence contaminates those memories. In his professional work, Marlowe follows a strict code of conduct, risking his own personal safety and often refusing financial gain in order to maintain his high moral standards. Chandler's detective is thus an anachronistic figure tied to old-fashioned notions of chivalry, yet trying

to make a living in a society based on greed and materialism.[23] In yet another moment of irony, Chandler's final unpublished novel *The Poodle Springs Story* shows Marlowe married to Harlan Potter's daughter Linda. Chandler jokes that Linda will "probably want to redo his office, but she won't get to first base with that either" (*Letters* 464). Despite marrying into a family of considerable wealth, Marlowe will insist on maintaining his modest way of life. Critics have generally taken Marlowe's willingness to live in bare surroundings as reflective of his stoic nature (which is certainly true, in part), but they ignore his acute awareness of these surroundings as shabby. Marlowe treats his office and apartment with "the kind of carelessness that was meant to be noticed" (*BS* 298), emphasizing that he is making a conscious decision to reject what he sees as materialistic vulgarity.

Marlowe thus shares Spade's renouncement of material possessions, but whereas Spade responds with cynicism to the harshness of life by expecting nothing from it, Marlowe tempers his cynicism with a desire for redemption. In Chandler's oft-quoted definition of the hardboiled detective, it is this search for redemption that Chandler cites as the detective's most important quality:

> In everything that can be called art there is a quality of redemption. [...] But down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, 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. [...] He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man's money dishonestly and no man's insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks, that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness. The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. (*LN* 991-92)

I believe that it is Marlowe's startling "range of awareness" coupled with his "disgust for sham" that allows him to tread the line as a hardboiled aesthete, to make pronouncements of taste without becoming elitist, corrupt, or effeminate. Marlowe is unafraid to showcase his appreciation for fine art because "it belongs to him by right," but he counters this potentially uncontrollable aesthetic energy with a sense of honor and masculine restraint. He rejects material possession not only because he is as suspicious as Spade of the upper classes, but more importantly, because he emulates James's conviction that the renunciation of ownership is an *ethical* decision, that aesthetics cannot be divorced from morality. Nostalgic for a pre-industrial era, Chandler thus reimagines the figure of the nineteenth-century aesthete in a modern context, but his hardboiled aesthete maintains his masculine autonomy through moral acts of renunciation. Marlowe's fluctuation between feelings of excess and

[23] In these various anomalous portraits – from Potter's Jamesian speech to Marlowe's hardboiled aesthetics – we can sense that Chandler himself felt nostalgic for a pre-industrial era and out of place in the age of consumption. In one of his early letters thanking his publisher for sending a copy of *The Works of Max Beerbohm* (a collection of essays that first appeared in *The Yellow Book*), Chandler mentions that he feels a personal connection to this particular work because "it belongs to the age of taste, to which I once belonged" (*Letters* 64). And later in the same letter, Chandler remarks that, like Beerbohm, he "was born half a century too late," adding in his usual sardonic tone that, "I could so easily have become everything our world has no use for. So I wrote for the *Black Mask*. What a wry joke" (*Letters* 64).

attempts to control that excess is enacted on the level of style in Chandler's use of room descriptions. Whereas James strives to create novels that are composed like houses, Chandler builds a multitude of "little rooms," as it were, through descriptive acts that add up to his own version of the House of Fiction. By moving in and out of rooms with his decorative style, Chandler performs the possibility of excessiveness and containment in order to recoup the energy for artistic control.

CHAPTER THREE

"It said it": Hardboiled Voice and Queer Aesthetics in James M. Cain

> "A voice is a physical thing, and if you've got one, it's like any other physical thing. It's in you, and it's got to come out."
> —James M. Cain, *Serenade*

When Chandler praises Hammett for writing "scenes that seemed never to have been written before," he qualifies his admiration by adding that "with all this [Hammett] did not wreck the formal detective story. Nobody can; production demands a form that can be produced" (*LN* 989). As I argued in Chapter 1, Hammett responds to the pressures of the mass market by developing a distinctly new mode of writing that completely transformed the American detective novel. Opposed to the Wildean "art for art's sake" aestheticizing tendency found in Van Dine, Hammett offers another criterion for artistic value that replaces the excesses of decadent materialism with the "manly" or stoic minimalism required of "real" detectives. This new style becomes Hammett's measure of authenticity in a literary market awash with easily reproducible, commodified novels that all sound alike. In contrast to Hammett's turn to minimalism as a reaction against the inauthenticity of the marketplace, Chandler attempts to set himself apart from mass-produced, formulaic detective novels by conceiving of Marlowe as a hybrid figure, simultaneously hardboiled and refined, a tough guy with the cultivated taste of a Wildean aesthete. In order to eliminate the hints of feminine weakness and corrupt materialism typically associated with the aesthete, Chandler invests the masculine detective with an elevated sense of taste that he never practices in his own personal life: Marlowe might notice a well-decorated room, but his apartment is just as sparsely furnished as Sam Spade's. As a result, Marlowe maintains his authenticity by rejecting the aesthete's artificial, excessive lifestyle and upholding a strict moral code. Whereas Hammett's hardboiled aesthetic manifests stylistically as an excess of facts surrounding the falcon's authenticity, facts that never resolve into a unified, coherent plotline, Chandler's room descriptions go against plot in order to open up the possibility of excess that can then be managed through artistic control.

While both authors succeed in distancing their work from the mass market, neither Hammett nor Chandler manage to entirely "wreck the formal detective story" because even their moments of excess are ultimately contained within the novel's generic requirements. If, as Chandler suggests, the commercial market demands a form that can be reproduced, this would then suggest that the hardboiled style itself is imitable. Chandler of course recognizes that the hardboiled style is "easy to fake; brutality is not strength, flipness is not wit, edge-of-the-chair writing can be as boring as flat writing; dalliance with promiscuous blondes can be very dull stuff when described by goaty young men with no other purpose in mind than to describe dalliance with promiscuous blondes. There has been so much of this sort of thing that if a character in a detective story says, 'Yeah,' the author is automatically a Hammett imitator" (*LN* 990). This struggle to locate an authentic voice within a mass genre, to avoid being merely a "Hammett imitator," is an anxiety that hardboiled writer James M. Cain

experiences, but Cain achieves, I argue, what his contemporaries could not: his stylistic excesses reach such a heightened level of expression that they completely *exceed* the generic limits of the hardboiled category.

Although Cain never features a hardboiled detective as one of his main characters, his novels are nonetheless associated with the hardboiled genre due to their gritty prose style and fast-paced plotlines. David Fine argues that Cain's Los Angeles novels draw on the "tough guy" tradition in order to "express the collective and destructive fantasies of the depression decade and turn these fantasies into nightmares. All his heroes and heroines are self-destructively driven by sexual passion, a too-consuming love or an overpowering desire for material possessions" (28). For Cain, who arrived in Los Angeles soon after the crash and remained through the Depression, the city came to represent the fallen status of the American Dream: "In the boom years hundreds of thousands had come seeking their fresh starts […] The dream seemed within grasp. Fortunes, real and rumored, were being made in real estate, restaurants, oil and movies. When the dream was most fervently believed and seemed closest to fulfillment, the collapse was more painful" (Fine 33). Unlike Chandler who attempts to counteract the harshness of society by offering Marlowe the possibility for redemption, Cain is unconcerned with questions of morality and focuses instead on how the destructive desires of his characters lead to their inevitable demise: "The reader is carried along as much by his own realization that the characters cannot have their particular wish and survive, and his curiosity is to see what happens to them" (*Three* xi). Harnessing what he thinks is the reader's morbid curiosity to see the characters collapse, Cain represents the paradigmatic intertwining of gender anxiety, artistic endeavor, and mass reproduction, but completely explodes these categories apart. Cain's use of excess performs the mobility and uncontrollability of sexual desire within a commodified marketplace, but rather than reigning in these excesses, Cain unleashes these forces to generate what he sees as the "real" hardboiled aesthetic.

Cain's relation to the hardboiled genre is a troubled one, given his outright rejection of being labeled as a hardboiled writer. In his 1941 review "The Boys in the Back Room," Edmund Wilson places Cain at the top of the list of California "tough guy" writers he refers to as the "poets of the tabloid murder" (13), a description which simultaneously acknowledges the literary craft of these "poets" while still situating them within the lowbrow category of "tabloid" or sensationalist writing. Along with Cain, the "boys" in Wilson's essay include John O'Hara, Horace McCoy, William Saroyan, John Steinbeck, and Hans Otto Storm, all of whom Wilson insists "stemmed originally from Hemingway" (11). Complaining that these new West Coast writers are little more than "Hemingway turned picaresque" (11), Wilson argues that their biggest flaw is following too closely the conventional storytelling techniques of Hollywood. James Cain, Wilson laments, is strictly a "writer for the studios. … [His novels] are a kind of Devil's parody of the movies. Mr. Cain is the *âme damnée* of Hollywood" (14). This division between "serious" literature and popular forms of mass entertainment becomes blurred, however, when Wilson admits that there is still "enough of a real poet in Cain" to redeem his unconsciously "burlesque" moments (14). Wilson's conflicting remarks raise the question of what exactly distinguishes the "high" art of Hemingway from Cain's "cruder" form of "studio" writing. What does it mean to say that Cain is "enough" of a craftsman, yet still nothing more than a Hemingway imitator? Is it even possible to have an authentic voice in the mass market?

It is hardly surprising that Cain would spend much of his career addressing the question of Hemingway's presumed influence on his writing style. By the time Cain published his first novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* in 1934, Hemingway's reputation both as distinguished writer and as recognizable public figure had already been firmly established. As the leading icon of masculinity, Hemingway became one of the most widely imitated stylists of the twentieth century, and it was commonly assumed that writers in the hyper-masculine genre of hardboiled fiction took their cue directly from Hemingway. Such an assumption would plague Cain for much of his writing career. In

his preface to *The Butterfly* (1947), Cain takes great pains to explain that he wrote his first short story "Pastorale" in 1927, and hadn't read a word of Hemingway until his short story collection, *Men Without Women*, came out in 1928. Cain goes on to delineate very clearly the differences between Hemingway's prose and his own, admitting only that they have a similar "leanness" in style "as a result of all this skinning out of literary blubber" (354). Although he does own up to a little "muscle flexing" (Hoopes 547) in his novels, Cain insists that he had no conscious desire to be tough or to imitate "this Hemingway thing." "All my guys are a bunch of yellow-bellied rats," Cain writes, "I thought if I ever met Hemingway I would ask him, 'How long do you boil them to make them so tough?'" (*Three* xi). Cain thus highlights the anxiety that writers experienced in attempting to elevate their work above mere imitation.

Although Hemingway's works do not fall under the genre of detective fiction, his influence on hardboiled style is unquestionable. Hemingway also serves as an important figure for understanding the paradoxical relationship between a writer's desire to create aesthetically serious literature and the opposing need to cater to the market in which his work will be sold and consumed. In Chapter 2, I discuss how Chandler and James considered mass media and consumerism as detrimental to artistic production. However, despite their criticism of the mass market, both James and Chandler still wanted their novels to sell well. Hemingway recognized very early in his writing career that he could take advantage of the press to promote his celebrity status, which would in turn boost the positive reception of his writing. As several critics have already noted, Hemingway's rise from obscure newspaperman to celebrated novelist was made possible in large part through his concentrated efforts to publicize his own self-image. In *Fame Became of Him: Hemingway As Public Writer*, John Raeburn explains that the figure of the celebrity is a twentieth-century phenomenon created by the growth of mass media, which produces "the celebrity not so much by extolling his accomplishments but by revealing, defining, and advertising his personality, for they are aware that his personality attracts the public to him. The mass media and the celebrity have a symbiotic relationship: in return for the fame they bestow upon him, the celebrity allows his private life to become a commodity for a mass audience" (3). Most critics tend to keep separate Hemingway's involvement with mass media and his higher artistic aims, a tendency that has perpetuated the notion that an irreconcilable divide exists between high and low. However, in *Masculine Style: The American West and Literary Modernism*, Daniel Worden argues that Hemingway's literary success should be viewed not as in conflict with his celebrity status, but rather that his mass appeal was complementary, and even necessary, to his high art ambitions. Worden further emphasizes the centrality of the marketplace to artistic production in that the "perceived disconnect between popular success and literary prestige was manufactured as a way of endowing modernist literature with cultural capital" (108). Interestingly, Worden formulates the divide between high and low as itself an artificial product created by artists themselves. The obvious irony of course is that Hemingway wants to hide the fact that he's manufacturing an image.

Claiming to represent an authentic masculine ideal, Hemingway popularized the image of the athletic, burly man who swears often and drinks too much, wears flannel shirts, khakis, and hunting vests, and embraces nature and an active sporting life. This "He-Man" image, which equated toughness with integrity and unflinching honesty, grew so prevalent in the popular media of the '30s and '40s that the reading public knew exactly how to dress, speak, and behave like Hemingway and his characters. Just as the image of a He-Man is meant to be read as authentic, so too is Hemingway's distinctive style presented as a impetus to "tell it like it is." For Hemingway, words have "lost their edge" (54) largely due to the crisis of masculinity that emerged after World War I. Concerned about the fact that words had become weak and limp, Hemingway attempted to inject language with the masculine virility that would restore it to a state of "rigidity." His hard, straightforward writing style became, according to Linda Wagner-Martin, the primary American means through which to reject "aristocratic notions of elegance, opulence, leisure, or the overt seeking of amatory adventure or

approval. It also signaled the end of two prominent Victorian styles for writers: the fop, replete in Wildean splendor; and the gentleman, austere in Jamesian comportment" (104). Rejecting what he saw as the effeminacies of decadent style, Hemingway sought to overturn the common view of the artist as too refined, effeminate, and snobbish, arguing that "prose is architecture, not interior decoration, and the Baroque is over" (191). In this architectural metaphor for narrative form, we witness a turning away from the fussiness of "interior decoration," which has been culturally coded as feminine, toward a bare prose style that emphasizes the external and the concrete. Defining his style against lavish interior decorating, Hemingway fashioned sparse, controlled exteriors that emphasized externality as the measure of "real" masculinity: one becomes masculine not through internal reflection or excessive brooding, but through outward actions and external self-discipline.

In his writing, Hemingway thus maintained that good prose was a matter of putting down "what really happened in action" and stating purely "the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion" (*Death* 12). To achieve this effect, Hemingway used his famous iceberg technique to create a prose style in which real emotion lies beneath the surface and the writer can strengthen the emotional impact of the story by omitting information. Much of the plot, the "sequence of motion" that makes the "real thing" felt, occurs offstage and the reader is thus forced to infer the unwritten. In *A Moveable Feast*, for instance, Hemingway writes that he deleted the "real end" of his short story "Out of Season" in order to make "people feel more than they understood" (75). Hemingway's emphasis on a tight formal economy aligns narrative strategies of omission with what is typically seen as masculine restraint. In this gendered view of writing, masculinity is characterized by the rejection of overly emotional displays that might lead to the kind of rhetorical excess found in decadent novels. Hemingway's aesthetics of manly restraint thus allowed him to transform the figure of the sensitive artist from "the sallow, writing type with an indoor soul" into "a literary he-man" (*Time*), thereby presenting art as an appropriate activity for a real man.

However, despite Hemingway's desire to equate his hard, "straight" style with an authentically masculine identity, Gertrude Stein casts his style as something that is less real than constructed. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Stein notes that the public will never hear the story of the "real Hem." Writing from the perspective of Alice B. Toklas, Stein wishes that Hemingway would "tell [the real story] himself but alas he never will. After all, as he himself once murmured, there is the career, the career" (204). Stein's implication here is that Hemingway's investment in preserving the image he has manufactured prevents him from exposing the very kind of self-authenticity that his writing purports to offer. The frequently cited Hemingway paper dolls published in *Vanity Fair* in March 1934 epitomize the idea that the "Hemingway style" is a construct that can be easily replicated. The paper dolls feature a caricature of Hemingway as "Ernie, the Neanderthal Man," along with four additional outfits showcasing familiar roles in his life and fiction: expatriate writer with pen in hand drinking alcohol at a cafe ("Ernie as the Lost Generation"), fisherman in a boat overflowing with freshly-caught marlin ("Ernie as Isaac Walton"), bullfighter gripping a dead bull by the horn ("Ernie as Don Jose, the Toreador"), and wounded World War I solider standing at the center of a bloody battle ("Ernie the Unknown Soldier"). Below, the caption reads: "Ernest Hemingway, America's own literary cave man; hard-drinking, hard-fighting, hard-loving – all for art's sake," a description which appropriates the aesthete's "art for art's sake" motto and harnesses it to broadcast Hemingway's hardboiled masculinity. By linking Hemingway to the stylized decadence of a Wildean aesthete, this caption underscores the idea that Hemingway's masculine aesthetics, despite its claims to being natural, authentic and uncontrived, was in fact formed through a calculated process of self-construction.[24] In light of this discussion that Hemingway's supposedly authentic style is in fact more contrived than

[24] Even though the paper dolls are a parody of Hemingway's celebrity masculinity, they attest to the fact that machismo is a self-conscious playing out of different roles that can be assumed and discarded simply by donning a new outfit.

real, Wilson's remark that Cain's style is a mere imitation of Hemingway's fails to consider the extent to which Hemingway himself was producing a commodified writing style. Hemingway invented his famous hardboiled style with the intention not merely to reinvigorate writing ("to make it real"), but also to appeal to the masses. In other words, Hemingway did not want his work to exist outside of the marketplace: his novels function simultaneously as commodities and works of art.

Cain's constant efforts to shed Hemingway's shadow subsequently extends to a more general desire to separate himself from writers of the hardboiled genre, which suggests that his approach to writing is motivated by a different set of factors. Claiming that he had a "morbid fear of boring the reader to death" (Hoopes 547), Cain gives new meaning to the term "fast-paced," eventually becoming what Tom Wolfe calls "the hard-boiled master of momentum and acceleration" (ii). This chapter argues that Cain attempts to counter accusations of imitating "the Hemingway thing" by employing hardboiled style as a measure not of narrative restraint, but of narrative *excess*, complete with all the complications of gender and authenticity that accompany notions of aesthetic excessiveness. In his review of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, Wolfe describes the famous Cain style in terms of its narrative velocity: "*momentum* was something he had a patent on. Or maybe acceleration is the word" (ii). Along the same lines, Harold Strauss writes in his *New York Times* 1934 review that "Cain rushes forward like a hound on a hot scent." Commenting on *Postman Always Rings Twice*, Strauss describes how the "story races with the speed and power of a cataract." Strauss goes on to analyze the particular nature of Cain's succinctness, which he believes originates from his former work as a newspaper man and which makes "Hemingway look like a lexicographer":

> Cain would be an asset to the tabloids, because he leaves lots of space for pictures. His story is a third as long as most novels, and its success is due entirely to one quality: Cain can get down to the primary impulses of greed and sex in fewer words than any writer we know of. He has exorcised all the inhibitions; there is a minimum of reason, of complexity, of what we commonly call civilization, between an impulse and its gratification.

Cain admits that when it comes to narrative structure, what makes his novels "hopeless" is that "[he] didn't seem to have the least idea where [he] was going with it, or even which paragraph should follow which" (353). Cain is therefore conscious of a certain lack of narrative control and foresight, and his plots frequently get out of hand. Unlike Chandler whose plots disintegrate because his lengthy room descriptions *impede* the narrative's forward movement, Cain loses control of his plots because his novels have *too much* forward drive.

In his preface to *The Butterfly*, Cain explains that the driving force of his novels is "the wish that comes true. […] the wish must really have terror in it […]. I think my stories have some quality of the opening of a forbidden box, and that it is this, rather than violence, sex or any of the things usually cited by way of explanation that gives them the drive so often noted. […] Thus, if I do any glancing, it is toward Pandora" (*Three* 353). Cain's choice of Pandora, the first mortal woman, as his source of inspiration raises interesting questions regarding gender roles given Pandora's associations with female power. Similar to Pandora, whose inability to contain her curiosity causes the unleashing of evils into the world, Cain conceives of writing not in terms of Hemingway's contained, mostly-submerged iceberg, but rather as a releasing of hidden or forbidden forces. In other words, nothing remains beneath the surface in Cain. For Hemingway, the pursuit of formal restraint represents a desire to re-masculinize novelistic aesthetics through an emphasis on action and emotional control as indices of heteromasculinity. But for Cain, the metaphor of Pandora's box is a reversal of Hemingway's theory of narrative omission in that Cain lets loose the inner emotions that Hemingway would be at pains to conceal. The uniqueness of Cain's hardboiled style lies in the fact that his minimalism functions as an

attempt not to control, but rather to liberate the inhibitions that the hardboiled hero typically ignores or represses.

This chapter examines how Cain adapts the commodified form of the hardboiled style to create a new aesthetics for the American high art novel. The detective figure is no longer even a Marlowesque hybrid figure, but morphs into an actual artist, specifically the high art opera singer. Both Spade and Marlowe encounter situations of homoeroticism, but Hammett and Chandler keep hints of queerness at bay in order to impose a code of heteronormativity. Cain, on the other hand, makes explicit the gender complications that accompany any act of aesthetic creation. Cain uses the operatic voice to represent real aesthetic triumph, but this perfection is inextricably tied to the destructive forces of sexual desire and commercialized production. Specifically, I will explore how Cain's *Serenade* (1937), a novel about an opera singer who loses his ability to sing and struggles with his own sexuality, raises questions about the relation between gender, sexuality, and aesthetic production within a mass market. For Cain, the defining tension between lowbrow entertainment and high aestheticism that characterizes the American modern novel is enacted in his juxtaposition of the Hollywood film industry and the operatic stage. Cain attempts to diagnose what it means for genre fiction to strive for high art by presenting his hardboiled hero as an artist who is forced to commodify his voice in order to return to the high art stage of opera. His aesthetic achievement is made possible, however, not through the expected mode of masculine restraint, a stoic containment (or repression) of weak and "aberrant" emotions. Rather, Cain's hero finds aesthetic *and* commercial success only when he unleashes his destructive desires and recognizes the interdependence between his queerness and his artistic production. The excessive energy of the artist is reflected in the unique velocity of Cain's style. Working within the commodified form of the hardboiled novel, Cain employs the hardboiled style in his works, but implies that the Hemingway mode of masculine reticence is in fact a sign not of male authenticity, but of commercialized imitability, an inflexible, reproducible masculinity that no one possesses. Cain's heroes are, by contrast, yellow-bellied and unrestrained, but achieve a "real" hardboiled aesthetic through the outpouring of their excessive emotions. On the level of style, the excesses of Cain's sentences can therefore still be "mastered," but always only in relation to the dark passions of his characters.

"a somewhat special breed"

When Cain moved to Hollywood in 1931, he claimed it was because he "wanted the picture money" (Skenazy 11). "I worked like a dog to get it," Cain explained, "I parked my pride, my aesthetic convictions, my mind outside the street, and did everything to be a success at this highly paid trade. I studied the 'Technique' of moving pictures, I did everything to become adept at them" (Skenazy 11). Cain began work on several scripts for Paramount and Columbia; however, he was soon fired from both jobs.[25] Cain deeply resented Hollywood, but his close involvement with the film industry no doubt influenced his later literary publications. The release of his first novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934) did not take place until several years after Cain had been working for Paramount and Columbia. Cain's continuing legacy within the genre of hardboiled fiction has much to do with the fact

[25] Paul Skenazy observes that, "like Raymond Chandler, whose career parallels Cain's in so many ways, Cain was a man schooled in the early years of the century, who grew to maturity between World Wars I and II. Trained in one world, with one set of social and economic conditions, his stories and tones seemed anachronistic when he tried to impose them on the motives and concerns of the 1950s and 1960s" (17).

that the highly successful film adaptations of his novels *Mildred Pierce* and *Double Indemnity* are considered exemplary examples of film noir.

When Cain declares that he has set aside his "aesthetic convictions" to write for Hollywood, he puts forward the implicit critique that film is a lesser art form than the novel. Though Cain despised having his works compared to film, his desire to be financially successful contributed to the thematic content of his literary works, many of which dramatize this tension between aesthetic ambition and a commercial marketplace that has no discerning aesthetic taste. Cain's desire to create an authentic voice can be traced in his novelistic representation of two opposing realms of artistic production: the operatic stage and the film (or radio) industry. Long regarded as the epitome of high art, opera would appear to have little in common with mass-produced movies and radio talk shows. *Serenade* offers the most direct and sustained meditation of this divide between the elitist art form of opera and the mass consumerism of Hollywood, but we see an earlier representation of this tension in *Mildred Pierce* (1941). In order to fully appreciate the ways in which Cain develops the complex dynamics of authenticity, mass culture, and aesthetics in *Serenade*, it would be useful to first examine how Cain initially tackles these issues in *Mildred Pierce*.

Written near the end of the Depression, *Mildred Pierce* "probes middle-class anxiety about the already destabilized boundaries between worker and aristocrat, undercutting Mildred's Horatio Alger-like rise through a consistent devaluation of traditional markers of class and culture" (Campbell 2).[26] After her husband loses his fortune and social status on Black Thursday, Mildred is forced to enter the workforce as a waitress in order to support her two children. As Donna Campbell notes, Mildred "struggles to retain her autonomy in a service-oriented, consumption-driven culture" (2), but eventually succeeds in building and running her own business empire of restaurant chains. Initially, Mildred is embarrassed by her work in the service industry: "The idea of putting on a uniform, carrying a tray, and making her living from tips made Mildred positively ill" (43). She takes great pains to hide her waitressing from her children, especially her demanding and spoiled older daughter Veda, whose pretentious snobbery secretly pleases Mildred because it "hint[s] at things superior to [Mildred's] own commonplace nature" (16). Mildred's unhealthy attachment to Veda will become the driving tragedy of the novel as Mildred tries again and again to garner, indeed to *buy*, Veda's affection.

A novel deeply invested in examining the ethics of service and production that govern the marketplace, *Mildred Pierce* keeps a meticulous financial record of receipts, bills, payment plans, and business transactions. Mildred can account for every cent that passes through her hands: she bakes pies to sell for three dollars each; calculates the exact cost of grocery expenses, bank withdrawals, and insurance policies; memorizes the prices of fifty-five- and sixty-five-cent lunch items on the restaurant menu; and cultivates regular customers who are better tippers and leave "dimes instead of nickels" (55). As she becomes more confident in her waitressing abilities, Mildred begins to study the intricate system of running a restaurant business – "the bookkeeping, the marketing, the method of using up leftovers" (89) – in order to determine how to reduce "waste" (91) and streamline costs. Mildred's "common sense" (151) and quick head for business culminates in the opening of her own chicken-and-waffle restaurant, complete with a side pie business.

Over the course of the novel, Veda emerges as Mildred's biggest expense, the one "costing [her] money" (286). No matter how tight on cash she might be, Mildred always manages to save 50 cents a week for Veda's piano lessons. Later, Mildred deposits $21 a week for a year to pay for the $1100 grand piano that Veda would practice on from home. Resentful of her middle-class status, Veda

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[26] David Madden comments perceptively on the general linkage between food and sex in *James M. Cain*. See especially Chapter 3, "The Love-Rack and the Wish-Come True," 61–91. A more recent essay on Cain's use of food is Robert Dingley's "Eating America: The Consuming Passion of James M. Cain." Dingley suggests that the diners and barbeque restaurants in Cain's works are part of a broader cultural preoccupation with fast food in a mobile society.

ridicules her mother's profession as a waitress and the "Pie Wagon," yet willingly and wastefully spends Mildred's hard-earned money. Ironically, Mildred gains her daughter's approval only when she becomes involved with Monty Beragon, an upper-class playboy and "professional loafer" (113) who, like Veda, looks down on anyone who has to work for a living. Representing the social elite and old money of Pasadena, Monty "had been born to a way of life that included taste, manners, and a jaunty aloofness from money, as though it were beneath a gentleman's notice. But what he didn't realize was that all these things rested squarely on money: it was the possession of money that enabled him to be aloof from it. […] Now, with the money gone, he was unable to give up on the old way of life, or find a new one" (168). Instead of working for living, he begins to accept $10 and then $20 bills from Mildred, who hands over the money in exchange for the intimacy with Veda that Monty's company brings.[27] When Monty introduces Veda to high society, Mildred takes consolation in knowing that Veda has access to the "social equality that [Monty] withheld from her" (238), "lav[ing] herself in Veda's sticky affection, and [buying], without complaining, the somewhat expensive gear that heaven required: riding, swimming, golf, and tennis outfits; overnight kits, monogrammed" (153). Mildred gives Veda "everything that money can buy" (238) in an attempt to secure her affection and ultimately to possess her. As Cain explains to John Carr: "The two lovers in that book […] are Mildred and Veda. […] Mildred's so absorbed in Veda that it becomes equivalent almost of a sexual relation" (Skenazy 72). Joyce Carol Oates echoes this sentiment, positing that the novel "has at its center a forbidden wish made articulate: that a mother may possess her daughter completely as if the daughter were a lover" (116). Late in the novel, Mildred tries to purchase Veda's attention by secretly paying for her singing lessons, but this gesture brings her no closer to her daughter. Again, Mildred applies the "payment for service" model she learns from waitressing, but Veda (and Monty) adheres to an economic system which figures exchange without reciprocity. As Campbell succinctly explains, Monty calls Mildred a varlet precisely because she has the "varlet's unreasonable expectation of receiving goods or services if money changes hands, whether that involves driving Veda to piano lessons or functioning as Mildred's 'paid gigolo,' as he calls himself" (168). Whereas Mildred is motivated by the desire to "get [her] money's worth" (196), Veda, Monty claims, would never stoop to picking up tips and actively removes herself from her mother's possessive desire to "buy" her.

It is against this backdrop of class inequality, consumer desire, systems of exchange, and marketplace demands that Cain presents Veda's inborn talent as an opera singer. Veda's medium of exchange and artistic expression is music and Mildred invests financially and emotionally in Veda because she has "a deep, almost religious conviction that Veda was 'talented'" (14). Veda becomes an oddly contradictory vehicle for representing the epitome of aesthetic perfection achieved in the form of a character who is excessively phony and morally corrupt. Even at the young age of eleven, Veda "spoke in the clear, affected voice that one associates with stage children, and indeed everything she said had the effect of having been learned by heart, and recited in the manner prescribed by some stiff book of etiquette" (15). Throughout the novel, Veda is constantly described in terms of her artificial and exaggerated demeanor: the "phony toniness" (86) of her voice, her frequent "simulations of surprise" (85), and her general "stagy, affected counterfeit" (86). Cain's description of Veda's manner as "counterfeit" is particularly interesting in that the term refers to a fakeness that is an *exact* imitation of something genuine and valuable, a fakeness that recalls the status of the black bird in *The Maltese*

[27] Donna Campbell includes an insightful discussion of Monty's status as a member of the upper class: "Monty believes that a gentleman lives only on the unearned increment gained from the labor of others, and his accepting tips from Mildred meets this criterion. Also like Bert, he has defined leisure as the status marker of the gentleman. But in the novel's Depression-era setting of 1928–1937, the disappearing boundary between those who need not work and those who cannot work quickly erases the distinction between gentleman and discarded worker. In the economy of the era, an excess of enforced leisure drives down the value of the rare and precious commodity of leisure that signifies class" (12). Even though Mildred earns more than Monty, he sees her working wages as a reflection of her lower class.

Falcon. Moreover, in her effort to become a desirable commodity in the marketplace, Veda has no moral qualms about deceiving and defrauding those around her. It is a striking decision on Cain's part to emphasize, on the one hand, Veda's utter lack of authenticity, and on the other, to elevate her as the only character in the novel with aesthetic talent.

When Veda abandons her piano lessons to train under the famous conductor Carlo Treviso, she quickly triumphs as an opera singer. Mildred is astounded when she hears her daughter sing for the first time on a national broadcast for the popular Hang Somerville (Snack-O-Ham) radio program: "It seemed impossible that anybody could dare such dizzy heights of sound, could even attempt such vocal gymnastics, without making some slip, some dreadful error that would land the whole thing in ruin. But Veda made no slip" (246). The purity of Veda's aesthetic ambition is somewhat diminished by the fact that she is performing on a popular radio station and not on the operatic stage. However, Cain leaves no room for doubt that Veda's voice is "the real thing." Interestingly, Cain had initially attempted to pursue a career as an opera singer. However, his mother, Rose Callahan, herself a trained coloratura soprano like Veda, was horrified by her son's decision to become a singer, telling Cain that he had "no voice, no looks, no stage personality. You have some musical sense, but it's not enough" (Hoopes 35). After a year of frustrated efforts to develop his singing skills, Cain finally had to admit that his mother was right, but he would always look upon the discovery that he had no voice as "the worst blow of [his] life" (Hoopes 555). Indeed, he considered his writing career merely a "consolation prize" (554) and regarded opera as the higher art form.[28] Cain's veneration of opera, even above writing, in fact colors his ability to write an appropriate ending for the novel, in general, and for Veda, in particular.

Cain confesses that he had struggled for months to come up with a fitting conclusion for *Mildred Pierce*, but finally "banged into a climax that was a beauty" (209). Mildred's entrepreneurial success crumbles in the wake of her failed efforts to take full credit for her daughter's musical achievements. To further emphasize Veda's moral bankruptcy, the novel culminates with Mildred stumbling upon her daughter in bed with Monty. In a fit of jealous rage, Mildred reaches for Veda's throat, strangling her daughter for whose musical advancement she had sacrificed so much, and "destroying," as Cain puts it, "the one thing she loved most on this earth, Veda's beautiful voice" (209). When Veda tries to sing, the sound that comes out is "like a man's voice" (297). Cain, however, could not follow through with this ending for Veda. Instead, he later admits that, "I threw it away … I let Veda, this girl who was the bane of her mother's existence, be incredibly, impossible and needlessly smart." At novel's end, we learn that Veda has only feigned losing her voice to get out of an onerous

[28] The biographical parallels between Cain and Hemingway are also worth mentioning. Both were journalists before turning to fiction writing, a factor which helped shape their direct, economical novelistic style. Hemingway claims that he relied on the *Kansas City Star's* style guide to develop his prose ("Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. Be positive, not negative"), and Cain considered himself a "newspaperman who writes yarns on the sides" (Hoopes 549). Both novelists were also exposed to music at a very early age. Hemingway's mother Grace was formally trained as a grand opera singer and aspired to a career on stage. She was accepted by the Metropolitan Opera Company, but left the stage to concentrate on raising her children. Due to her musical upbringing—her mother Caroline Hall performed locally as a singer and pianist, while her father Ernest Hall was a baritone and regularly attended the Chicago Opera—Grace firmly believed in the importance of art appreciation, and as soon as her children were old enough, she taught them music at home and took them to see plays and operas. Hemingway sang in the church choir at an early age, and complained that his mother forced him to practice the cello even though he had no talent for it. Despite his boyhood hatred of cello lessons, Hemingway remained deeply interested in music, continuing to attend operas and symphony concerts as an adult. Like Grace Hemingway, Cain's mother Rose Callahan, was a trained opera coloratura, and Cain's childhood memories are filled with her lyric soprano "Brünnhilde voice […] racing up and down scales, popping up into *alt*, cascading down into a middle section that was as big and deep as a contralto. Its agility was amazing" (Hoopes 6). Later in this chapter, I will discuss how Cain's desire to pursue an opera career influenced the thematic content of his detective fiction writing.

contract with the radio producers. Cain writes that this new ending "got the curtain down, but that's about all I can say about it. Believe it or not, I had by that time fallen in love with Veda's totally imaginary voice, and I couldn't bear to think it was permanently gone." (Hoopes 309). The clumsy ending of *Mildred Pierce* is a thus direct result of Cain's fixation on the voice he had created.

Cain's infatuation with so monstrous a character as Veda leads him to forfeit the integrity of his novel to preserve her voice. Defending his portrayal of Veda, Cain writes to a friend that, "The development of this child is one of the things I take pride in, in my writing, for she had to be credible at all times, and yet, when her true 'talent' is finally revealed, the reader must realize and vividly believe that what he's been witness to is the development of an opera singer, a somewhat special breed, remote from Mildred's world of pies, menu cards, and chefs, and utterly beyond her ability to understand" (Skenazy 77). Cain valorizes the "somewhat special breed" of opera singers to such an extent that, to use Skenazy's words, he employs the "heroic representation of unscrupulousness in the service of beauty" (79), something for which Cain never apologized. By portraying Veda as an artist whose musical talent is rivaled only by her moral corruption, Cain reveals his privileging of opera as the aesthetic ideal. As a coloratura soprano, Veda is, in Treviso's eyes, "a special fancy breed, like blue Persian cat. Come once in a lifetime […] If is *real* coloratura, bring more dough to a grand opera house than big wop tenor. And dees girl, is coloratura, even a bones is coloratura" (250).

The ironic tension of the ending resides in the fact that Veda fakes the loss of her voice precisely in order to continue singing *on her own terms*. In other words, Veda's aesthetic talent is realized not through an outward expression of her inner authentic essence, but through a performance of artifice that masks her interior motives. Moreover, Veda might not have reservations about allowing her voice to be commodified on the radio, but she certainly refuses to give up control over her voice. Just as she rejects her mother's possessiveness, Veda also refuses to be owned by the radio producers and thus breaks her contract in order to remove herself from a system of exchange that she cannot control. And yet, after her contract is dissolved, Veda reenters the marketplace as a commodity that is somehow exempt from the pressures of an economic system of exchange. Treviso perfectly summarizes Veda's exception from market forces when he states, "All coloratura, they got, 'ow you say?—da *gimmies*. Always take, never give. O.K., you spend plenty money on dees girl, what she do for you? […] She do nothing for you" (250). Veda is somehow able to have it all: to exist as a highly desirable commodity and simultaneously to exert the authority and autonomy of an authentic work of art. It is important to note that Cain's inability to destroy Veda's voice also carries significant gender implications: when Mildred strangles her daughter, Cain does not write that "no sound" comes out of Veda's throat, but rather that her singing sounds "like a man's." The moment in which Veda loses her artistry thus coincides with her performance of gender. Cain does not further explore the implications of Veda's temporary vocal aberration—within a few short weeks, Mildred learns that Veda's ruined voice was merely an act, another counterfeit performance—but the linking together of voice and gender anxieties is the central focus in Cain's earlier novel, *Serenade*.

If Veda succeeds in breaking her contract and retaining ownership over her own voice, the opposite would seem to hold true for the character of John Howard Sharp in *Serenade*, a novel with much higher stakes in the debate over aesthetic authenticity in the age of commodification. In 1915, two years after his failure to pursue a career in opera singing, Cain began developing the storyline for *Serenade*, whose first-person narrator, John Sharp, is simultaneously a hardboiled tough guy and a struggling artist figure. When we first meet Sharp, he is a washed-up opera singer relegated to working in second-rate nightclubs in Mexico City. In his fiction, Cain would feature his passion for opera in two other novels, *Career in C Major* (1943) and *The Moth* (1948), but *Serenade* is by far the most unconventional portrayal of opera. Like Veda, Sharp also seeks the perfect stage for his singing, but he fails to manipulate marketplace demands to his advantage. When Sharp leaves Mexico and returns to Los Angeles in hopes of resuscitating his musical career, he experiences a somewhat unlikely meteoric

rise in the movie industry. In the ensuing clash between the consumerism of popular culture and the high art of opera, Sharp is quick to express his disapproval of Hollywood: "I didn't like Hollywood. […] To them, singing is just something you buy, for whatever you have to pay, and so is acting, and so is writing, and so is music, and anything else they use. That it might be good for its own sake is something that hasn't occurred to them yet" (99). Sharp's reference to art as being "good for its own sake" echoes the *fin de siècle* decadent motto "art for art's sake." Yet despite his hatred for Hollywood's commercialism, Sharp is still willing to participate in it, which raises the issue of how Sharp will channel his operatic prowess, an art form traditionally reserved for highbrow upper classes, into the money-making world of movies and mass entertainment.

The mouthpiece for Hollywood consumerism is Rex Gold, the president of the movie company who tells Sharp about his most recent visit to the Metropolitan where he saw Tosca, "the same opera that we do a piece of in Bunyan […] Well, boy, I'm telling you, we just made a bum out of them. That sequence in our pictures is so much better than their job, note for note, production for production, that comparison is just ridiculous" (115). Gold goes on to argue that motion pictures "have stepped in and done it so much better than they can do it that they can't get by any more, that's all. Opera is going the same way the theatre is going. Pictures have just rubbed them out" (115). Cain presents Gold as the voice of lowbrow mass entertainment, which has "rubbed out" the less accessible forms of "high" art like opera and theater. Acknowledging Sharp's refined aesthetic taste, Gold nonetheless insists that, "Maybe you know what's pretty but I know what sells. […] The way I'm building you up, we're going to take that voice of yours, and what are we going to do with it? Use it on popular stuff. The stuff you sing better than anybody else in the business. The stuff that people want to hear. Lumberjack songs, cowboy songs, mountain music, jazz—you can't beat it! It's what they want! Not any of this tra-la-la-la-la-la!" (116).

Although his suspicion of Hollywood never subsides, Sharp allows Gold to instruct him on how to sing the "popular stuff" that "people want to hear." Hoping that the film industry will provide him with the necessary publicity to make possible a return to the operatic stage, Sharp stars in a B picture that is such a hit that he becomes a "Hollywood celebrity overnight" (104). Sharp manages to negotiate a contract with Gold for three pictures, a fifty-thousand-dollar compensation for each film. However, after the success of his first film, he receives an offer from the Metropolitan Opera in New York that they want him to perform. Sharp appears to be in exactly the position he had hoped for: his Hollywood celebrity status has opened the door to a performance at the Met. Reasoning that a "contract was just something that you probably couldn't read anyway" (112), Sharp contemplates breaking his contract with Gold to realize his artistic goal to sing at the Met. The most pressing question for Sharp revolves around the issue of who owns his voice. Since Sharp cannot fully grasp the repercussions of breaking a Hollywood contract, his lawyer cautions him: "You run out on this contract, and your name is mud in Hollywood from now on—" (113). Sharp's lawyer even tells Sharp that Gold "will buy a voice. He'll dub your sound for you," to which Sharp retorts, "Not for me he won't," attempting to assert that he has rights over how his own voice is used (114). But his lawyer reminds Sharp that in Hollywood, marketplace principles trump aesthetic rights: "Will you for Christ sake stop talking about art? I'm talking about money" (114). Against his lawyer's advice, Sharp leaves for New York to make his operatic debut at the Met while simultaneously working with a radio broadcast program to write a song that would feature a melody from his recent film *My Pal Babe*. Sharp fails to understand the gravity of his decision to break his Hollywood contract until the members of the radio show inform him that Gold has forbid them to use any song from *My Pal Babe:* "We can't use it! We can't use a note of it! It's his!" (124). Realizing to his horror that his voice belongs to Gold, Sharp is forced to return to Hollywood to fulfill Gold's contract.

What this scenario reveals is the way in which voices are treated as purchasable commodities in Hollywood. Sharp's relation to authenticity and commodification differs from Veda's in that his

position as a hardboiled character emphasizes his masculinity as a sign of authenticity. By contrast, Veda's femininity is coded as a reflection of her willingness to commodify her voice through dishonest and inauthentic means. Unlike Veda's clever and successful manipulation of the marketplace, Sharp has no ownership over his own voice, and Cain is quick to highlight the central threat that consumerism poses to Sharp's aesthetic production. Sharp is very conscious of the possibility that art will be commodified in the form of radio or film because his voice can be so easily be reproduced, dubbed, and replaced. But aesthetically speaking, what exactly is the difference between a (live) artistic performance of opera and a recorded performance (whether on radio or on film)? Is Sharp justified in believing that the recording of his voice on *My Pal Babe* is aesthetically inferior to his operatic performances at the Met? In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin comments on how the rise of technology has created a divide between live and recorded performances: "This situation might also be characterized as follows: for the first time—and this is the effect of the film—man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor. However, the singularity of the shot in the studio is that the camera is substituted for the public. Consequently, the aura that envelops the actor vanishes, and with it the aura of the figure he portrays" (220). The result of capitalism's industrial development (along with the rise of consumer culture) is the eradication of what Benjamin calls "aura." In the realm of the aesthetic, aura describes the authenticity and authority of a work of art, its value as a unique object. For Benjamin, aura is bound to tradition and ritual, to a specific time and space, because an original work of art cannot be separated from the unique location within which it was created. In the modern age, aura is destroyed because reproducible art is no longer attached to a particular history of creation and thus loses both its authenticity and its authority: "Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin 220). In the same essay, Benjamin applies the concept of aura to the introduction of film, describing the commodification of aura through which the film actor is turned into a star with cult personality:

> The feeling of strangeness that overcomes the actor before the camera, as Pirandello describes it, is basically of the same kind as the estrangement felt before one's own image in the mirror. But now the reflected image has become separable, transportable. And where is it transported? Before the public. Never for a moment does the screen actor cease to be conscious of this fact. While facing the camera he knows that ultimately he will face the public, the consumers who constitute the market. This market, where he offers not only his labor but also his whole self, his heart and soul, is beyond his reach. During the shooting he has as little contact with it as any article made in a factory. This may contribute to that oppression, that new anxiety which, according to Pirandello, grips the actor before the camera. The film responds to the shriveling of the aura with an artificial build-up of the "personality" outside the studio. The cult of the movie star, fostered by the money of the film industry, preserves not the unique aura of the person but the "spell of the personality," the phony spell of a commodity. (220)

The aura of the actor, and of the character portrayed by the actor, vanishes because the camera is substituted for the audience. In place of the aura, film studios build up a cult of the star as a constructed image. This is not a true aura, but the "phony spell of a commodity." In the character of Veda, Cain combines both phoniness and authenticity: Veda has fewer qualms than Sharp about commodifying her aesthetic talents on the radio station. Unlike Veda who exhibits complete mastery of her singing voice, Sharp has an extremely unstable relation to his own singing, but he clearly desires to achieve an authenticity that he defines in opposition to consumerism. In *Serenade*, Sharp struggles to

negotiate his dependence on Hollywood for both financial security and public recognition, and his aesthetic ambition to reenter the operatic stage.

It is also significant that *Serenade* is written in the first person, whereas *Mildred Pierce* is presented through third-person narration. We perceive only Veda's cold, phony façade, and have no access to her as an authentic self because the third-person narration distances her as a commodity that lacks any interiority. By contrast, in *Serenade*, Cain's hardboiled style emerges as more direct and authentic despite (or perhaps because of) the inconsistencies in Sharp's first-person narration. In the following section, I will trace Sharp's attempt to achieve an authentic masculine aesthetic through his struggle to recover his singing voice. Although Sharp appears to adhere to the traditional construction of the hardboiled male hero, his aesthetic ambition is complicated by his repressed homosexuality, a complication that will reveal itself stylistically in Cain's re-envisioning of hardboiled prose as an expression of excess rather than of manly restraint.

"the voice of the bull"

In Erin Smith's analysis of gender politics in *Hardboiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*, she argues that the problem of authenticity raised by hard-boiled fiction is inseparable from the problem of masculinity in the age of consumer culture (84). As discussed earlier, the yoking of authenticity with masculinity also becomes a way of defining the famous hardboiled style, which represents an assertion of male authority in the face of a weakening (feminized) language and a consumer-driven society. Hardboiled voice is therefore a combination of tough (manly) talk and straight (honest) talk, which is further emphasized by the tendency of hardboiled fiction to be written in first-person voice. Breu further notes that the hardboiled novel is "typically structured around a core set of narrative elements and oppositions. The hard-boiled protagonist is usually presented as doing one of two things: observing or acting. The former activity situates him as the subject of the gaze, implicitly controlling that which he observes, a positionality that is reinforced by the first-person narrative voice" (13). In *Serenade*, Sharp is introduced as a down-and-out American expatriate living in Mexico. The novel opens with a classic hardboiled male voice commenting on his surroundings. Sharp displays all the expected attributes of the tough guy with a hardboiled exterior when he describes the physical appearance of Juana Montes, a Mexican-Indian prostitute:

> I was in the Tupinamba, having a *bizcocho* and coffee, when this girl came in. Everything about her said Indian, from the maroon *rebozo* to the black dress with purple flowers on it, to the swaying way she walked, that no woman ever got without carrying pots, bundles, and baskets on her head from the time she could crawl. But she wasn't any of the colors that Indians come in. She was almost white, with just the least dip of *café con leche*. Her shape was Indian, but not ugly. (1)

In this opening paragraph, Sharp establishes himself as someone who is adept at reading people and categorizing them into social types, a skill typically associated with the detective figure. Sharp observes those around him in both totalizing terms ("everything," "no woman," "any of the colors") and unique, individualized details. The most common technique that Sharp uses to qualify his generalizing tendency is through the conjunction "but," which allows Sharp to make finer distinctions in the ways that Juana defies certain social categorizations, a reading which is of course problematic in its racialization of Juana's physical features: her "shape [is] Indian, but not ugly; she is "slim, but […] voluptuous" with "thick, but pretty" lips. Furthermore, Juana is "almost" white with the just slightest

("least") hint of *café con leche*. Sharp's first-person commentary enables him to assert his authority in terms of visual command as well as masculine toughness. Robert Rose reads this opening scene an example of how hardboiled heroes tend to "traffic in the language of essence," to pinpoint that which is most essential and therefore constitutive of a person: "Sharp declares his heterosexuality in belligerent terms (that will appear in retrospect as overcompensation) and at the same time displays an essentializing impulse that is both racialized and sexualized" (59). This paragraph gives way to a typical scene of masculine confrontation when Sharp and bullfighter Triesca vie for the attention of Juana. Triesca belongs to the rising group of commercial bullfighters whose monetary interests outweigh their devotion to the cultivation of their craft: "He was a wow with the cape, and just moving up into the money. [...] He was alone, but the managers, agents, and writers kept dropping by his table" (4).[29] Sharp's response to Triesca's popularity is to challenge it, and after a sufficient display of muscle-flexing, he succeeds in winning Juana's approval and seems to secure his position as hardboiled male hero.

Following this opening scene, Sharp reveals to us that his singing voice has mysteriously dried up for unspecified reasons. The pacing of *Serenade* starts off slowly as Sharp hops from one nightclub to another, but the plot quickly picks up speed when Sharp's violent sexual assault (bordering on rape) of Juana miraculously cures his voice. With his newly restored voice, Sharp travels through Mexico with Juana in order to return to America, where he quickly establishes a career in the film industry. As discussed earlier, Sharp dreams of leaving behind the mass commercialism of Hollywood to reenter the high art arena of the opera by performing at the Met in New York. But when our hardboiled hero is reunited with Winston Hawes, a wealthy young conductor, we learn that the cause of Sharp's earlier loss of voice is attributed to his past homosexual affair with Winston. In a sudden reversal, Sharp is forced to confront his repressed homosexuality, which now poses a renewed threat to his singing. The love triangle that develops between Sharp, Juana, and Winston culminates in a decadent drag party during which the effeminate Winston dresses as a bull while Juana plays the masculine role of bullfighter, ultimately stabbing and killing her rival to ensure Sharp's status as her heterosexual male lover.

Serenade is therefore structured in roughly two halves, with the first half consisting of a road trip through Mexico and a return by boat to the States, and the second half taking place in Hollywood and then New York with a final brief and tragic return to Mexico. What is unusual about *Serenade* is the fact that, for almost two-thirds of the novel, Sharp provides no explanation whatsoever for his vocal breakdown, despite fully acknowledging his role as narrator. The only clue we're given early in the novel to explain Sharp's loss of voice is his passing mention of how "this thing happened in Europe, and it cracked up on me for no reason I could see" (57). For the entire first half of the novel, this ambiguous "thing" remains unspecified, and we only know that Juana is suspicious that the "priestly" (48) quality of Sharp's singing makes him less of a man.

The initial mystery surrounding Sharp's loss of voice parallels, in interesting ways, Jake Barnes's reticence concerning his war wound in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, a novel which confronts the difficulty of portraying a post-World-War-I American expatriate whose virility has been replaced by a wounded impotence. Throughout the novel, Jake struggles to reaffirm his male identity,

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[29] Having seen Triesca perform in the ring several times, Sharp demonstrates enough knowledge about bullfighting to be able to recognize that Triesca is a "wow with the cape," but it is important not to mistake this observation as a sign of praise. On the contrary, Sharp regards Triesca with the same disdain Jake holds for Marcial, and we can almost hear Hemingway's complaint in *Death in the Afternoon* that the art of bullfighting has decayed due to the introduction of unnecessary stylistic frills like over-elaborate cape work. In *The Sun Also Rises*, we witness early indications of the negative effect that commercialism had on bullfighting, but in Hemingway's Spain, the older form of bullfighting is still kept alive by a select few, like Pedro Romero. By the time we reach Cain's Mexico, this more artistic form of bullfighting seems to be virtually nonexistent, and commercialized bullfighters like Triesca now carry the status of "popular idol" (7).

or as Delbert Wylder flatly observes, "his wound has made him unmanly" (19). Although Hemingway withholds the exact nature of Jake's injury, it is clear that his inability to perform sexually leaves him feeling emasculated both physically and psychologically. Breu suggests that Hemingway's use of the paratactic first-person narration typically functions to "repress any direct representation of affective investment" (88). Jake's reticence therefore serves as a means to avoid confronting his insecurities. For instance, in the frequently cited scene in which Jake looks at his wound in the mirror, he does directly acknowledge the existence of his wound, but immediately attempts to distract himself by displacing his gaze onto the furniture. Unlike Marlowe whose lengthy descriptions of furnished rooms are tied to his hybrid status as a hardboiled aesthete, Jake's perceptions of the room work as a mechanism to reassert his threatened masculinity:

> I lit the lamp beside the bed, turned off the gas, and opened the wide windows. The bed was far back from the windows, and I sat with the windows open and undressed by the bed. Outside a night train, running on the street-car tracks, went by carrying vegetables to the markets. They were noisy at night when you could not sleep. Undressing, I looked at myself in the mirror of the big armoire beside the bed. That was a typically French way to furnish a room. Practical, too, I suppose. Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny. I put on my pajamas and got into bed. (29)

Breu has aptly argued that while the narration in key moments such as this is able "to indicate the male protagonist's affective investments, allowing the sentimental attachments that are repressed from hard-boiled prose to return to the surface of the text, this return of the repressed generally produces only a repetition, rather than a working through, of the ideological significance of these attachments" (89). I would modify Breu's argument only insofar as I believe Jake's repression returns *without ever breaking* the surface of the text. The very moment at which his repression is about to surface, Jake instantly averts his glance towards the armoire, thus allowing his repressed fears to remain submerged and therefore safely contained.

In a scene that is almost uncanny in its resemblance to that of Jake undressing for bed, Sharp has returned to his hotel after Juana refuses his sexual advances, apparently due to the fact that his "priestly" singing disturbed her. To avoid thinking about what Juana's displeasure might imply, Sharp undresses in his room "without turning on the light, so I wouldn't see the concrete floor, the wash basin with rings in it, and the lizard that would come out from behind the bureau. I got in bed, pulled the lousy cotton blanket over me, and lay there watching the fog come in" (17). Unlike Jake who leaves the light on while undressing, Sharp quite literally shuts things out by remaining in the dark. The gesture of Jake's averted gaze toward the armoire is reversed in that Sharp is prevented from displacing his attention onto the furniture (the bureau and wash basin) because he chooses to leave the light off. And just as Jake lays awake in bed with his "mind jumping around" (29), Sharp also lays in bed struggling to block out what might have caused Juana's rejection: "When I closed my eyes I'd see her looking at me, seeing something in me, I didn't know what, and then I'd open them again and look at the fog. After a while it came to me that I was afraid of what she saw in me. There would be something horrible mixed up in it, and I didn't want to know what it was" (17). The ambiguous language in this paragraph, the "something" that Sharp is afraid to face, refers to his homosexual affair with Winston, who we eventually learn is the root cause of Sharp's "crack up." Much later in the novel, Sharp will finally be forced to acknowledge and confront the consequences of his homosexual relationship with Winston. But at this point in the novel, Sharp operates in the same mode of avoidance and displacement as Jake.

Though the cause of Sharp's loss of voice remains a mystery, the cure is certainly made blatantly evident. During Sharp's trip through Mexico with Juana, the pacing of the action

encapsulates Cain's "Pandora's box" method of structuring his novels as an ever-increasing drive toward danger. Heading toward Acapulco, after hours of driving in the deserted countryside, Sharp and Juana realize they must find shelter from an impending storm. They come across an abandoned church that is locked, leading Sharp to break down the doors with their car and illuminate the interior with his headlights, both signs of violence that foreshadow his violation of Juana. The deeper they get into the countryside, the more primitive Juana becomes, gradually shedding her clothes, shoes, and "civilized" manners until she is barefoot and, in Sharp's words, "pure Aztec" (31). Inside the church, Juana crouches at the altar and offers up eggs, coffee and corn the way "an Aztec treats a god": "She was stark naked, except for a *rebozo* over her head and shoulders. There she was at last, stripped to what God put there. She had been sliding back to the jungle ever since she took off that first shoe, coming out of Taxco, and now she was right in it" (49). Juana's primitivism heightens Sharp's desire, and in a violent scene of religious sacrilege, Sharp violates Juana at the church altar, an attack which Sharp admits "was rape, but only technical [….]. Above the waist, maybe she was worried about the *sacrilegio*, but below the waist down she wanted me, bad" (50).

Following this scene of rape, Juana's curative powers culminate in an eroticized scene in which Sharp traps an iguana, prepares a soup with it, then rubs the broth on Juana's breasts and feeds off her. This merging of sexuality, orality and violence restores not only Sharp's sense of manhood, but also his voice: "I sang … [and I] didn't sound like a priest anymore. [My voice] came full and round, the way it once had, and felt free and good" (51). The link between voice and body is thus made explicit when Sharp's singing ability is restored through the demonstration of his sexual authority. Recognizing that Sharp's "vocal restoration through female companionship" might be too unbelievable, Cain explains the difficulty a writer faces when he "grazes a scientific boundary":

> The lamentable sounds that issue from a homo's throat when he tries to sing are a matter of personal observation, and if I could have stopped there I could have been completely persuasive, and made a point of some interest. But the theme demanded the next step, the unwarranted corollary that heavy workouts with a woman would bring out the stud horse high notes. [...] Several doctors of eminence assured me that they could believe it. (Hoopes 283)

On the level of narrative, Cain feels that the theme of voice and sexuality would be inadequately developed had he stopped with the "lamentable sounds" that Sharp produced after his homosexual relations with Winston. Instead, Cain takes the "next step" by reversing the effects of Sharp's homosexuality on his voice through his sexual conquest of Juana. Several years before he began drafting *Serenade*, Cain was regularly attending concerts and operas in New York, and noticed what he saw as a connection "between a singer's 'sex coefficient,' as he put it, and the quality of his voice. After moving to Hollywood in the thirties, Cain had the opportunity to observe singers in a more intimate setting when he and playwright Henry Meyers organized musical events every Friday night at Cain's home. During these evenings, Cain closely studied the singers' performances and conceived of his theory that there was a relationship between homosexuality and singing. John Lee Mahin recalled that at concerts Cain would remark that "a guy sang with his balls. And sometimes, if Cain didn't like a singer, he'd say: 'He doesn't have any balls; a guy's got to have balls" (Hoopes 266). Cain felt that the macho lifestyles of truly successful male singers like Caruso or McCormack was what allowed them to achieve their great singing. However, still concerned about writing a book that "doctors will laugh at," Cain would only be convinced that the story was worth pursuing when Dr. Samuel Hirshfeld, a prominent Los Angeles physician, assured him that his theory was clinically sound.[30] In *Serenade*, Cain

[30] After the novel's publication, Cain learned that it was prescribed reading in psychiatry courses across the country. At the time, Cain believed that he had hit upon an entirely new interpretation of the familiar myths about opera and sexuality.

attempts to challenge the conceptions of opera as an unmasculine art form by presenting Sharp's masculine aggression toward Juana as the necessary step in securing the "balls" to hit the "stud horse high notes." When Sharp finally succeeds in reaching these high notes, his singing is described in sexualized terms: "On the F sharp, instead of covering up and getting it over with quick, I did a *messi di voce*, probably the toughest order a singer ever tries to deliver. You start it *p*, swell to *ff*, pull back to *p* again, and come off it" (119).

After Sharp's voice is restored (and his heterosexuality confirmed through his act of rape), Juana admits that she might have been mistaken in thinking he sang "just like a priest" (48). She now approvingly describes Sharp as having "the voice of the bull" (15). Here, Cain introduces a third term into the link between opera and sexuality, that of bulls and bullfighting. The significance of this third term reappears later in the novel, when Juana meets the homosexual singers in Winston's choir group. Juana insists that when it comes to men, she knows "*all*. …these man who love other man, they can do much, very clever. But no can sing. Have no *toro* in high voice, no *grrr* that frighten little *muchacha*, make heart beat fast. Sound like old woman, like cow, like priest" (142). Cain connects the metaphor of bullfighting to operatic singing in order to present the theory that great art is characterized by its *toro*, its ability to move and strike fear in its audience, the "*grrr* that frightens." Cain's aesthetic theory contains striking parallels to Hemingway's use of the ritual of bullfighting as a metaphor for a new aesthetics of style in which direct, simple and "pure" forms of expression become synonymous with heteromasculinity.

As Daniel Worden has noted, the decay of bullfighting is linked for Hemingway to the decay of writing, a notion which Hemingway explores in *Death in the Afternoon* (1932). A detailed study on the history and aesthetics of bullfighting, *Death in the Afternoon* not only provides a commentary on how to appreciate authentic bullfighting, but also offers a theory of modern prose style. In a series of aesthetic debates between himself and an unnamed "Old Lady," Hemingway argues that the demise of the art of bullfighting stems from the introduction of unnecessary stylistic embellishments. A good bullfighter knows that he is "performing a work of art and he is playing with death, bringing it closer, closer, closer to himself" (213). In modern bullfighting, however, this confrontation with death has been replaced by stylistic frills, such as overly-elaborate cape work, that distract the audience from the pivotal moment of killing: "As the corrida has developed and decayed there has been less emphasis on the form of killing, which was once the whole thing, and more on the cape work, the placing of the banderillas and the work with the muleta. The cape, the banderillas and muleta have all become ends in themselves rather than means to an end" (67). The decadent bullfighter thus gives the impression of danger through the use of ornamentation, whereas a true bullfighter exposes himself fully to death without resorting to decoration, thereby producing a sincere and honorable performance. The decay of bullfighting is associated, for Hemingway, with the fact that language has also become too imprecise: "All our words from loose using have lost their edge" (54). Arguing for a more rigid and straightforward approach both to bullfighting and to writing, Hemingway insists that a bad writer "mystifies to avoid a straight statement" (54), whereas if "a man writes clearly enough any one can see if he fakes" (54). Hemingway's use of the word "straight" here suggests both that writing "clearly" is the only way to generate authenticity and that "real" prose is gendered as masculine.

Historically, the association of opera with the breakdown of clear sexual differences has its origins in the castrati tradition of early Italian opera. According to Robert Ness, Italian opera was, "until the end of the eighteenth century, synonymous with the castrati" (185). These "strange creatures, mutilated in the name of art" (185) were seen as "unnatural monsters. In fact, they occasionally acted *en travesti*, in what part they pleased, as men or women. In short, the basic distinction, that of sexual distinction, was blurred in the castrati" (187). The androgynous sexuality of the castrati gave rise to hostile perceptions of opera as a "decadent, frivolous and effeminate form" that was reserved for upper-class dandies and unfit for "real" men (175). See Ness, "'The Dunciad' and Italian Opera in England," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 20 (1986).

These associations between bullfighting, sexuality, authenticity, and style combine in interesting ways in *The Sun Also Rises*. In contrast to Belmonte's fake performances in the ring, the young bullfighter Romero practices an older and more artistic form of bullfighting. In the bullring scene, the commercialization of modern bullfighting is juxtaposed with the "real emotion" of Romero's aesthetic style:

> Romero never made any contortions, always it was straight and pure and natural in line. The others twisted themselves like corkscrews, their elbows raised, and leaned against the flanks of the bull after his horns had passed, to give a faked look of danger. Afterward, all that was faked turned bad and gave an unpleasant feeling. Romero's bull-fighting gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time. He did not have to emphasize their closeness. Brett saw how something that was beautiful done close to the bull was ridiculous if it were done a little way off. I told her how since the death of Joselito all the bull-fighters had been developing a technique that simulated this appearance of danger in order to give a fake emotional feeling, while the bull-fighter was really safe. Romero had the old thing, the holding of his purity of line through the maximum of exposure, while he dominated the bull by making him realize he was unattainable, while he prepared him for the killing. (171)

Jake's bare, concrete prose in this scene is a direct reflection of Romero's pure and unembellished bullfighting. Modern bullfighters who are excessive in their "simulation" of danger give a "fake emotional feeling," whereas Romero's "purity of line" creates "real emotion." Interestingly, Jake's "straight" description of Romero's artistry is among the most homoerotic moments in the novel as Jake lingers lovingly over every detail of Romero's performance. However, the underlying homoerotic emotion that vibrates in Jake's first-person narration remains firmly encoded within Hemingway's larger narrative of hetereomasculinity.

The symbol of bulls and bullfighting appears in *Serenade* as the "*grrr* that frightens," the missing ingredient needed to remasculinize Sharp's voice, but unlike Jake, Sharp's desires fail to adhere to a narrative of heterosexuality. As the rivalry between Winston and Juana for Sharp's affection intensifies, we witness a clash not only between homosexuality and heterosexuality, but also between two radically different sets of artistic and ethical principles. If Juana exhibits the nurturing and curative abilities of the primitive world, then Winston represents the exploitive power of modern consumer-driven civilization. Despite Juana's lack of education and sophistication, her influence on Sharp is seen as pure and restorative, whereas Winston's refined cosmopolitanism is manipulative and ultimately corrupting.

In the inevitable scene of confrontation between Juana and Winston, we are introduced to Winston's crowd of androgynous and homosexual friends. At a lavish drag party hosted by Winston, Sharp and Juana encounter women dressed as men and men dressed as women:

> When we got there, the worst drag was going on you ever saw in your life. A whole mob of them was in there, girls in men's evening clothes tailored for them, with shingle haircuts and blue make-up in their eyes, dancing with other girls dressed the same way, young guys with lipstick on, and mascara eyelashes, dancing with each other too, and at least three girls in full evening dress, that you had to look at twice to make sure they weren't girls at all. (151)

The fluidity of gender and sexuality in this scene is appropriate for the climactic clash between the two rivals for Sharp's love. Weaving together opera, sexuality and bullfighting, Cain stages a melodramatic performance in which Juana adopts the masculine role of bullfighter with Winston playing the bull, all

while Winston's current lover Pudinsky is at the piano playing the bullring music from the opera *Carmen*. While Juana and Winston act out a bullfight in the middle of the living room, Sharp is in the position of the inactive spectator, not unlike Jake watching Pedro's performance in the ring. Juana performs the connection to Hemingway through bullfighting in two crucial turning points of the novel: early in the novel, she compares Sharp's singing to bullfighting, and she later takes on the bullfighter's position in order to fight for Sharp's love. But what begins as a farcical play-acting turns deadly when Juana uses her sword to kill Winston. The reversal of gender roles here places Juana in the role of the aggressive male who triumphs over the effeminate Winston, thereby ensuring that Sharp will remain her heterosexual lover. In her performance of gender, Juana embodies not only the masculine bullfighter, but also the male ideal that Sharp fails to achieve. Juana takes over Sharp's proper position, but performs it better than him in that the dividing line between reality and performance is erased as soon as she kills Winston. Moreover, Sharp's "masculine" voice doesn't in fact make him dangerous (he isn't the murderer), but his voice is what stimulates Juana's erotic feelings of danger because Sharp becomes the erotic object for whom she fights. In other words, the operatic voice ends up being not the authentic sign of masculine sexual power, but the autonomous trigger for female sexual desire. Unlike the wounded Jake who has no compensating artistic power, Sharp's voice induces Juana's eroticism and triggers female power in a performance where she becomes the "real" man. The fatal bullfighting scene in *Serenade* thus encapsulates Cain's Pandora style of writing in which forbidden forces are unleashed and tragic consequences ensue. The following section will trace how Sharp's repression of his desire for Winston forces itself to the surface of the text, releasing all the inhibitions that would have remained submerged in Hemingway's narrative.

"five percent of that"

Winston Hawes stands both as the architect of Sharp's aesthetic achievements and as the catalyst of his demise. More than two-thirds of the way into the novel, facing legal trouble for having violated the terms of his Hollywood contract, Sharp finally provides us with the backstory to his relationship with Winston Hawes. In typical hardboiled fashion, the ominous sound of a ringing telephone initiates a series of flashbacks in which Sharp explains, without ever directly stating, that Winston is his former lover. A wealthy amateur conductor whom Sharp first encounters at an art store in Paris, Winston is described by the newspapers as "the man that had done more for modern music than anybody since Muck," but Sharp tells us that Winston was never "one of the boys. There was something wrong about the way he thought about music, something unhealthy, like the crowds you always saw at his concerts, and what it was I can only half tell you" (127). Sharp's hesitation to be forthright, his attempt to evade by only "half telling" us what is "wrong" with Winston's crowd, suggests that Sharp is deeply nervous about being considered as "one of them." Moreover, Sharp's unusual use of the second-person to address the reader, coupled with his straightforward hardboiled narrative style, would seem to promise some kind of transparency. And yet, his declaration that "what it was I can only half tell you" represents a moment of narrative withholding. Does this moment of narrative reticence signify that Sharp is unaware of his own motivations or that he is afraid to articulate them? In either case, Sharp's use of the second-person invites a kind of intimacy with the reader, but stops short of actually offering it.

Winston thus conforms to the traditional negative portrayal of the over-refined aesthete figure who is "unhealthy" and effeminate ("not one of the boys"). Even his taste in décor is depicted with the kind of lavish furnishings that we might find in Chandler's rooms: "The stuff I remembered from Paris was there, rugs, tapestries, furniture, all of it worth a fortune, and a lot of things I had never

seen," including a 500-year-old Aztec stone sculpture of a cricket that Winston had recently brought back from Mexico (148). From the young men who accompany Brett in *The Sun Also Rises* to characters like Joel Cairo in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* and Lindsay Marriot in Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*, the effeminate male is a creature of scorn and ridicule in the "tough guy" tradition. As Skenazy puts it, "He is a soft-boiled man in a hard-boiled world: vulnerable, gutless, impractical; often a man of culture characterized by his 'precious' tastes" (55). When Sharp attends Winston's Little Orchestra concerts in New York, the crowd at the opera performance consists of homosexual boys, young lesbians, and androgynous men and women:

> It was the same mob he [Winston] had had in Paris, clothes more expensive than you would see even at a Hollywood opening, gray-haired women with straight haircuts and men's dinner jackets, young girls looking at each other straight in the eye and not caring what you thought, boys following men around, loud, feverish talk out in the foyer, everybody coming out in the open with something they wouldn't dare show anywhere else. (131)

The fact that Winston has a regular "mob" attending his concerts hints at the control and influence he exerts on those around him. In his article on opera and queerness in *Serenade*, Robert Rose argues that Sharp's "antagonism is directed at the crowd itself, the queerness of it, but more pointedly at its infiltration into a specific realm, the opera house" (63). Rose notes that the novel presents a contradictory gesture of rejecting "any elements in opera that would open it to a queer sensibility" while simultaneously acknowledging opera's receptiveness to gay culture since Winston's queer crowd "wouldn't dare show anywhere else": "Indeed, the most striking element of the intensely homophobic thematics of *Serenade* is the degree to which they are directed at an art form that has so deep and complex a history of sexual transgression" (Rose 63). Cain depicts a queer community of artist figures, but distances the reader from this community through a manipulative use of the second-person address: Winston's mob walks around without "caring what *you* thought" about them. The question that the reader faces, then, is why does Sharp insist that we share his feelings of hostility? What does he *really* think about Winston and his artsy crowd?

In his flashback, Sharp narrates that when he was still performing at the Opéra Comique in Paris, Winston spent hours coaching him. Sharp admits that Winston was "the best coach in the world, bar none" (130), but criticizes Winston's commercial investment in music: "Winston didn't care about art, the way you do or I do, as something to look at and feel. He wanted to *own* it. Winston was that way about music. He made a whore out of it" (127). Winston exhibits the same overly possessive tendencies as Waldo Lydecker, an art connoisseur in Vera Caspary's *Laura* whose collecting mania will be explored in the following chapter. Furthermore, Winston's view of music as a financial transaction (he "made a whore out of it") echoes Monty's labeling of Mildred as a "varlet" who follows an economic system of equal exchange. Winston's need for ownership is a reminder that even in the high art sphere of opera, Sharp's voice is still treated as a commodity. Sharp does attempt to argue that unlike Hollywood films, music cannot be owned, but his lengthy explanation falls short of its desired effect: "You can't own music, the way you can own a picture, but you can own a big hunk of it. You can own a composer, that you put on a subsidy while he's writing a piece for you. You can own an audience that has to come to you to hear that piece if it's going to hear it at all. You can own the orchestra that plays it, and you can own the singer that sings it" (128). Sharp's explanation in fact offers little evidence to suggest that legal ownership in mass-produced films differs from ownership in (operatic) music. If it's possible to own the composer and his musical compositions, the audience, the orchestra, and the singer, then what is left of music that *isn't* owned? Winston's desire for control and ownership forms the entire basis of his relationship with Sharp. When Winston hears of Sharp's legal trouble, he urges Sharp to "tell it to Papa" (133), affectionately calling Sharp "my Jack" (137). Despite

Winston's display of ignorance, we learn that he not only orchestrated Sharp's entire success in Hollywood, but also devised the scheme involving Sharp's contract violation to force Sharp to seek his help. Winston then "waves his magic wand" to resolve Sharp's dilemma, and immediately presses him to perform in his orchestra (137). Even though Sharp eventually picks up on the "sham," he agrees to join which Winston's twenty-seven man chorus, which puts Sharp in the emasculated position of a kept man.

What is most striking about Sharp's interactions with Winston is that despite his first-person narration, Sharp consciously refuses to acknowledge the complexity of his feelings for Winston. Sharp's inability to directly address the kind of relationship he had with Winston emphasizes his unwillingness to confront his homosexual attraction to the young conductor: "It was quite a while before it dawned on me what he really wanted. As to what he wanted, and what he got, you'll find out soon enough, and I'm not going to tell any more than I have to. But I'd like to make this much clear now: that wasn't what I wanted. What I meant to him and he meant to me were two different things, but once again, I wouldn't be telling the truth if I didn't admit that what he meant to me was plenty" (129). In another moment of hesitation, Sharp wavers between not wanting to "tell any more than [he] has to" and recognizing his narrative imperative to "tell the truth." Although he insists that what he wanted was entirely different from what Winston wanted, Sharp never specifies the exact desires of either party, only going so far as to vaguely say that "that" wasn't what he wanted. Sharp only half admits that Winston means "plenty" to him and that "pretty soon I [Sharp] was singing to him and nobody else" (130). As their relationship deepens, Sharp comes to depend on Winston's company: "I got so I was with him morning, noon and night, and depended on him like a hophead depends on dope" (131). When Sharp finally acknowledges his homosexuality, he simultaneously underplays it by claiming that "every man has got five percent of *that* in him, if he meets the one person that'll bring *it* out, and I did, that's all" (144, emphasis mine). Here, the pronoun "that," which appears to refer to Sharp's homosexuality, is repeated in the form of another ambiguous pronoun, "it," to further emphasize the extent to which Sharp attempts to avoid specifically naming his desires. Sharp's deliberate underplaying of his emotions, however, has the directly opposite effect of emphasizing the rigid control which he must impose upon his thoughts in order to avoid confronting what his desires imply about his masculinity. I want to suggest that the "it" pronoun becomes the crucial site at which Cain's hardboiled style undergoes a radical transformation.

Hemingway is of course one of the first writers to heighten narrative ambiguity through his use of the "it" pronoun, the best example being his short story "Hills Like White Elephants," where the pronoun "it" appears fifty-six times. As Alex Link has demonstrated, most of these occurrences are anaphoric references in which "it" refers to a noun that precedes it. However, the most prominent "it" in "Hills Like White Elephants," appears twenty-four times and is situationally exophoric, meaning that it refers to something not explicitly stated in the story. In most cases, this situationally exophoric "it" usually refers to the "operation," and the fact that it is never specified beyond the vague description of "letting the air in" (275) attests to its unspeakable nature. The characters' substitution of the word "it" for the "operation" becomes a controlling mechanism to contain their inner turmoil. In *Serenade*, the scene in which Sharp confronts his repressed homosexuality parallels Hemingway's use of "it" as a mechanism of avoidance, but also differs, in important ways, in its final consequences:

> I ran into the bedroom, flopped on the bed, pulled the pillow over my head. I wanted to shut *it* out, the whole horrible thing she had showed me, where she had ripped the cover off my whole life, dragged out what was down there all the time. I screwed my eyes shut, kept pulling

> the pillow around my ears. But one thing kept slicing up at me, no matter what I did. *It* was the fin of that shark.
> […] I kept telling myself she was crazy, that voice is a matter of palate, sinus, and throat, that Winston had no more to do with what happened to me in Paris than scenery had. But here *it* was, starting on me again the same way *it* had before, and I knew she had called *it* on me the way *it* was written in the big score, and that no pillow or anything else could shut *it* out. I closed my eyes, and I was going down under the waves, with something coming up at me from below. Panic caught me then. (144, emphasis mine)

Similar to Hemingway's use of the "it" pronoun to indicate the unspeakable nature of the "operation," Sharp's repetition of "it" throughout this scene emphasizes his effort to avoid giving voice to his homosexual desire for Winston. However, the key difference between Hemingway's and Cain's use of the situationally exophoric "it" lies in the contrast between the former's iceberg theory and the latter's Pandora metaphor. To return to the scene when Jake looks at his wound in the mirror, Hemingway combines the "it" pronoun with his motif of the submerged iceberg: "I [Jake] lay awake thinking and my mind jumping around. Then I couldn't keep away from it, and I started to think about Brett and all the rest of it went away. I was thinking about Brett and my mind stopped jumping around and started to go in sort of smooth waves. Then all of a sudden I started to cry. Then after a while it was better and I lay in bed and listened to the heavy trams go by and way down the street, and then I went to sleep" (29). Here, Jake is unable to avoid thinking about "it," his war wound, but just as he begins to lose control, the thought of Brett allows his mind to stop jumping around and "go in sort of smooth waves." In other words, although Jake does momentarily succumb to tears, he is able to regain his self-control and keep the metaphorical surface of the water "smooth." In *Serenade*, however, Sharp fails to keep his panic contained and his fears refuse to remain beneath the surface: Juana has "ripped the cover off" of Sharp's secret, "dragged out what was down" below the surface. The excessive repetition of "it" enacts on a stylistic level what Cain describes as the opening of Pandora's box. Unlike Hemingway's use of "it" to evoke repression or avoidance, in the scene of Sharp's sexual revelation, Cain's use of "it" does not function as a force of containment, but initiates a spiraling out of control. Six of the seven appearances of "it" refers most logically to Sharp's homosexuality, but the second occurrence of "it" actually directly names its referent: "one thing kept slicing up at me, no matter what I did. It was the fin of that shark." The image of the shark fin confirms that, in Cain, the secret doesn't remain unsaid. Sharp's language corresponds to the wave imagery in Jake's description, but describes a completely opposite effect of breaking the surface of the water: "I was going *down under the waves*, with something *coming up* at me *from below*."

The image of the shark fin first appears when Sharp and Captain Connors are out at sea, in the middle of a heated debate on the perceived effeminacy of opera. Connors openly disapproves of opera music, describing it as a "castrated eunuch urging me to buy soap" (62), a critique that presents America as sissified and overly commercialized. As Sharp and Connors argue over the connection between singing and sexuality, the issue of beauty arises when Sharp refers to singer McCormack to explain that what makes a voice aesthetically pleasing has nothing to do with size: "He [McCormack] had a *great* voice, not just a good voice. I don't mean big. It was never big, though it was big enough. But what makes a great voice is beauty, not size" (77). In response to Sharp's thinly-disguised phallic suggestion that "size doesn't matter," Connors defines beauty in terms of a hidden terror: "If it's beauty I feel, then it must be under the surface, because beauty is *always* under the surface. […] True beauty has *terror* in it" (79). Pausing to light their pipes, Sharp and Connors suddenly see a black fin lift out of the water:

> It was an ugly thing to see. It was least thirty inches high and it didn't zigzag, or cut a V in the water, or any of the things it does in books. It just came up and stayed a few seconds. Then there was the swash of a big tail and it went down.
> "Did you see it, lad?"
> "God, it was an awful-looking thing, wasn't it?"
> "It cleared up for me what I've been trying to say to you. Sit here, now, and look. The water, the surf, the colors on the shore. You think they make the beauty of the tropical sea, aye, lad? They do not. 'Tis the knowledge of what lurks below the surface of it, that awful-looking thing, as you call it, that carries death with every move that it makes. So it is, so it is with all beauty." (79)

Connors defines beauty as the knowledge that terror is lurking below the surface, carrying "death with every move," a description which is reminiscent of Pedro's ability as a true bullfighter to bring death closer and closer in order to create the "sensation of coming tragedy" (217). Cain's description of the shark's black fin thus operates in a related but opposing way to Hemingway's iceberg theory. For Hemingway, the iceberg is an analogy for an aesthetics of writing in which narrative omission is necessary for the production of real emotion, but for Cain, the horror of the monster suggested by shark's fin refuses to stay submerged. Real beauty (the kind that isn't found "in books") *doesn't* stay under the surface. Rose interprets the shark fin as a "unifying (yet contradictory) metaphor" that represents the novel's own contradiction of introducing opera (with its queer associations) into the hardboiled aesthetic while denying "any traces of queerness in that convergence […] Despite itself, *Serenade* seems to align beauty with the homoerotic impulse in fairly clear terms: the shark fin, used first to describe an intimation of the sublime, becomes the image by which Sharp understands the depth of his attraction to Winston Hawes. Thus the novel advances the case for a homoerotic sublime, a love between men that provokes terror but that yields beauty" (Rose 68). I would argue, however, that the novel does not align aesthetics ("beauty") with homosexuality "despite itself," but precisely *because of* Cain's reimagining of hardboiled style as an expression of excess. Rose's interpretation suggests that the novel offers a "homoerotic sublime," but doesn't explain what constitutes Cain's aesthetics of *style*. How does Sharp express this beauty through his singing, and how does this beauty emerge in the *prose itself*? I would like to argue that Cain's use of the shark fin as a metaphor for beauty signifies not a paradoxical opposition between a queer aesthetics of singing and a masculine hardboiled style, but a necessary merging of the two that eliminates gender altogether.

Representing the "wish that must have terror in it," the shark fin functions as the necessary precondition for beauty. In other words, Cain's definition of beauty is based on his conception of Pandora's box: beauty is equated with the terror of a wish coming true. If terror is necessary for the production of art, then it would follow logically that Sharp is only able to achieve perfection with his voice due to his terror of facing his homosexuality. In other words, his homosexuality is the very source of his creative inspiration. Sharp himself admits that Winston is the one who brings his singing as close to perfection as humanly possible: "I sang for him four times, and each time it was something new, something fresh, and a performance better than you even knew you could give. He had a live stick all right. […] He threw it on you like a hypnotist, and you began to roll it out, and yet it was all under perfect control. That's the word to remember, perfect. Perfection is something no singer ever got yet, but under him you came as near to it as you're ever going to get" (129). As soon as Sharp is forced to confront the terror of his wish, Cain's style undergoes a radical transformation. The use of "it" no longer represents a Hemingway form of male restraint, but rather signals a mode of aesthetic excess. In terms of hardboiled style, this aesthetics takes the form of a Pandora-like explosion in which the "it" pronoun manages to escape gender. Sharp's repeated insistence on using the second-person address again seems to prompt a moment of intimacy with the reader. However, he is

describing a particular period in his *own* relationship to Winston, which makes his avoidance of using the first-person pronoun appear either as a form of deflection (along the lines of Hemingway's Jake) or as an attempt to project his repressed shame onto the reader. Sharp's constant habit of addressing the reader using the second-person pronoun becomes a sign of his tortured struggle to deny that his aesthetic triumphs in music were formed in large part through a homoerotic encounter.

Cain's use of the ambiguous or de-gendered "it" makes an earlier appearance in the novel when Sharp describes his work in the Hollywood musical *My Pal Babe*. Starring as a modernized version of Paul Bunyan, the well-known American icon of rugged masculinity, Sharp plays a "singing lumberjack that winds up in grand opera" (104). Sharp acknowledges that the storyline of the movie makes no sense. In one sequence, Paul Bunyan attends a Macy parade with balloons in the shape of animals:

> One of the balloons was a cow, and when they cut them loose, with prizes offered to whoever finds them, this one floats clear out over Saskatchewan and comes down on the trees near the lumber camps. Then the lumberjack I was supposed to be, the one that has told them all he's really Paul Bunyan, says it's Babe, the Big Blue Ox that's come down from heaven to pay him a Christmas visit. Then he climbs up in the tree and sings to it, and the lumberjacks sing to it, and believe it or not, it did things to you. Then when the sun comes up and they see what gender Babe really is, they go up the tree after the guy to lynch him, but somebody accidentally touches a cigar to the cow and she blows up with such a roar that all the trees they were supposed to cut down are lying flat on the ground, and they decide it was Mrs. Babe. (120)

In this passage, the ambiguity of the "it" pronoun derives from an ambiguity of gender: initially, the balloon is described as a female cow, but Paul Bunyan calls it an ox, a term usually reserved for castrated male bulls. When the lumberjacks begin singing to "it," the indeterminacy of the phrase "it did things to you" foreshadows a later moment in the novel when Sharp watches a baseball game and realizes that he is attracted to the pitcher: "I sat looking at him, taking in those motions, and then all of a sudden I felt my heart stop. Was it coming out in me again, this thing that had got me when I met Winston? Was that kid out there really *doing things to me* that had nothing to do with baseball?" (184, emphasis mine). The ambiguity of this phrase reenacts Sharp's vague claim that every man has "five percent of *that* in him." At daybreak, the lumberjacks assume they have been singing to a female, but when they realize it was a male ox, they attempt to reassert their masculinity through an act of violence. Cain's hardboiled prose suddenly breaks down in a confusion of which pronoun to assign the balloon: one lumberjack tries to lynch "him," but "she" accidentally blows up. In this description of *My Pal Babe*, the men ultimately remove the threat of their implied homosexuality by assigning a gender to "it," declaring that the balloon was Mrs. Babe. In contrast to the lumberjack's assertion of heteromasculinity, the novel's conclusion features Sharp's achieving perfection through his singing, but in this final climactic scene, Cain's excessive use of the "it" pronoun obliterates any gender designation.

After the murder of Winston, Sharp and Juana flee to Guatamala to escape arrest. Since his celebrity status as a Hollywood star has made him too recognizable, Sharp realizes that he must never sing again in order to protect Juana, but the longer his voice is silenced, the more Sharp feels an "ache" inside. Cain describes Sharp's silenced voice in sexualized terms as a male organ: "A voice is a physical thing, and if you've got one, it's like any other physical thing. It's in you, and it's got to come out. The only thing I can compare it with is when you haven't been with a woman for a long time, and you get so you think if you don't find one soon, you'll go insane" (180). Sharp's pent-up energy finally reaches its breaking point in the novel's final scene of confrontation between Sharp and Triesca, who now appears to be involved with Juana. Interpreting Sharp's love of opera as evidence of his

emasculation, Triesca orders the *mariachi* band to play *Cielito Lindo*, but "instead of them singing it, he [Triesca] got up and sang it. He sang right at me, in a high, simpering falsetto, with gestures" (193). Triesca's performance of queerness is meant as a challenge to Sharp's masculinity, but Sharp responds by throwing the words right back at the bullfighter:

> And then I shot it:
> *Ay, Ay, Ay, Ay!*
> *Canta y no llores*
> *Porque cantando se alegran*
> *Cielito lindo*
> *Los corazones!*
> It was like gold, bigger than it had ever been, and when I finished I was panting from the excitement of it. He stood there, looking thick, and then came this roar of applause. The *mariachi* leader began jabbering at me, and they started it again. I sang it through, drunk from the way it felt, drunk from the look on her face. On the second chorus, I sang it right at her, soft and slow. But at the end I put in a high one, closed my eyes and swelled it, held it till the glasses rattled, and then came off it." (194)

In this scene, the proliferation of "it" represents a moment of narrative excess that doesn't try to remain contained. In fact, Sharp's singing is clearly a celebration of excess: Sharp's vocal ejaculation leaves him "panting from excitement" and is followed by hearty applause. The striking quality of Cain's use of "it" is that the ambiguity of the pronoun derives from the impossibility of assigning only *one* specific referent to "it." If we attempt to designate a specific noun for each occurrence of Cain's situationally exophoric "it" (as I have done below), we can see that the pronoun encompasses a multiplicity of meaning:

> It [**my voice**] was like gold, bigger than it [**my voice**] had ever been, and when I finished I was panting from the excitement of it [**singing**]. He stood there, looking thick, and then came this roar of applause. The *mariachi* leader began jabbering at me, and they started it [**the music**] again. I sang it [**the song/lyrics**] through, drunk from the way it [**the singing**] felt, drunk from the look on her face. On the second chorus, I sang it [**the chorus/song**] right at her, soft and slow. But at the end I put in a high one [**note**], closed my eyes and swelled it [**the note**], held it [**the note**] till the glasses rattled, and then came off it [**the note**].

The fact that the "it" pronoun appears to stand in for a wide range of possible referents attests to the way in which Cain's Pandora style of writing expresses itself through an aesthetics of excess. But this narrative surplus does not take the form of feminine or homosexual excessiveness that Hemingway felt would weaken language. Sharp exhibits complete mastery of this moment of excess, the same kind of self-control expected of a hardboiled hero. The "it" pronoun thus becomes decoupled from a gendering of prose as either masculine or feminine. If in Chandler, gender is treated as a hybrid because Marlowe is a combination of the masculine hardboiled detective and the femininized aesthete, then in Cain, Sharp explodes gender categorization because his masculine command of his excessive (feminine/homosexual) singing defies gender politics. Perhaps the most illuminating example of how Cain deploys the manly minimalism of hardboiled prose to produce an aesthetics of excess is when Sharp states, quite succinctly, "That was all. It said it" (130). Sharp is referring here to a performative gesture that Winston has taught him to use on stage, and how this gesture encapsulates "everything." Cain uses the simplest sentence construction possible, a sentence that would have made Hemingway's prose look ornate. The bareness and brevity of "it said it" aligns Sharp's words with masculine

terseness, yet these words express a form of excess that cannot be pinned down to any one, singular meaning.

In Hemingway, the iceberg calls upon the power of the unstated or never named as an index of lasting trauma and as a "tough guy" performance of grace under pressure; this is still figured, however, in terms of a negative capability. By contrast, in Cain's novel, the protagonist has a *positive* power: the aesthetic triumph of his voice. In both *Mildred Pierce* and *Serenade*, Cain explores the *relation* between the aesthetic power of the voice and the particular moral character of the person from whom the voice emanates. In *Mildred Pierce*, Cain seems to suggest that good art can come from bad people: Veda is such a monster that her artistic ability makes even her author fall in love with her. In a similar vein, Cain suggests in *Serenade* that good art comes from the *struggle* with "aberrant" desires: beauty is not merely linked to, but is in fact produced by hidden terror. Homosexual passion in *Serenade* is not the feminizing weakening of aesthetic production (as Wilde may be understood to represent), but is recoded as a kind of polymorphous perversity. The "it" in the above passage defies gender polities because Cain masterfully imbues the pronoun with so many meanings. He furls out his sentences to include the excessive implications of "it," which is the opposite function of Hemingway's iceberg where "it" has always only one unnamable referent. This means that Cain's "it" sentence cannot be detached from its scene of gender competition in which female desire and heteromasculine prowess are threatened by homosexual eroticism. For Cain, being the tough guy doesn't mean repressing that "five percent," but actively struggling with it. Sharp does succeed in achieving a beautiful voice, but he needs to be in a homoerotic relation in order to access both his sexual prowess and his aesthetic achievement. In other words, the shark fin (the aesthetically perfect voice or "it") cannot be separated from the body of the shark (the hidden terrors). The "it" might appear to be neutral, able to exist autonomously, but this aesthetically perfect "it" exists only because the rest of the shark is engaged in a constant struggle with perverse desires that may at any moment upsurge and drag Sharp beneath the surface. In other words, the aesthetic beauty of excess produced by Cain's sentences can be valued as an autonomous experience; but Cain registers its power to convey the fragility of this ordering and the relation of this ordering to the dark destructive passions that threaten constantly to break through the hardboiled "surface" of the text.

By novel's end, Sharp has achieved real beauty through his performance, but due to Cain's conception of beauty as necessitating the terror that comes with opening Pandora's box, Sharp must pay dearly for his brief moment of aesthetic perfection. The proliferation of "it" pronouns consequently initiates the release of dangerous forces: Sharp's singing immediately betrays his real identity to the police, who then capture and fatally shoot Juana. In response to her death, Sharp vows to never sing again, and the novel ends with the metaphorical silencing or castration of Sharp's voice. If Cain had been unable to destroy Veda's voice in *Mildred Pierce*, he certainly learns to sacrifice Sharp's voice to the fatal beauty of opening Pandora's box.

CHAPTER FOUR

"A taste for privacy":
Ownership and Female Identity in Vera Caspary

> "I find it harder and harder every day
> to live up to my blue china."
> —Oscar Wilde

> "Who wants to play a painting?"
> —Gene Tierney

In Cain's *Serenade*, female desire is registered as an unleashing of dangerous forces, but this powerful energy has no lasting dominance in a male-governed world. Juana's sexuality initially allows Sharp to regain his masculine prowess, but she is only able to secure Sharp as her erotic object when she plays the male role of bullfighter. She conveniently murders homosexuality when she kills Winston, but even with Winston's death, she is ultimately unable to remove the threat of homosexuality from her relationship with Sharp. In Sharp's most triumphant moment of aesthetic achievement, the excessive power of his singing is described as a sexual release of pent up polymorphous energies that directly lead to Juana's tragic death. Sharp's performance of aesthetic perfection is therefore only possible through the complete removal and destruction of female desire. The competition between the hardboiled hero, the female lover, and the homosexual rival is also enacted in the detective fiction of Vera Caspary, but as a female novelist writing in a predominately masculine, and frequently misogynistic genre, Caspary represents the formation of female identity in very different terms than Cain. This chapter argues that Caspary portrays the same gender anxieties found in Cain, but focuses on the excesses of a female aesthetic. Subscribing to the Chandleresque belief that identity cannot be defined through material possession, Caspary uses the detective novel to investigate the difficulty of establishing an autonomous female identity in a male-dominated, consumer-driven society. Specifically, in her hardboiled novel *Laura*, the various male social types that compete for authority share a tendency to treat women as purchasable commodities or passive objects of sexual desire. What separates Caspary's novel from her male contemporaries is that her female heroine, Laura Hunt, resists male objectification by exercising a feminine excessiveness that cannot be fully represented or contained.

The majority of Caspary's novels revolve around female characters searching for autonomy in the male workplace. Depicting the female quest for independence as non-threatening, however, proves difficult within the genre of detective fiction, where women tend to fall under one of two categories: 1) the *femme fatale*, that deadly seductress whose ambition and dangerous sexuality threaten the destruction of the noir male, or 2) the redemptive woman, whose innocence and virtue provide a stable, moral base for the hero. Dissatisfied with both archetypes of women as either powerful but destructive, or nurturing but passive, Caspary is particularly vexed by the fact that the heroine, with whom the detective was to fall in love, had to be a suspect: "If her innocence was in doubt, how could her thoughts be made clear to the reader?" Determined to make her characters more than mere

"detective-story stereotypes," Caspary takes up the suggestion of screenwriter Ellis St. Joseph to use what he calls the "Wilkie Collins method of having each character tell his or her own version, revealing or concealing information according to his or her own interests" (194). Like Collins's mystery novels *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, Caspary's *Laura* is also structured through a series of first-person narrators, each of whom represent a specific social and class type: the cultured, effeminiate connoisseur Waldo Lydecker; the working-class, hardboiled detective Mark McPherson; the upper-class playboy Shelby Carpenter; and the female murder victim Laura Hunt, who, in a sudden twist of events, becomes the key murder suspect. The novel opens with Waldo's account of Laura, who is presumed to have been murdered by a shotgun blast to the face. Part 2 shifts to Mark perspective on the night when Laura returns, alive, from the countryside, and reveals the identity of the murdered woman to be Diane Redfern. The novel then provides a brief transcript of an interview of Laura's fiancé Shelby, followed by a fourth segment written from Laura's point-of-view. We then return to Mark's perspective for the novel's concluding account, in which it is revealed that Waldo is the murderer. Caspary's decision to allow Laura to narrate her own story challenges the literary convention within the detective genre to privilege the male point of view, often to the complete exclusion of the female voice.[31] Given the unique opportunity to articulate her own point of view, Laura attempts to dispel the false constructions of her identity and ultimately challenge her status as a passive object of male desire.

In the same vein as Chandler, Caspary presents objects as markers of social class, but questions the ability of possessions to accurately reflect the full identity of their owners. The uneasy relation between objects and their owners is epitomized in Otto Preminger's 1944 film adaptation of *Laura*, which is especially remembered for its repeated visual motif of what one critic has called "the most famous portrait in the classic Hollywood cinema" (Humphries 115). This painted portrait of Laura simultaneously casts her as sexual temptress and passive object of male desire. In the portrait, Laura's head is tilted coyly, her body turned sideways to accentuate her bare neck and shoulder, her right hand placed seductively on her breast. Laura's captivating beauty fuels the male sexual fantasies and the painting becomes, as Reynold Humphries suggests, "an idealized representation of Laura, Laura as she was at the moment of posing, Laura as she wanted to appear, but especially Laura as others, particularly men, wanted to see her" (116). Although Laura's beauty has the power to mesmerize onlookers, the portrait reflects what Kathryn Kalinak describes as the "double-bind of female sexuality in film noir: it attracts and threatens" (168). Since her dangerous sexuality must be defused, Laura is "conveniently circumscribed for most of the film in the frame of a portrait of her that the men safely adore as a *memento mori"* (Liahna Babener 88). Confined within the pictorial space, Laura can neither return the viewer's gaze nor contest her own objectification. Even when Laura reappears alive, the portrait still remains the "strongest visual image" of the film (Janey Place 58). The prominence of the portrait in the film's *mis-en-scene* even led actress Gene Tierney to express reservations about accepting the role of Laura: "Who wants to play a painting?" she said to studio executive Darryl Zanuck.

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[31] This convention is almost always maintained in film noir. In her discussion of how Caspary's novel is adapted to the big screen, Liahna Babener argues that the film's narrative is "reconstructed to silence Laura's voice and deny her power" in order to ensure "the masculine contest of sexual mastery over Laura" (83). Whether through the visual dominance of her portrait or the submissive positioning of her body within the camera's frame, Laura is frequently being reduced to what Laura Mulvey calls a state of "to be-looked-at-ness." In fact, Preminger decided against using the initial screenplay draft in which Jay Dratler attempted to stay as close as possible to Caspary's narrative structure, permitting each character to narrate his or her own section. Although the use of multiple voiceovers within the medium of film may have resulted in clumsy storytelling, the fact that only Waldo's voiceover remains in the final version emphasizes the film's desire to keep Laura silent and passive.

Given the extent to which the film insists on establishing the portrait as a visual embodiment or substitute for the real character of Laura, it might come as a surprise to readers of Caspary that the portrait is much less prominent in the original novel. In Part 1 of *Laura*, when Waldo Lydecker gives a detailed description of the painting, there is little trace of the haunting, seductive quality that dominates the film's representation of Laura's portrait:

> Near the door, a few feet from the spot where the body had fallen, hung Stuart Jacoby's portrait of Laura. Jacoby, one of the imitators of Eugene Speicher, had produced a flattened version of a face that was anything but flat. The best feature of the painting, as they had been her best feature, were the eyes. The oblique tendency, emphasized by the sharp tilt of dark brows, gave her face a shy, fawn-like quality […]. Jacoby had caught the fluid sense of restlessness in the position of her body, perched on the arm of a chair, a pair of yellow gloves in one hand, a green hunter's hat in the other. The portrait was trifle unreal, however, a trifle studied, too much Jacoby and not enough Laura. (33-34)

In this description, Jacoby's painting is certainly beautiful, but Laura's face is "shy" and "fawn-like," and her "restlessness" seems more a sign of her lively energy than of the provocative sensuality that is associated with the film's portrait of Gene Tierney in a strapless black evening gown. Moreover, Waldo points out that the painting ultimately fails to accurately capture Laura's essence: there is "too much Jacoby and not enough Laura." In fact, Jacoby had painted the portrait while he was in love with Laura, highlighting how the artwork symbolizes the way men seek to objectify Laura and deny her agency.[32] The portrait's troubled relationship to the real Laura raises interesting questions about the representation and value of high art in the novel. Caspary thus shares Chandler's conviction that objects do not define character: Laura is more than what she owns.

On the level of form, Caspary enacts the male tendency to objectify Laura by structuring the novel through shifting viewpoints and style. Similar to Hammett's fragmentary description of Spade's isolated physical features, Caspary's use of multiple narrators performs the fragmentation of Laura's own identity. As Eugene McNamara has observed, the three distinct prose styles in *Laura* "come from disparate literary sources and interact to create the sense of clashing *milieux*. Waldo's wit and his allusions derive from the *fin de siècle*, Laura's is borrowed from romance fiction and the movies. McPherson's finds its antecedents in the hardboiled school of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett" (33). Caspary's aesthetic project thus resides in her attention to the differences in styles of each of her narrators, in her commitment to crafting a unique voice and distinctive interiority for each character, thus allowing them to transcend their commodified status as predictable social types. Like Chandler, Caspary is interested less in plot, than in character. Confessing that detective stories have never been her "favorite reading," Caspary recognizes that mysteries are not of the "same class as a novel. The novel demands a full development of each character. This was my problem. Every character in the story, except the detective, was to be a suspect" (194). For Caspary, the plot requirements that come with writing in the detective genre hamper the kind of character development that is made possible through novelistic scope. In her autobiography *The Secrets of Grown-ups*, Caspary laments the generic tendency of mystery writers to privilege plot at the expense of character:

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[32] The only line in novel that remotely resembles the visual motif in the film adaptation of *Laura* is when Caspary writes, "From the wall Stuart Jacoby's portrait smiled down" (47). However, it is significant that Caspary writes it is *Jacoby's* and not Laura's portrait, thus emphasizing the disconnect between Laura's interiority and the objectified image that is supposed to represent her. The last mention of the portrait occurs in the scene when Laura returns from the countryside and Mark notes that "the picture of Laura Hunt was just behind her" (71). This isn't even the midway point of the novel, and the portrait is never again mentioned.

> The murderer, the most interesting character, has always to be on the periphery of the action lest he give away the secret that can be revealed only in the final pages. If mystery writers were to expose character in all of its complexity, they could never produce the solution in which the killer turns out to be the butler, the sweet old aunt or a birdwatcher who ruthlessly kills half a dozen people in order to get hold of a cigarette case with a false bottom that conceals a hundred-thousand-dollar postage stamp." (194)

Despite her awareness that mystery writers are bound by necessities of plot, Caspary echoes Chandler's criticism of British detective fiction for being "too contrived." In "The Simple Art of Murder," Chandler complains that the weakness of classic detective novels is that they all involve "the same careful grouping of suspects, the same utterly incomprehensible trick of how somebody stabbed Mrs. Pottington Postlethwaite III with the solid platinum poignard just as she flatted on the top note of the Bell Song from *Lakmé* in the presence of fifteen ill-assorted guests" (*LN* 985). This cheap trickery is precisely what Caspary objects to in storylines constructed to reveal that the murderer is a birdwatcher searching for a cigarette case. In an effort to resist such unrealistic turns of plot, Caspary is instead invested in depicting her characters as "alive and contradictory while keeping secret the murderer's identity," a sentiment which addresses Chandler's same concern that "if [a detective story] started out to be about real people […], they must very soon do unreal things in order to form the artificial pattern required by the plot. When they did unreal things, they ceased to be real themselves" (*LN* 985).

The greatest narrative dilemma of *Laura* is of course the secret of Waldo's identity as the murderer. Of all the narrators in the novel, Waldo is the only one who takes conscious liberties with his storytelling:

> That is my omniscient role. As narrator and interpreter, I shall describe scenes which I never saw and record dialogues which I did not hear. For this impudence I offer no excuse. I am an artist, and it is my business to recreate movement precisely as I create mood. I know these people, their voices ring in my ears, and I need only close my eyes and see characteristic gestures. My written dialogue will have more clarity, compactness, and essence of character than their spoken lines, for I am able to edit while I write, whereas they carried on their conversations in a loose and pointless fashion with no sense of form or crisis in the building of their scenes. (17)

In this passage, Waldo claims that his bid for high art necessitates him to describe scenes he never witnessed and to edit conversations he never heard for the purpose of "clarity, compactness, and essence of character." Declaring that his writing will improve upon reality, Waldo justifies his need to embellish by arguing that his manipulation of fact is performed all in the name of Art. However, Waldo's appeal to the demands of Art is necessary for the preservation not of his status as an artist/writer figure, but of the mystery of *the novel itself*. In other words, it is Caspary herself who needs Waldo to assume the role of an "omniscient" narrator in order to maintain the secret of the murderer's identity. After all, if Waldo were to provide a "real" account from his own point of view *as murderer*, there could be no detective story. Thus, while Caspary attempts to (and in some ways succeeds in) creating a believable voice for Waldo, his "omniscient" style is nonetheless deployed in large part to maintain the mystery of the plot.

The demands of plot thus pose the biggest hurdle for Caspary's aesthetic aspirations for the detective novel. Caspary conceives of her aesthetic project in terms of a formal commitment to crafting a unique voice and distinctive interiority for each character, thereby allowing them to transcend their commodified status as consumable social types. The novel seeks to distinguish

between pure art and commodified value, positing that the two are separate and mutually exclusive entities. However, I argue that despite her efforts to avoid falling prey to creating consumable types, Caspary is working within a genre in which everything is commodified. Due to the requirements and limitations of the detective novel form, Caspary is ultimately unable to escape from instrumentalizing her characters for the sake of plot, to keep from re-circulating these common social types. This tension between autonomous art and instrumentalized art exemplifies the form of the detective novel itself, which gestures towards high art while ignoring its own participation in a commodified system.

This chapter studies Caspary's attempt to locate a female aesthetics within a masculine, commercialized genre by first examining how the social types of the connoisseur and the detective interact with the female object of desire. Both Waldo and Mark fail to gain access to Laura's interiority, a failure that the novel itself enacts through its use of shifting narrators. By offering competing male voices, each with his own distinctive style, Caspary performs through style the fragmentation of Laura's identity. In Laura's own narrative, the stylistic excesses I discussed in the works of Hammett, Chandler, and Cain take the form of female indecipherability in Caspary. Laura's excesses initially allow her to resist male attempts to define her, but Caspary quickly nullifies the potential power of this resistance by reinscribing Laura into a hetero-normative plotline in which she becomes romantically involved with the hardboiled hero and thus loses her autonomy.

"the charm of old porcelain"

In *The Secrets of Grown-Ups*, Caspary admits to being more invested in the characterization of Waldo than that of Laura. Not only does Caspary believe that the murderer is the "most interesting character," but she also writes that she sat up night after night talking with Ellis about the development of Waldo's character, "the impotent man who tries to destroy the woman he can never possess. We developed his background, imagined his youth, analyzed the causes of his frustrate masculinity, considered his taste, his talent, his idiosyncrasies. I enjoyed the trick of writing in his style, contrasting his florid mannerisms with the direct prose of the detective and, through the girl's version, showing the vagaries of the female mind" (194). Waldo is a blend of the various aesthete figures I have examined thus far: as a connoisseur, he shares Vance's expertise in all matters of art and is the leading figure in New York society of high culture and aesthetic refinement, but he also exhibits Gutman's all-consuming obsession with material possession. His "florid mannerisms" further indicate that his feminizing excesses are meant as a challenge to the masculine hardness of the detective. Unlike in Cain, where the gay male lover threatens the female's sexual possession of the hardboiled hero, Waldo is a danger to Laura's female identity not because he wants to attract Mark (although Mark certainly expresses a homoerotic attraction to Waldo), but because he wants to possess Laura as an object in his art collection. Although Laura feels no sexual attraction to Waldo whatsoever, she does want and need his approval: Waldo's connoisseurship triggers female desire insofar as Laura knows that her social and financial success is achieved in large part through his endorsement. The threat that Waldo poses to female identity is therefore presented in terms of ownership: Laura feels indebted to Waldo for his patronage, whereas Waldo constantly exercises his "right" of possession over her. As the foil to Waldo's corrupt aestheticism, Mark stands as the hardboiled hero who, like Spade and Marlowe, is contemptuous of the upper classes. Although Mark initially assumes that Laura is deserving of the same contempt he shows Waldo, he quickly becomes obsessed with discovering who Laura really is. Because Laura is presumed to be dead for a significant portion of the novel's opening chapters, Mark develops a close relationship with Waldo in order to learn more about Laura. Thus, when Laura returns alive, the intimacy between the hardboiled hero and the effeminate connoisseur becomes

triangulated. In the following section, I want to examine how Waldo and Mark have differing approaches to the question of ownership and commodification (Waldo is highly possessive of his belongings, whereas Mark rejects attachments of any kind). In their treatment of Laura, however, both men seem to exercise the same commodifying impulse to categorize her in definable terms.

A well-respected columnist and art collector, Waldo describes himself as "a fat, fussy, and useless male of middle age and double charm" (17). In his typical decadent attire, Waldo is first introduced wearing a "Persian dressing-gown, padding on loose Japanese clogs to answer the doorbell" (11). Caspary explicitly modeled the character of Waldo after Wilkie Collins's effete Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*. Like Count Fosco, Waldo's defining physical characteristic is his corpulence: "My proportions are, if anything, too heroic. While I measure three inches above six feet, the magnificence of my skeleton is hidden by the weight of my flesh…. At certain times in history, flesh was considered a sign of good disposition, but we live in a tiresome era wherein exercise is held sacred and heroes are always slender" (16). Caspary's description of Waldo's flesh is strikingly similar to Marion Halcombe's diary entry on Count Fosco's similarly fascinating bulk:

> For example, he is immensely fat. Before this time I have always especially disliked corpulent humanity. I have always maintained that the popular notion of connecting excessive grossness of size and excessive good-humour as inseparable allies was equivalent to declaring, either that no people but amiable people ever get fat, or that the accidental addition of so many pounds of flesh has a directly favourable influence over the disposition of the person on whose body they accumulate. (217)

In addition to the shared reference in both passages to the presumed connection between excessive weight and a "good disposition," the "great bulk" (184) of Waldo and Fosco also calls to mind the physique of Oscar Wilde. According to biographer Richard Ellmann, both Oscar and his brother Willie were "over six feet—Willie by four inches, Oscar by three—both inclined to be fat, both languid" (126), a detail which suggests that Waldo's six-foot-three frame is a self-conscious allusion to Oscar. Interestingly, some years after the publication of *Woman in White*, Wilde took 'Fosco' as his nickname during his college days at Oxford. In a journal dated 4 December 1875, J. E. Courtenay Bodley, one of Wilde's closest Oxford friends, includes a note that reads: "Called on Wilde, who leaves foolish letters from people who are 'hungry' for him and call him 'Fosco' for his friends to read" (59).

Indeed, Wilde bears more than one physical similarity to the charismatic Count. On Wilde's arrival in America for his lecture tour, Lily Langtry notes that his face was "so colourless that a few pale freckles of good size were oddly conspicuous," and an anonymous reporter for the *New York Tribune* further adds that, "the most striking thing about the poet's appearance is his height, which is several inches over six feet, and the next thing to attract attention is his hair which is of dark brown colour, and falls down upon his shoulders … His eyes are blue, or light gray, and instead of being 'dreamy' as some of his admirers have imagined them to be, they are bright and quick." This account is uncannily similar to Marion's portrayal of Count Fosco in *Woman in White:* "[Fosco's eyes] are the most unfathomable grey eyes I ever saw, and they have at times a cold, clear, beautiful, irresistible glitter in them which forces me to look at him … Other parts of his face and head have their strange peculiarities. His complexion, for instance, has a singular sallow-fairness, so much at variance with the dark-brown colour of his hair, that I suspect the hair of being a wig" (218). The two descriptions of Oscar and Fosco, from their pale skin and bright gray eyes to their long dark-brown hair, are practically indistinguishable. Along the same lines, Waldo lists his own failings to be "obesity, astigmatism, the softness of pale flesh" (17). Beyond the noticeable physical resemblances among these three figures, they also boast an enviable mastery over language: Wilde is of course famous for

his conversational wit; Count Fosco is praised for his extraordinary command of the English language despite being a foreigner; and Waldo not only makes a living as an acerbic columnist ("I don't use a pen; I use a goose quill dipped in venom"), but even goes so far as to quote from his own publications.

Caspary's portrayal of Waldo as a murderous connoisseur carries further connections to Wilde's linking of aestheticism with crime in his essay, "Pen, Pencil, Poison." In *Laura*, the relationship between connoisseurship and criminality is symbolized in Waldo's most prized possession, a walking stick that he acquired in Dublin and that had originally belonged to an Irish baronet. Mark describes the cane as "one of the heaviest I have ever handled, weighing at least one pound, twelve ounces. Below the crook, the stick was encircled by two gold bands set about three inches apart" (112), a description that is reminiscent of Wilde, who was often observed walking with his ivory cane. Mark criticizes Waldo's walking stick, saying it's a "phoney" and an "affectation," but Waldo, who enjoys "[bragging] about his possessions, responds: "Everyone in New York knows Waldo Lydecker's walking stick. It gives me importance," performing a Veblenesque moment of social distinction by emphasizing status through possessions. As Mark searches Waldo's apartment with its "spindly overdecorated furniture, striped silks, books and music and antiques" (189), he uncovers an unfinished, unpublished manuscript, which included the following passage: "In the cultivated individual, malice, a weapon darkly concealed, wears the garments of usefulness, flashes the disguise of wit or flaunts the ornaments of beauty" (191). Mark explains that the piece "was about poisons hidden in antique rings, of swords in sticks, of firearms concealed in old prayer-books" (191). In portraying Waldo as a murderous connoisseur, Caspary draws from Wilde's essay "Pen, Pencil, Poison," which recounts the story of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, a famous poisoner. In a passage strongly resembling Waldo's essay, Wilde writes: "the poison that he [Wainewright] used was strychnine. In one of the beautiful rings of which he was so proud, and which served to show off the fine modelling of his delicate ivory hands, he used to carry crystals of the Indian *nux vomica*, a poison, one of his biographers tells us, "nearly tasteless, difficult of discovery, and capable of almost infinite dilution." In her description of Waldo's walking stick, Caspary thus employs the same decadent motif of beautiful surfaces that hide depraved or deadly depths. Although Waldo's cane was written out of the film version, Caspary intended the walking stick to represent Waldo's impotence and had conducted "research in museums and consulted a specialist in antique weapons. The friend who had introduced me to this expert was an artist and had made a drawing of the walking stick with a diagram of the concealed weapon" (*Secrets* 190). Waldo's walking stick is therefore a symbol not only of his hidden corruption, but also of his lack of masculinity.

In order to assert his authority, Waldo engages in art collecting to achieve a sense of control in relation to the world. As the collector severs objects from their use value, he maneuvers them into a new subjective order of which he is sole author. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin posits that collecting is at once an act of separation and union, selecting objects from a diverse field in order to place them together with objects of a similar kind. Objects brought together in this manner form collections. These collections are the fruit of the work of the collector, the individual who is able to 'pursue and encounter' objects and present them in his own private space, not the space of their origin. In this way, as Benjamin observes, "he takes up the struggle against dispersion." He seeks to thwart his impression of "the confusion ... the scatter, in which the things of the world are found" (*Arcades* 2). Late in the novel, during his search for a murder weapon in Waldo's house, Mark notices the extent to which Waldo's belongings, from priceless relics down to even the most mundane everyday items, have been customized to suit his personal taste:

> I made a search of cabinets and shelves in the living room, then went into the bedroom and started on the dresser drawers. Everything he owned was special and rare. His favorite books

> had been bound in selected leather, he kept his monogrammed handkerchiefs and shorts and pajamas in silk cases embroidered with his initials. Even his mouthwash and toothpaste had been made up from special prescriptions. (185)

By personalizing his belongings with his own monograms and initials, Waldo is in effect marking his ownership over these items. Even the most mass-produced products like toothpaste and mouthwash have been individualized with "special prescriptions" to signify his control over his possessions.

Although Waldo's refined sense of taste enables him to appreciate and accumulate beautiful things, his obsessive art collecting participates in a form of consumption that is regarded as both dangerous and immoral. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Francescato defines art collecting as encompassing both "the economic meaning of consumption as a 'satisfaction of needs' *through* the object and the etymological meaning of consumption as 'the action of destruction' *of* the object. One of the main elements which defines art collecting as a consumerist – 'destructive' – practice is the thought that the possession of the work of art may interfere so much with its appreciation, that the latter eventually becomes completely obsolete from an aesthetic viewpoint" (2-3). Waldo's need to acquire, collect and display works of art transforms his capacity for aesthetic appreciation into a destructive mode of consumption. Caspary shows the dangers of Waldo's collecting in the pivotal scene in which Waldo attempts to purchase an antique mercury glass vase from the art dealer, Mr. Claudius:

> It was natural that he [Claudius] and Waldo should know each other. They could both go into a trance over an old teapot. What Waldo had seen in Claudius' window was a duplicate of the vase he had given to Laura. It was made like a globe set upon a pedestal. To me it looked like one of those silver balls that hang on Christmas trees, strictly Woolworth. And I understand that it is not so rare and costly as many of the pieces that cause collectors to swoon over. Waldo valued it because he had started the craze for mercury glass among certain high-class snobs. (113)

Narrated from the point of view of Mark, this scene highlights the clash between the highbrow aesthete and the lowbrow detective. Not only does Mark harshly criticize Waldo's pretentious effort to instigate new aesthetic trends, but he also reveals a Marlowesque sense of aestheticism in his awareness that this particular vase is not a piece that most collectors would "swoon over." Mark mocks Waldo's obsession with the glass vase by comparing it to one of the silver balls manufactured by Woolworth, a reference to the American businessman who in the 1880s established a chain of department stores selling inexpensive goods. Like Chandler, Caspary portrays Mark as simultaneously suspicious of the cultural elite yet sensitive to aesthetic value. Making no attempt to hide his disinterest in Waldo's antique dealings, Mark turns his back on Waldo and Claudius, while the two argue over the sale of the vase, a heated exchange which is worth quoting in length:

> While Waldo made love to the vase, I looked at some old pistols. The conversation went on behind my back.
>
> "Where did you get it?" Waldo asked.
>
> "From a house in Beacon."
>
> "How much are you going to soak me for it, you old horsethief?"
>
> "It's not for sale."
>
> "Not for sale! But my good man …"
>
> "It's sold," Claudius said.

Waldo pounded his stick against the skinny legs of an old table. "What right have you to sell it without offering it to me first? You know my needs."

"I found it for my customer. He'd commissioned me to buy any mercury glass I found at any price I thought was right."

"You had it in your window. That means you're offering it up for sale."

"It don't mean that at all. I got a right to put things in my window, Mr. Lydecker."

"Did you buy it for Philip Anthony?"

There was a silence. Then Waldo shouted: "You knew I'd be interested in anything he want. You had no right not to offer it to me."

His voice sounded like an old woman's. I turned around and saw that his face had grown beet-red.

Claudius said: "The piece belongs to Anthony, there's nothing I can do about it now. If you want it, submit an offer to him."

"You know he won't sell it to me." (114)

Caspary is playing here with the dual meaning of "right" as *being* right, in a justifiable or moral sense, and *having* a right to act a certain way. Claudius explains to Waldo that he had been commissioned by Anthony to acquire any mercury vase at a "right" or reasonable price. This requires Claudius to exercise a personal judgment on what would be the "correct" market value of a particular vase. Waldo, however, is concerned primarily with the latter definition of "rightness" as *entitlement*, a debate which I also discussed in Spade's conversation with Gutman on who has right of ownership over the falcon. Accusing Claudius of having "no right" not to offer the vase to him first, Waldo insists that he should have what would be called in legal terms the right of first refusal, in which a given party has a contractual right to enter into a business transaction with a seller before anyone else can; only if the first party declines its first refusal right is the seller then free to open up the bidding to other interested parties. Of course the issue here is that Waldo has never entered into any such agreement with Claudius. Waldo is therefore indifferent to whether his accusation is "right" in an ethical or legal sense; in fact, Waldo pressures Claudius to break his agreement with Anthony and sell the vase to him. Waldo wants to have the sole right of ownership over the vase, regardless of what moral lines he would be crossing.

This brings up interesting questions about what constitutes the "right" conditions for the sale and purchase of an object. Waldo claims that since Claudius has displayed the vase in the shop window, the vase is therefore up for sale on the market. In other words, it would be "false" advertising if Claudius were to display objects in his window that aren't for sale. However, as the "owner" of the antique store, Claudius claims that he has every "right" to exhibit anything he chooses in the window, regardless of whether they are on the market. Yet Claudius seems to contradict himself when he says later that the "piece belongs to Anthony, there's nothing I can do about it now," relinquishing his ownership (and hence his "right") over the object. If Claudius maintains that he can exhibit commodities that aren't for sale, then how is the market economy affected when sellers can display things that don't belong to them? In Waldo's case, he displays his possessions to show his ownership, but is it also possible to display something without owning it? The fraught social relationships that exist around the question of ownership recall the distinction that James makes in *The Spoils of Poynton* between possessing and appreciating. In the case of *Laura*, Waldo's desire to possess the vase can similarly be said to contaminate his capacity to objectively appreciate its aesthetic beauty without contaminating that appreciation with his own selfish motivations.

Indeed, Waldo seems to fall prey to what Thorstein Veblen has termed "conspicuous consumption." In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen questions the very existence of art appreciation in a society dominated by the need to buy and display objects in order to achieve social distinction.

According to Veblen, any manifestation of taste always hides a persistent attempt to prevail in the social arena. This idea of ownership as a means of competing for social status clearly applies to Waldo's desperate attempt to prevent Anthony from acquiring the vase. The scene marks a moment when the triangulation of desire intersects with the market economy. Waldo covets the vase less for its intrinsic aesthetic worth (he started the craze for mercury glass, after all) than for its value *to Anthony*. Since Waldo knows that Anthony will never sell the vase to him, Waldo is worried that the vase is going to be pulled out of circulation, but in fact, the vase is already part of a commercial exchange in which Waldo cannot take part. For Waldo, there are only two ways to take something out of circulation: to own it or to destroy it. And he chooses the latter option; he pretends to trip and "accidentally" breaks the vase. This act of destruction gives him a great deal of satisfaction, "almost as if he'd got the vase anyway" (115). Waldo has short-circuited the process of exchange and re-established his control. Claudius is so dismayed by the shattering of the vase that he behaves as if, ""something human might have been killed" (114), a reaction that not only echoes Waldo's initial act of "making love" to the vase as if it were human but also foreshadows Waldo's murderous attempts to destroy Laura.

The lengths to which Waldo will go to maintain control over his social status is tied to the fact that he occupies a position of power and influence as the connoisseur figure. As a prominent art critic, Waldo openly boasts of his authority: "I've every weapon, money, connections, prestige, my column" (160). In a parallel scene to Waldo's interactions with Claudius, we are introduced to art dealer Lancaster Corey, who has come to inform Waldo about the potential sale of Jacoby's portrait of Laura. Waldo catches Corey "contemplating his porcelains lustfully" (46), a pose which mirrors Waldo's initial "love-making" to the mercury vase. However, unlike Claudius's denial to grant Waldo the right of first refusal for the mercury vase, Corey reveals to Waldo that a bid for the painting came through a "private channel," and gives Waldo the opportunity to be the first to bid on Laura's portrait. Instead of expressing pleasure or even mild gratitude for the opportunity, Waldo is insulted that Corey would "dare" to offer him "that worthless canvas," which he considers a "bad imitation of Speicher" (47). Disdainfully declining to submit a price for the portrait, Waldo mocks the potential buyer, whose "taste makes it clear he knows very little about painting" (48). Convinced that his aesthetic taste is far superior to Corey's "prospective sucker," Waldo inquires whether the bidder is "some connoisseur who saw the picture in the Sunday tabloids and wants to own the portrait of a murder victim" (49). Waldo distinguishes here between a "real" art connoisseur, who would be able to discern that Laura's portrait is a poor imitation, and a "sucker," who is too easily influenced by mass-market "tabloids" and sensationalist headlines to possess discriminating taste. The hypocrisy of Waldo's condescending remark is obvious considering the fact that he is himself a highly-published, widely-read columnist with, in his own words, "millions of fans" (171). What exactly separates Waldo's "highbrow" column, much of which has been "devoted to the study of murder" (15), from the "lowbrow" vulgar material that appears in Sunday tabloids? Waldo seems to answer this very question when he attempts to manipulate Corey into revealing his buyer's identity. Corey at first resists Waldo's tactics, insisting that it wouldn't be "strictly ethical" (49) to give names, but Waldo eventually incites Corey's greed for profit by intimating that he would publish a story about the famous portrait without mentioning any names:

> An ironic small story about the struggling young painter whose genius goes unrecognized until one of his sitters is violently murdered. And suddenly he, because he had done her portrait, becomes the painter of the year. His name is not only on the lips of collectors, but the public, the public, Corey, know him as they know Mickey Rooney. His prices skyrocket, fashionable women beg to sit for him, he is reproduced in *Life*, *Vogue*, *Town and Country*…" (49)

The main question that this passage asks us is what defines and constitutes value in the novel? What conditions determine an object valuable or worthless? Does a painting by an unknown artist reach the status of high art through its inherent aesthetic beauty or due to external, arbitrary forces beyond the painter's control? Within the world of Waldo's fabricated narrative, it would appear that the "value" of the young painter's work is achieved less though any intrinsic merit it might possess (the painter is a "genius," but his talent goes "unrecognized"), than through a mere fortunate turn of events that launches the painting into the domain of high art. In a sense, the "real" aesthetic worth of the painting is irrelevant; it is the sitter's violent murder, an incident external to the status of the painting as an independent work of art, that is responsible for bestowing "value" onto the painting. The tabloid coverage of the murder case causes the "price" of the artist's paintings to "skyrocket," increasing the apparent "value" of the artworks until they are finally "reproduced" in the pages of commercial magazines. In this final stage, what then separates the authentic art object from the mass-produced commodity?

Corey touches briefly on the question of what determines real value when he begs Waldo to mention Jacoby's name because the story would be "meaningless" (50) without it. Waldo claims that such an "inclusion would remove my story from the realms of literature and place it in the category of journalism" (50). Keeping in mind that Waldo is fabricating this story primarily to persuade Corey to reveal the buyer's identity, we can nonetheless see that, for Waldo, maintaining the anonymity of painter allows Waldo to make his piece "vivid and original," whereas anchoring the story to real-life events would cheapen the piece and make it "painfully commercial" (59). Corey of course isn't concerned with the portrait's "meaning," but only with its monetary value and how much profit he can make from its sale. Telling Waldo that Jacoby's portrait is "getting more valuable every day" (47), Corey hopes that Waldo's column will bring more publicity to Jacoby and augment the sale of his works. Despite the fact that the painting itself remains unchanged (it hasn't improved or become more objectively beautiful since the day Jacoby first finished painting it), Corey recognizes that Waldo's influential column will further ignite the public's interest in Laura's murder case, which will in turn created higher demand for the portrait and cause the price (the market "value") of the painting to rise. In other words, Waldo is essentially participating in a commercial process in which he holds the power to determine the "value" of a particular object. We have already seen that Waldo is responsible for instigating the craze for mercury glass, so this begs the question of whether high art can exist apart from the economic system of commodification

Caspary, perhaps unintentionally, epitomizes the inseparability of art and commodification in her symbolic use of Laura's "Byron pen." Waldo explains to Mark that he first met Laura when she approached him to request his endorsement for the Byron pen, a "fifty-thousand-dollar advertising campaign which could not fail to glorify [his] name," and which would provide "huge publicity for reward" (12). Feigning outrage, Waldo replies: "Give *me* publicity, my good girl! Your reasoning is sadly distorted. It's my name that will give distinction to your cheap fountain pen. And how dare you take the sacred name of Byron? Who gave you the right? […] Do you know how many dollars' worth of white space my syndicated columns now occupy?" (12). Caspary attempts to distinguish between non-commodified and commodified value by having Waldo argue that *his* celebrated name is what will "give distinction" to Laura's "cheap fountain pen." Waldo hypocritically declares, in his usual propriety language, that Laura has no "right" to use "the sacred name of Byron" for a mass-produced pen. In response, Laura hides her embarrassment because she had "named the fountain pen herself and […] was proud of its literary sound" (12). The Byron pen is therefore the ultimate symbol of commodified art in the way that it attaches the poet's name to a specified market value ("a fifty-thousand-dollar campaign"). Despite his vocal disapproval of the pen, Waldo does ultimately agree to endorse the campaign, admitting to Mark that the pen helped substantially in the sale of his essays: "For seven years Waldo Lydecker has enthusiastically acclaimed the Byron Pen. Without it, I am sure

that my collected essays would never sell one hundred thousand copies" (13). Even Waldo, the self-proclaimed "heir to the literary tradition" (180), cannot hold himself above the sphere of commodification. Despite his professed devotion to the "realms of literature," Waldo writes a syndicated column and is unequivocal about his interest in vulgar profit: "I am the most mercenary man in America. I never take any action without computing the profit" (13). Despite his position as the art connoisseur of the novel, Waldo is clearly deeply implicated in the economic forces of the marketplace, and his evaluation of artistic value is often contaminated by monetary biases.

Given the extent to which the projected market value of an object often fails to reflect its "real" or intrinsic worth, how do we make sense of moments in which art objects appear to be overvalued or undervalued? Does Waldo place too much value on his art collection because of his emotional (and financial) investment in them? Waldo later advises Mrs. Treadwell not to lower the price of Laura's portrait: "I'd keep the price up if I were you. The portrait may have a sentimental value for the buyer" (52). The implication here is that sentiment may lead the buyer to pay *more* than what the portrait is "really" worth in order to own it. We have already witnessed the extremes that Waldo will go to in order to attain ownership or to prevent losing ownership. In the case of Laura's portrait, Waldo asks Corey: "How can you offer what you don't own? That picture is hanging on the wall of Laura's apartment. She died without leaving a will, the lawyers will have to fight it out" (48). Corey explains that Mrs. Treadwill is assuming responsibility for Laura's possessions and had reached an agreement with the landlord to vacate the apartment. The fact that Corey is given the right to sell a painting he doesn't own parallels the scene in which Claudius claims that he can display the mercury vase in his shop window despite not owning it. Both Corey and Claudius hold positions of "distributors" in or "agents" of the commercial process in that they can only make money based on commercial circulation. The news that Mrs. Treadwell is in charge of Laura's belongings alarms Waldo, who nervously inquires what "arrangements have been made for her other things. Whether there's to be a sale?" (48). Immediately following his meeting with Corey, Waldo hurries to Laura's apartment to inquire about the status of her possessions:

> "Perhaps you know, Mrs. Treadwell, that this vase did not belong to Laura." I nodded toward the mercury glass globe upon the mantel. "I'd merely lent it to her."
> "Now, Waldo, don't be naughty. I saw you bring that vase on Christmas, all tied up in red ribbons." […]
> "Not ribbons, dear lady. There was a string tied to my Christmas package. Laura wasn't to give it away. You know that Spanish prodigality of hers, handing things to anyone who admired them. This vase is part of my collection and I intend to take it now." (51)

The ambiguous status of Laura's mercury glass globe suggests that the act of lending objects is a third potential means of taking an item out of public circulation. What precisely is the status of a "borrowed" object in relation to the commercial market? Since Laura's globe is the "twin" to Waldo's matching vase, it is surprising that Waldo would have been willing to separate the pair in the first place. Laura's glass vase is still in circulation in the sense that it isn't displayed as part of Waldo's original private collection, yet the vase is not for sale to outside buyers. According to Waldo, Laura was not permitted, under any circumstances, to give away the vase. He claims that the vase never "belonged" to Laura, but how can something be part of a "collection" and not be housed within the same space? Waldo's pun that his gift to Laura didn't have "ribbons" but came with a "string attached" highlights his obsessive need to dictate the movement and exchange of every object and person in his life. Waldo attempts to control both the public market and private space to the point where even his gifts come packaged with strict preconditions. I will discuss Laura's generosity, her habit of "handing things to anyone who admired them," in the last section of the chapter.

If, as Mark claims, "possessions were like people with Waldo" (191), then the reverse holds true as well. In the case of Laura, Waldo's love of possessions leads to a possessiveness that turns deadly. By novel's end, Waldo is revealed to be the murderer: rather than lose her to another man, Waldo attempts to kill Laura not once, but twice. Similar to his treatment of Claudius's mercury vase, Waldo wants to take Laura out of public circulation, but when he fails to do so, he resorts to destruction. Throughout the novel, Waldo views Laura as a beautiful work of art, as something to be displayed alongside his valuable antiques, and he takes personal credit for creating the woman that Laura became, or as McNamara aptly puts it, "in addition to the lust of the collector, Waldo also has the pride of the artificier" (76). Waldo tells Mark that when he first met Laura, she was only "mildly terrific at that period. I recognized her possibilities, however. Under my tutelage she developed from a gauche child to a gracious New Yorker. After a year no one would have suspected that she came from Colorado Springs" (13). Waldo molds Laura into the ideal woman, sophisticated, gracious, cultured, a woman worthy to be seen on his arm and to sit among his antiques, so much so that "she became as well known at openings nights as Waldo Lydecker's graying Van Dyke or his gold-banded walking stick" (13). When Laura is later accused of murder, Waldo declares that "from this day forth, every day, eighty syndicated essays will be devoted to the case of Laura Hunt [...] You shall be my heroine, Laura, my greatest creation; millions will read about you, will love you. I'll make you greater [...] than Lizzie Borden" (161). Waldo seems unaware of the irony behind using the wide distribution of his column as a means of removing Laura from public circulation. Moreover, when Waldo boasts of his intention to make Laura famous, he grabs hold of her hand, "displaying possession triumphantly" (170), further emphasizing the extent to which he claims ownership over Laura.

Because Waldo aestheticizes Laura into an art object, he treats her in proprietary terms as a prized part of his collection without ever really desiring her sexually. In his discussion of gay aesthetes in film noir, Frank Naremore notes that their "aestheticising tendency is of a piece with their villainy. Queers generally in film noir are not evil just because homosexuality is abnormal or wrong. Nor is it even only because they are 'like' women […]. Queers are also evil because the aesthetic gives them an access to women that excludes and threatens the normal male. On the one hand, the very feeling for the aesthetic is coded as feminine in the culture; on the other hand, its asexuality allows queers a closeness to women uncomplicated by heterosexual lust." Interestingly, Waldo derives a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction from watching Mark investigate the contents of Laura's apartment. For Waldo, the living room "still shone with Laura's lustre," (30), and he is eager to see if Mark will be able to "appreciate the quality of the woman who adorned this room" (30). Waldo's use of the word "adorned" here further emphasizes the extent to which he views Laura as a decorative object. Moreover, the idea that Laura's room still contains her "lustre" evokes the Benjaminian notion that possessions contain imprints of their owner's individuality. In his essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," Benjamin argues that with the rise of the commercial economy, the ability of the individual to leave traces of herself on her environment becomes increasingly difficult:

> Since the days of Louis-Philippe, the bourgeoisie has endeavored to compensate itself for the fact that private life leaves no trace in the big city. It seeks such compensations within its four walls—as if it were striving, as a matter of honor, to prevent the traces, if not of its days on earth, then at least of its possessions and requisites of daily life, from disappearing forever. The bourgeoisie unabashedly makes impressions of a host of objects…For the Makart style, the style of the end of the Second Empire, a dwelling becomes a kind of casing. This style views it as a case for a person and embeds him in it, together with all his appurtenances, tending his traces as nature tends dead fauna embedded in granite. The real or sentimental value of the objects thus preserved is emphasized. They are removed from the profane gaze of non-

> owners; in particular, their outlines are blurred in a characteristic way. (Paris Second Empire 46)

In this passage, Benjamin makes a distinction between private and public spaces, and their mediation by objects and things. What allows things to remain enclosed within the cocoon of private space, and what forces them to enter into circulation? What forms of subjectivity do objects crystallize or loosen up? In Benjamin's conception of the alienating effect of public space, the individual turns her attention to the private space of her home, where she can protect her possessions from "the profane gaze of non-owners" and thus preserve their "sentimental value" (46). The capacity for objects to retain and preserve impressions of their owners is particularly relevant to the detective novel, where the detective's primary goal is to successfully decode the contents of a room to locate clues to the owner's personality. Benjamin takes note of how the process of reading and interpreting interior spaces gives rise to the detective story: "To live means to leave traces. In the interior these are emphasized. An abundance of covers and protectors, liners and cases, is devised, on which the traces of objects of everyday use are imprinted. The traces of the occupant also leave their impression on the interior. The detective story that follows these traces comes into being" (155). Benjamin's emphasis on these domestic forms of liners, cases, and protectors is paradoxical in that these covers simultaneously protect objects from getting marked yet also become the surfaces upon which those traces are left.

As the detective investigating Laura's supposed murder, Mark has been trained to uncover the hidden significance behind every object. Although we never visit his home, Mark tells us that the "steely furniture in [his] bedroom reminded him of a dentist's office" (70). Similar to Marlowe, Mark's "outsider" loner status allows him to acquire taste without succumbing to the dangerous complications of ownership: "His Presbyterian virtue rejected the danger of covetousness. He had discovered the best of life in a gray-walled hospital room and had spent years that followed asking himself timorously whether loneliness must be the inevitable companion of appreciation" (36). Mark can be said to undergo a kind of aesthetic initiation over the course of his interactions with Waldo, such that by novel's end, the hardboiled detective who used to prefer baseball to opera is able to discover Waldo's secret. Without intending to, Mark falls under the spell of luxury. As an outsider to Waldo's aestheticized milieu, Mark is "contemptuous of luxury," yet quickly becomes "charmed by it" ("Great Detectives" PG). In Waldo's words, Mark "resents my collection of glass and porcelain, my Biedermeier and my library, but envies the culture which has developed appreciation for surface lustres" (16). Unlike Waldo, however, Mark isn't driven by the desire to own antiques, which allows him to "yield to the charm of old porcelain" and simply "appreciate" their surfaces without coveting and being corrupted by them.

For Mark, objects offer a way to come to know Laura's character. He seeks clues in "such inconsistent trifles as an ancient baseball, a worn *Gulliver*, a treasured snapshot" (35). As Mark delves deeper into the details of Laura's life, he begins to fall in love with her *through* her possessions, "shaping Laura's character to fit his attitudes as a young man might when enamored of a living woman" (40). In a reversed, but symmetrical process to Waldo's conversion of Laura into an art object, Mark attempts to reconstruct her identity by decoding her belongings. Laura's possessions contain a mixture of high and low, from rare antique books to a tattered baseball autographed by Cookie Lavagetto in 1938, an item which leads Mark to ask: "But why did *she* keep a baseball on her desk? He emphasized the pronoun. *She* had begun to live" (33). The italicized pronoun underlines the fact that Laura's belongings are breathing life into Mark's image of her. In a matter of a few short days, Mark has familiarized himself with every detail of Laura's inner life: "*Her* address and engagement books, bank statements, bills, check stubs, and correspondence filled his desk and his mind. Through them he had discovered the richness of her life, but also the profligacy" (36). The written records of Laura's life – her bank statements and check stubs – underscore the dual nature of

consumption: Mark notices both the real allure ("richness") and the false glamour ("profligacy") of the commodities that Laura consumed. If Mark's access to Laura's interiority is made possible primarily through her *economic* and *social* life, then to what extent does Laura's commercial transactions define or construct her inner subjectivity? What kind of information can these records yield and does Mark's romanticized image of Laura comes any closer to a "right" or more accurate understanding of Laura than Waldo's idealized/aestheticized perception of her? Mark claims that he has never known a woman as intimately as he knows Laura:

> Alone in the apartment, he had made unscientific investigation of Laura's closets, chests of drawers, dressing-table, and bathroom. He knew Laura, not only with his intelligence, but with his senses. His fingers had touched fabrics that had known her body, his ears had heard the rustle of her silks, his nostrils sniffed at the varied, heady fragrances of her perfumes. Never before had the stern young Scot known a woman in this fashion. Just as her library had revealed the quality of her mind, the boudoir yielded the secrets of feminine personality. (46)

Mark's "unscientific investigation" of Laura's bedroom is described here in the eroticized terms of sexual conquest. The language in this passage emphasizes the idea that objects expose and disclose information: her books "revealed" her mind and her bedroom "yielded" hidden feminine "secrets." The great irony of this passage, however, is the fact that Waldo remarks earlier in the novel how it had been Laura's "taste for privacy that led to her death" (29). After Laura is presumed to be dead, the privacy of her home is constantly being violated. For instance, the fact that Mark knows where Laura's liquor is stored leads Waldo to observe that the detective "certainly knows his way about this apartment" (53). Mark himself admits that he has taken liberties in Laura's apartment: "I had the key in my pocket and I let myself in as coolly as if I'd been entering my own place" (70). Laura is fully aware of the extent to which people are constantly intruding into the privacy of her apartment. She notices, for instance, that Mark knows that the drinks are stored in the corner cabinet: "How do you know my house so well, Mr. McPherson?" to which Mark replies: "There isn't much about you I don't know" (73). Regardless of Mark's claim that he has uncovered practically everything about Laura, the question still remains: how well does Mark really *know* Laura? Has he reconstructed a truthful representation of her through her belongings? If we are to believe that Waldo fashioned Laura into the woman who decorated this room, then is Mark falling for the actual Laura, or the Laura envisioned by Waldo, or perhaps even Waldo himself? In fact, late in the novel, Mark expresses his homoerotic attraction to Waldo: "I clung to Waldo. I was afraid of losing him. I despised the guy and he fascinated me" (109).

To further complicate matters, many of the objects in Laura's apartment were gifts from Waldo, so it could also be argued that the room's "lustre" belongs just as much to Waldo as it does to Laura, that Waldo has left "traces" of himself on certain objects. Waldo constantly insists that he wants his vase back, that it didn't belong to Laura – so which of the objects reflect her and which reflect Waldo? If the objects are displayed in Laura's house, does that constitute Laura's ownership over them? Or can she, like Claudius, display things that she does not own? Mrs. Treadwell laments that "poor Laura was so careless, she never knew what she owned" (51), suggesting that Laura did not abide by the rules of ownership that define market transactions: unlike Claudius who is certain that Anthony owns the mercury globe or Waldo who demands sole proprietorship, Laura appears not to know or care about who owns what. Laura's "carelessness" thus confirms that many of her possessions were either given away or never belonged to her in the first place. This would imply, then, that Mark couldn't possibly decipher Laura's interiority through her possessions if Laura herself hasn't been "tending her traces," in the Benjaminian sense.

Objects in *Laura* thus seem not to mirror, but rather to scatter and obscure identity, thus contesting the Benjaminian notion that possessions can unambiguously reflect their owner. This idea is further confirmed by the proliferation throughout the novel of reflective and deceptive surfaces, from gilt-framed mirrors, to mercury glass globes, to painted portraits. Characters are constantly catching glimpses of their strained faces in windows or watching each other's movements through mirrored reflections. The maid Bessie recalls that her "first glimpse of the body had been a distorted reflection in the mercury-glass globe on Laura's mantel" (32). For Waldo, Jacoby's portrait of Laura is too "studied" to be accurate, whereas for Mark, the painting comes to symbolize his idealized vision of a "real" woman. The novel also plays with mistaken identities and Pygmalion complexes. Since Diane Redfern's face is destroyed by the shotgun blast, the police cannot properly identify her and she is mistaken for Laura, or as Waldo puts it, "Laura is Diane and Diane was Laura" (111). Along the same lines, Waldo believes that he has created Laura as a reflection of the best parts of himself, as his "greatest creation." But what Caspary seems to be emphasizing throughout the novel is the idea that surface lustres are beautiful but deceptive, a theme not uncommon in *fin de siècle* decadent literature. Waldo writes on this very phenomenon in his piece, "Distortion and Refraction":

> Glass, blown bubble thin, is coated on the inner surface with a layer of quicksilver so that it shines like a mirror. And just as the mercury in a thermometer reveals the body's temperature, so do the refractions in that discerning globe discover the fevers of temperament in those unfortunate visitors who, upon entering my drawing-room, are first glimpsed in its globular surfaces as deformed dwarfs. (113-14)

Even judging from the essay's title, Waldo places his focus not on accurate reflections and likenesses, but rather on misrepresentations, on "distortions and refractions." In this passage, the transparent medium of glass is made opaque through a "layer of quicksilver" that creates a reflective mirror. This mirror-like surface does not, however, produce a faithful duplicate image of its corresponding object. Rather, its "globular surfaces" create "refractions" that "deform" the original image. Interestingly, the etymology of the word "refraction" derives from the Latin root *re-*, meaning 'back,' and *frangere*, meaning 'to break.' The fragmenting effect of the mercury glass epitomizes Laura's status as a fragmented object of male desire. When Laura returns, alive, from the country, Mark is therefore forced to confront the "real" Laura and reevaluate her against his idealized construction of her subjectivity. He finds that the living Laura does not align completely with what he had imagined. For instance, Mark disapproves of her taste in men, specifically what he sees as her misplaced love for Shelby: "I had expected Laura to be above that sort of nonsense. I thought I had a found a woman who would know a real man when she saw one. […] I felt cheated" (119). Unlike Benjamin's metaphors of "dead fauna embedded in granite," objects in *Laura* don't "preserve" the actual shape and traces of their owner. Instead of fossilized outlines that retain real impressions of their owners, *Laura* abounds with slippery surfaces that deflect, deform, and refract. Far from being an accurate and complete reflection of Laura, her possessions provide at best a partial picture of her interiority, and at worst a distorted and false representation.

"what kind of dame was she?"

Throughout the novel, the privacy of Laura's apartment is constantly being violated, her possessions placed in and out of circulation and subject to endless scrutiny, making it impossible to piece together an accurate and comprehensive picture of Laura's inner life. If these objects scatter

Laura's identity through their mediation between and among characters, then the same can be said of the narrative structure of the novel itself. As discussed earlier, on the level of form, *Laura* is structured through a series of first-person male narrators whose narrative reliability is often in question. Given the hyper-masculine genre of detective fiction to which *Laura* belongs, it is not surprising that Caspary poses the enigma of Laura's identity through the clashing perceptions of three vastly different male figures: Waldo, the effeminate, impotent connoisseur, views Laura as his crowning aesthetic achievement; Shelby, the attractive, virile playboy, both depends upon and resents Laura's patronage; and Mark, the hardboiled representative of a "real man," shapes Laura (whom he presumes to be dead) into his ideal romantic fantasy. In these conflicting constructions of Laura's identity, each male voice competes for control.

In the opening section of *Laura*, Waldo counteracts his sexual impotence by claiming responsibility for Laura's talent and success. In a sense, Waldo has created Laura twice: first, in his Pygmalion-like effort to transform her into the epitome of female refinement, and second, when he narrates to Mark (and the reader) the circumstances of how his relationship with Laura began. The first physical description in the novel of Laura is entirely mediated by Waldo's point-of-view: "'She was a slender thing, timid as a fawn and fawn-like, too, in her young uncertain grace. […] When I asked her why she had come, she gave a little clucking sound. Fear had overtaken her voice. I was certain that she had walked around and around the building before daring to enter, and that she had stood in the corridor hearing her own heart pound before she dared touch a frightened finger to my doorbell'" (12). Waldo's claim that he "was certain" of Laura's actions (that she walked around the building) and of her emotions (her pounding heart and frightened finger) indicates the extent to which his narration attempts to control Laura's image. But Waldo's alleged "certainty" is in fact mere speculation given that both are said to occur *before* he has even met Laura ("before" she "dared to enter" the building and ring his doorbell). Moreover, the fact that this description appears in dialogue form during a conversation with Mark raises further questions of Waldo's intentions toward the detective. Does Waldo intentionally construct Laura's image as shy and "fawn-like" in order to excite Mark's imagination? To what extent is Waldo fashioning Laura's subjectivity to suit his own motives (and prevent Mark from discovering his crime)?

In contrast to Waldo's self-serving portrayal of Laura as a young woman whose qualities were cultivated through his tutelage, Shelby Carpenter gives us a revised version of Laura as secretly weak and unstable. In the stenographic report of his police statement to Mark, Shelby describes Laura as an overly emotional woman in need of male protection: "Miss Hunt, you know, is a very intelligent young woman, but sometimes her emotions get the better of her, and she becomes almost hysterical about world conditions. […] This, added to a certain cynicism about the work she does, gives her an emotional instability which, I thought, I might help to correct" (128). Shelby's desire to "correct" Laura's "emotional instability" is based on his self-perception as "a gallant hero protecting a helpless female against a crude minion of the law" (121). Playing the part of a Southern gentleman with grand "airs and graces" (142), Shelby expresses a typical chauvinistic attitude toward women in part to compensate for his dependence on Laura financially and socially. As a top executive at the advertising agency, Laura is the one who gives orders to Shelby, who occupies an inferior position both in the public working place and in their private romantic relationship. Even Laura recognizes that she treats him as a plaything, "wearing him proudly as a successful prostitute wears her silver foxes to tell the world she owns a man" (146). As a result, Shelby perceives of Laura's career as a "burden," implying that women have no place in the male-driven economy: "I have often protested at her arduous and unflagging devotion to her career, since I believe that women are highly strung and delicate, so that the burden of her position, in addition to her social duties and personal obligations, had a definite effect on her nerves. For this reason I have always tried to understand and sympathize with her temperamental vagaries" (125). Just as Waldo perceives of Laura as his finest achievement in order to

compensate for his impotence, so too does Shelby construct Laura as "delicate" in order to neutralize her threat to his masculinity.

As the only character who does not know Laura before she was presumed to be murdered, Mark might appear to be the most objective of the male narrators. However, his access to Laura's interiority suffers from a double bias: first, because Mark learns about her *indirectly* through her possessions and the skewed accounts provided by other characters, and second, because Mark is already in love with Laura by the time she comes back alive. As a result, despite his efforts to maintain neutrality, Mark's objectivity has already been compromised: "I couldn't trust my own judgment. Personal feelings were involved" (121). The one advantage in Mark's favor is his position as a detective trained in categorizing suspects and decoding how their social traits and behavior patterns type them as members of a certain class. For Mark, the mystery of Laura's identity is therefore primarily a question of determining what "type" of person she is.

The novel proliferates with simultaneous and contradictory attempts to categorize and to resist categorization. On the one hand, we have Mark working to classify each suspect according to social types, but on the other, Caspary is self-consciously attempting to break away from using "detective-story stereotypes." Since the generic form of the detective novel is centered on the process of detection and decoding, it is only natural for Waldo to demand of Mark, "What do you know and how do you know so much?" (56). Mark spends much of the novel identifying characters by their social type, and *Laura* is therefore inundated with phrases that attempt to define what "sort" or "kind" of person so-and-so is. For instance, according to her landlady, Diane Redfern fell into the category of "*those kind* of girls" who are "here today, gone tomorrow" (94). Mark realizes that he "had known *girls like that*," who had "no home, no friends, not much money" (95), but Laura later defends Diane by saying that "she wasn't *the sort of person* anyone could hate" (104). In the case of Shelby, Waldo explains that Shelby is "quite the sporting *type*" (56), which leads Mark to ascertain that Shelby isn't "the *type* to use a sawed-off shotgun" (57), a weapon generally only used by gangster types. Along the same lines, Mark is certain that Waldo wouldn't use a "shotgun, whole or sawed-off. Waldo wasn't the *type*. If he owned a gun, it would look like another museum piece among the China dogs and shepherdesses and old bottles ... Everything he owned was special and rare" (185).

Although the novel privileges Mark's skill in categorizing characters according to type in order to identify the murderer, Caspary is equally invested in the opposing project of resisting the tendency of detective fiction to rely on stereotypes. For instance, in the case of Mark, Caspary explicitly describes her desire to redefine what it means to be a detective. Before *Laura* was published as a novel, Caspary had envisioned it as a play: "In my first draft of *Laura* (in play form) the detective had no special quality. He was simply a device. Later, when the novel started, the detective was the only character who failed to come alive" (*Detectives* 143). Caspary admits to having a prejudice against detective figures: "I did not like detectives. I knew they were necessary in modern society, but I loathed men who spied for money. It seemed preposterous for me to make a hero out of such a fellow" (*Detectives* 144). Caspary goes on to explain that she solves her prejudice by reimagining Mark as what she calls a "romantic detective," not unlike Chandler's chivalric detective. Just as the novel *Laura* is concerned with the question of what "sorts" of people populate the story world, Caspary also asks herself, "What sort of man would [Mark] be? Not psychotic certainly, nor the swaggering hard-boiled private eye of popular mysteries. […] Nor would my romantic detective fit the pattern of the persevering, stolid public servant, nor the impassive genius of deduction" (*Detectives* 144). Caspary makes Mark "come alive" by showing him as "contradictory" and therefore "human." Mark "despises the chic world which Laura inhabited, is scornful of her smart circle, contemptuous of luxury, also charmed by these things. […] He loathes pretense but can be awed by pretentious persons whose culture he envies. His lower-middle-class Scotch Presbyterian morality is rigid but a burden to him. He

is ambivalent, therefore human" (*Detectives* 145). By defying social expectations of what a detective "should be like," Mark avoids easy classification.

In the novel, Caspary makes a very deliberate attempt to draw attention to the fact that Mark is "different" from other detectives. Mark himself is very aware of moments when he is acting "like a detective" (52): "I was business-like. I was crisp and efficient. I sounded like a detective in a detective story. 'I am going to be direct,' I said" (119). In these moments, Caspary wants us to know that Mark recognizes he is putting on an act (he sounds *like* a detective). He is fully conscious of when he is "talking detective-story language" (121), but the implication here is that this "detective language" does not define his identity. Even Shelby notices that Mark doesn't conform to the stereotype of the tough detective: "He ought to be hardboiled. You'd expect him to be tougher. I don't like his trying to act like a gentleman" (139). Laura, on the other hand, is pleased to find that Mark goes against type: "I think he's nice. You'd never think of a detective being like that" (139). Laura even defends Mark against Waldo's criticisms, attempting to characterize what Mark is "really like": "He's not that sort at all. […] Mark isn't like that, he'd never sacrifice anyone for the sake of notoriety and his own career" (163). In a conversation between Laura and Mark, Caspary provides a detailed explanation of why she finds detectives and detective fiction, in general, to be "detestable":

> She said, "You don't seem like a detective."
> "Have you ever known any detectives?"
> "In detective stories, there are two kinds, the hardboiled ones who are always drunk and talk out of the corners of their mouths and do it all by instinct; and the cold, dry, scientific kind who split hairs under microscopes."
> "Which do you prefer?"
> "Neither," she said. "I don't like people who make their lives out of spying and poking into people's lives. Detectives aren't heroes to me, they're detestable. [...] But you're different. The people you go after ought to be exposed. Your work is important. [...] You don't talk like a detective, either."
> "Neither hardboiled nor scientific?"
> We laughed. (77)

For Caspary, this exchange between Laura and Mark is what finally allowed her to make her detective figure "come alive" ("Detectives" 146), to exist as more than a mere novelistic device. Caspary believes she has created a detective who is "neither hardboiled nor scientific," but rather a romantic hero who is "too imaginative, too intelligent to play the roughneck" ("Detectives" 145), or to use Laura's words, "You're not just a detective who sees nothing but surface actions. You're a sensitive man, you react to nuances" (87). Caspary is convinced that she has conceived of a new incarnation of the "tough-minded but warm-hearted" detective, yet in the very same breath, she admits that "such qualities were developed in him by the demands of the story. The detective has to be a foil for the brilliant, malicious columnist, Waldo Lydecker. As a hero Mark is obliged to top Waldo in repartee" (145). The language Caspary uses here is one of necessity: Mark "*has* to be a foil" and "is *obliged*" to compete with Waldo. Caspary perhaps fails to realize the full implications of her admission: despite her desire to create an "authentic" character, she still must submit to the "demands of the story." This tension between the demands of plot versus that of characterization is especially crucial to understanding the elusiveness behind Laura's identity and ultimately determining whether Caspary succeeds in making her heroine "come alive."

Of all the social types that appear in the novel, the categorization of Laura proves to be the most difficult to pin down. *Laura* revolves around the central question that Mark poses to Waldo at the beginning of the novel: "What kind of dame was she?" (30), a question that becomes increasingly

unanswerable. Initially, Mark refers to Laura as "a two-timing dame" (5), to which Waldo replies curtly that she was "not the sort of woman you call a dame" (30). But as Mark falls for Laura (before he knows that she is alive), he begins to dislike the thought of Laura "drinking with a man in her bedroom like a cutie in a hotel" (46). When she returns, he is pleasantly surprised to learn that she's not "that kind of girl" (84) who would hold herself above doing housework, but finds it hard to believe that she's "not the sort of woman" (153) who enjoys solitude. Given the novel's preoccupation with asking what "sort" of person Laura "is like," we are finally given the opportunity to access her interiority directly when, more than halfway through the novel, Laura at last surfaces to assert her own voice.

After reading the conflicting male accounts of Laura as independent and successful (though perhaps prone to emotional outbursts), it is somewhat startling when Laura declares in her own words that, "the idea that I'm an intelligent woman is pure myth" (137). By providing Laura with her own first-person account, Caspary allows her to constitute herself as an autonomous subject and resist the objectifying impulses of the male characters. Instead of offering a unified and coherent account of her interiority, Laura's narrative is disordered, erratic, and excessive. On the one hand, it would seem that Caspary has fallen back on conventional stereotypes of women as weak and flighty, but Laura's fragmentary thoughts operate, I argue, as a means to resist categorization. In the opening paragraph of her narrative, Laura describes herself in spatialized, object-like terms when she explains how her mind works:

> At work, when I plan a campaign for Lady Lilith Face Power or Jix Soap Flakes, my mind is orderly. I write dramatic headlines and follow them with sales arguments that have unity, coherence, and emphasis. But when I think about myself, my mind whirls like a merry-go-round. All the horses, the bright and the drab, dance around a shining, mirrored centre whose dazzling rays and frivolous music make concentration impossible. I am trying to think clearly of all that has happened in the last few days, to remember the facts and set them upon the horses and send them out in neat parade like sales arguments for Jix or Lady Lilith. They disobey, they whirl and dance to the music. (137)

In this passage, Laura's thoughts are disorganized and scattered, and the extended metaphor of her mind as a whirling "merry-go-round" would seem to indicate that, like the male characters, even she can't escape from viewing herself in objectified terms. As the top executive of an advertising agency, Laura is forced to sell her own labor, and more specifically, to market commodities using "dramatic" and persuasive ad campaigns. Working as a woman in a predominantly male workplace, she is also well aware of the masculine tendency to view women as sexual commodities. In an effort to divorce herself from the systematic commodification of which she is a daily part, Laura conceives of her own interiority as a disordered, disobedient merry-go-round. The crucial point to make here is that the metaphor of the merry-go-round is *active*, not static: the horses "disobey." Refusing to organize her thoughts in "neat parade" like sales pitches, Laura allows them to "dance and whirl," uninhibited by the demands of a masculine market economy. Moreover, these metaphorical horses spin around a "shining, mirrored center." In a house of mirrors, the mirrors are turned inward and reflect and glance off each other, suggesting an empty center of reflections. The image of a mirrored center, on the other hand, means that there *is* a center, and that it is also working to deflect and repel the gazes of others. The circulation of Laura's dispersed emotions around this mirrored center can therefore be read as a source of empowerment, as a way of preventing men from turning her into a fixed object. By conceiving of her own subjectivity as something fluid and unpredictable, Laura seeks to transcend her commodified status. She defines herself through a negative capability that resists the collective efforts of men who seek to label and control her.

Late in the novel, when Laura declares that "I belonged to myself" (174), Caspary links together the issue of subject formation with that of ownership. Rejecting the possessive desires of men (particularly Waldo), Laura conceives of her private interiority in proprietary terms. After her return from the country, she explains to Mark the importance of maintaining her privacy: "Freedom […] meant owning myself, possessing all my silly and useless routines, being the sole mistress of my habits. […] Freedom meant my privacy. It's not that I want to lead any sort of double life, it's simply that I resent intrusion" (86). For Laura, "owning herself" means having access to her private self, being the "sole mistress" of her freedom. Because she values her autonomy, Laura heeds her mother's advice to "never give yourself to a man": "That is why," she tells Mark, "I had given so much of everything else; myself I have always withheld" (156). Since Laura is finally narrating her own story, we expect at this point to have full access to her "true" interiority, yet her identity is now framed in terms of a *narrative* withholding. Due to the generic demands of the detective novel, Laura must remain a suspect. As a result, she cannot be completely forthright in her own account, which means that her narrative is as incomplete and misleading as the male accounts that preceded it:

> This is no way to write the story. I should be simple and coherent, listing fact after fact, giving order to the chaos of my mind. When they ask me, "Did you return on Friday night to kill her, Laura?" I shall answer, "He hasn't the face of a man who would lie and flirt to get a confession": and when they ask me about ringing the bell and waiting at the door for her to come and be killed, I shall tell them that I wish, more than anything in the world, that I had met him before this happened. (162)

Laura herself recognizes that the degree to which she is emotionally scattered and unable to give order to the "chaos in [her] mind." Are we to conclude, then, that the "authentic" Laura is a dispersed, excessive Laura? In other words, Laura appears to be just as inaccessible in her own narrative as she was in the fragmented accounts told by the male characters. Moreover, Laura clearly refuses to directly answer the questions she poses to herself. This is of course the central narrative dilemma that Caspary faced: how to allow Laura to speak in the first-person without revealing her own innocence or guilt? The pressing question that the reader expects Laura to answer in her narrative is whether she killed Diane. However, in order to fulfill the demands of plot and maintain the mystery of the murderer, Caspary is forced to return to the stereotype of women as temperamental and scattered. Thus, when Laura responds to her own question, not with a direct 'yes' or 'no,' but rather with the evasive answer, "He hasn't the face of a man who would lie and flirt to get a confession," this moment of narrative withholding is presented as an instance of Laura's feminine vagary. Our anticipation of being granted access to Laura's private mind is ultimately denied because her interiority, even within her own narrative, is still being mediated through the social construction of women as emotional and capricious. Initially, Laura's female excesses, her whirling "merry-go-round" of thoughts, empower her to resist male commodification. But these excesses are quickly recoded negatively as stereotypical feminine weakness. Caspary thus cannot present Laura as a distinct, autonomous subject because she is still being deployed as a device for the sake of plot. This then begs the question of authorial ownership: To what degree does Caspary own her characters if the novel form requires them to be typified? Similar to Caspary's treatment of Mark, who "has to be a foil" for Waldo, Laura must also be instrumentalized to satisfy the generic requirements of the detective novel form.

Given that Laura's narrative withholding is rationalized by casting her as a stereotypical flighty female, the process of her social typification is further emphasized through her writing style. In her essay "Mark McPherson," Caspary writes that since "style expresses point of view," she took great pains to contrast Mark's "direct unadorned sentences" with "Waldo's florid prose and Laura's feminine confessions" (146). However, despite Caspary's desire to create distinct and authentic voices,

the prose styles in the novel cannot escape being commodified. Laura's disordered narrative, which had initially mobilized female excess as a source of empowerment, becomes increasingly more clichéd until she begins to sound like the "helpless female" who Shelby feels bound to protect. Indeed, her narrative ends with a sentimentalized description of her yielding to Mark's passionate embrace:

> I forgot everything; I melted shamelessly, my mind clouded; I let go of all my taut fear; I lay back in his arms, a jade. [...] What room was there in me for any sense of danger, any hint of trickery, any memory of warning? My mother had said, never give yourself, and I was giving myself with wayward delight, spending myself with such abandon that his lips must have known and his heart and muscles that he possessed me. (175)

In the span of a few days, Laura has transformed from a woman in sole possession of herself to one who gives herself with "wayward delight" and "abandon" to a man she has only just met. What is striking is Laura's choice of words ("he possessed me"), which not only contradicts her previous vow to withhold herself from a man, but also replays an earlier scene with Waldo in which Caspary makes explicit reference to Victorian fiction. In an attempt to display his ownership over Laura, Waldo theatrically proclaims that he will feature her in his column, but Laura experiences a dissociative sensation in which she imagines herself as a character from a Victorian novel: "It was unreal; it was a scene from a Victorian novel. I sat with my hand locked in his hands, a frail creature, possessed, like a gentle, fading, troubled woman of long ago. And he, by contrast, had become strong and masterful, the protector" (160). Not only does Caspary fall back on the stereotype of women as weak, but Laura also associates herself with a genre of fiction that depicts women as "frail creatures." The same social categories that problematized the male accounts of Laura therefore still persist in Laura's own writing.

Caspary seeks to create a female aesthetics by positing Laura's subjectivity as illegible and thus immune to the commodifying male impulses that seek to fix her as an object of consumption. Through the detective novel form, Caspary presents female individuality as a collective identity that is defined negatively by the way it escapes male objectification. In her narrative, Laura mobilizes her scattered energies to ensure that she is representable only in terms of an invisible and indecipherable excess. However, Caspary is confined not only by the formulaic restrictions of the detective novel, but also by the *gendered* expectations of the genre. The novel therefore reinstates a code of hetero-normativity by concluding with the romantic union of hardboiled detective and his female lover. Caspary's hardboiled aesthetic thus envisions female excess as productive and potentially powerful, but the detective novel form ultimately requires Laura's excessiveness to be reincorporated back into a heteromasculine narrative.

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