AN UNCERTAIN POETICS OF THE INTOXICATED NARRATIVE: DRUGS, DETECTION, DENOUEMENT

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation attempts to examine how certain modes of intoxication touch, affect, transform and underlie the movement of narrative, which has been for the longest time our primary mode of ordering reality. Operating somewhat speculatively, this study contends that that most, if not all, narratives either function in an intoxicated manner, or desire the operations of intoxication. The articulation and untangling of the “intoxicated narrative,” as I have termed it, is the central impulse of this dissertation, which aims at unravelling the constant need for and presence of intoxication that narratives carry in their very grain.

To do this, I have examined what I tentatively call narratives of detection, i.e., narratives that unfold roughly in the manner of detective fiction, which I have posited as the dominant genre of modernity. These narratives – dating from the early 19th century to the early 21st – usually (though not always) include the figure of a detective or detective-substitute, operate causally and teleologically, and are apparently set within a framework of strict logic and rationality. At the same time, though, these narratives frequently destabilize, derail and subvert their own logical operations. I connect this derailment to the obscure presence of intoxication (in various forms) that inflects them constantly, because from its very inception, detective fiction appears to have had a subtext of intoxication coursing through its veins. To this end, I have explored the different ways in which intoxication appears in these otherwise reason-dominated narratives, be it as a thematic element in the story, or as a reader’s intoxication with text, or the critic’s
intoxication with the act of analysis. Most importantly, this project attempts to liberate
the glimmerings of intoxication that the narrative process itself is subject to, and to trace
a connection between the intoxicated narrative and the increasingly databasal (i.e., non-
narratival) logic of the internet. Is the internet the extreme logical conclusion these
intoxicated narratives of detection have been wending their way towards? And is this
indeed the reason these narratives have become the underlying structural obsession of
postmodernity? These are some of the questions this project hesitantly seeks to locate
answers to.
Enивrez-Vous

(Get High)

You must always be high.
Everything depends on it:
it is the only question.
So as not to feel
the horrible burden of Time
wrecking your back
and bending you to the ground,
you must get high without respite.
But on what?
On wine, on poetry, or on virtue,
whatever you like.
But get high.
And if sometimes you wake up,
on palace steps,
on the green grass of the ditch,
in your room’s gloomy solitude,
your intoxication already waning or gone,
ask everything that flees,
everything that moans,
everything that moves,
everything that sings,
everything that speaks,
ask what time it is.
And the wind,
the waves,
the stars,
the birds,
clocks,
will answer,
“It is time to get high!
So as not to be the martyred slaves of Time, get high;
get high
constantly!
On wine, on poetry, or on virtue as you wish.”

— Charles
Baudelaire
For Jerry Garcia, who started it all. May the Candyman always come ’round again.

And for *Father Ted*, who got me through it.

And, of course, for the Dude. May he ever abide.
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I’d like to thank the police department and the fire department and the guys selling loose joints who’re giving the city half their incomes tonight. It’s been a long strange trip. Remember to hydrate.
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THE OBSERVATION OF TRIFLES, IN LIEU OF AN INTRODUCTION

“Yeah, PIs should really stay away from drugs, all ’em alternate universes just make the job that much more complicated.”
“But what about Sherlock Holmes, he did coke all the time, man, it helped him solve cases.”
“Yeah, but he... was not real?”
“What, Sherlock Holmes was—”
“He’s a made-up character in a bunch of stories, Doc.”
“Wh – Naw. No, he’s real. He lives at this real address in London. Well, maybe not anymore, it was years ago, he has to be dead by now.”

– Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*

*It is, of course, a trifle, but there is nothing so important as trifles.*

– Sherlock Holmes, ‘The Man with the Twisted Lip’

*She is watching the detectives.*

– Elvis Costello

On a fateful Sunday in May, 1975, Michel Foucault, “militant and professor at the Collège de France,” found himself at Zabriskie Point in Death Valley, California. With a tape of Karlheinz Stockhausen’s *Kontakte* playing from the car parked nearby, the famous French philosopher sat gazing out into the desert. He was tripping on LSD, for the first time in his life.¹

By most accounts, this was a life-altering event; Foucault would later call it “the greatest experience in his life.”² Coming as it did in the wake of his discovery of and headlong immersion in the intense gay culture of San Francisco in the seventies, it marked a profound change in the way he would approach his work for the rest of his life. David Macey

² Miller, 245.
mentions, for example, in his biography of the philosopher, that “Foucault claimed that the hallucinogen had had a revelatory effect.”\textsuperscript{3} Foucault later wrote to his guide in Death Valley, a young American academic named Simeon Wade, saying that the acid trip had “led him to shelve almost everything that he had previously written about sexuality.”\textsuperscript{4}

The Death Valley acid trip certainly changed the way he had been thinking about sexuality and his next project, a change Foucault himself noted as having been sudden—“the rupture did not occur progressively. It was very abrupt. Starting in 1975-76, I completely abandoned this style” of thinking about the History of Sexuality.\textsuperscript{5} As James Miller points out in \textit{The Passion of Michel Foucault}:

Before his LSD epiphany in Death Valley in 1975, he had intended to devote the different volumes of his monumental History of Sexuality to a detailed account of topics like hysteria, incest, masturbation, and perversion, analyzing developments in nineteenth-century biology, medicine, and psychopathology. But... his focus changed dramatically.\textsuperscript{6}

Instead of trying to unravel the ways in which modern science had effected our own discourses of sexuality, Foucault went to the very source of the Western philosophical tradition, to the ancient Greeks and Romans, in order to look at how the very notion of self had come into being, and thence to how subjectivity itself had developed historically.

Foucault’s abrupt shift in focus from specific mechanisms of transformative thought to the more abstract elemental levels of conceiving one’s self in relation to the “experience of the flesh” may or may not have been a direct result of his acid trip. The philosopher himself evidently thought so, although Macey believes this claim should be treated with a pinch of salt; “the insights granted by LSD tend to be short-lived and illusory rather than real.”\textsuperscript{7} (Macey presumably never \textit{really} tripped on acid, since most of the – admittedly little –

\textsuperscript{3} Macey, 340.
\textsuperscript{4} Miller, 252.
\textsuperscript{5} Michel Foucault, ‘Le retour de la morale’ (int), \textit{Les Nouvelles}, 2937 (28 June–5 July 1984), 36. Quoted in ‘Notes to pages 251-253,’ Note 22, in Miller, 439.
\textsuperscript{6} Miller, 319-20.
\textsuperscript{7} Macey, 339.
research on LSD, and my own experiences with the substance, seem to vehemently oppose his claim). What can be said with some degree of certainty is that there is an undeniable association, not least in his own consciousness, between the abrupt shift in Foucault’s work and his Death Valley acid trip. Is it, then, stretching the imagination too far to think that the subterranean operations of LSD manifest themselves in his methodological transformation, whereby he moves from an archaeological mode of uncovering the essential structures of systems of thoughts to genealogical studies of how these systems themselves come into being, develop and are supplanted by other systems? In other words, the move from the problematic of ‘what constitutes’ to ‘what connects,’ a move that transforms a vertical focus into a horizontal (dare we say rhizomatic?) wandering, is this narrative move not akin to the way in which acid affects the body and its relationship with what is outside, yet contiguous with, the body, and therefore resulting in the transformation of both the body and its outside?

It is this desire to study how certain modes of intoxication touch, affect, transform and underlie the movement of narratives that has given birth to this dissertation. In a way, this study is a response to Nietzsche’s exhortation in The Gay Science: “Oh who will relate the whole history of narcotica? Why – it is almost the history of ‘culture,’ of our so-called high culture!” Not to that first question; that has been related very ably in, among others, Richard Davenport-Hines’s The Pursuit of Oblivion: A Global History of Narcotics (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004 [2001]); David T. Courtwright’s Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Jordan Goodman, Paul E. Lovejoy, and Andrew Sherratt (editors), Consuming Habits: Drugs in History and Anthropology (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (editors), Drugs and Narcotics in History (Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
But Nietzsche’s insinuation that the history of narcotica is almost the whole history of culture would imply that there is something of the narcotic (in the broader sense of ‘illicit mind- or body-altering substance,’ not simply sleep-inducing or even simply narcotics) that travels through culture, and, in fact, is a substantive and inseparable part of it. This is reflected in our linguistic denotation of narcotica as the essential, universal ‘substance’; the correct term for ‘drug abuse’ is ‘substance abuse,’ after all. The fact that we identify a word that basically signifies all corporeal matter as well as holding the meaning of ‘nature’ or ‘essence’ with narcotica should make us wonder whether ‘substance’ is part of the very DNA of culture.

The discovery in the 1980s of the presence of cannabinoid receptors throughout the human body makes it clear that our own physical DNA considers at least one kind of substance – cannabis – part of itself. And it has, of course, long been the contention of poets and artists that our bodies actively desire the actions of drugs, what Davenport-Hines calls “the pursuit of oblivion.” As Georges Bataille wrote in *Le Coupable*, “the need to go astray, to be destroyed is an extremely private, distant, passionate turbulent truth, and has nothing to do with what we call substance.”

More recently, the psychopharmacologist Ronald K. Siegel has put forward the revolutionary theory that the “pursuit for intoxication with drugs is a primary motivational force in the behavior of organisms.” The need for intoxication is a “fourth drive,” Siegel believes, that is a natural part of our biological makeup and functions much like our accepted drives of hunger, thirst and sex, at times even overshadowing the other three. Siegel’s studies, conducted over a period in excess of two decades, find that this drive is universal, cutting across geographical spaces, ages and cultures, as well as across species. For every human who drinks alcohol to change their mood, there is an elephant which purposely gets drunk on

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fermented fruit. For every junkie shooting himself up with heroin, there are bees that suck the nectar of certain orchids, fall to the ground in a stupor, and weave back for more. Both humans and monkeys hallucinate on magic mushrooms. Shamans from antiquity to the present have used the *Amanita muscaria*, or fly agaric, to see spirits; the Siberian Chukchi tribespeople use human urine containing traces of fly agaric to round up the reindeer at the end of the day, which are intensely drawn to the intoxication of this urine. In fact, the Chukchi value the fly agaric even more than their reindeer, and the barter price of a single muscimol (the psychoactive agent in fly agaric) mushroom can be as high as three reindeer. As Siegel points out, “the reindeer may feed and clothe the body, but the mushrooms nourish the soul with ecstatic visions and this is worth more....”

So if ‘substance’ is this pervasive and universal – if, indeed, it is a fact of nature – then is it unfair to suppose that it has had a profound influence on culture and cultural forms, and that it continues to do so? This influence need not be overt or overwhelming; sometimes, perhaps it is barely there. But barely-there-ness is also a presence, and as such needs to be excavated.

It seems to me, therefore, that the intoxications of substance, of narcotica, can be felt in the unfolding of that most fundamental of cultural forms, narrative; a form that Barbara Hardy calls a “primary act of mind transferred from art to life.” If the human mind-body-spirit constellation requires the pursuit of oblivion strongly enough for intoxication to constitute a “fourth drive,” then surely one of its most basic, pervasive and easily accessible acts – the act of narrative – does so too. In which case, it is entirely conceivable that most, if not all, narratives either function in an intoxicated manner, or desire the operations of

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9 Ibid., 66.
intoxication. The articulation and untangling of the “intoxicated narrative,” as I have termed it, then, is the central impulse of this dissertation. Much like Foucault’s uncovering of “the braided network” of power and knowledge that underpins various discursive practices and connects these acts in systems of “discursive formations,” or, after Freud, the rise of the study of gender and sexuality as discursive formations that run through all literary texts and often deconstruct the explicit ‘meaning’ of these texts, this project aims at unravelling the constant need for and presence of intoxication that narratives carry in their very grain.

The significance of this altered state of consciousness of narrative is expressed, therefore, in the constantly whimsical inclination of narratives to destabilise, derail and subvert their own logical operation. This can be witnessed, for instance, in The Big Sleep (1939), in which the mysterious death of a trifling character is simply forgotten a few pages after it occurs, never to be referred to again. This is a remarkable oversight in a detective novel, which, after all, posits its entire existence on the fact of the explication of all mysterious happenings contained within it (even if the explication is incorrect or incomplete, as happens in many so-called postmodern detective fictions). Is this the narrative’s rebellion against its author and its purpose, its own pursuit of oblivion of sorts?

Much of what is to come is undeniably, but also inescapably, speculative. It hints at the existence of some other, ill-defined, barely articulatable narrative dimension which can at times seem almost occult or mystical in nature. It is this occult essence that this dissertation aims to seek out, by constantly drawing attention to what Foucault once called a “kind of glimmering,” and what Gregg Lambert clarifies as the obscure object of Foucault’s gaze, that “sudden glimmering of exteriority that unexpectedly breaks through the centrality of

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11 As well as the “narrative desirous of intoxication”; but that, I think, is too unwieldy a formulation, and so “intoxicated narrative” should be considered standing for both.
13 Foucault, ‘Qu’est ce que la critique?,” Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie, 84th year, 2 (April-June 1990), 35-63, a transcription of a lecture delivered on 27 May 1978, at the Sorbonne. Quoted in Miller, 305.
forms at a given moment.” The key players in this study, its active agents, are the notion of intoxication and the motion of narrative, which affect/effect a field of fiction. This operation is usually subversive, winding through the underbelly of narrative, glimpsed in the odd reflective scene or heard in the too-oft muffled rustle of the language. Resonances and frissons are therefore of greater significance than explicitly logical analyses. The analyses performed herein, therefore, are oblique, often not entirely causally linked to each other or the texts in question. In this approach, it is perhaps more faithful to the baroque than the classical mode of thought and of perceiving and representing reality. This dissertation does not move across the straight and clearly-demarcated lines of thought and study articulated by the themes and texts chosen, but along their folds, for, as Gilles Deleuze argues, “the criterion or operative concept of the Baroque is the Fold, everything that it includes, and in all its extensiveness.” Because the baroque perceptual regime constantly ‘shifts’ the centre of perspectival arrangements, it can articulate complex spatial relationships. It is one way, then, to deterritorialize accepted ideas of space, and to move through this space, by close reading, with special attention to the excesses of thought, language, form and representation, to paradox, and to all the dark places one sees out of the corner of one’s eye.

This working along the fold, and the attention devoted to trifles throughout the dissertation, is of special significance to the subject-matter examined in these pages. The narratives I have chosen to analyse are all narratives of detection, and barring Philip K. Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly* and Julio Cortázar’s ‘Continuity of Parks’ (both investigated in the final chapter), they all belong to what can broadly be called detective fiction, which John T. Irwin calls “the most dominant modern genre.” As Irwin indicates, not only is this sort of

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17 These two works, while not usually classified as ‘detective fiction,’ certainly have elements of that genre predominating in their narrative fabrics.
fiction the most numerically overwhelming genre of modernity, “with the most titles listed or the most copies printed in any given year” – there are some who believe this genre to be responsible for a fourth of all fiction published in English, while more conservative estimates put the figure at one out of every ten – it is also “pre-eminently” the genre of modernity, of “an age dominated by science and technology, an age characterised by mental-work-as-analysis.... From psychoanalyst to literary critic, from particle physicist to diagnostician, the most (self-)satisfying description of what one does (and thus what one is) seems to fall naturally into the scenario of a knotty problem and its solution....”

There is another aspect to detective fiction that makes it suitable for any attempt at a foundational study of the intoxicated narrative, and this is the tendency of readers and critics to describe the genre as inherently intoxicating or addictive. As early as 1833, W. M. Thackeray referred to the Newgate novels, early-Victorian expressions of a public’s taste for hangings and lurid crimes in all their glorious minutiae, as “absolute drugs in the literary market.” Edmund Wilson was among the first to do so with respect to the modern detective story – his 1945 New Yorker article ‘Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?’ infamously dismissed the entire genre as an “addiction.” Three years later, W. H. Auden, in a piece for Harper’s Magazine, came out as an “addict” when he confessed:

For me, as for many others, the reading of detective stories is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol. The symptoms of this are: Firstly, the intensity of the craving–if I have any work to do, I must be careful not to get hold of a detective story for, once I begin one, I cannot work or sleep till I have finished it. Secondly, its specificity–the story must conform to certain formulas (I find it very difficult, for example, to read one that is not set in rural England). And, thirdly, its immediacy.

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19 William Makepeace Thackeray, ‘Foreign Correspondence,’ in Burlesques, from Cornhill to Grand Cairo, Including Juvenilia (New York: Cosimo, 2005 [1903]), 422.
His article, ‘The Guilty Vicarage,’ was even subtitled ‘Notes on the detective story, by an addict.’

There is, in addition to the factors enumerated above, a strong reason to tease out the connections between narratives of detection and the intoxications of substance, and that is the genre’s long and easy identification with pure reason and the intellect. As Michael Holquist points out in a perceptive essay on the metaphysical detective story, at any given time, regardless of the rest of the reading public, one can always find a large number of intellectuals reading tales of detection. And not only reading; as Holquist goes on to show, it is often intellectuals, academics and scholars who turn their hands to writing detective fiction. While he admits that identification of an intellectual readership with detective fiction is not always easy to prove statistically, it is nonetheless “clear... that detective fiction is the one aspect of popular culture which most exercises the imagination of intellectuals.”21 Closely associated with this is the historian Carlo Ginzburg’s identification of the strong ties that narratives of detection share with one of the primary discursive formations prevalent in the West from the 19th century onwards, what he calls the “evidential paradigm.” This is the fundamental mode of scientific investigation, and hence the underlying principle of our fundamentally ‘rational’ conception of the world.

What better way, then, to liberate the glimmerings of intoxication underpinning narrative than to examine the predominant, intellectual, narrative-stylistic popular cultural category of our age? Something that is most often described in terms of the irrational, non-causal, unreasonable, and excessive, the actions of intoxicating substance should be the complete antithesis of the narrative of detection. Yet, as the following pages will hopefully show, the two are not as far removed as reason might dictate. And if these narratives of ratiocination, populated with the wanderings of the figures and shadows of what Borges

called, after Poe, “the pure reasoner,” if these are themselves afflicted with the unreasoned, unthinking intoxications of substance, then is it not possible, nay, likely, that other, less ostensibly rational, causally-dominated narratives, may be even more so?

*   *   *

This is not an etiological study, nor does it aim to be a comprehensive historical overview, although the chapters are arranged in a roughly chronological order. We shall begin with the Sherlock Holmes stories from the late 19th and very-early 20th centuries, arguably the definitive – certainly the most famous – narratives of detection, and observe within them the subterranean operations of morphine and cocaine, two intoxicants that gained great popularity in Victorian England around the same time. We shall discover how the paradoxical figure of the bored detective – as a thrice-inflected figure at the crossroads of the oppositional forces of Enlightenment rationality, Romantic creativity and an almost mystical superhuman-ness in conjunction with a distinctly Byronic sense of ennui, and the burgeoning shock of modernity – is virtually constructed as, and is in a constant process of becoming a paradigmatic narrative expression for a whole century to come through the workings of the intoxicated narratives he inhabits. It is almost as if the cocaine in the detective’s body gets injected into the narrative, and from then into the reader’s perception. This might explain the strange preoccupation in the readerly consciousness with his cocaine, as well as the unique afterlife of Holmes as a mythical “real” being in the critical corpus.

Thence, we shall move on to the American ‘hardboiled’ fictions of Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, and the two substances that have since become synonymous with them – alcohol and tobacco. The hardboiled style of writing narratives of detection first appeared in the 1920s in the pulp magazines of the time, notably Black Mask (which was,
incidentally, founded by H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan in 1920 as a money-making venture to fund Mencken’s more highbrow literary journal *The Smart Set*). In its very origin, therefore, the hardboiled story is connected to popular perceptions of the lower forms of literature, and to alcohol, an intoxicant that at the time was officially viewed as a “vice” and the subject of a nationwide Prohibition.

There is an interesting confluence of the social operations of alcohol and cigarettes with the hardboiled mode of narrative. In an influential essay on Prohibition written in the sixties, the historian John C. Burnham noted that the prevailing attitudes to liquor associated it with the “lower classes” and thought of saloons as “noxious institutions.” And while saloons were considered social evils, at the same time they could not be done without in urban areas. These connotations of alcohol (and cigarettes, which was posited against the aristocratic habit of smoking cigars) with the lower classes are essential to the flowering, around the same time, of hardboiled fiction as a literature of mean city streets.

The French existentialist crime novelist Jean-Patrick Manchette hints at the revolutionary potential of this noir literature when he notes that the hardboiled mode produces the “novel of anxiety for the negative”; the negative of what Foucault might have called a mushrooming neoliberal discursive formation. For Manchette, the essential dialectic of Golden Age detective fiction – its post-WWI celebration of “the victorious counterrevolution, of the reestablished order” – is left behind in noir, with its proliferation of reified negatives without an antithetical positive. Manchette sees this happening because noir “manifests the bitterness and cold anger of the vanquished... [and a] consciousness in revolt

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23 From *film noir*, or the “dark film,” a genre no one quite agrees upon. But we can say with some certainty that it is the cinematic successor to the American hardboiled narratives of Hammett, Chandler, et al. Consequently, hardboiled literature is often retrospectively referred to as noir literature.
24 The so-called Golden Age of detective fiction was approximately the period between the two world wars. The classic British whodunit is born in this ‘age,’ and crime is often seen as a pathological threat to an orderly society; the unmasking of the criminal is therefore an almost medical act of removing disease from an otherwise healthy body.
describes a world where the order that reigns is hateful. However, this order has imposed itself. Before it, consciousness withdraws into a glacial calm." Can it be that the intoxicants littering the pages and images of hardboiled fiction and film noir, that persistently subvert the workings of rationality and epistemology, work their way into the ideological unconscious of these narratives at the same time, thereby facilitating such subversions of hateful order, overturning the authority of what one character in Thomas Pynchon’s Inherent Vice calls “the agencies of command and control?” In which case, not only do we observe the movement of the intoxicated hardboiled narrative, but we also notice the influence of this intoxication on the thematic penumbra of such narratives.

I have suggested elsewhere that the Coen Brothers’ 1998 stoner noir film The Big Lebowski acts as “a sort of retroactive ur text that hovers above the tentative genre and deliberately articulates all the conventions, themes, styles, and inarticulations of noir.” This text also features the overly articulated perpetual motion of two intoxicants, White Russians (5 parts vodka, 2 parts coffee liqueur, 3 parts fresh cream, ice, stir slowly and drink) and cannabis, through the fabric of its narrative. This should give pause to wonder about the perpetual and subterranean functioning of intoxicants in hardboiled narratives (be they literary or cinematic); if this operation is brought above ground, as it is in The Big Lebowski, it almost transforms the narrative from a mere constituent of the genre into an entire comment on it, making it something of an ur text. This would seem to point towards an inextricable structural link between the hardboiled narrative and the work of intoxication.

So this chapter probes two pivotal hardboiled texts (which comprise at least four separate narratives) that roughly bookend this particular system of narration. Hammett’s 1929 book The Maltese Falcon and John Huston’s 1941 adaptation of it (this is traditionally

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25 Jean-Patrick Manchette, Preface to Stefano Benvenuti, Gianni Rizzoni, and Michel Lebrun, Le Roman criminal: histoire, auteurs, personages (Nantes: L’Atalante, 1978). This is from an excerpt translated by Don Callen.

thought of as the first *film noir*, incidentally), and Chandler’s *The Long Goodbye* (first published in 1953) and its 1973 cinematic adaptation by Robert Altman, which is a tongue-in-cheek almost-parody of the genre, are examined very closely to investigate the mechanics of the intoxicated hardboiled narrative.

The final chapter looks at the postmodern or metaphysical detective story, a narrative genre that is inaugurated around the time of the Second World War and which comes into its own in the ’60s, and its strange and nebulous correspondences with the action of hallucinogenic substance. Curiously enough, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges’s short story ‘The Garden of Forking Paths,’ which we shall have occasion to brush up against in this chapter, was published in 1941, exactly one hundred years after the publication of what is now considered to be the first modern detective story, Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue.’ Even more curiously, this is more or less in conjunction with the accidental invention and gradual discovery, on another continent entirely, of LSD (it was synthesized in late 1938, but kept away for a few years, until its hallucinogenic properties were actually discovered in early 1943).

It is, however, in the mid ’60s that hallucinogens of all sorts (but primarily LSD, psilocybin and mescaline) erupt onto the American consciousness. Plumb in the middle of that decade is published Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, a tale of paranoia, of trips of (empty) discovery, and of international conspiracy. Or not, because it is entirely possible the narrative hallucinates all these conspiracies into being. Indeed, if the sole purpose of a worldwide conspiracy involving enormous sums of money and series of murders can be only to carry on delivering the mail – as the shadowy network called the Trystero seems to be doing – then, in this age of hyperrationality and logic, can it be anything other than a narrative which is, in the parlance of our times, tripping balls?
The Crying of Lot 49 is not a metaphysical detective story per se in the sense that there is no real crime that is committed to set off the investigations of its charming but clueless protagonist; it can, however, be found in a few lists/discussions of the genre. The same cannot be said for the other novel that comes under (minor) scrutiny in Chapter 3. This is Philip K. Dick’s incredibly affecting novel about the tragic consequences of prolonged drug use, the unintentional and innocent waywardness of the sixties, and the capitalist manipulations of those whom such behaviour benefits, and which is conventionally categorised as science fiction; my copy of the book is even part of a series of publications by Gollancz called SF Masterworks. Yet A Scanner Darkly is much, much more than that. As Dick makes clear in a very moving afterword, it is a novel of Nemesis, an intensely personal odyssey through lost time and lost friends. It is also, both in its surprising conclusion and its central character of a law enforcement agent (of the narcotics bureau), a surprisingly well-constructed narrative of detection that ultimately begins to act as if under the influence of psychedelics.

With A Scanner Darkly, we come full circle, from the “other contemporaneous possibilities” elucidated by the actions of cocaine on the body of the detective and thence on the body of the textual Holmes canon, to the ostensibly fixed genre-text which is in the process of becoming something multiply other when acted upon by the transformative intoxication of hallucinogens.²⁷ It is around this time, sometime in the ’70s, that the idea of postmodernism really comes into its own in the popular imagination (even though it had been doing the rounds in more rarefied circles since at least the ’50s), bringing with it what Lyotard memorably called an “incredulity towards metanarratives” and the impulse for multiplicities of all kinds. Consequently, there is a slew of ‘postmodern’ works of art that begin to be produced from the 1980s onwards. Of these, the postmodern detective story is of

²⁷ For Deleuze and Guattari, a becoming opens up “other contemporaneous possibilities”; there are bodily connections – “unnatural nuptials” – with things “outside the programmed body.” See A Thousand Plateaus, 273.
special significance, because it seems to be the narrative model that is appropriated, deconstructed, reconstructed, parodied, tweaked, and generally used to make some kind of point the most; Holquist even speculates that the detective story is the structuring recurrent subtext of postmodernist literature, and functions in much the same way that myth did in the context of modernism. I would have enjoyed examining these texts in detail, therefore – texts like Georges Perec’s *A Void*, a 300-plus page novel written entirely without the letter ‘e,’ which the narrative has seemingly hallucinated out of existence; or Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, where the movement of the narrative starts to mirror the seemingly aimless wandering of its protagonist through the streets of New York; or Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, in which the narrative becomes maddeningly diverse, each chapter becoming in essence a different *fabula*, a separate book, while remaining part of the same narrative, in much the same way that the tripper on acid feels dissociated from her ego and a part of many selves, even if inhabiting only one body.

But this would probably be the stuff of a whole other dissertation. And frankly, in the final analysis, I ran out of time, steam and imagination.

* * *

There are a number of contexts in which the word *intoxication* is used here, and while most of these uses are implicit in the pages to follow, perhaps it is best to clarify them as much as possible before proceeding. The most sustained use of the term is, as will become evident, in its capacity as a state of being of narrative itself; the forward (or, at least, seemingly forward) movement of narrative comes under the spell of substance and starts to display the idiosyncrasies of intoxication. This intoxicatedness of the very fabric of narrative can be witnessed in various narrative quirks or oddities – the loose ends and lack of closure
demonstrated by *The Crying of Lot 49* and so many other metaphysical detective stories, for instance. It is seen in the derailments of certainty that occur in *The Maltese Falcon* (in which the private eye is certainly emotionally invested in the killer, surely in love with her, but cannot trust her enough to keep from sending her up the river), and even more strongly in *The Long Goodbye*, where the narrative itself, from having been apparently about solving murders, becomes, suddenly and in its dying pages, one about friendship and its betrayal, in which the whole process of detection takes a backseat to allow the interplay of emotion between Marlowe and Terry Lennox, who can never be friends again – indeed, it is hard to say after one has completed an encounter with *The Long Goodbye* whether it is a detective story or a novel of betrayal. It can also be seen in the lurching movements of the Holmesian narrative, which as a rule begins all sedate and ennui-ridden, with very little apart from demonstrations of the detective’s craft occurring in its first pages, but then steams ahead towards apparent closure in a burst of hyperactivity that mirrors its protagonist’s cocaine fix. It can even be observed in mistakes or logical confusions in the metafictional universe, as in the confused chronology of events that permeates the Holmesian narrative (for a detective’s sidekick, Watson seems incredibly foggy incredibly often about his own marital status).

But *intoxication* has other uses and other paths of ingress. In *Lost in a Book*, Victor Nell demonstrates the results of an in-depth psycho-physiological study and comes to the conclusion that the state of reading – being lost in a book, so to speak – has its correspondences in states of dreaming, trance and being-on-drugs. Nell even notes similar physiological and mental responses between the act of reading and the act of being high on mescaline.28 This perfectly encapsulates what surely many of us have felt frequently, the delirious sensation of constantly returning to the book, any book or many books or some books or certain kinds of books, as a drug to be partaken of, often but not limited to the times

when we are sad, or lonely, or in need of comfort. The book as self-medication for the soul. The book as agent of intoxication for the reader.\textsuperscript{29} This is especially pertinent in the wake of various studies that now appear to show that not only does the reading of narrative fiction transform that abstract thing we call a self by simulating social experience,\textsuperscript{30} but that it actually causes physical changes to our brains.

In a recent study conducted by the Dynamic Cognition Laboratory at the Washington University in St. Louis, functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) was used to track brain activity in real-time as participants read individual words and stories. The neural imaging reveals that neural systems track changes in narrative movement and new neural pathways are actually \textit{created} while reading:

These results suggest that readers dynamically activate specific visual, motor, and conceptual features of activities while reading about analogous changes in activities in the context of a narrative: Regions involved in processing goal-directed human activity, navigating spatial environments, and manually manipulating objects in the real world increased in activation at points when those specific aspects of the narrated situation were changing. For example, when readers processed changes in a character’s interactions with an object, precentral and parietal areas associated with grasping hand movements increased in activation.\textsuperscript{31}

So, in some utterly bizarre way, readers actually \textit{experience} narrative, actively using perceptual and motor representations while comprehending narrative, representations which are dynamically updated with the flow and transformation of narrative. It is not a giant leap of faith, then, to suggest as I do in the first chapter, that it is as if Holmes’s cocaine had injected itself into the reader’s own body and affected it much like it does Holmes,

\textsuperscript{29} Personally, I find myself retreating into Wodehouse or genre fiction when depressed, which would mean the comfort of the accustomed-to is an addition to the already-functioning intoxication of the narrative.


dissipating the boredom of the commonplace in step with the detective’s inexorable but uncertain march towards a solution.

This readerly intoxication with text can be extended to the critical function of reading, whereby the process of critical reading itself becomes intoxicating. Such is the case with Holmesians playing “the Game,” the widespread practice of writing/reading/thinking about the Holmes Canon as if the Great Detective and his Boswell truly lived and breathed the dank Victorian London air. To this end, one finds numerous essays in learned journals attempting to trace Holmes’s familial lineage, or purporting to finally have uncovered the mystery of his missing years, or whether indeed he was an Oxford man or Cambridge.

The Game is not just an intoxication, but an addiction, and it resembles remarkably its counterpart in the Canon’s substance of choice, cocaine. It is the Holmesian critic who imparts to a corpus many might describe merely as a narrative of pleasure – of convention, of character, of being secure in the knowledge that the detective will solve the crime, of simple lisible pleasures – its additional dimension as a narrative of bliss.

I use this differential taxonomy following Roland Barthes, of course, who makes the (halting, incomplete) distinction between those sorts of lisible texts where the reader is passive and receives the joys of the text comfortably (“Text of Pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria: the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading”) and those more scriptible texts where the reader actively enjoys jouissance (“Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts[…], unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions…”).32

The Holmesian, with her invariable playing of the Game, gives the Canon a feeling of eternal incompleteness – the Game can, after all, be played for ever, because there is no ‘real’ or ‘correct’ history in existence here that can one day prove or disprove all previous histories.

Theoretically, regardless of whatever ‘new’ evidence in unearthed about Holmes’s college life, no one will ever be able to say for certain whether he went to Cambridge or Oxford or the moon. The Holmesian critic thus *adds* to the pleasure of the text and gives it its blissful excess of pleasure (Barthes uses *jouissance*, which Richard Miller translates as *bliss*; but *jouissance* in French contains an added implication of sexual bliss, of orgasm) by choosing to play the Game. It is almost as if the Holmesian responds to the original canonical narrative of Holmes by creating another, new, narrative. “Every work of art,” Malraux said, “is created to satisfy a need, a need that is passionate enough to give it birth.” The passion with which Holmesians play the Game even today, more than a hundred and twenty years after the first Holmes story was published, has resulted in this thriving parallel existence, symbolising perhaps the eternal wish to stave off boredom through crime and cocaine. So newer and newer histories arrive, hitherto unknown ‘facts’ about the detective emerge. The Holmesian corpus is thus acted upon and successively enacted by its intoxicated critics and transformed into a narrative that is ever in a state of becoming, or perhaps more appropriately, of coming.

The intoxication of the critic, who is also a writer in her creation of a response to the work she encounters, leads therefore to the figure of the author itself. In addition to the ancient idea of literary creation itself being a sort of inspired madness or state of intoxication, the genre of the narrative of detection this dissertation discusses is littered with the authorial corpses of junkies and drunks. Like the Hemingwaysque Roger Wade in *The Long Goodbye*, many of these men had inspired and debilitating attachments to substance. Edgar Allan Poe, drunk. Wilkie Collins, opium addict. Dashiell Hammett, drunk. Raymond Chandler, drunk. Thomas Pynchon, dopehead (in truth, though, we know hardly anything about Pynchon). We do know, however, thanks to Andrew Gordon’s delightful essay on ‘Smoking Dope with

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Thomas Pynchon: A Sixties Memoir,” that he was a big stoner.\textsuperscript{34} Although, in California in the sixties, who wasn’t?). Philip K. Dick, amphetamines, marijuana, mescaline, LSD, sodium pentothal, PCP (although his most celebrated hallucination, in which he believed the sky was firing pink laser beams into his mind so that he could see thousands of paintings never painted by Klee, Kandinsky and Picasso, was triggered by a huge dose of the relatively non-hallucinogenic vitamin C\textsuperscript{35}).

So, while the main impetus of this study is to observe and, hopefully, liberate the glimmerings of intoxication that the narrative process itself is subject to, all these other modes and constellations of intoxication are equally relevant, and the reader should bear these in mind while reading. The point of this dissertation is to persuade that the intoxication of substance is everywhere, and breathes through the very pores of the narrative of detection. The intoxicated narrative is soaked in the dense fumes of all these other intoxications as well, the intoxication of author, of reader, of critic, and, of course, of the presence of intoxicants in the story itself – intoxication as a thematic element in the text, so to speak. We can observe this, for example, in the Holmes Canon (the use of cocaine, the frequent presence of opium dens); Hammett (Spade smoking, Gutman using alcohol as a way to literally ‘drug’ Spade); Chandler (Marlowe and Terry drinking together, the alcoholic writer figure of Roger Wade); and especially Dick, many of whose works feature intoxication as a way of tapping into alternative realities (Substance D in \textit{A Scanner Darkly}, Can-D and Chew-Z – highly addictive drugs that make shared hallucinations possible – in \textit{The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch}, Ubik in \textit{Ubik}). And, of course, the specificity of the intoxication depends on what Avital


Ronell calls “the specificity of the technology of the drug.” Hence the different ways in which different narratives are saturated in intoxication, as we shall see in the pages to follow.

Again, this is not to overstate the influence of any of these intoxications – Borges, for instance, claimed he preferred the stimulation of mint candy to mescaline and cocaine – but to exhort the reader to keep the corner of her eye out for them, as it were, and to be aware that narratives are products of a whole assemblage of systems, behaviours, codes, and networks of transaction between givers, receivers, observers and interpreters. As Ronell notes, literature has always been “secretly associated” with “pharmacodependency” and “the trajectory of Rausch, the ecstasy of intoxication” – “as sedative, as cure, as escape conduit or euphorizing substance, as mimetic poisoning.”

As such, the concept of intoxication itself poses questions of power and control, both at the political level as well as at that of the self. Politically, it problematizes notions of civil obedience and its other, and is “routinely associated with subversion.” At a personal level, “drugs are eccentric and depropriative,” and can produce what Ronell calls a “supplementary interiority.” Hence the creation of a sort of internal commons goes hand in hand with the practice of intoxication that allows for a field of play within the intoxicated imagination whereby “fractal interiorities” can be explored. Intoxication, then, allows the decentralization of subjectivity, seen in Foucault’s constant attempts to obliterate his self through acts centred around the asystematic system of what he called “bodies and pleasures” – acts of sadomasochism, for instance, or taking substance, in a constant process of “obliterating himself – disorganizing his mind, surrendering his body, opening himself to

37 Ibid., 11.
38 Ibid., 19.
39 Ibid., 29.
40 Ibid., 33.
41 The term “fractal interiorities” is from Ronell, 15.
the otherwise unthinkable, trying to unriddle [his] singular constellation of impulses and fantasies. Intoxication opens up other possibilities, poisoning (*intoxicate* = to make toxic) existing structures, and strictures, of being. The intoxicated narrative thus works against the very structure of narrative, perhaps gradually heading into some strange extra-narrative, “extra-erotic, extra-epistemic” space of existence.

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This is not a study of genre, although it is a study *in* genre, in the sense that the investigations it seeks to perform take place within the temporal and spatial co-ordinates of genre – both genre in terms of a classificatory system of popular cultural expression, as well as in terms of the specific, if porous, genre of detective fiction at large. It is also, as its title indicates, an uncertain attempt at formulating a sort of vocabulary to deal with, to analyse as well as experience, the intoxicated narrative. As Peter Brooks suggests in his introduction to Richard Howard’s translation of Todorov’s *Introduction to Poetics*, for Todorov, “in the wake of Barthes... any act of interpretation implies a theory of how texts mean – a poetics – that is usually unconscious and inchoate.” A proper poetics would allow rational and coherent theories of interpretation to function. The poetics this dissertation seeks to formulate, however, is not proper. It wanders between textual analysis and elucidating socio-cultural contexts to attending to the seeming triviality of quirks and elisions in the epistemology and ontology of narratives. At its point of origin, it attempts to integrate two opposed forms of looking at literature – one, that sees a literary text as an object worthy of analysis in and of itself, and the second, which aims to analyse a text as a symptom of a larger abstract

43 Miller, 246.
44 Ronell, 33.
structure. But it does so, again, only uncertainly. I would argue that the nature of intoxication is such – uncertain, unpredictable, ambulatory and, as mentioned earlier, necessarily comprising an almost mystical dimension that is difficult to articulate rationally. Consequently, this dissertation, as a first attempt to analyse the intoxicated narrative on its own terms, must necessarily be similarly uncertain, inflected with wanderlust, and in some way possessed of an occult inclination. It would hardly do for a study that wanted to tease out secret and invisible processes underlying narrative, processes depending more on a holistic and experimental experience of many realities rather than on causal logic, to simply analyse such processes causally and rationally. I have tried, therefore, to replicate this experimental-experiential aspect in my analysis.

In her Translator’s Note to Maurice Blanchot’s *The Book to Come*, Charlotte Mandell finds two ambiguous “groups of words” that thrive in his writing. They are the French word *expérience* and the Latin *errare*. The first word means experience, of course, but also experiment, in both the scientific sense of conducting an experiment as well as the artistic sense of, say, a piece of experimental music. The second, *errare*, means to wander and drift, and is also the root of the English words ‘error,’ ‘err,’ ‘erroneous’ and ‘errant’ (as in ‘knight errant’). In Blanchot’s work, there is a strong sense of paradox and the lack of an all-encompassing coherence, which is replaced by a stress on the experience of experiment (or the experiment of experience), which is closely allied to a sense of wandering, through ideas and texts and writing itself. But, to quote J. R. R. Tolkien, not all those who wander are lost. After all, this triad of experience-experimentation-wandering can be a powerful stimulus to narrative development, and in the intoxicated narratives of detection I have considered, it indeed is. Sometimes, therefore, the pages to come might seem to ramble, but it has been my constant effort to be open to this triad, to demonstrate its existence in the invisible silences of

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narrative, as well as to incorporate it in my own method of experience and analysis. This is why there is much attention devoted to trifles, be they passing whimsies in the considered texts, or seemingly insignificant words and their histories, or the state of boredom in which the detective sometimes finds himself. These trifles may be usefully thought of as Barthesian “twinklings” which are possible embodiments of the intoxicatedness of narratives. And, ultimately, this is the detective’s own process, is it not, this illumination of twinklings from observing the rims of teacups and missing sideburns in family portraits? I have merely tried to play detective.

As a genre, detective fiction has always had an almost-perpetual subtext of intoxication (and its darker sidekick, addiction) rippling through its veins. Indeed, the very roots of the genre are shrouded in vapours of alcohol and clouds of opium smoke, from dark stormy nights in Philadelphia where Edgar Allan Poe suffered from alcoholism and created Le Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, the first modern literary detective; through the murky side streets of Paris in the 1860s in which Emile Gaboriau’s Monsieur Lecoq imbibes absinthe in copious quantities; past the opium-fuelled Orient of The Moonstone (1868) – widely considered the first full-length detective novel – whose author, Wilkie Collins, was himself strung out on laudanum for most of his life; and finally to the faux respectable streets of London in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the most famous bachelor “digs” in all of literature, 221B Baker Street. It is entirely possible, therefore, that the dissertation to come has existed for years. It was merely waiting to be written down.

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47 Barthes uses this word to describe what he sees as the “figures” or “traits” of “the Neutral,” which is “everything that baffles the paradigm.” These “twinklings” are things like “sleep,” “tact,” “silence,” “benevolence,” etc. See Roland Barthes, The Neutral, trans. Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
CHAPTER I

PIPE DREAMS AND PUNCTURE MARKS:

HOLMESIAN HIGHS AND LOWS

You can’t come to grips with reality by logic alone.
– Friedrich Dürrenmatt, The Pledge: Requiem for the Detective Novel

Armchairs

Armchairs are essential. Sumptuous and comfortable, they are also usually high-backed – no reclining here! – letting both indolence and alertness in. And every self-respecting detective has one.

In detective literature, the armchair is never appreciated explicitly enough. Not only is it synonymous with popular images of detection (think, indeed, of the armchair detective; there, however, the armchair becomes a mere metaphor for ratiocination at a distance), but it is also, in its primary ontological condition of armchairness, a hermetically sealed space of detectival contemplation, indolence and stimulation. So it becomes in many ways an extension of the detective, a reservoir of the virtual dimensions and constellations of possibilities contained within the figure of the detective. Edgar Allan Poe’s detective – commonly acknowledged as being the first full-fledged detective in fiction – the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, for instance, sits steadily in his accustomed armchair... the embodiment of respectful attention. He wore spectacles during the whole interview; and an occasional glance beneath their green glasses sufficed to convince me that he slept not the less soundly, because silently, throughout the seven or eight leaden-footed hours which immediately preceded the departure of the Prefect.¹

Dupin’s *accustomed armchair* is both his refuge from the boring monotone of the Prefect (who is narrating the details of the mysterious death of Marie Rogêt, a perfume shop attendant whose body has been found in the Seine; details that Dupin will later prefer to glean from contemporaneous newspaper accounts rather than pay attention to the Prefect at the present) and his own space of removed detection – he *sits steadily* and *sleeps soundly*, but even the Police Prefect of Paris has no power to disrupt the hermetic space of the detective that has been delineated by his body+armchair.

The detective+armchair, then, becomes a sort of Deleuzian “body without organs” (BwO), a speculative space of possibility where certain configurations of connections, affects, movements, thought processes and traits can be experimented upon and reconfigured onto a plane of immanence. Alternatives need a logical space to emerge and jostle with each other in the detective’s psyche and identify themselves as alternatives – the BwO is this phase space, where all possible states of a system can be represented:

This space of coordination within the psyche... is a medium which is not confined within the particularity of individual sensations. It is a moment of *indifferentiation* preceding all articulations of elements into a set of relations. This non-differentiated medium is a transcendental horizon of the psyche, a primary virtual space which must be presupposed before scattered elements can be assembled. This horizon is called the *body without organs*.

Let us now take another armchair. This one is velvet-lined, and rests in the sitting room of 221b Baker Street, and into it sinks Sherlock Holmes “with a long sigh of satisfaction,” after having administered himself a dose of cocaine in a seven-per-cent solution:

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3 In mathematics, a phase space, introduced by the Yale Professor of Physics Willard Gibbs near the end of the nineteenth century, is a theoretical 3-or-more-dimensional space where all points in a certain system can be represented. So, for instance, “ice, water, and vapour, are three phases of the same chemical substance – water.” Thus, the phase space contains – theoretically – all the points that a system is capable of representing. Alex Findlay, *The Phase Rule and Its Applications* (London, New York, Bombay and Calcutta: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1911), 8-9.

Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle, and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the sinewy forearm and wrist all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks. Finally he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined arm-chair with a long sigh of satisfaction.\(^5\)

Here, of course, the armchair comes into contact with another virtual dimension of reality, the plane of intoxication, an equation we can perhaps speculatively denote as:

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\text{Detective+armchair} + \text{Detective+intoxication} = \text{Becoming detective}
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That is, these two phase spaces come together to actualize the becoming-detective, an intoxicated Holmes in his velvet-lined armchair. It is here that one BwO runs into another, to allow a playing-out of various conglomerations of alternatives in the detective’s psyche to carry his psychical narrative forward, to create ripples and movements in his realm of possibilities, for, as he makes clear just a little later to Dr. Watson:

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\text{My mind rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation. That is why I have chosen my own particular profession...}^6
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\text{That is why I have chosen my particular profession... to stave off boredom, to revolt against stagnation, to nullify the dull routine of existence. Sherlock Holmes, the world’s greatest consulting detective, seems to have chosen his profession not in an attempt to do good, to right the innumerable wrongs in the world, or for money, really (there are few instances of Holmes being paid for his services; indeed, he seems particularly nonchalant about his fees time and time again – in ‘The Adventure of the Speckled Band,’ for instance, when his client Helen Stoner brings her troubles to him and informs him that she will only be able to pay him in a few weeks’ time, Holmes’s reply is, “As to reward, my profession is its}
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\(^6\) *Sign*, 50.
reward”), but to make existence a little more bearable. This is why, when Watson attempts to put Holmes’s theories about deductive reasoning to “a more severe test” by asking for details of his (Watson’s) late brother’s watch, Holmes eagerly accepts the challenge, because, “it would prevent me from taking a second dose of cocaine.” The cocaine at the opening of *The Sign of Four* thus fills in a narrative gap left by the lack of a case at the time, and becomes the metonymic image of a bipolar detective desperate for stimulation in a “dreary, dismal, unprofitable world.” Indeed, Holmes’s meta-narrative involves a sharp vacillation between narcoticisation and stimulation, between depressed immobility and hyperactivity, between the narcotic effects of morphine and the stimulating reactions of cocaine, between the absence of a narrative of detection and the presence of a game afoot.

**Morphine or Cocaine?**

> “Which is it to-day,’ I asked, “morphine or cocaine?”

The existence of commonplaces, and the commonplace of existence, is a recurrent, if barely-explicated, attitude manifested throughout the Holmes Canon. Holmes seems to view the drudgeries of daily life with an abhorrence that verges on the obsessive – “My life,” he says at the end of ‘The Red-Headed League,’ “is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence.” “Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth.” His pathologisation of the human condition is almost Absurdist in outlook, and connects to a longstanding and recurrent western European tendency, since at least the sixteenth century, to

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8 *Sign,* 54.
9 *Sign,* 49.
10 The Canon, or Sacred Writings, is the term used by Sherlockians (or Holmesians, as they’re called on the other side of the Atlantic) to denote the 56 short stories and 4 long tales written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; in addition to the Canon, there are numerous stories purportedly ‘recovered’ from previously lost manuscripts penned by John H. Watson, M.D.
12 *Sign,* 56.
conceive of the self as machinic and constantly in need of adjustments to prevent corrosion from the frictions of daily existence – “Life is an incurable disease,” as the 17th century English poet Abraham Cowley once wrote.\textsuperscript{13}

And so, morphine or cocaine?

Morphine was first isolated from opium – approximately 10% of which is morphine – by the German apothecary Friedrich Wilhelm Sertürner in 1805 (or between 1805 and 1816; no one seems to know for certain) as a basic yellowish-white crystalline substance that existed in opium as a compound in combination with a special acid. Sertürner called it *morphine*, after Morpheus, the Greek god of dreams, because it was about ten times as potent as opium (which is associated with the plant *Papaver Somniferum*, Latin for ‘sleep-inducing poppy’\textsuperscript{14}) in relieving pain and inducing euphoria. As an opioid, morphine induces drowsiness, analgesia, and a sense of well-being, and, after commercial production of the drug began in the mid-19th century, it was touted as a cure for opium addiction and dependence.\textsuperscript{15}

Curiously, then, since the physiological effects of the drug were almost certainly generally known by 1891 (the date of publication of ‘A Scandal in Bohemia,’ the first of the short stories to appear in the *Strand Magazine*), Watson seems to confuse morphine for cocaine when he notes Holmes’s alternations between “cocaine and ambition, the drowsiness of the drug, and the fierce energy of his own keen nature... risen out of his drug-created dreams”\textsuperscript{16} – as the psychologist J. Thomas Dalby points out, “this error is puzzling. Cocaine was recognized widely as a stimulant and given Doyle’s attempt to specialise as an oculist, where cocaine was used as an anaesthetic, it is likely that he was well versed with the

\textsuperscript{14} *Oblivion*, 29.
Morphine, then, not cocaine, to go with the stasis of a commonplace existence when there is no mystery to solve, no hell-hound to track, no naval treaties to recover. The morphine stupor – the drowsiness of the drug – is shaken off as soon as a problem rears its enticing head in the form of the King of Bohemia, come to engage the great detective in a matter of the gravest delicacy. The narrative stasis marked by the absence of a case gives way to mobility – the narcotic drug is replaced by another source of intoxication, the stimulant of a problem to be solved (in this case, a particularly incriminating photograph must be recovered). Here, the assemblage that is detective+narcotic once again intersects with detective+armchair – Holmes settles “himself down in his armchair and close[s] his eyes” as he starts to listen to the King’s narrative – to allow a becoming-detective to start to coalesce into the figure of Holmes, only, this time, one BwO appears to build upon and replace the previous one, although the BwO detective+morphine lurks always in the air, threatening to make a comeback the moment interest in the case starts to lag. Which it never does, since this is the one adventure that manages to defeat Holmes – the ultimate high, a case he cannot solve! – and Irene Adler becomes to him “always the woman.”

Interestingly, it seems the assemblage detective+narcotic is banished forever from the totality of the narrative system, which is why there are no further references in the Canon to Holmes using morphine, except for Watson’s “morphine or cocaine?” in The Sign of Four, and Adler becomes a recurrent trope for pointing out the detective’s only failure through the rest of the Canon (Watson, in ‘A Case of Identity,’ states “Once only had I known [Holmes] to fail, in the case of the King of Bohemia and of the Irene Adler photograph.”).

There is something very subversive about Irene Adler being the agent of ultimate intoxication here. So powerful an intoxicant, in fact, that she effectively neutralizes the

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18 ‘Scandal,’ 15.
19 ‘Scandal,’ 5.
20 Conan Doyle, ‘A Case of Identity,’ in NASHI, 92.
narcotic (morphine) in favour of the stimulant (cocaine, which will soon present itself in the Canon). Leslie Klinger notes in an annotation to the tale in his edition of *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, “Holmes is characterised throughout the balance of the Canon as verging on misogynistic.... His feelings towards Irene Adler, then, eventually form a startling contrast to the accepted picture of Holmes.” So Adler sets up two defining features of the Canon, and of the perception of Holmes to come. First, the most obvious perhaps, is Holmes’s sharp turn (a reaction to ‘losing Irene’ and ‘losing to Irene,’ perhaps) towards the misogynistic and the aloof, cementing forever his image as solitary, impenetrable, asexual, forbidding, and sometimes downright scary – the now-conventional image of a certain kind (pre-hardboiled) of superhuman fictional detective.

The second modality in the Canon which her sudden presence and hurried absence bring about has to do with intoxication. One, mentioned above, is the thematic element of the narrative which abjures morphine forever from now and takes up cocaine. This may well gesture towards the changing trajectory of attitudes in society and culture to the intoxications and uses of substance at the time. A few years before the publication of ‘Scandal,’ the first warnings about hypodermic morphine addiction had begun to be sounded; in 1870, T. Clifford Allbutt (the model for Dr. Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, incidentally) started suspecting morphine of arousing craving and exhibiting withdrawal symptoms of restlessness and depression, and in 1877, the German physician Eduard Levinstein published the first major scientific treatise on morphine addiction, *Die Morphiumsucht*, which was translated and published in English the very next year as *Morbid Craving for Morphia.* At the same time, the concept of hypodermic addiction began to get associated with gender – as Richard Davenport-Hines remarks in his *Global History of Narcotics*, “hypodermic addiction became

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22 *Oblivion*, 102-103.
notorious as a female characteristic,”23 and “the hypodermic habit was feminised”24 – and in the late 1870s and 1880s, morphine addiction became both pathologized and gendered, as ‘morphinomania’ or ‘morphinism,’ “a new disease afflicting the upper classes of European society, especially women.”25 Subsequently, in the mid-1880s, after Freud’s publication of an essay extolling the virtues of cocaine, it began to be acclaimed as a cure for morphine addiction, just like morphine had been for opium addiction, and the morphine habit began to give way to a fashion for cocaine. It was also by this time proclaimed as a modern anaesthetic when Freud’s colleague, an Austrian ophthalmologist by the name of Carl Koller announced his discovery of the drug as a local anaesthetic in the autumn of 1884, demonstrating this by touching his own cocaine-numbed cornea with a pin.26 (Koller’s discovery revolutionised eye, mouth and nose surgery, and many years later, after his death, a reprint of Freud’s paper on cocaine and fatigue was found with a dedication written by Freud – “To his dear friend Coca Koller, from Dr. Sigmund Freud”27).

So by the early 1890s, morphine is out of public taste, but Holmes, never one for what the public thinks anyway, is still using it. Enter the Woman, who cannot fail to signify the connection with morphinomania and, of course, its attendant ‘deviance.’28 Holmes’s encounter with her, and especially, perhaps, being outwitted by her, changes him. In a move mirroring that going on around him, he shifts to cocaine. Is this simply out of resentment, a result of the contemporary identification of morphinism with femininity and thus the need to divest himself of any vestige of womanhood? Perhaps. But it is also certainly an admission that now, post-Irene, post-the woman, he can no longer be satisfied with the narcotisation of

23 Oblivion, 112.
24 Oblivion, 114.
26 Oblivion, 156.
28 This association is present even in today’s representations of Irene Adler; in an episode (called ‘A Scandal in Belgravia’) of the modern BBC television show Sherlock (2011–), she is depicted as a bisexual dominatrix.
morphine. Irene, with her own being and by outwitting him and therefore giving him the ultimate high – the unsolved case – has stimulated Holmes too much. Morphine will no longer suffice. A stronger anaesthetic will be required to combat the pain of commonplace existence.

It is no surprise, then, that the very next Holmes story – ‘The Red-Headed League,’ published in the *Strand Magazine* in August 1891, just a month after ‘A Scandal in Bohemia’ – sees the first appearance of a familiar Holmesian refrain, that of the dread of ennui and “the commonplaces of existence.” The morphine that Holmes took till before the encounter with Irene Adler (even though Watson calls it “cocaine,” note how the narrative refuses to comply and insists on providing details of morphine-use symptoms immediately after his inaccurate remark) must be left behind, so the narrative comes up with a more dire threat, that of existence-negating ennui. Before the entry of Irene Adler into the Canon, Holmes’s morphine use is seen as arising out of his bohemianism; Watson mentions early on in ‘Scandal’ that Holmes “loathed every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul” and therefore alternated “from week to week between cocaine [the good doctor of course means “morphine”] and ambition.” After Adler, his habit switches abruptly to cocaine, no longer because of mere bohemianism but out of a profound existential numbness, “the commonplaces of existence.”

Even today, over a hundred and twenty years since Irene Adler appeared, the resonances of cocaine in the Holmesian universe are inescapable, from Robert Downey, Jr.’s portrayals of a drug-crazed Holmes in Guy Ritchie’s films (*Sherlock Holmes* in 2009 and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* in 2011) to Jonny Lee Miller’s Holmes, in the 2012-13 television show *Elementary*, as a recovering addict always threatening to relapse (Watson is even shown here as Holmes’s “sober companion”). These resonances could be seen as

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29 Is this the answer to the age-old mystery of Holmes’s cocaine habit, then – a turn to cocaine because of the Woman?
early as in 1916, in the short film *The Mystery of the Leaping Fish*, a Holmes parody in which Douglas Fairbanks plays a hyperfrequent cocaine-using detective called Coke Ennyday, who is given to injecting himself from a bandolier of syringes he wears and to dipping liberally into the contents of a large hatbox containing a white powder and labelled "COCAINE." So cocaine, the stimulant, comes to be closely identified the myth of Holmes, from the earliest non-Canonical representations to the latest. Morphine, the narcotic, is left behind, and Holmes is injected it only once ever again, in ‘The Adventure of the Illustrious Client.’ But even here, it is used purely in its medical capacity as narcotic and painkiller, to treat the pain of “two lacerated scalp wounds and some considerable bruises,” after Holmes is set upon and injured by two thugs, and Holmes is far from intoxicated by it. Indeed, the sole purpose of morphine in this story is to slow him down, to *retard* Holmes’s progress towards a solution to the crime by narcotising him and giving him rest.

So, in some way, perhaps Irene Adler is the originary wound that rips open Holmes’s morphine-scarred arm and pricks the Holmesian narrative forever with the puncture marks of cocaine, setting it up as the stimulant with which Holmes will be forever associated. Having left him behind with an unsolvable case, she has given him the glimpse of an eternal high, a theoretically possible future of endless wandering for clues that never appear. From Watson’s vague and general description of Holmes’s substance use in this, his very first short story, we can now see his need for intoxication in its specificity.

This is also remarkable because it is the Woman who leads him on to coke. Unlike the already-in-place gendered pathologisation of morphinomania, cocaine is at the time exultantly consumed by both men and women, with “little stigmatisation of cocainists until the mid-1890s,” i.e., a few years after Irene disappears from the Canon. Interestingly, when cocaine does start to get demonised in the early 20th century, the first associations of its

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31 *Oblivion*, 163.
villainous qualities are with women and prostitution – Davenport-Hines records how the police “exacerbated alarm by telling journalists that cocaine ‘is driving hundreds of women mad’, which resulted in the Daily Chronicle blaring [...] that ‘the use of cocaine has become [...] a veritable mania, an obsession only too terribly common among the women who haunt the West End at night,’ [...] and] stories circulated alleging that prostitutes were using cocaine to drug, stupefy and rob their johns.”

Within this sexist discursive framework, Irene’s act of stimulating Holmes more intensely than morphine, so intensely as to make any hint of subsequent morphinomania disappear from the Holmesian universe, might be seen as profoundly liberatory, an act of supreme, if barely visible, female agency. (Or have I simply tried to perform an overambitious and fantastical critical act of reclamation here? This too is a possibility).

As a corollary, the Holmes metanarrative too now gets hooked on not just any drug, but to cocaine and its specific technology, something we shall soon see in The Sign of Four. Perhaps Holmes’s recourse to cocaine is a desperate attempt at recapturing this intense stimulation, and an attempt to fill a void left behind, an emptiness that comes from the disappointing awareness that he will never again be outwitted. In doing so, Adler possibly sets in motion one of the strongest scintillations to emanate from the entire Canon, the swirling white dust of cocaine, which continues to intoxicate not only the Canonical Holmes, but also the 20th century Holmes and the 21st century Holmes. And so, “To Sherlock Holmes she is always the woman.”

The narrative system loses the representational co-ordinates of an assemblage signifying stupefaction at this point, but gains an additional “body without organs” in the co-ordinates of the new detective+stimulant. At this point, it is possible that the replacement of representational points creates a ripple in the system, which may be observable as a systemic

32 Oblivion, 220.
discrepancy in the form of a confused chronology of events in the fictional universe. While the action of ‘A Scandal in Bohemia’ begins, according to Watson’s account, “one night – it was the twentieth of March, 1888” \(^{33} \) – he also claims to be married at the time, which seems impossible given that his first marriage is to Mary Morstan, whom he first encounters in The Sign of Four, supposedly on Tuesday, July or September 7, 1888. \(^{34} \)

That the transition from one assemblage to another causes a chronological discrepancy in the Canon is mere conjecture, obviously; but it is undeniable that this puzzle seems to have found its way, entirely unconscious of the writer, to this precise moment in the fictional universe when the detective+narcotic constellation is rejected – unconscious because Sign was written and published before ‘Scandal,’ and the transition from morphine to cocaine could surely not have been foreseen.

Therefore, as mentioned above, in another of those strange and perhaps not unconnected parallels between reality and fiction, in July 1884, Sigmund Freud published his first scientific paper, ‘Über Coca’ (it appeared in English as ‘Coca’ in The St. Louis Medical and Surgical Journal in December 1884, and was the first classification of cocaine as a stimulant and a euphoriant, as opposed to prevailing views of the substance as ‘narcotic’ or ‘anaesthetic’,\(^{35} \)), and suggested the use of cocaine as a cure for morphine addiction, experimenting on his friend Dr. Ernst von Fleischl-Marxow.\(^{36} \) And so, in life as in the Canon, morphine began to give way to cocaine.

\(^{33} \) ‘Scandal,’ 6.

\(^{34} \) William Baring-Gould’s The Annotated Sherlock Holmes places the date of ‘Scandal’ as May 20-22, 1887, for some reason, while Leslie Klinger’s The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes argues for 1889. For Sign, writes Shafquat Towheed in his edition of the book, “Leslie Klinger offers a summary of the various conflicting start dates suggested for the opening of the story [in ‘The Dating of The Sign of the Four,’ in NASH: The Novels, 380-1] (Holmes scholars have offered at least seven, and none are entirely satisfactory), while William Baring-Gould advances perhaps the most plausible argument… for the action taking place between 18 and 21 September 1888” (‘Introduction,’ Sign, 20).


A Seven-Per-Cent Solution

Possibly cultivated by the Incas in ancient Peru since before A.D. 1000, the leaves of the coca plant were chewed in religious ceremonies, and their mildly stimulating effects were recorded even then. Centuries later, Albert Niemann, a Göttingen chemist, first isolated cocaine from coca leaves, as announced in his dissertation of 1860. Then, in 1863, Angelo Mariani, a Corsican trained as a pharmacist, began selling a tonic called Vin Mariani, which contained Bordeaux wine laced with coca leaf extracts. And in 1883, Theodor Aschenbrandt, an army surgeon, published a medical paper where he noted the power of cocaine to revive exhausted Bavarian soldiers.37

Cocaine affects the central nervous system and ‘overamps’ it, causing euphoria, increased sensory awareness, a higher state of vigilance, tachycardia, rise in blood pressure, anorexia, respiratory increase, mind widening, increased creativity, and a reduced need for sleep.38 By the time the incidents in Sign take place, one grain of cocaine – 65 milligrams – would yield “three ample doses, one day’s supply, and a grain a day was often mentioned in the literature of the time as a recommended dosage for the treatment of melancholia.”39

The action of The Sign of Four takes place over a period of approximately 96 hours, for at least 82 of which Holmes is on a “sleep-deprived, cocaine-induced manic high.”40 That he exhibits almost all the symptoms of a cocaine high throughout the text is therefore understandable; what is surprising is that he seems to exhibit these symptoms all the time, throughout the Canon. Yes, there are references to the profound ennui of life and the existence of commonplaces. Yes, there are moments of lassitude and torpor. Yes, there is even a reference to Watson’s having “weaned [Holmes] from that drug mania which had

37 Oblivion, 132-4.
38 Pharmacology and Abuse of Cocaine, 56.
40 Shafquat Towheed, ‘Introduction,’ The Sign of Four, 15.
threatened once to check his remarkable career.”41 But these are almost always at the beginning of the narrative, and before the start of the detective story itself.

A minor digression (narratology demands it). Gerard Genette makes the distinction between “story (the totality of the narrated events), narrative (the discourse, oral or written, that narrates them), and narrating (the real or fictive act that produces the discourse – in other words, the very fact of recounting).”42 In these terms, all that Watson sets down as his account of an ‘adventure’ – this includes details of character and setting that may or may not be irrelevant to the solving of the case, chunks of time from before the case was brought to his or Holmes’s attention, the fact of it being brought to their attention, the course of incidents that unfold during the adventure, its satisfactory (or dissatisfactory) conclusion, thoughts or exchanges after the solution has been found (again, these may or may not be relevant to the adventure) – belongs to the realm of narrative, but the detective story itself consists only of the textual events connected with the ‘adventure,’ i.e. the story of a crime and its investigation.

In this sense, then, the narrative of the detective story in the Canon is never off cocaine. It demands a constant intoxication from its detective, and to this end creates a state of intoxication either by cocaine or by crime. Thus, once the needle punctures Holmes’s left arm at the start of Sign, he is never really not high – hence his manic 82-hour spree. It is almost as if the cocaine enters Holmes’s body and then bleeds into the veins of the narrative, keeping it from collapsing from exhaustion at every turn by effecting the discovery of fresh clues.

Becoming Detective, Becoming Text

There is often created, in mystery and in a drug experience, a dialectical dialogue between connections and wanderings. In detective fiction, the wandering through labyrinthine corridors of knowledge is an impulse towards experiential closure, and it can be achieved only within a structure of rapid connections made between one clue and the next. The detective text can continue as long as there are more connections to be made – the last connection halts the wandering, the mystery is solved, the text is closed. Which is why the narrative demands an ingress, an incision (perhaps, an injection), every time a roadblock is stumbled upon. So, in ‘The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot’ (‘strangest case I have handled,’ said Holmes’s telegram to Watson of it), there is a point at which the investigation strikes a brick wall and gets stuck:

Holmes paced with light, swift steps about the room; he sat in the various chairs, drawing them up and reconstructing their positions. He tested how much of the garden was visible; he examined the floor, the ceiling, and the fireplace; but never once did I see that sudden brightening of his eyes and tightening of his lips which would have told me that he saw some gleam of light in this utter darkness. [Italics mine]

Not a clue in sight. “What are you going to do now, Mr. Holmes?” “I think, Watson, that I shall resume that course of tobacco-poisoning which you have so often and so justly condemned.”

Tobacco this time, not cocaine – Watson did claim, after all, in ‘The Missing Three-Quarter,’ to have “weaned him” from that particular vice – but for all practical purposes, it is an injection of intoxication into a narrative that is faltering, unable to make the connection required to set off the next bit of wandering:

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45 ‘Devil’s Foot,’ 1402.
46 ‘Devil’s Foot,’ 1402.
47 Although both are considered stimulants, physiologically speaking. See *Oblivion*, 12.
48 A claim that is hotly debated by Holmesians. Jack Tracy and Jim Berkey, in *Subcutaneously, My Dear Watson*, trace the course of Holmes’s drug habit from 1887 to 1902, with only short intermittent drug-free periods; and they label Watson’s claim in ‘The Missing Three-Quarter’ as an “insupportable boast.”
He sat coiled in his armchair, his haggard and ascetic face hardly visible amid the blue swirl of his tobacco smoke, his black brows drawn down, his forehead contracted, his eyes vacant and far away. Finally he laid down his pipe and sprang to his feet.49

Ah! The return of the armchair! This time, there is a problem at hand, but it needs penetration. The old assemblages come back and intersect once again, and the equation repeats itself:

\[
\text{Detective+armchair} + \text{Detective+stimulant} = \text{Becoming detective}
\]

It seems, here, that the body of the detective comes to be an anthropomorphic representation of something much less predestined than itself – the text. The seven per-cent solution of cocaine bleeds into Holmes’s body and then disperses itself in the very fabric of the text, in the words and the pauses and abruptions of action – Holmes coiled in his armchair – Holmes vacant – Holmes springs up! Holmes is the text; rather, he has become-text.

Or, perhaps, to put it differently, the detective text has become-corporeal through the experience of intoxication.

“It is in jumping from one plane to the other,” write Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, “or from the relative thresholds to the absolute threshold that coexists with them, that the imperceptible becomes necessarily perceived.”50 Cocaine, intoxication, stimulation – *my mind rebels at stagnation*! – jumping from the plane of the detective’s consciousness to the unconscious plane of the text, being rendered perceptible thus.

Deleuze and Guattari view reality as shifting, as not-ontologically-fixed-yet, thus, always in a state of becoming. For reality is always in flux, by which is meant that the processes constitutive of it are always interacting with each other, never really fixed other than in some ideal (and imposed) model of an imagined static reality. Reality, think D&G,

49 ‘Devil’s Foot,’ 1403.
50 *Thousand Plateaus*, 311.
need not be reduced to its conventionally hierarchized organizing principles and structures.

Thus, there are many becomings, few beings. As Doro Wiese puts it, for D&G,

"life is always expressive, but cannot be reduced to its organizing structures. There are "other contemporaneous possibilities" [A Thousand Plateaus, 273] to prevalent forms of capture like (hu)man, culture, language, history. The latter sustain unifying and hierarchizing tendencies, formulated and enforced by power relations which privilege white, bourgeois, heterosexual men (cf. Braidotti 1991, 1994, 2002, 2006; Bogue 2010; Colebrook 2008). Becoming upsets this "molar" form, and might be described as the composition of relations which undermine stable, unifying and hierarchizing formations. Although it lacks a form which can convey its meaning – "becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself" (238) – it can be traced as a play of singular, definable moments in time, intensities and affectivities, events and accidents (cf. Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 253). As such, becoming expresses the capability of life to escape signification, and to undo pre-established opinions, notions, perceptions. Becoming shows that the forces of life may create "other relations, other worlds" (Colebrook 2004, 13), thereby "transforming social and environmental relations in unpredictable ways" (Bogue 2010, 14)." 

The concept of becoming needs to be considered in the light of a critique of sorts of the Platonic idea of the Ideal. For Plato, what is becoming is not fixed, not Ideal. It is the property of "sensibles," i.e., those components of the world that are perceived by the senses. In Platonic thought (and consequently in much of the Western philosophical tradition), the fixity of being is privileged as a systematic mode of knowledge over the fluctuations of constant becoming. D&G rescue this notion of becoming and imbue it with a power derived from its very unknowability. A becoming cannot be easily grasped by collective utterances (based on systematic knowledge), and cannot therefore be easily assigned a representative position in an organised schema of reality. A becoming is unpredictable. A becoming affects a component of reality and alters it in its very basic relations to the world and itself.

Since a becoming is fundamentally unpredictable because it does not flow from an antecedent state, it does not fall within conventional categories of change. The change

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51 Doro Wiese, ‘Sexuality captured, sexuality on a line of flight: Tracey Emin’s Top Spot,’ Rhizomes 22 (Summer 2011), accessed July 18, 2011, [http://rhizomes.net/issue22/wiese.html](http://rhizomes.net/issue22/wiese.html)

that a person undergoes in becoming can perhaps best be characterized as a process of absorption. A person is absorbed in an activity or in a situation and this increasing absorption changes him or her.\(^53\)

A process of absorption – absorption of a vast and complicated network of possible sensations, feelings, thoughts, and affects; the velvet of the armchair, the neat morocco case, the cold syringe, the nervous fingers adjusting the delicate needle, the feel of the shirt-cuff, the skin of the forearm interrupted with ruptures, the soft working of the piston, the “old black-letter volume which he had opened” after injecting himself,\(^54\) all these ‘sensibles’ combine to effect on Holmes an absorption – very literally represented in the absorption of cocaine by his central nervous system – that changes not any one categorisable characteristic in him, but causes a perpetual process of change. A changed/changing Holmes, not a change in Holmes. This bundle of becoming is in very real terms a zone of “another power,”\(^55\) a co-creative zone in which the properties of the subjective unit “Sherlock Holmes” are both effaced and augmented by the properties of the unit “cocaine,” which are themselves also effaced and augmented by the properties of the unit “Sherlock Holmes.” Holmes is thus becoming-cocaine (and perhaps the cocaine is becoming-detective at the same time).

And then, of course, the cocaine is absorbed into the central nervous system of the text itself.

What the drug does is “confer upon the perception the molecular power to grasp microperceptions, microoperations, and upon the perceived the force to emit accelerated or decelerated particles in a floating time that is no longer our time…”\(^56\) It works not by stimulating Holmes’s mind and guiding it towards the Truth – a stimulant that does not stimulate? – but by disorienting the detective and the very text, and thereby bringing into existence the possibility of jumps within different writerly and readerly, socially and

\(^53\) Due, Deleuze, 142.
\(^54\) Sign, 49.
\(^55\) Thousand Plateaus, 239.
\(^56\) Thousand Plateaus, 312.
culturally, created surfaces of sense. Cocaine and armchairs and tobacco become
deterritorializing forces that allow certain ordering principles – the commonplace of
existence, or the impermeability of a mystery – to undergo a process of abstraction “from
their embodiment within a stratum or a process in order to assign to these ordering principles
a more abstract, cultural or even purely cognitive function.”57 After all, “drugs give the
unconscious the immanence and plane that psychoanalysis has consistently botched,” write
D&G in ‘1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible….’58

This is where it gets complicated. “Drug addicts,” continue Deleuze and Guattari, as
willing as ever to throw a spanner in the works, “continually fall back into what they wanted
to escape: a segmentarity all the more rigid for being marginal, a territorialization all the
more artificial for being based on chemical substances, hallucinatory forms, and phantasy
subjectifications.” The deterritorializing force of drugs, then, is not in their mere (ab)use, but
in their potential to change the reception of a not-drug experience:

To reach the point where “to get high or not to get high” is no longer the question, but
rather whether drugs have sufficiently changed the general conditions of space and
time perception so that nonusers can succeed in passing through the holes in the world
and following the lines of flight at the very place where means other than drugs are
necessary. Drugs do not guarantee immanence; rather, the immanence of drugs allows
one to forgo them. 59

Sherlock Holmes appears to be addicted to intoxication – my mind rebels at
stagnation! – but the intoxicatory impulse of the detective is sublimated into the intoxicated
narrative, a text high on the perception of imperceptibles, a text that constantly attempts to
retard such perception, for such perceiving is antithetical to the very nature of itself. A
detective story is materially far more reliant on a state of ignorance than a condition of
knowledge, after all – the greater the ignorance (internally, of its characters, and externally,
of its reader), the longer the story. This contradictory impulse – of both providing clues and

57 Due, Deleuze, 133.
58 In Thousand Plateaus, 256-341, 315.
59 Thousand Plateaus, 315.
continuing a wandering of sorts (for without this wandering from a state of ignorance to a state of knowledge, there is no detective story, at least in its conventional form) – is perhaps expressed in the experience of the text-on-drugs, as well as the text-as-drug. The “immanence of drugs,” by which is meant their affective potential to clearly express the ideal state of reality not as it is experienced, but as it unfolds in accordance with its own genetic logic, is arguably unleashed in this reading of the Canon. Holmes is effectively shown shooting up (or already shot up) only a couple of times, but the metaphor persists, precisely because it takes a hold on the affective surface of the text, and it is as if the text is on drugs without being on drugs, and it is as if the reader is on drugs because the text is perpetually becoming-drug.

Perhaps this is why the traces of cocaine linger in the Canon, and why there has been so much interest in his “cocaine habit” in Holmes scholarship – as Jack Tracy and Jim Berkey note, “From its very beginning, Holmes’s drug dependence seized the popular imagination. All the rest of his bizarre idiosyncracies… all came later, in the several series of short stories which began appearing in 1891. The cocaine was the first. It has always been the most intriguing and the least understood.” Indeed, the Granada TV adaptation of the short story

'The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot’ – starring Jeremy Brett/Holmes and Edward Hardwicke/Watson, and called simply ‘The Devil’s Foot’—squeezes not one, but two fairly dramatic scenes out of Holmes’s cocaine use. The first is a near-exact visualization of the opening lines of *The Sign of Four* (quoted above), simply transposed onto a different setting in a different story, and notable most (just like in the Canon) for Watson’s reaction to it; in *Sign*, he goes against the prevailing medical opinion of his time and pleads with Holmes to

> Count the cost! Your brain may, as you say, be roused and excited, but it is a pathological and morbid process which involves increased tissue-change and may at least leave a permanent weakness. You know, too, what a black reaction comes upon you. Surely the game is hardly worth the candle. Why should you, for a mere passing pleasure, risk the loss of those great powers with which you have been endowed? Remember that I speak not only as one comrade to another but as a medical man to one for whose constitution he is to some extent answerable.\(^{61}\)

While in the television adaptation, this gets condensed into a look of resignation, disapproval and sadness, and “I’ll see to the luggage.”\(^{62}\)

> The second instance is Holmes’s renunciation of cocaine – even more dramatic, with lush strings – as he throws the seven per-cent solution out of its bottle, and then buries his syringe in the sand.\(^{63}\) Interestingly, he decides to do away with cocaine *before* any news of a mystery reaches him, thus giving the impression that perhaps the great detective has made peace with the commonplace of existence after all.

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\(^{61}\) *Sign*, 50.

\(^{62}\) Thomas Dalby notes, “The most singular aspect of cocaine in the Holmes stories is not Holmes’s habit, but rather Watson’s reaction to it. In spite of celebrated cases of cocaine addiction (e.g. Dr. W. S. Halsted) and even reports of death from cocaine use as early as 1891, there was no general medical condemnation of cocaine use in the late 19th century. The retired Surgeon General of the U. S. Army extolled its fatigue reduction and mood-elevating properties, while others vigorously promoted cocaine as an anaesthetic, a cure for alcoholism and opium abuse. Freud’s endorsement of cocaine at the time was extreme, suggesting that its therapeutic use might even do away with inebriate asylums. Against this professional acclaim, we see Watson admonishing Holmes.” ‘Sherlock Holmes’s Cocaine Habit,’ 74.

\(^{63}\) ‘The Devil’s Foot,’ *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, dramatised by Gary Hopkins (April 6, 1988, ITV; London: Granada TV), TV.
But wait! For it appears that altered states of perception refuse to leave the narrative even so.

**Radix Pedis Diaboli**

A brief digression into a brief summary. In ‘The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot’ (both short story and television adaptation), Holmes and Watson are in Cornwall so that the former can recuperate from the strain caused by his workaholism (another addiction!) to his otherwise “iron constitution,” much to his own chagrin, of course. During the course of this holiday, they are visited by the local vicar, Mr. Roundhay, with his lodger, a Mr. Mortimer Tregennis, in tow, who report that Tregennis’s two brothers were found that morning at the card table with “the senses stricken clean out of them,” while his sister “lay back stone-dead in her chair.”\(^{64}\) Tregennis had gone to their family home in the nearby hamlet of Tredannick Wollas the previous evening (he himself lodges at the vicar’s because of a family dispute to do with property, which now seems to belong to the past), and later left his siblings playing whist. The next morning, he goes back to find them in their present state, his brothers insane, his sister dead.

That same afternoon, our heroes run into Dr. Leon Sterndale, “the great lion-hunter and explorer,” who shows an uncommon interest in the case, asks an equivocal Holmes whether he suspects anyone yet, and then dashes off in a huff. The next morning, the vicar is back, breathlessly informing Holmes that Mortimer Tregennis too has been discovered dead, appearing to have suffered the same symptoms as the rest of his family, “his limbs… convulsed and his fingers contorted as though he had died in a very paroxysm of fear.”\(^{65}\) Holmes soon finds unconsumed traces of a brownish powder in the smoke-guard of a lamp in

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\(^{64}\) ‘Devil’s Foot,’ 1397.  
\(^{65}\) ‘Devil’s Foot,’ 1409.
Tregennis’s room, and, going back to their rented cottage, the pair decides to conduct an experiment with the found powder.

The powder unleashes terrible and bizarre visions, and it is only with a superhuman effort that Watson manages to grab Holmes and lurch out into the open air, where slowly the effect of the fumes retreats. It soon turns out that the powder is *Radix pedis diaboli*, devil’s-foot root, native to West Africa and used as the murder weapon in both crimes.

Holmes’s cocaine use here is shown only in the tv episode, of course, and not in the story, because in the Canon, at the time the tale is set, Holmes has already been “weaned off” his drug mania. But the adaptation, by continuing to reference the drug use, and by explicitly showing him throwing his cocaine and its paraphernalia away, hangs on to the strange fascination Holmes’s cocaine inspires in readers/viewers and Holmesians alike. And it lets drugs bleed out of its protagonist’s consciousness and into its own text in the visions Holmes and Watson suffer under the influence of the devil’s-foot root.

Holmes scholars have tried long and hard to identify the “devil’s-foot root.” George B. Koelle, writing in ‘The Poisons in the Canon’ in 1959, likens its effects to those of the then newly-synthesized LSD and expresses the hope that a similar compound may be discovered in nature, thereby solving the mystery of the identity of the “devil’s foot.” In ‘Radix Pedis Diabolis: A Speculative Identification,’ Verner Anderson decides on the Calabar bean, and this is seconded by James G. Ravin, M.D., who identifies the drug as eserine, which is now known to be derived from the Calabar bean. Other nominees include *muavi* or *moavi*, a Kiswahili name for the *Erythrophleum guineense* – “*E. guineense* is a

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widely distributed handsome tree with a number of undefined varieties or sub-species which have been the cause of some confusion. The plant is also reputed for its uses as an ordeal poison for executing capital punishments for witches, to kill or scare away stubborn pests from cultivated farms”⁷⁰; niando, a Congolese plant that is used as an intoxicant⁷¹; an early and natural form of angel dust or PCP, a synthetic “dissociative” drug that was developed as an anaesthetic in the fifties and is sold as tablets, capsules or powder, that can be eaten, smoked or snorted, and that distorts perceptions of sight and sound and causes detachment⁷²; and even the hallucinogenic fungus ergot.⁷³

Whatever the drug, it causes both Holmes and Watson to hallucinate wildly – “At the very first whiff of it my brain and my imagination were beyond all control,” writes Watson, while Holmes’s face goes “white, rigid, and drawn with horror.”⁷⁴ No longer on cocaine, indeed, actively away from cocaine (in one version, at least), the detective must needs be on drugs nonetheless for the next connection to be made. And the wandering must continue through the labyrinths of the text in one form or another; thus, once the mystery is solved, a different mystery is purposefully set upon as Holmes tells Watson, in the very last sentence of the story – “And now, my dear Watson, I think we may dismiss the matter from our mind, and go back with a clear conscience to the study of those Chaldean roots which are surely to be traced in the Cornish branch of the great Celtic speech.”⁷⁵ The wandering in the text (from clue to clue) becomes, almost literally, a wandering through text. (This will later be taken to its extreme in the metaphysical detective stories that get written in the latter half of the 20th

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⁷⁵ ‘Devil’s Foot,’ 1423.
century; for instance, Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault’s Pendulum*, or Orhan Pamuk’s *My Name is Red*, or Paul Auster’s *The New York Trilogy*, or even Douglas Adams’s *Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency*; this last is, in the words of its author, “a kind of ghost- horror-detective-time-travel-romantic-comedy-epic, mainly concerned with mud, music and quantum mechanics,” in which Samuel Taylor Coleridge must not be allowed to complete ‘Kubla Khan,’ or the universe will explode).

**Of Rustle and Rausch**

Walter Benjamin, in one of his ‘protocols’ on hashish, suggests that the pleasure of hashish intoxication lies in speaking of the hashish rush (*rausch*). Benjamin, who is the great theorist of repeated (repeating? repeatable? repetitious?) experience, textualizes the *rausch*, not in terms of writing about it or writing while on it, but as a way of expressing the textuality of intoxication and the intoxication of textuality. “The *pharmakon* is both the substance ingested and the writing to which it gives rise.” But this textuality is necessarily incomplete and incompletable, much like Benjamin’s own *Arcades Project*, an obviously incompletable attempt at creating in words an archive of everything. As Benjamin notices, it is a constant retardation of closure that we seek in a drug experience, a phantasmagoria of space that is ever-renewing itself:

> The two coordinates in the apartment: cellar – floor/the horizontal. Great horizontal extension of the apartment. Suite of rooms, from which music is coming. But perhaps also dread of the corridor....

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76 Documented drug experiments that took place between 1927-34 in Berlin, Marseilles and Ibiza, these “protocols” included Benjamin and, at various times, the philosopher Ernst Bloch, the writer Jean Selz, the physicians Fritz Fränkel, Ernst Joel, and Egon Wissing, and Wissing’s wife Gert. “Originally recruited as a test subject by Joel and Fränkel, who were doing research on narcotics, Benjamin experimented with several different drugs: he ate hashish, smoked opium, and allowed himself to be injected subcutaneously with mescaline and the opiate eucodal. Records of the experiments – they were very loosely organized – were kept in the form of drug ‘protocols.’ Some of these accounts were written down in the course of the experiments, while others seem to have been compiled afterward on the basis of notes and personal recollection.” Howard Eiland, ‘Translator’s Foreword,’ *On Hashish*, vii.

77 Gary Shapiro, ‘Ariadne’s Thread: Walter Benjamin’s Hashish Passages,’ in *High Culture*, 60.
Connection/distinction... no matter how deeply you penetrate, you are always moving on the threshold. A sort of toe dance of reason.\textsuperscript{78}

The transformation of spatiality in this state of intoxication creates a preoccupation with passages, “dread of the corridor.” As Gary Shapiro notes in ‘Ariadne’s Thread,’ the “passage” is related to architecture, movement, and writing, all three. Holmes’s epistemophilia – which is to say, the reader’s epistemophilia, the epistemophilia that is inherently inscribed in the very structure of detective fiction, the very essence of what makes such forms of fiction exist, its detectivifictionness, so to speak – transforms into Benjamin’s metaphor of “Ariadne’s thread,” constantly unravelling the “colportage phenomenon of space.”\textsuperscript{79} The labyrinth seems to provide a spatial framework for the experience of intoxication, and the detective text becomes corporeal, its physicality a wandering through labyrinths, as expressed often by Jorge Luis Borges, for example (on whom more later, but of course). The detective text, perhaps more than any other, spatializes itself as a geographical space for intellectual wandering, playing itself out in relation to itself and its reader in much the same way as the cat-and-mouse game between “the pure reasoner, an Auguste Dupin,” Erik Lönnrot, and his arch-enemy Red Scharlach in Borges’s ‘Death and the Compass’ (again, on which more later).

Roland Barthes identifies a certain mode of reading whereby “the reader is drawn onward through the book’s length by a force always more or less disguised belonging to the order of suspense: the book is gradually abolished, and it is in this impatient, impassioned erosion that the delectation lies...”\textsuperscript{80} The words are significant, perhaps: drawn onward, through the book’s length, erosion... the image of Benjamin’s passages can be found even in Barthes’s description, a description that finds almost literal form in the detective novel, where the primary delectation is that of suspense. The passage connects reading and writing –

\textsuperscript{78} On Hashish, 19-20.
\textsuperscript{79} On Hashish, 28.
Barthes goes on to note how reading is ultimately “a conductor of the Desire to write... what we desire is only the desire the scriptor has in writing, or again: we desire the desire the author had for the reader when he was writing...”

Words repeat themselves, creating spaces that are constantly eroding, ever renewing. Intoxication’s love affair with text continues in Benjamin’s attraction towards the speaking/writing/reflecting upon of the rausch, when he observes that “the most passionate investigation of the hashish trance will not teach us half as much about thinking (which is eminently narcotic), as the profane illumination of thinking about the hashish trance.”

Remember Deleuze and Guattari’s rejoinder to get high without getting high? *Drugs do not guarantee immanence; rather, the immanence of drugs allows one to forgo them.*

A “profound truth,” writes Richard Davenport-Hines in his masterly history of drugs, “is recognisable by the fact that the opposite is also a profound truth... as George Sand recognised in 1871, ‘every abuse secretes its opposite.’” A thinking of the trance thus has its flip side, which is that perhaps the whole notion of trance as reason’s Other is thought into existence. An articulation of intoxication is capable of leading to further illumination, Benjamin might argue, but does this not also mean, then, that the concept of being-on-drugs as separate from simply being itself may be a linguistic articulation and nothing more?

Jacques Derrida notes in a 1989 interview that “there are no drugs in nature;” i.e.,

The concept of drugs supposes an instituted and an institutional definition: a history is required, and a culture, conventions, evaluations, norms, an entire network of intertwined discourses, a rhetoric, whether explicit or elliptical.... Already one must conclude that the concept of drugs is not a scientific concept, but is rather instituted on the basis of moral or political evaluations: it carries in itself both norm and prohibition...
It is this attention to the non-scientific concept of drugs that wends its way through the Canon, making its presence felt through baroque *rustles* in the fictive language. As Barthes observes,

> The rustle is the noise of what is working well. From which follows this paradox: the rustle denotes a limit-noise; the noise of what, if it functioned perfectly, would make no noise. To rustle is to make audible the very evaporation of sound; the blurred, the tenuous, the fluctuating are perceived as signs of a sonic erasure. And language – can language rustle? As speech, it seems doomed to stuttering; as writing, to silence and to the distinction of signs; in any case, there is always too much meaning for language to afford a delight appropriate to its substance. Yet what is impossible is not inconceivable.\(^{85}\)

This rustle exposes the significance of reason’s Other – even the zenith of logical deduction must at times give in to the lure of intoxication to, ironically, keep his sanity – *my mind rebels at stagnation!* The tenuous, often-subversive but ever-present undercurrent of intoxication that wends its way through the Canon as its rustle lends credence to the possibility that it is, after all, intoxication that is at the heart of such detective narratives, and officially-recognised intoxications such as drugs and alcohol tend to collapse into the less recognised intoxication of the detective’s mind weaving through clues and misinformations to arrive at a surprising – but satisfying – condition of closure. Thus, when there are no puzzles intriguing enough for Sherlock Holmes, he must turn to cocaine. The reference to this variable of unacceptability, be it cocaine for Holmes, or alcohol and tobacco in hardboiled fiction, is the Barthesian *rustle*, the noise of “the very evaporation of noise.”\(^{86}\) Intoxication is the limit-value of *le roman criminal* – explicit cases break onto the surface of the text as a condition of its imperfect functioning, often, therefore, obscuring the fact that implicitly, intoxication (by many names, and of both reader and detective) is what it’s all about, and it is in the speaking of this *rausch* that enlightenment lies.

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\(^{85}\) Barthes, ‘The Rustle of Language,’ in *Rustle*, 76.

\(^{86}\) Barthes, ‘Rustle,’ 77.
Coincidentally, or perhaps fatefully, rustle and *rausch* meet not only in Barthes and Benjamin, but etymologically also, for, as Howard Eiland informs us in his foreword to Benjamin’s *On Hashish*, “the noun *Rausch* comes from the onomatopoeic verb *rauschen*, ‘to rustle; rush; roar; thunder; murmur.’”87 The rustle of language resonates always with the rush of the *pharmakon* – be it hashish or cocaine, reading or writing; do not forget, after all, for Derrida keeps reminding us, that Socrates compares writing to a drug in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, an “antisubstance,” “alternately or simultaneously – beneficent and maleficent.”88 The *pharmakon* exposes Benjamin’s dread of the corridor while – *alternately or simultaneously* – suffusing us with the knowledge that corridors also have doors, corri-doors, *correre*[in Latin, ‘to run’]-doors, outlets along the sides of the passage, labyrinths (or maybe mazes) that allow for the evaporation of what is undesirable, yet desired; inarticulable, yet an articulation obsessively sought.

“Operating through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one’s general, natural, habitual paths and laws.”89 An unsought wandering, but not less needed for being unwanted, much like Socrates’s wandering in the *Phaedrus* outside the city square and into the trees and open country. And not unlike the detective’s wandering either, which, after all, is at a certain socio-moral level undesirable, since it always has written into it the prior commission of (a) crime.

87 *On Hashish*, xii.
89 ‘Plato’s Pharmacy,’ 70.
The Pharmacopoeia of Missed Clues

Already: writing, the pharmakon, the going or leading astray.⁹⁰

Wandering, movement, a process of going astray, all seem to be sought obsessively in the Canon – anything to retard stagnation, after all. For Walter Benjamin, language assumes a spatially-recognizable dimension when the rush of the pharmakon takes over:

One is struck by how long one’s sentences are…. The arcade is also a phenomenon of long horizontal extension, perhaps combined with vistas receding into distant, fleeting, tiny perspectives.⁹¹

Sentences become arcades, and, like the arcades of Paris in the 19th century, they inscribe dual and opposing tendencies. The arcades are both exterior, because they are outside, but they are also interiors, because they are passages (there’s that word again!) almost hewn into a mass of buildings, like enclosed alleyways. The city-as-arcade, says Benjamin, “opens up… as a landscape, even as it closes around [one] as a room.”⁹² Much like, it would seem, the alternate and simultaneous desire in the detective narrative for both wandering and connection. The clue is obsessively sought, a leading astray in effect till it is stumbled upon or ratiocinated into being, and then, surprise surprise, left behind so that another going astray may be achieved. Consider, for example, once again ‘The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot’ – at the scene of the crime, Mortimer Tregennis (he whose siblings have been affected so strangely by the devil’s foot powder, remember) mentions something to Sherlock Holmes that may be a potential clue:

“Think carefully, Mr. Tregennis, for any clue which can help me.”

...Mortimer Tregennis considered earnestly for a moment.

“There is one thing which occurs to me,” said he at last. “As we sat at the table my back was to the window, and my brother George, he being my partner at cards, was facing it. I saw him once look hard over my shoulder, so I turned round and

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⁹⁰ ‘Plato’s Pharmacy,’ 71.
⁹¹ On Hashish, 20.
looked also. The blind was up and the window shut, but I could just make out the bushes on the lawn, and it seemed to me for a moment that I saw something moving among them. I couldn’t even say if it was man or animal, but I just thought there was something there. When I asked him what he was looking at, he told me that he had the same feeling. That is all that I can say.”

This is exceedingly interesting. As Bob Jones points out in ‘A Missed Clue in *The Devil’s Foot,*’ this is a blatant lie, and Holmes should have caught on to it in a flash – whist, the card game in question, is played by two teams of two each, with partners seated opposite each other. If George were partnering Mortimer, then the other two people at the table, Brenda and Owen, should have been found the next morning seated opposite each other; not, as is described in the text, beside each other. Can it be that this is the unconscious of the text deliberately repressing a clue to prevent a halt to the narrative? Is it a coincidence that the word *clue* is a phonetic variant of the old northern English/Scottish word *clew,* “a ball of thread or yarn,” with specific reference to the Ariadne of Greek mythology? As Andrea Battistini tells the story:

> Plutarch writes in telling the myth of Theseus, the labyrinth was “an ordinary prison, having no other bad quality but that it secured the prisoners from escaping” ([*Life of Theseus,* 16]). Those who were locked up inside wandered “in the labyrinth, and finding no possible means of getting out, they miserably ended their lives there” (15). To save the prisoners Theseus intervenes, arriving on the spot after a long journey because the labyrinth is also very far from human civilization. Ariadne’s help to Theseus is fundamental – she furnishes the hero the thread, which could be the metaphor of the path, the journey, a memory of history, a story, a plot building itself bit by bit, or a path paved with experience and observation.

A *clue*; almost literally, Ariadne’s thread. But to allow the narrative to continue to unravel, the text attempts to unroll Ariadne’s thread ad infinitum. In the case of ‘The Devil’s Foot,’ a clue is allowed to pass unnoticed, so that Holmes can resume his “course of tobacco-

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93 ‘Devil’s Foot,’ 1399.
poisoning” – the intoxication-detection dynamic seems almost to be reversed, so that it is as if it is the (not-noticing of the) clue that allows Holmes to proceed to intoxicating himself to, paradoxically, be able to discover another clue, further down the passage of the narrative.

“What joy in the mere act of unrolling a ball of thread,” Benjamin exclaims! “And this joy is very deeply related to the joy of intoxication, just as it is to the joy of creation…. The certainty of unrolling an artfully wound skein – isn’t that the joy of all productivity, at least in prose?” Barthes’s identification of the joy of reading as the lust for the scriptor’s subject-position finds a strange parallel here, and Holmes lets the skein keep unrolling, looking over the “missed clue” so he can sit once more in his armchair and smoke his meerschaum or his cherry-wood. This perhaps-unconscious tendency in the text – which makes it “miss” the clue – finds a conscious acknowledgement in ‘The Adventure of the Abbey Grange,’ when Holmes berates Watson’s publication of their adventures as being unnecessarily dramatic and with too much reader-appeal:

“Your fatal habit of looking at everything from the point of view of a story instead of as a scientific exercise has ruined what might have been an instructive and even classical series of demonstrations. You slur over work of the utmost finesse and delicacy in order to dwell upon sensational details which may excite, but cannot possibly instruct, the reader.”

His choice of words is interesting. You slur, Watson, and you dwell, alternately and simultaneously. Watson’s narratives stop and start, moving along in fits and spurts, and in their slurring and their dwelling they articulate a delight in wandering (for surely that is the ground where the “sensational details” play out) and an antipathy towards stopping the unravelling of the narrative (i.e., the successful decoding of clues, which when done correctly – with “the utmost finesse and delicacy” – spells certain doom for the protraction of the mystery, obviously).

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96 On Hashish, 53.
97 Conan Doyle, ‘The Adventure of the Abbey Grange,’ NASH2, 1160.
There is here, it appears, a certain contradiction in narrative purpose, between slurring and dwelling, but a contradiction that is necessary for the smooth functioning of the tales in the Canon. This paradox hints at the existence of the dual structures within which the stories operate. One is evident, the other not so evident.

The first, evident structure that guides the fictions in the Canon is the basic structure that guides most detective stories. This is the structure that progresses more or less teleologically, premised upon cause-and-effect. A crime is discovered, it must have been committed by someone (or more than one), a rational analysis is embarked upon by the detective, and there is ultimately a denouement of the criminal/s (the postmodern or metaphysical detective narrative frequently departs from this last convention, but that comes much later). Along the way, clues crop up, purely by chance or because of the detective’s perseverance, and the sense of a recognizable loss of omniscience is created for most of the narrative – “no observation exists without an observer; the author cannot, by definition, be omniscient as he was in the classical novel.”98 Once observations are made and clues found, the detective essentially works backwards, trying to reconstruct a story that is absent from the narrative but of the utmost significance.99 In this, the detective’s method becomes emblematic of the scientific method, which has become the dominant mode of perceiving reality in modernity.

A slight clarification. The detective’s method is one particular, subterranean strand of the grander scientific methodology that has dominated our perception and decoding of reality since the Early Modern era; it makes use of what the historian Carlo Ginzburg calls a “low intuition,” which is “rooted in the senses (though it skirts them)…. It can be found throughout the entire world, with no limits of geography, history, ethnicity, sex, or class – and thus, it is

99 Todorov also comments on this aspect of the detective story, noting how the story of the crime is always itself absent but important, whereas the story of the investigation is present but insignificant. In ‘Typology,’ 46.
far removed from higher forms of knowledge which are the privileged property of an elite few.”

Ginzburg’s essay, alternatively titled ‘Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,’ explicitly acknowledges Holmes, of course, and is an examination into what Ginzburg believes is the basic mode of scientific investigation and thus the basic mode of our conception of a ‘rational’ worldview from the late 19th century onwards – the “evidential paradigm.” He connects the analytical method called the Morelli Method, named for Giovanni Morelli, a 19th century Italian physician and art critic (who first began to study art by eschewing the broader issues of composition and brushwork, etc, and concentrating on the supposedly insignificant details of paintings – ears, fingers, etc. – as a way to correctly identify painters of misattributed artworks), to Holmes’s “science of deduction” and Freud’s method of psychoanalysis, and traces them all back to ancient methods of hunting and tracking. Ginzburg suggests this is an idiosyncratic form of knowledge, something akin to Donna Haraway’s understanding of a “situated knowledge,” and that it fundamentally relies on – or gives birth to – a narrative movement:

This knowledge is characterized by the ability to construct from apparently insignificant experimental data a complex reality that could not be experienced directly. Also, the data is always arranged by the observer in such a way as to produce a narrative sequence, which could be expressed most simply as “someone passed this way.” Perhaps the actual idea of narration (as distinct from charms, exorcisms, or invocation) may have originated in a hunting society, relating the experience of deciphering tracks.

The structure of the evidential paradigm, then, lies in the seeking of connections to make present a narrative that is absent. For Todorov, the “story of an absence” (which is the story of the crime) is the story that must be narrated into presence by the story of the investigation. This second story forms the field of play for clues to be connected to each other.

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102 ‘Clues,’ 103.
so narration can emerge from the shadows. This is where Theseus must unroll Ariadne’s thread to emerge unscathed from the labyrinth. And intoxication? Why, remember Benjamin? The pleasure of the *rausch* lies in its narration, of course!

But, Todorov says, there is no observation without an observer – what a way this is to demystify mystery! At this level, it appears that the detective novel, supposedly full of mystery, will admit none in its own narrative framework. All things must be explicated carefully, “the author cannot leave them unexplained.”

Enter paradox, in the form of the second, subversive structure of the detective narrative. This is less a structure than a vague scintillation, a barely-graspable presence running through the underside of the narrative; a Barthesian rustle, if you will. This rustle is also “rooted in the senses (though it skirts them),” but it moves in the domain of the barely-sensed too, alternately and simultaneously. It is what causes that strange intoxication of reading the narrative, of following the unrolling of Ariadne’s thread and wishing it would never run out – “a pleasure that is at least compulsive in that I am driven to repeat it, and that entails an interruptive thickening of a reading that might otherwise proceed too quickly,” as Gregory Forter observes. Forter is talking about hard-boiled crime fiction here, which he contrasts to the classical detective story, but what the hard-boiled story makes explicit is what lies in the shadows of the classical Holmesian text – a subversive rustling of intoxication that breaks onto the surface whenever the narrative is unable to contain it, in the figure of an armchair, of cocaine, of strange unknown powders, and, indeed, in the very figure of the detective and his steadfast chronicler. And not surprisingly, it is a strange and inexplicably obsessive relationship that readers of the Canon enact with textual creation (or the textually created) that gives the lie to Forter’s observation that the joy of the classical detective story.

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103 ‘Typology,’ 46.
lies only in its “Holmesian closure.” If it did, surely those crazy Holmesians would have stopped believing in the sacredness of the Canon by now, would they not?

The Detective and the Critics

“Come, Watson, come!” he cried. “The game is afoot.”

In 1891, a mere four years after the publication of the first Holmes story, A Study in Scarlet, Arthur Conan Doyle decided he had had enough of his detective. Writing to his mother Mary, he said, “I think of slaying Holmes... and winding him up for good and all.” And so it came to pass that in December 1893, upon publication of ‘The Final Problem,’ an adoring public was stunned to learn that Sherlock Holmes had in fact been dead these last two years, perishing in a fatal struggle with his archenemy Professor Moriarty in May 1891 – the two had wrestled on the brink of the Reichenbach Falls, near Meiringen, Switzerland; the professor plunged to his death in the Falls, and Holmes disappeared, presumed dead.

This revelation horrified all of England, it seems. As Leslie Klinger documents it in his very erudite introductory essay to the New Annotated Sherlock Holmes,

young City men that month put mourning crepe on their silk hats or wore black armbands. One anguished correspondent wrote to Conan Doyle: “You brute!” “I was amazed,” Conan Doyle admitted, “at the concern expressed by the public.” The publisher of the Strand Magazine [in which most of the Holmes stories first appeared] described Holmes’s death to his shareholders as the “dreadful event,” and twenty thousand people reportedly cancelled their subscriptions.

Of course, Conan Doyle published what is perhaps Holmes’s greatest case, The Hound of the Baskervilles in 1901, even after he had killed off Holmes, but this was styled as

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105 ‘Abbey Grange,’ 1158. In spite of this phrase being inextricably associated in the public imagination with Holmes, this is the only occasion on which he utters it, paraphrasing quotes from Shakespeare’s The First Part of Henry the Fourth and The Life of Henry the Fifth. As Klinger notes in a humorous aside, that because this phrase is actually uttered by Holmes, “it is therefore one degree more respectable than the popular ‘Elementary, my dear Watson,’ which appears nowhere in the Canon.”

106 Quoted in Leslie S. Klinger, ‘The World of Sherlock Holmes,’ in NASH1, xxxii.

107 Ibid.
a ‘reminiscence’ and set in an uncertain period, presumably before the events of ‘The Final Problem.’ But then, a strange thing happened. Sherlock refused to stay dead.

In September 1903, the *Strand Magazine* announced: “Fortunately, the news of his death, though based on circumstantial evidence which at the time seemed conclusive, turns out to be erroneous.” And the next month, ten years after everyone thought Holmes had died, he returned in ‘The Adventure of the Empty House,’ an event greatly hyped by the *Strand*:

Bold letters at the top of the cover trumpeted “Sherlock Holmes,” with the story title in smaller letters below, and the first page of the story declared “The Return of Sherlock Holmes” in large letters above the title.108

With great fanfare thus the detective returned to active duty once again. It was revealed in ‘The Empty House’ that he had actually survived the fight at Reichenbach and gone into hiding from the vengeance of Moriarty’s gang, travelled the world, and had secretly returned to London in 1894 and resumed his career as a consulting detective. It appears “Conan Doyle and Dr. Watson conspired to suppress this news for nine years, until Holmes relented and Conan Doyle was able to strike a remarkably lucrative deal with the *Strand Magazine* for another set of tales about the celebrated detective,” as Klinger makes us aware.109 Holmes continued to appear in stories until 1927, when the last Holmes volume, *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, was published.

Klinger’s statement, that Conan Doyle and Watson conspired, until Holmes relented, might strike one as somewhat odd. Unlike in Woody Allen films, fictional characters tend to show a marked propensity towards not coming out of the pages of a book and engaging in conspiracies with their author. Yet, Klinger writes his entire lengthy and very learned introduction to what is perhaps the definitive edition of the Canon as if all the stories in it really happened, as if Mr. Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson really lived and breathed the foggy London air in their time. Indeed, he even devotes some serious consideration to

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speculating on whether Holmes ever met Watson’s “literary agent,” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, citing the “widely reported” fact that “Conan Doyle gave illustrator Sidney Paget a cigarette case on the occasion of Paget’s wedding with the inscription ‘From Sherlock Holmes, 1893.’”

What Klinger does in this introduction is a far from uncommon phenomenon in Holmes scholarship. In fact, it’s quite the norm. Indeed:

Some students of the Master Detective contend that he is indeed still among the living. Their principal proof for this contention is the observation that the death of one so famous would not have gone unreported by The Times of London, which has to date published no obituary for Holmes. Others sneer that Holmes was a fictional character. However, such a wild assertion will not be considered in a work as serious as these volumes. In the words of the eminent bookman Vincent Starrett, writing of Holmes, “Only those things the heart believes are true.”

This deliberate self-delusion of existence is what Holmesians call “the Game” (Classical scholar and mystery writer Dorothy L. Sayers, in a Foreword to her 1946 collection of essays, Unpopular Opinions, first called it “the game of applying the principles of ‘Higher Criticism’ to the Sherlock Holmes canon”). It is a game of applying the same methods that scholars of the Bible apply to their object of investigation, to attempt to discover various conditions of the text and its origins. First begun in an essay called ‘Studies in the Literature of Sherlock Holmes’ by Monsignor Ronald A. Knox in 1911, the Game was taken up by Holmes scholars all and sundry soon after this essay was republished in 1928 in Knox’s Essays on Satire. Remarkably enough, it has persisted till date.

Why is this so? Why do so many people, from diverse backgrounds and in diverse professions, from toxicologists to physicians to literature professors, willingly delude themselves into playing the Game? It is perhaps here that we can attempt to speculatively connect the fascination with Holmes’s cocaine (remember, it’s mentioned directly only twice

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110 Klinger, footnote to ‘The World of Sherlock Holmes,’ xxvii.
111 Klinger, footnote to ‘The World of Sherlock Holmes,’ xvii.
in the Canon, but has still managed to grip the public imagination, with most film and television adaptations invariably referencing it at least once; even Holmes scholarship focuses almost obsessively on his “cocaine problem” – see Footnote 60) to the addict’s reluctance to give up the substance of choice, in this case, the text of the Canon. In this case, it is as if the text begins to work as cocaine, overamping the nervous system of the critical response to it, triggering off unrelenting attempts to pin down minutiae, such as, for instance, the quest to establish whether Holmes was a Cambridge man or an Oxonian.¹¹³

The Game signals an unwillingness to arrive at an ending. It echoes both Watson’s dwellings and slurrings, and as such it seems to indicate the desire for both wandering and finding connections – the wandering lies in the attempted retardation of closure by keeping Holmes’s scent alive, while the connections can be found in all the attempts to pinpoint certain facets of Holmes’s life, like which university he attended. Just as Holmes’s cocaine energizes him, stops his mind from stagnating, makes him manic and lets him keep the commonplace of existence at bay, so it seems that the Canon itself acts as a drug for generations of readers and critics, keeping them fascinated with their subject for almost a century. The Game has a similar effect of Holmesians that Irene Adler has on Holmes – it gives its players, those putative detectives, the ultimate high, an unsolvable case. Or, more accurately, an infinitely-solvable case. A case that will never exhaust itself, since clues can be manufactured at all times and for all time. Because this problem (of proving various details of Holmes’s so-called actual existence) involves a field of play consisting of the gestalt relations

¹¹³ So, William Baring-Gould asks this question in Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street: A Life of the World’s First Consulting Detective (he believes Holmes attended both); Dorothy Sayers asks it also in ‘Holmes’s College Career,’ in Unpopular Opinions, 134-147 (she thought he had studied chemistry at Cambridge); W. S. Bristowe asks it in ‘Oxford or Cambridge,’ Sherlock Holmes Journal 4, No. 2 (Spring 1959): 75-76; Trevor H. Hall asks it in ‘Sherlock Holmes’s University and College,’ in Sherlock Holmes: Ten Literary Studies (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1969), 56-85; John Linsenmeyer asks it in ‘Sherlock Holmes’s University – Oxford or Cambridge?’ Baker Street Journal 39, No. 2 (June 1989): 71-74; N. P. Metcalfe asks it in ‘Oxford or Cambridge or Both?’ Baker Street Journal, Christmas Annual (1956): 7-14; he asks it again in ‘Holmes’s University Career – A Reassessment,’ Sherlock Holmes Journal 9, No. 4 (Summer 1970): 125-130; Roger Lancelyn Green asks it in “‘At the University’: Some Thoughts on the Academic Experiences of Mr. Sherlock Holmes,” Sherlock Holmes Journal 9, No. 4 (Summer 1970): 123-124; these are merely the fruits of a cursory search, and it is entirely possible there are many more such investigations.
between reality and fiction, both of which intrude into the other. The metanarrative of the Canon is in a perpetual state of becoming-real, and because fictions can be extended into reality for ever (the only barriers being a lack of time, space, or imagination), the Game is destined to be extended into infinity, an intoxication into everness. The Game is eternally incomplete, and therefore always in a position inviting investigation.

This text-induced hypermania, if one may call it that, can perhaps clue us in to the writerly intoxication of reading that Barthes was speaking of not too far back in this chapter. It is perhaps another middle ground of slurring-and-dwelling, an inchoate space of perpetual existence and purpose, yet also of an ultimate fruitlessness of purpose. A middle ground also, perhaps, between reader and text, i.e., the cocaine-text allows the reader to transcend her merely-readerly position and achieve a closer engagement with the text. This can even be scented in Conan Doyle’s placement of “the reader midway between his two great protagonists,” as John le Carré points out in his charming little introduction to Klinger’s edition of the Canon. He writes:

Holmes the towering genius is miles ahead of us…. But take heart: for we are smarter by a mile than that plodding Dr. Watson! And what is the result? The reader is delightfully trapped between his two champions. Is there anywhere in popular literature a sweeter portrait of what Thomas Mann sonorously called the relationship between the artist and the citizen? In Holmes, we are never allowed to forget the artist’s urge towards self-destruction. Through Watson, we are constantly reminded of our love of social stability.\(^{114}\)

The reader is therefore, for le Carré, always-already positioned within the text in this strangely nebulous manner, like a character who isn’t there. Is it this sense of being an invisible but vital component of the text that makes it so hard for all these generations of critics to stop playing the Game? The text acts like Freud’s miracle drug, refusing to let its hold slip; the critic, always aware of the true nature of the Game (much like the cokehead who knows intimately all the dangers of the habit), must keep playing it incessantly

\(^{114}\) John le Carré, Introduction to *NASHI*, xiv.
nonetheless. Holmes’s mind, rebelling at stagnation, takes to a seven per-cent solution of cocaine; finding a mystery, it transfers its cocaine rush to the thrill of detection (but continues to exhibit all the symptoms of the cocaine). But always it is the next mystery that must be solved, the next fix that must be administered. Perhaps this is why Conan Doyle could never truly kill Holmes off, and why the critics have kept him alive as a man of flesh and blood—“the algebra of need” constantly demands that rumours of Holmes’s death be always greatly exaggerated. And so it seems Watson was wrong when he said, “I had no idea that such individuals exist outside of stories,” because they do, having been dragged out by other minds that also rebel at stagnation. The Canon casts its intoxicatory tentacles over us all, alleviating the commonplace of existence; but then, as the Great Detective himself once remarked, “Depend upon it, there is nothing so unnatural as the commonplace.”
CHAPTER II
SHADOWS, SMOKES AND VAPOURS: HARDBOILED DETOURS

A good story cannot be devised; it has to be distilled.
– Raymond Chandler

Epistemic Uncertainties

During the filming of what eventually became the notoriously incomprehensible 1946 cinematic adaptation of The Big Sleep, Howard Hawks (the director) and Humphrey Bogart (the lead, as cynical wisecracking private eye Philip Marlowe) become embroiled in an argument; to wit, they can’t agree on the identity of one of the (numerous) murderers, or, indeed, whether it is a murder and not a suicide. The character of Owen Taylor, chauffeur to the Sternwood family – the pater familias, the invalid General Sternwood, happens to be Marlowe’s client – is last seen hurtling into the river in his car. How and why this happens, and who the guilty party is, no one is precisely certain of (least of all the screenwriters, who include William Faulkner, Leigh Brackett and Jules Furthman). So Hawks sends off a telegram to Raymond Chandler, the writer of the novel, asking him to enlighten everyone. As Chandler tells it in a letter to his publisher Jamie Hamilton (founder of the publishing house Hamish Hamilton Ltd.):

I remember several years ago when Howard Hawks was making The Big Sleep, the movie, he and Bogart got into an argument as to whether one of the characters was murdered or committed suicide. They sent me a wire... asking me, and dammit I didn’t know either.²

² Raymond Chandler Papers, 105.
In Chandler’s book, one of the barge-men who fish out the car with Taylor’s body in it thinks it’s suicide, and a few pages later, Marlowe asks the District Attorney’s chief investigator, Bernie Ohls, if it was suicide:

“Suicide?” I asked.
“No can tell. He didn’t leave any notes. He had no leave to take the car....”

That’s it. Those are the only two, speculative, references to suicide in the novel, and the chauffeur’s death is more or less forgotten for the rest of the story. Why is this so? What sort of narrative and readerly processes are at work here, that allow us to hail The Big Sleep as one of the great novels (and not just great detective novels) of the 20th century, and yet be comfortable while it so brazenly flouts the very fundamental premise of a detective novel, i.e., that no mysterious death should go unexplained?4

Let’s bear this in mind as we turn to another related instance of epistemic uncertainty, this time in Dashiell Hammett’s seminal work of hardboiled fiction, The Maltese Falcon, and John Huston’s classic cinematic adaptation of the same name. Starring Humphrey Bogart as the frequently cold-hearted private eye Sam Spade, the film was released in 1941 and is often cited as having inaugurated the classic film noir genre; one of the first such citations being in the first book to deal with and define noir as a genre, Etienne Chaumeton and Raymond Borde’s 1955 Panorama du film noir américain 1941–1953: “The Maltese Falcon... has been rightly described by Georges Sadoul as the first in a series....”5

The story begins in San Francisco, circa 1929 (book)/1941 (movie), with one Miss Wonderly, if you must know, walking into the office of Spade and Archer, detective agency.

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Sam Spade and his overenthusiastic partner Miles Archer take Miss Wonderly’s case, which is to tail a certain Floyd Thursby, who seems to have run off with Wonderly’s sister. Archer is murdered that night while following Thursby, Thursby is bumped off a little later, and Spade is implicated as a suspect. The next day, Spade visits Miss Wonderly at her hotel, and soon learns she is not who she pretends to be. Her real name is Brigid O’Shaughnessy and she has no sister; Thursby was an acquaintance/accomplice (we aren’t quite sure which at this point in the tale) who had betrayed her, and it seems she wanted to know of his comings and goings.

In the meantime, Spade is visited by a strange man named Joel Cairo, who suggests a connection between the death of Floyd Thursby and the possible presence in San Francisco of a statuette of a black bird, a statuette Cairo wants Spade to recover for its unnamed ‘owner.’ Afterwards, O’Shaughnessy contacts Spade again, and he casually mentions his encounter with Cairo, which disturbs her a great deal and she insists he arrange a meeting with Cairo.

When the three meet at Spade’s apartment, Cairo offers money for the statuette, but O’Shaughnessy says she does not have it, but knows where it might be. As the two begin to argue, two cops show up, seemingly to question Spade about the two murders. Spade refuses to let them in, but as they are about to leave, a scream comes from the inside. The cops force their way in to find Cairo pointing a pistol at O’Shaughnessy. Spade manages to explain it away as an elaborate prank, and the policemen leave, albeit taking Cairo with them for questioning. Spade tries to get more information out of O’Shaughnessy, who stalls, and they end up in bed together.

The next morning, Spade slips out of the apartment quietly while O’Shaughnessy is still asleep and goes to her hotel room and rummages through it, presumably looking for a clue of some sort. On his way out, he makes it look like an attempted burglary. Various actions transpire after this, but what concerns us immediately is the textual trace of this
particular event (i.e., Spade riffling through O’Shaughnessy’s room) or, rather, the lack of its trace. Because what happens is this – the next time O’Shaughnessy sees Spade, she’s in a right old tizzy (obviously), because, as she informs Spade: “Somebody has been in my apartment.” In the book, Spade attempts to explain it away first as a burglar, then as possibly Cairo, but O’Shaughnessy remains dissatisfied; in the film, all he says is: “Might’ve been Cairo. He wasn’t at the hotel last night, he told me he’d been standing up under a police grilling. I wonder...” The conversation drifts away to the question of finding a new place for O’Shaughnessy to live, which leads to Spade’s secretary, Effie Perine, escorting her to Effie’s own home, only to be given the slip en route.

The interesting bit about all this is that nowhere after this, in either book or film, is this incident referred to again; Brigid O’Shaughnessy never asks about it again, and Spade, who, especially in the book, is often allusive and meandering and who has a long drawn out dialogue with O’Shaughnessy where various threads are explained, never bothers to bring it up and explicate. The incident simply vanishes from their – and thus the text’s – consciousness.

With respect to the book, a case may be made that this omission is not really an omission. The reader, after all, in her (limited) omniscience, is aware of what went on. She knows how Brigid’s room was ransacked, who ransacked it, when it was done, and the reasons for the doing. And perhaps, in the heat of the climax – pun entirely intended – this trifling detail escaped both Brigid’s and Sam’s attention. The viewer of the film, however, has no such roadmap, because we do not see Sam’s actions at all. All we’ve seen is Brigid O’Shaughnessy agitatedly telling Spade that her room’s been broken into, and that “it’s all upside down, every which way.” At first glance and for all we know, Spade may be absolutely correct in speculating onscreen that it was Cairo who broke into Brigid’s room. On

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further reflection, though, this seems fairly implausible, because Sam keeps insisting, rightly, that he’s too much of a pro to let anyone follow him without his knowing it; later on, in the book, he even snaps at his secretary Effie when she suggests he and Brigid may have been followed somewhere:

Spade stopped pacing the floor. He put his hands on his hips and glared at the girl. He addressed her in a loud savage voice: “Nobody followed her. Do you think I’m a God-damned schoolboy? I made sure of it before I put her in the cab, I rode a dozen blocks with her to be more sure, and I checked her another half-dozen blocks after I got out.”

How would Cairo, then, have known where O’Shaughnessy was staying? No, this narrative gap cannot be explained away by speculation. And what’s more, once again we come upon a mystery left unexplained in an exemplary text that belongs to a broad genre in which the most important prerogative is the satisfactory unravelling of the knots of mystery. (*The Maltese Falcon* is also, like *The Big Sleep*, often thought to be not just a great detective novel, but a great novel in general – see, for instance, the Modern Library’s list of the “100 Best Novels” of the 20th century, where it comes in at #56).

These ellipses in the narrative, then, seem to create no ‘flaw’ in the unity of the artworks in question; as shown above, both works are highly regarded, in both their literary and cinematic avatars. These apparent incongruities in no way diminish our enjoyment of the narratives; in fact, they seem to almost slip through the cracks not only of the texts in question, but also through the cracks in the consciousness of the reader. We are now aware of the lack of explanation for the mysterious death in *The Big Sleep* only because of Howard Hawks’s telegram and Chandler’s subsequent retelling of it, and, as far as I can tell, no one has yet spotted the particular inconsistency in *The Maltese Falcon* that is mentioned above. Consequently, we may safely assume that these incongruities do not bother us as readers of

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these texts.\textsuperscript{10} This means – it \textit{must} mean – that there are other, non-narrative, or perhaps more correctly, non-narrative-at-the-level-of-plot, processes at work, processes which possibly lead subterranean existences, and which influence narrative desire and pleasure in somewhat oblique manner. What might these structural subtexts be, and how might they work? To answer these questions, perhaps we need to approach them too in oblique ways, paying attention to, maybe even unearthing, deviations, dissonances and drifts in otherwise smoothly flowing narratives.

\textbf{Falling Beams and Narrative Meanderings}

Roughly a third of the way into \textit{The Maltese Falcon} – the book (Hollywood, it would appear, has little patience for digression) – the reader will stumble onto a remarkable little setpiece that has since come to be known amongst readers, scholars and general hangers-on as the Flitcraft Parable. O’Shaughnessy and Spade have just entered Spade’s apartment and are waiting for Joel Cairo to show up when Spade settles himself into an armchair (remember that armchair that every detective loves?) and starts telling her, “without any preliminary, without an introductory remark of any sort,” a story that seems to have no relevance to anything else that has happened, is happening, or, indeed, will happen to or around them.

This ‘parable’ is about a real-estate agent in Tacoma called Charles Flitcraft, who goes out to have lunch one day and never returns. No one can figure out where he went, or, indeed, why he disappeared. He is fairly well-off, has a loving wife and two children, and no “secret vices, or even...another woman in his life.”\textsuperscript{11}

Well, five years after this, when Spade is working with a big detective agency in Seattle, Mrs. Flitcraft arrives with the information that “somebody had seen a man in

\textsuperscript{10} The appellation ‘reader’ here encompasses any sort of interaction with any sort of text; thus, if the text is a film, then ‘reader’ means ‘viewer.’ In essence, therefore, for the purposes of this chapter, a ‘reader’ of a text is anyone who ‘receives’ the text, in whichever medium.

\textsuperscript{11} Hammett, \textit{The Maltese Falcon}, 62.
Spokane who looked a lot like her husband.” So Spade goes to Spokane to investigate, and tracks down the man in question, who is indeed the missing Mr. Flitcraft, and who has been living in Spokane for the previous couple of years as Charles Pierce. He now has an automobile business that nets him about the same amount of money his work in Tacoma used to, a wife and a son, and his life seems to be fairly close to what it was like before he disappeared from Tacoma. Spade sits down with him and they have a conversation:

Flitcraft had no feeling of guilt. He had left his first family well provided for, and what he had done seemed to him perfectly reasonable. The only thing that bothered him was a doubt that he could make this reasonableness clear to Spade.\(^\text{13}\)

The explanation for his disappearance five years before is simple – “Going to lunch he passed an office-building that was being put up... [when] a beam or something fell eight or ten stories down and smacked the sidewalk alongside him. It brushed pretty close to him, but didn’t touch him.”\(^\text{14}\) This had, it seems, shocked him into the realisation that life could be fragile and haphazard, and that the security and comfort of a middle-class existence could come tumbling down entirely by chance. “Life could be ended for him at random by a falling beam: he would change his life at random by simply going away.”\(^\text{15}\) So away he went, drifting for a few years till he wandered back to the Northwest, where he settled in Spokane and got married, and slowly got back into the same groove of life he had left behind in Tacoma. “But that’s the part of it I always liked,” Spade concludes. “He adjusted himself to beams falling, and then no more of them fell, and he adjusted himself to them not falling.”\(^\text{16}\)

As soon as Spade is done narrating, O’Shaughnessy brings up the question of Cairo, thereby breaking the spell and returning the narrative to its ostensible course, and for the rest of the book, it’s as if the digression never took place. But Spade’s excursion into this

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 63.  
\(^{13}\) Ibid.  
\(^{14}\) Ibid.  
\(^{15}\) Ibid.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid.
existential reflection is remarkable for a number of reasons, and from a number of different perspectives.

**Detours**

“As a story that illustrates the importance of routine in the modern world,” writes Martin Harris in ‘Hammett’s Flitcraft Parable, *The Stepfather*, and the Significance of Falling Beams,’ “the brief Flitcraft parable is itself a very deliberate rupture in the ‘routine’ of *The Maltese Falcon*’s narrative and of its protagonist’s usual *modus operandi*.” 17 How so, you ask? Well, Harris goes on to explain, because “Sam Spade, Hammett’s prototypical hard-boiled detective, is typically shown listening to others’ stories, not telling his own, and when he does speak his reasons for doing so are usually made clear.” 18

Now, digression itself seems to be a structural presence in detective fiction. Dennis Porter, for example, analysing this structural prerogative in *The Pursuit of Crime*, informs us that detective fiction “begins by stimulating desire, [and] proceeds to tease it through a technique of progressive revelation interrupted by systematic digression....” 19 Porter’s “progressive revelation” and “systematic digression” correspond roughly to what we have discussed earlier as “connections” and “wandering.” 20 The Flitcraft Parable, however, is not a structural digression in the sense that Porter uses the term. (An example of a structural digression might be a clue that is a red herring or a false lead). The Parable is a literal digression, and therefore identified by Harris as a “rupture” in the text. It is not a wandering of the narrative but a wandering in it, and it is clearly identified as such, being vocalised as a digression. Thus, in a text that has the act of “systematic digression” built into its very DNA,

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18 Ibid.
20 See Chapter 1 of this dissertation, ‘Pipe Dreams and Puncture Marks: Holmesian Highs and Lows.’
the Flitcraft Parable functions as a meta-digression, especially because it plays around with the interplay of the voice of the hardboiled detective and the reader’s expectations of genre by creating a narrative time-warp that puts the brakes abruptly on a steadily escalating narrative of suspense. The digression also creates a co-existent space that is not homologous to the space of the narrative – San Francisco, the falcon, a partner’s murder, nothing is relevant to the digression. It thus creates in the text a Foucauldian heterotopia, an “other space” where “discontinuity prevails – facilitating... (counter)histories and divided identities.... Such counter-sites can be most productively viewed as a history of crises.”21 The digression into the Flitcraft Parable vocalises certain crises in the body of the text, affectively bringing to our attention the frictions that exist here. But what are these frictions, and what have they to do with the intoxicated text?

**Voice and Voiceover**

Joan Copjec, in writing about ‘The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in Film Noir,’ mentions the fact that “one feature of film noir... is the voice-over narration, which definitively links the hero to speech and hence, we would suppose, to community.”22 This notion of the voiceover being a fairly widely acknowledged characteristic of noir (and therefore of hardboiled fiction, which belongs in a similar discursive realm),23 perhaps we should look at the way it functions in The Maltese Falcon, and especially in the Flitcraft Parable.

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The Maltese Falcon, unlike much hardboiled fiction, does not employ a first-person narrative. This may be, as some critics like Sinda Gregory have thought, in order to “underscore the mystery surrounding the detective” which, for Gregory, fits into the larger context of Hammett’s work, with its “declaration of the omnipresence of mystery and the failure of human effort (on the part of both the reader and the detective) to ever dispel it.” The Flitcraft Parable may therefore be seen as some sort of brief extra-textual excursion into a first-person ‘voiceover.’ It is indeed the cinematic function of the voiceover that this little straying performs, even though very little of it is narrated in Spade’s first-person voice. The Flitcraft Parable causes a radical break in the flow of an otherwise breathless narrative in which event after event and “progressive revelation” after “systematic digression” keeps tumbling over one another. To this action Spade supplies a pause for breath, thereby creating this heterotopic narrative space, the space of the voiceover.

“However contiguous it is with the diegetic space, the space of the voice-over is nevertheless radically heterogeneous to it.” Copjec is, of course, talking about film noir, but her point seems to be equally valid for any literary text that functions in a similar discursive mode. By creating these two separates spaces, the narrative keeps a certain kind of cognitive dissonance at bay. There are two opposing and opposed realities: one, that the detective is in complete control of the narrative, which will be resolved because it must be resolved, because such is the way of the text; the other, that the detective has absolutely no clue about anything going on around him – for all he knows, everything might as well come together by chance. Think, for instance, of a typical Agatha Christie narrative; let us take for our purposes the

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24 One notable non-user of the hardboiled first-person narrative is Chester Himes.
26 Ibid., 88.
27 For an interesting analysis of The Maltese Falcon’s narrative structure, see Peter J. Rabinowitz, “‘How Did You Know He Licked His Lips?’: Second Person Knowledge and First Person Power in The Maltese Falcon,” in Understanding Narrative, eds. James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), 157-177. Here, Rabnowitz analyses the work as one “in which the plot consists not of events, but of continual acts of narrativizing and renarrativizing about events that may or may not have taken place” (161).
1941 novel *Evil Under the Sun*, although many others will suffice equally. In the manner of many of Christie’s tales, Hercule Poirot, the odd little Belgian detective, has gathered the dramatis personae together for the denouement. He starts off by articulating one possible version of events that may have led to the crime; this version seems to clearly implicate two specific people in his audience, Captain Marshall and Rosamund Darnley, who protest this implication. Poirot immediately does a volte-face:

“Later, you moved your typewriter to the table under the mirror so as to substantiate your story – but it was too late. I was aware both you and Miss Darnley had lied.”

Rosamund Darnley spoke. Her voice was low and clear. She said: “How devilishly ingenious you are!”

Hercule Poirot said, raising his voice: “But not so devilish and so ingenious as the man who killed Arlena Marshall!”

Saying which, Poirot implicates two other members of his audience! Heated declarations of innocence ensue, Poirot persists, and the criminal loses his cool and tries to strangle the detective, thereby in essence confessing.

Here, Poirot comes to certain conclusions based on vague categories – in the victim he sees a “passion for men, a predestined prey for an unscrupulous man of a certain type”; in the murderer, “with his good looks, his easy assurance, his undeniable charm for women, I recognized at once that type” – and ultimately arrives at a solution based on exciting the criminal into confessing. Here, epistemology breaks down, and it is as if the criminal himself, and not the detective, has solved the problem.

To come back to *The Maltese Falcon* then, it is this strange invisible awareness of the ultimately aleatory nature of the resolution of narrative conflict between knowing and not knowing which leads to a so-called ‘solution’ to the problem posed (in this case, the recovery of a fabled sculpted bird of unimaginable value), and it is this that is brought to the surface in

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29 Agatha Christie, ‘*Evil Under the Sun: Conclusion,*’ serialized in *Collier’s Weekly* Volume 104 (February 22, 1941), 16.
the Flitcraft Parable. The voiceover, because it is in this strange “other space,” as Foucault has termed it, expresses the point at which cracks begin to appear in the narrator’s relationship to and hitherto unquestioned supreme connection with the reality in the text. “The voice-over narration,” says Copjec, “serves less to describe or attempt to describe the world that the narrator inhabits than to present that world at the point where he is abstracted from it.” In so doing, it marks an alienation of the passive narrative voice, separated from any historical or spatial markers with respect to who it is attached to – the absolute degree of the narrative voice, so to speak – from the chain of events, historical and spatial, in the narrative that is responsible for the existence of this voice. Spade’s voice sheds its universality at this point and becomes a marker of a failure of meaning. Which is to say his passive ‘voiceover,’ even though most of it is in the third person, is categorically not commentary, and the words no longer carry their literal – universal – meanings. Well, that is not entirely correct, perhaps. They do carry their universal meanings, but only to the point of conveying a message, facilitating communication. There is another separate register that the telling of this ‘parable’ activates, and that is why it can be said to operate along the lines of a cinematic voiceover. This is the register of desire, of the excess of meaning that this sudden digression depicts – the passive voiceover is perhaps an indicator of Spade’s own unknown desire for interpretation (“interpretation which, Lacan says, is desire... desire does not impose a bias but supposes a gap.... Interpretation means that evidence tells us everything but how to read it.”) which suddenly breaks out of an otherwise impassive textual surface. It thus exposes what Roland Barthes calls a friction between the encounter of language and voice, i.e., the grain of the voice.

30 Ibid.
The grain of Spade’s voice in this particular event – or, rather, the grain of his passive voice – does not contain substance, but exists merely as the “friction” between the words that come out his mouth (presumably) and the excess of meaning they create in the context of the parallel narrative of crime and detection related to the avian statuette. This can happen, possibly, only because his words are not subsumed under the category of ‘dialogue’ but appear as a first-person digression that is not in the first person, even though they are ostensibly an on-screen narration, so to speak. This results in making the reader aware that there exists a separate space of non-knowledge about which she can only conjecture, but in which there will always be knowledge remained, an excess of meaning. To our knowledge, and, implicitly, as Spade seems to acknowledge, to the detective’s knowledge, an unknown ‘X’ – “the mark of our nonknowledge,” as Copjec puts it33 – needs always to be added. After all, what does the Flitcraft Parable mean? Why does it intrude suddenly on an already existing tale of heady suspense? We can only suspect, speculate, theorise. And in so doing, our own act of conjecture in turn leads us to interpret, thus transforming our relation with the narrative at this point into one of desire. I do not know if this is the point of the Flitcraft Parable, but it is certainly a function of it. The Parable, it seems, is one more instance of an epistemic uncertainty, though not in the same way as the barely-remembered death (suicide? bloody murder? drunken accident?) of the chauffeur Owen Taylor in The Big Sleep, nor even in the way of the case of Brigid’s burgled rooms earlier in The Maltese Falcon itself, which creates a gap in epistemic transmission. Those uncertainties operate as uncertainties in the text that vanish, leaving vague traces behind. The Flitcraft Parable, on the other hand, creates an uncertainty in the reader. Indeed, this uncharacteristic and fairly long digression from the usually terse Spade hardly brushes Brigid O’Shaughnessy’s consciousness; at the conclusion of Spade’s telling, she peremptorily, and perhaps

sarcastically, remarks, “How perfectly fascinating,” before going back to talking about Joel Cairo. In other words, one actual textually present character barely acknowledges the Parable and/or its telling, while the other textual presence which narrates it is almost effaced during the narration (because of the passive voice in which the tale is told) as well as immediately before and after the narration (there is, after all, neither preamble nor coda to Spade’s telling of the Parable). The grain of the voice therefore “surfaces alongside the diegetic reality,” to put Copjec’s words to work again, of the situation the characters in the text are in; “it materializes rather that which can never be incorporated into the narrative.” And it makes desiring subjects out of us, the readers. But is that the point of the Parable? Is there even one?

Pointed or Pointless?

“Now, clearly,” writes John T. Irwin in ‘Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them: Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon,*’ “one of the structural purposes of Flitcraft’s story in the novel, this tale that Spade tells Brigid while they are alone together in his apartment waiting for Joel Cairo to arrive, is that it foreshadows the novel’s final scene between Spade and Brigid, in which they are again alone together in his apartment, this time waiting for the police to arrive, and Spade explains to her in great detail why he is going to turn her in for Miles Archer’s murder.” Structurally, then, it appears roughly in the middle of the text and creates an invisible anchor for one of two climactic events to follow (the other climactic event being the ultimate unveiling of the statuette and the events leading up to it, when all the main characters are assembled in Spade’s apartment for the duration of a whole night).

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34 Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon,* 64.
35 Copjec, ‘The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal,’ 188.
But opinions begin to diverge, and wildly so, when it comes to interpreting the
digression. Steven Marcus, for instance, in his influential 1974 reading of the Parable in
‘Dashiell Hammett and the Continental Op,’ interpreted it as “the most important or central
moment in the entire novel” (and “one of the central moments in all of Hammett’s
writing”), and saw in it an existential turmoil about “the ethical irrationality of existence,
the ethical unintelligibility of the world.” For Marcus, the lesson implicit in the Flitcraft
Parable is that “despite everything we have learned and everything we know men will persist
in behaving and trying to behave sanely, rationally, sensibly, and responsibly [. . .] even when
we know that there is no logical or metaphysical, no discoverable or demonstrable reason for
doing so.” Marcus then notes that Flitcraft commits a “random” act – abruptly leaving his
wife and family and home behind in Tacoma – to get in step with his sudden epiphany about
the randomness of the world, only to fall back into the old way of things a few years later. “It
is this sense of sustained contradiction that is close to the center – or to one of the centers – of
Hammett’s work. The contradiction is not ethical alone; it is metaphysical as well. And it is
not merely sustained; it is sustained with pleasure.”

Marcus’s reading has since tended to linger over much of the discussion about the
Flitcraft Parable. For instance, two years later, in 1976, Robert Porfirio’s article in Sight and
Sound entitled ‘No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir’ made the claim that what
the Flitcraft story “reveals is that Spade is by nature an existentialist, with a strong conception
of the randomness of existence.”

The divergence of critical opinion regarding the Parable can be seen in the same year,
1976, when John Cawelti’s Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and
Popular Culture was published. Cawelti offered a slightly different reading of the Flitcraft
Parable.
Parable in his chapter on ‘Hammett, Chandler, and Spillane,’ which can be said to have initiated a counter-tradition of finding far more ambiguity in the Parable than Marcus’s existential interpretation. Cawelti also implied the structural connections between this incident and the final scene between Spade and Brigid, but found great ambiguity in the fact that while both Flitcraft and Spade survive their respective falling beams and act decisively as a result, they are both left without a proper humane resolution:

Flitcraft goes back to the same respectable middle-class life that he had so suddenly awakened from; Spade returns to his shabby office, having sent the woman he loves off to prison. The price of survival would seem to be a terrible emptiness, a restriction of human possibilities, a cynical rejection of deeper emotion and commitment. [...] The existentialist believes that recognizing the irrationality and absurdity of the universe can be the prelude to a new spiritual depth. Through such a realization man can pass beyond despair to a freely chosen moral responsibility that gives meaning to an otherwise ridiculous and empty existence. The Flitcraft parable seems to come out at the other end. Only a rejection of all emotional and moral ties can help survive in a treacherous world.  

41

There you have it. Existential excursion, or ambiguous perambulation? If it is the former, then it has a delicately precise point. If the latter, then it would seem to be rather a pointless wandering, unless it were functioning in some accrued-over-readerly-time manner to give evidence of the moral aesthetic of Hammett’s universe. Caught in the (Maltese?) talons of this epistemological quandary, perhaps we could do worse than to resign ourselves to our fate as desiring subjects, give in to the interpretive act, and look at the structural implications of the Parable to the narrative of The Maltese Falcon as Irwin has underlined them.

The falling beam, thinks Irwin, allows Flitcraft to perceive the difference between two distinct ontological modes. One is life-as-being, living defined as the passage through time and space of an individual consciousness. The other is life-as-having, life as an accruing of the things of living, “the accumulation of people, property, habits, whatnot, by an individual

during the course of his existence.”\textsuperscript{42} This distinction between life-as-being and life-as-having is “part of the point of the Flitcraft story,” thinks Irwin.\textsuperscript{43} If Flitcraft is a Freudian, and he well may be, it is at this point that he decides to take control of the trauma of the falling beam in order to stop it from overpowering him. Therefore, according to Freud, he would have to repeat the traumatic experience “unpleasurable though it was, as a game,” till he can take “an active part” in it and thereby reverse his role in his relation to the original trauma.\textsuperscript{44} To this end, he purposely replays the trauma of almost losing his life-as-being by attempting to lose his life-as-having. “He leaves all those people, things, and habits that had previously constituted his life. He symbolically replays his own death and thus seems to regain active control of his own fate.”\textsuperscript{45} Irwin therefore sees the interplay of three concepts ingrained in this falling beam – repetition (of the traumatic event), singularity (of death, barely avoided and sought thereafter in other forms), and the exceptional (the random event of the beam falling). He furthermore sees this constellation as going beyond the Flitcraft Parable and suffusing the entire narrative of \textit{The Maltese Falcon} with respect to Spade’s actions and his seeming worldview and (work) ethic.

Spade, by turning Brigid in to the police at the end, appears to have divided the idea of life into not just two but three separate modes; in addition to life-as-being and life-as-having, he perhaps conceives of it primarily as a life-as-doing, life defined by actions and not by the accumulation of the vestments of living. This would explain his rejection of what is quite possibly love or something tending towards it, a rejection of a life-as-having, in favour of his life-as-doing.\textsuperscript{46} It would also tie in with Cawelti’s view that “the job is the source of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{42} Irwin, 346.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 362.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Sigmund Freud, \textit{Beyond the Pleasure Principle} (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1972), 35. Quoted in Irwin, 347.
  \item \textsuperscript{45} Irwin, 347.
  \item \textsuperscript{46} Admittedly, Irwin’s categories are a little tenuous. It can be argued, for example, that life-as-having is a more refined and later stage of life-as-doing, in that our actions often result in our picking up things along the way, like friends, habits, etc. This is not always the case, of course; sometimes, life is unmitigatedly random. For our
value and meaning for Hammett’s hard-boiled hero.” And, indeed, among the seven or eight reasons Spade gives Brigid for deciding to turn her over to the authorities, the first three directly address “the job,” as it were:

Listen. When a man’s partner is killed he’s supposed to do something about it. It doesn’t make any difference what you thought of him. He was your partner and you’re supposed to do something about it. Then it happens we were in the detective business. Well, when one of your organization gets killed it’s bad business to let the killer get away with it. It’s bad all around – bad for the one organization, bad for every detective everywhere. Third, I’m a detective and expecting me to run criminals down and let them go free is like asking a dog to catch a rabbit and let it go. It can be done, all right, and sometimes it is done, but it’s not the natural thing. “I’m a detective,” Spade keeps reiterating. When the morning after he turns Brigid over, his secretary Effie asks him, “You did that, Sam, to her?” he replies “Your Sam’s a detective.” This way of conceptualising identity and a life lived connects Spade to Flitcraft, not in their own conclusions of what it means to live or even the way they arrive at these conclusions, which are both different, but in Spade’s recognition of this central metaphysical problem as one that is all-consuming and eternal. He therefore understands that Flitcraft’s attempt to end his life-as-having in order to escape the trauma of random acts cannot be prolonged indefinitely. Which is why Flitcraft’s random-action response to the random act of a falling beam ultimately results in a reaccumulation of the life he had left behind. His escape, as Spade understands it, can only be “a temporary psychological or philosophical reply to ‘a new glimpse of life’”; only the singularity of death can truly allow any permanent escape from the eternal recurrence of random events. The “new glimpse of life” that Flitcraft speaks of is brought about by what, in Irwin’s terms, is the exceptional event of the random falling beam. It is here that Spade’s structural worldview seems to obliquely intersect with that of that other, earlier, detective, perhaps the detective, Sherlock Holmes.

discussion, however, these categories are interesting ways of thinking through the seeming pointlessness of the Flitcraft Parable and its place in the rest of the *Falcon* narrative. So we’ll quibble over details another day.

47 Cawelti, 168.
49 Ibid., 216.
50 Irwin, 368.
Other Forms of Boredom Advertised as Poetry

In my previous chapter, I have written of how Holmes dreads “the commonplace of existence.” In his attempt to stave off what Wallace Stevens once called “the celestial ennui of apartments” he takes to cocaine, and from then on to other intoxicants more abstract and less easily weaned off, like the stimulation of the case and the thrill of the chase; the job, so to speak. Yet Holmes is always aware of the transitory nature of his high; he does not fail to recognise at the end of ‘The Red-Headed League,’ for example, that the exceptional event that causes a rupture in the repetitive is ephemeral – the return of the repetitive is mandated within the very structure of the exceptional, after all:

“It [the act of reasoning the puzzle of the case out] saved me from ennui,” he answered, yawning. “Alas! I already feel it closing in upon me. My life is spent in one long effort to escape from the commonplaces of existence. These little problems help me to do so.”

Aside: Do note, Holmes also extols ‘the job’ immediately after this, when he too implies a conception of life as life-as-doing, not -as-being or -as-having, (mis)quoting Flaubert in an attempt to extract some sense of meaning from his ‘work.’ “‘L’homme c’est rien–l’oeuvre c’est tout, ’” he says; the man is nothing, the work is everything.

Spade, too, is assailed by the commonplaces of existence, and perhaps feels them as sharply as Holmes does, albeit more laconically. Irwin feels this is the true reason for Spade’s “wild and unpredictable” behaviour, so that he can disturb the repetitive surface of actions-in-life to keep his enemies off balance, engaging in such behaviour only occasionally to keep the exceptional from becoming repeated and expected.

51 See Chapter 1 of this dissertation, ‘Pipe Dreams and Puncture Marks: Holmesian Highs and Lows.’
53 The original quotation, incidentally, is “l’Homme n’est Rien l’Œuvre Tout.”
54 Brigid remarks many times on Spade’s wild unpredictability. For instance, near the end of the book, when Spade tells Brigid he plans to turn her over to the police, she says, “You know you do such wild and unpredictable things that –” (211). This connects with an earlier incident in the story, the bit right after Spade is done narrating the Flitcraft Parable when Cairo shows up and gets into an argument with Brigid that coincidentally turns violent just when the cops show up at Spade’s door. Spade leaves Brigid inside holding a
The existential boredom that Spade, like Holmes, feels gnawing at him eternally is thus alleviated through exceptional acts—“wild and unpredictable behaviour,” or a once-in-a-lifetime adventure involving the pursuit of a fabled statue that may or may not be real, or falling in love with a dangerous and beautiful woman, which may or may not result in death. However, Spade is almost certainly aware that these exceptional events or actions, if repeated too often or prolonged indefinitely, will gradually become repetitive and tedious, just as Flitcraft’s attempt to incorporate the exceptional in his life in order to get “into step with life” ends up in a repetitive circle. In Irwin’s astute analysis, the ending of the book is indicative of Spade’s extreme self-awareness of and resignation to the repetition-singularity-exceptionality constellation. While the film ends with the police taking Brigid away (they get into an elevator, the grates shut, and the elevator can be seen going down as police detective Polhaus and Spade, carrying the Falcon, descend the stairs), the ending of the book is far more interesting, if less dramatic. In the book, it is the morning after the climactic events have occurred, and Spade has just walked in and exchanged some pointed words with Effie when:

The corridor-door’s knob rattled. Effie Perrine turned quickly and went into the outer office, shutting the door behind her. When she came in again she shut it behind her.

She said in a small flat voice: “Iva is here.”

Spade, looking at his desk, nodded almost imperceptibly. “Yes,” he said, and shivered. “Well, send her in.”

Iva is, of course, Spade’s late partner Miles Archer’s widow, with whom Spade had been having an affair before the events of the novel and who is something of a spectral gun on Cairo while he goes to the door to send the police away. While he’s talking to them, however, sounds of a scuffle followed by Cairo’s screams for help reach them, and the cops make their way in. And Spade, in order to keep them all from being arrested, manufactures an incredibly goofy story. The story is so crazy that the cops become uncertain enough about whether they’re being made fools of and eventually leave. Brigid then refers to him as “wild and unpredictable” many times, culminating in Spade’s telling her that his “way of learning is to heave a wild and unpredictable monkey-wrench into the machinery.” (86)

One of the reasons Spade gives for not saving Brigid is that “since I’ve also got something on you, I couldn’t be sure you wouldn’t decide to shoot a hole in me some day.” (214)

Hammett, The Maltese Falcon, 64.

Ibid., 217.
presence throughout the novel. After her husband’s death, she repeatedly tries to seek out Spade, believing perhaps now their affair might lead to something more permanent, but Spade keeps brushing her off. Now, at the novel’s conclusion, she returns to Spade’s office. As Irwin writes:

And now with the extraordinary case of the Maltese falcon and the affair with Brigid over, repetition recaptures Spade in both the professional and the personal spheres: he returns to work at his office the next morning, and his former lover walks back into his life – Spade’s shiver of revulsion suggesting that, faute de mieux, he will resume their liaison.58 It is almost as if Spade’s “shiver of revulsion” mirrors Holmes’s yawn at the end of ‘The Red-Headed League.’ And perhaps this is the strange, almost invisible function of the Flitcraft Parable, to let emanate from the text brief scintillations of the value of the exceptional event, but also to give a sense of the ultimate pointlessness of such events. In this, it is at the point of his narration of the Parable that Spade realises... maybe ‘realises’ is too strong. No, it is at this point that perhaps Spade begins to sense in an almost intangible way that the true value of the black bird lies more in its myth, its narrated history, than in its material being. And it might be this vague whiff in the air that leads him to keep referring to the Falcon as “the dingus.” Tracing its lineage back to the Dutch word ding, meaning ‘thing,’ Spade’s usage of the word as a placeholder for the statuette reduces it, in its material form, to just another thing, which ultimately it does turn out to be. Interestingly, the last line of the film, spoken by Spade, describes the statuette as “the stuff that dreams are made of,” which is a further resonance of the idea that the value of the Falcon exists purely in a mythical realm of discourse and narrativity. Separated from this narrativising, it is merely a dingus. Yet, for Spade, that is precisely the point of it all. There might, theoretically, be many such statuettes, but as long as the story of the Falcon sets forth only one, it becomes of incalculable value, not merely in terms of money or lives, but in its thereby becoming an exceptional story. In this,

58 Irwin, 369.
Spade seems to be acutely aware of the nature of the Falcon as a MacGuffin and a MacGuffin only, but gives in to the thrill of its chase nonetheless because of its exceptionality, its promise of elevating him, if only for a brief period of time, out of his humdrum office and the staid affair with Iva of which he appears to be supremely tired.

Even Casper Gutman, Joel Cairo’s portly associate and the main, albeit rather amusing, villain of the piece (“the Fat Man,” played memorably by Sydney Greenstreet in John Huston’s film version), chooses the statuette over his hired gun Wilmer near the end by noting the exceptionality of the idea of the Falcon:

Gutman smiled benignly at him and said: “Well, Wilmer, I’m sorry indeed to lose you, and I want you to know that I couldn’t be any fonder of you if you were my own son; but – well, by Gad! – if you lose a son it’s possible to get another – and there’s only one Maltese falcon.”[Italics mine]

So perhaps these are some of the oblique resonances and purposes of Spade’s recounting of the Flitcraft Parable. But it becomes important to our discussion of the intoxicated narrative – finally! – because of one simple little detail, or, rather, the absence of a little detail. Throughout his narration, Spade neither smokes nor drinks. Not even one cigarette, and not a single drink. In the context of his incidental actions throughout the rest of the novel, this is quite remarkable.

**Thank You for Not Smoking**

From the beginning of *The Maltese Falcon*, Spade is almost constantly smoking. The very first description of his office, for instance, on the second page of Chapter 1 in my edition (the first page in most others) is built around the components of smoking; a “limp cigarette

59 The ‘MacGuffin’ is Hitchcock’s term “for the key element of any suspense story.” See Alfred Hitchcock, *Hitchcock on Hitchcock: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1997), 124. Slavoj Žižek defines it as “the pure pretext whose sole role is to set the story in motion but which is in itself ‘nothing at all’ – the only significance of the MacGuffin lies in the fact that it has some significance for the characters – that it must seem to be of vital importance to them.” See Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 163.

smolder[s]” in a “brass tray filled with the remains of limp cigarettes,” there are “grey flakes of cigarette-ash” on everything, and Miss Wonderly’s (yet to transform into the dangerous Brigid O’Shaughnessy) first focus in the office is on these flakes that “twitch and crawl” in a current of air.\textsuperscript{61} In the entirety of the novel, Spade is described rolling and smoking cigarettes on no less than twenty three occasions. Again, these are only the instances he is explicitly shown making his cigarettes. In addition to these, he is shown buying tobacco, “two sacks of Bull Durham,” once,\textsuperscript{62} as well as smoking (with no mention of having rolled the cigarettes) a further couple of times. There is also an extended scene that takes place in Spade’s office the morning after Miles’s murder, where Effie rolls a cigarette for a still-disoriented Spade. Indeed, there are only two scenarios in the whole novel where Spade is indoors and not smoking (there are a few other scenes where he is shown not smoking, but in these he is either engaged in strenuous physical activity or in surreptitious actions like breaking and entering that require him to keep his own trace absent). These are, chronologically, the instance of his recounting of the Flitcraft Parable, and the climactic scene with Brigid O’Shaughnessy. In view of the structural links we have discovered between these two sequences, this non-smoking might turn out to be fairly significant.

\textbf{Smoking Section}

Before we analyse these two instances of non-smoking, however, a few points need to be made about the congruence of the iconography of smoking and the hardboiled detective. It is a truth universally acknowledged that a hardboiled detective must be in possession of a trenchcoat, a quick wit, an alcohol problem, a tight lip, and a cigarette dangling from said lip. While our association of the trenchcoat with the private eye is almost certainly a result of the imagery of \textit{film noir}, the other accoutrements of the gumshoe are by and large noticeable in

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 52
much of hardboiled fiction. Of these, the cigarette dangling from the detective’s lips has become a ubiquitous image in our cultural imaginary, thanks in no small part due to the eternal association of Humphrey Bogart as the archetypal noir detective, whose last name has even passed into popular culture to imply the practice of selfishly appropriating a cigarette (chiefly a marijuana cigarette) without passing it around – hear, for instance, the Fraternity of Man song ‘Don’t Bogart Me,’ with its “Don’t bogart that joint, my friend/Pass it on to me.” But, of course, Bogart’s image is a result directly of the literary characters he portrays on screen, Sam Spade not least among them, whose smoking habit can in turn almost certainly be traced back to Holmes and his ever present meerschaum pipe.

So Spade smokes continually. His smoking, interestingly, often coincides with certain nodal points in the narrative where the story takes a turn because some new information has been supplied to him (and by extension, to us, the readers), but usually not because of his actions. That is, most of the times he’s seen smoking, he is being acted upon, or else he is a sort of interested observer but not really involved in the action. For instance, when he’s been called in to the D.A.’s office for questioning, or when Gutman tells him the story of the Maltese Falcon and then knocks him out by slipping him a mickey (in this instance he’s smoking a cigar, one of Gutman’s), he’s smoking. Or when Brigid tells him her version of events leading up to everyone’s landing in San Francisco on the trail of the Falcon. Similarly, when he hears of his partner’s death, he starts to roll a cigarette, as a re-action.

But a case can be made that perhaps it is this last bit of information that is most significant in terms of the continuation of the narrative. It is because of Miles’s murder, which hits closest to Spade’s conception of life-as-work, i.e., the death of his professional partner on a job that was his to do too, that he eventually turns Brigid in, and how he realises her for the murderer that she is. It is at this point, possibly, and, indeed, this early on in the narrative, that realisation actually dawns on him that Brigid might be Miles’s murderer. We
can sense this when, in his climactic scene with Brigid, in the face of her asserting that she
wouldn’t have given Miles and Spade the fake assignment she did at the beginning of the
novel had she known Floyd Thursby would kill Miles (“I didn’t for a minute think he’d shoot
him like that”\textsuperscript{63}), Spade tells her he knows Thursby didn’t shoot Miles, and it must have been
Brigid herself – “Miles hadn’t many brains, but, Christ! he had too many years’ experience as
a detective to be caught like that by the man he was shadowing.... [Thursby] couldn’t have
tricked Miles into an alley like that.... But he’d’ve gone up there with you, angel.... He was
just dumb enough for that. He’d’ve looked you up and down and licked his lips... and then
you could’ve stood as close to him as you liked in the dark and put a hole through him....”\textsuperscript{64}

So, when he gets a phone call from the police late at night informing him of Miles’s
murder and something presumably already starts clicking into place in his head, Spade’s act
of rolling a cigarette is described in precise detail:

Spade’s thick fingers made a cigarette with deliberate care, sifting a measured
quantity of tan flakes down into curved paper, spreading the flakes so that they lay
equal at the ends with a slight depression in the middle, thumbs rolling the paper’s
inner edge down and up under the outer edge as forefingers pressed it over, thumbs
and fingers sliding to the paper cylinder’s ends to hold it even while tongue licked the
flap, left forefinger and thumb pinching their end while right forefinger and thumb
smoothed the damp seam, right forefinger and thumb twisting their end and lifting the
other to Spade’s mouth.

He picked up the pigskin and nickel lighter that had fallen to the floor,
manipulated it, and with the cigarette burning in a corner of his mouth stood up.\textsuperscript{65}

Here is the one major difference, then, between Holmes’s pipe-smoking and Spade’s
cigarettes. The former does it to inspire action/intellection (“It is quite the three pipe
problem,” he tells Watson in ‘The Red-Headed League,’ “and I beg that you won’t speak to
me for fifty minutes”), whereas the latter does it when he has already absorbed narrativized

\textsuperscript{63} Hammett, \textit{The Maltese Falcon}, 208.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 208-9.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 12.
fragments of knowledge. The act of rolling/smoking his cigarette then becomes for Spade almost an action signifying post-coital bliss after the climax of knowledge has dawned.

So, cigarettes are an important part of Spade’s life. But this in itself is unremarkable; like any addict, he needs his nicotine. More importantly though, Spade’s cigarettes signify him as a subject desiring temporary exception from the repetitive routine of existence. This collapsing of desire into the act of smoking has strong roots in the artistic hedonism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Remember, for instance, Oscar Wilde’s famous passage in The Picture of Dorian Gray – “You must have a cigarette. A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied.” Here too there is that conflation of desire (it leaves one unsatisfied, after all, and is therefore still redolent of wanting) with a cigarette. But his smoking habit is not just a signifier of Spade’s status as a desiring subject; in the context of the narrative, it is a signifier of his status as the only desiring subject.

It is interesting that throughout the text, Spade is the only character who smokes cigarettes. Gutman, the only other character who smokes diegetically, is shown smoking cigars, of course, but there is a key difference. Cigars were the preferred technology of smoking till the very early twentieth century (chewing tobacco was far and away the most popular method of ingesting tobacco at the time, incidentally), far more ubiquitous than cigarettes. “As late as 1904,” writes Allan Brandt in The Cigarette Century, “cigarettes still constituted only approximately 5 percent of the American market in tobacco products.” In 1881, however, James Bonsack, a Virginian and an inventor, came up with a rolling machine capable of producing 200 cigarettes a minute, as many as a skilled hand roller could roll in an hour. This revolutionised the cigarette industry and, significantly, allowed it to be turned into

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66 The U.S. Surgeon General has claimed that nicotine is “the most addictive substance used by humans.” See Carol S. North and Sean H. Yutzy, Goodwin and Guze’s Psychiatric Diagnosis (6th Edition) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 315.
a mass cultural commodity. Unlike cigars, which held all the trappings of elitism and had become “a powerful symbol of social authority and power,” cigarettes suddenly became a mass produced commodity and, therefore, one consumed *en masse* in a burgeoning consumer-driven economy. Cigar production, on the other hand, did not quickly embrace machinery. As an older, bigger, and more successful industry, its workers led in the fight for unionization. These unions now fought with considerable success against the introduction of machines that would replace their workers. Further, the cigar industry, consisting of many small local firms rarely commanded the necessary capital to invest in such technological improvements. This contrast between the cigar and the cigarette would soon represent the historical shifts typified by the twentieth century.

Cigarettes came to symbolize the modern, the forward-looking, as opposed to the past that cigars represented. Indeed, even the Wilde passage quoted above is an exhortation to smoke a cigarette in clear opposition to a cigar (“Basil, I can’t allow you to smoke cigars. You must have a cigarette”). Gutman’s cigars thus reek of perceptions of elitism, regression, social authority and power, but Spade’s cigarettes give out the whiff of a more mass appeal and the ability to look forward. (Knowing Dashiell Hammett’s working-class sympathies – he was a member of the American Communist Party from the late 1930s and was imprisoned and blacklisted during the Communist witch-hunts of the ’50s – it might not even be entirely ludicrous to suppose that these associations are meant intentionally to resonate with the reader). At the same time, Spade does not smoke readymade cigarettes, but rolls his own, a fact that probably separates him from ‘the masses,’ so to speak, and renders him as a ‘special’ character, thereby keeping alive his unique appeal as a hardboiled protagonist.

Mention ought also to be made of Brigid O’Shaughnessy in this context. When she first enters Spade and Archer’s office, the air is thick with smoke and twirling ashes, and, interestingly, all the cigarettes around Spade are insistently described as “limp” – “On

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68 Ibid., 25.
69 Ibid., 30.
Spade’s desk a limp cigarette smoldered in a brass tray filled with the remains of limp cigarettes”70 [italics mine]. The next time we see her with a cigarette, she’s just been informed that Joel Cairo is in town looking for the Falcon. The moment Spade tells her he’s been offered five thousand dollars by Cairo for the black bird, “her teeth tore the end of her cigarette”71 [italics mine]. Limp cigarettes and torn cigarettes are Brigid’s bequest to the language and perceptions of smoking in the novel, and while it may be tempting to read this as some sort of symbol of emasculation (which it well may be, Brigid obviously being the traditional femme fatale in such kinds of narratives), the way in which the imagery of cigarettes has been operating here would seem to suggest otherwise. Cigarettes in The Maltese Falcon perform the sublime function of expressing vague impressions of character, constructing certain forms of identification (cigarettes = forward-looking, working class, ‘good’ / cigars = backward-looking, power, elite, ‘bad’), and acting as punctuation marks between and around moments of intensity. By allowing them to wilt and break in her lips and under her gaze and so restrict her from smoking, the narrative appears to be denying Brigid the same choices it affords not only its male protagonist (who is, after all, the most important character in the narrative and can in some ways justifiably be granted more actions of consequence), but also one of its male villains. Brigid’s position as an acting subject seems therefore to be undermined, and the limp and torn cigarettes are resonances on the surface of the text of the process of silencing she has to undergo in the narrative.

This silencing, of which I claim the inability to smoke a cigarette in the diegetic space is a subconscious marker, can be seen more overtly in the final confrontation between gumshoe and femme fatale. Here, as Peter J. Rabinowitz has noted in “How Did You Know He Licked His Lips?”: Second Person Knowledge and First Person Power in The Maltese Falcon, “Hammett silences her with a rhetorical... coercion” by making “Spade’s account of

70 Hammett, The Maltese Falcon, 4.
71 Ibid., 56.
her story... definitive... as she is rhetorically objectified as absent and hence silent.”72 As evidence of this process of silencing, Rabinowitz cites the line that gives his perceptive essay its title – “‘How did you know he – he licked his lips and looked – ?’ she asks, and in asking this question, she affirms the consonance of their stories.”

So the involuntary, authorially imposed inability to actually smoke within the confines of the diegetic space, as it were, marks the effacement of subjecthood for the primary female character. There are only two other female characters in the narrative, one of whom, Miles Archer’s widow Iva, is so spectral a presence as to almost not count. The other, Spade’s secretary Effie, also expresses in her character an effacement of female subjecthood – she is never shown smoking either, and her femininity is deliberately confused by the language of the narrative. She is described at the very beginning as “a lanky sunburned girl” with a “boyish face,”73 and Spade frequently addresses her in words that explicitly bestow upon her a male subjectivity – “You’re a damned good man, sister,” he tells her when he leaves her at the office with the corpse of Captain Jacobi while he goes off to hide the black bird.74

There is, however, one extended passage that takes place the morning after Miles Archer’s murder, when Spade has just seen Iva out of his office and is obviously about to roll a cigarette, having taken tobacco and cigarette-papers out of his pocket, but gets suddenly weighed down, presumably, by thoughts of his dead partner. So he keeps sitting without rolling, gazing “with brooding eyes at his dead partner’s desk.” At this point, Effie walks in, and in an unsentimental but sensitive manner, she takes “the tobacco sack and the papers from his inert fingers” and proceeds to roll a cigarette for him. When done, she “place[s] it between Spades lips.”75

72 Rabinowitz, 172.
74 Ibid., 160.
75 Ibid., 27.
Here, Effie’s interaction with Spade and his cigarette feels like it is the diametric opposite of Brigid’s interactions with smoke. Where Brigid leaves cigarettes broken and unfirm in her wake, Effie props them up (again, it is tempting to see the cigarette as a phallic symbol\(^{76}\)). And, interestingly, her handling of the cigarette has a deep epistemological implication, because it is at this point, while she rolls Spade’s cigarette for him, that she contributes the only new piece of information to Spade that she will impart in the course of the entire narrative. To wit, that when she arrived at Iva’s late the previous night to break the news of Miles’s murder, she could clearly tell Iva had only come home a few minutes previously (meaning she was out very late at night, during Miles’s murder, and therefore without an alibi). For a brief flicker of a moment, it is Effie who is the active agent of the transmission of knowledge, while Spade remains the passive listener. But she fills her new role out only for the duration of rolling the cigarette.

The cigarette is rolled soon, however, and effectively sheds itself of Effie’s influence, and no more does she come into contact with its smoke. This explains why the fragment of knowledge that seemed like an epistemological addition when Effie first provided it to Spade soon disappears into a puff of insignificance.

The explanation for Iva’s whereabouts is simple. She and Miles were not a very happy couple, and Miles had, earlier that day, kidded her that he had a date with another woman. So Iva went about following Miles, saw him on the job following Thursby and O’Shaughnessy, and, realising Miles had indeed been “ragging her,” she went to a movie, from where she went on to Spade’s apartment. Not finding Spade at home, she went back to her own home, got impatient waiting for her husband to return, drove back to Spade’s only to have missed him again (this time, Spade was out looking at the crime scene), drove around a little and got back home only a few minutes before Effie arrived to break the news of Miles’s

\(^{76}\) See Rabinowitz’s essay “‘How Did You Know He Licked His Lips?’: Second Person Knowledge and First Person Power in *The Maltese Falcon*” (cited above) for thoughts on phallic signifiers in *The Maltese Falcon*. Rabinowitz sees the ‘absent phallus’ punctuating the novel’s texture throughout.
death to her. Iva’s movements and seeming lack of alibi therefore cause no further ripples on the surface of the text, and Effie’s sole epistemic contribution to the investigation, the only time she behaves like a detective and not a detective’s secretary (she had paid attention to Iva’s clothes dumped on a chair, noticing that “her hat and coat were underneath. Her singlet, on top, was still warm. She said she had been asleep, but she hadn’t. She had wrinkled up the bed, but the wrinkles weren’t mashed down.”77), is undermined to the point of irrelevance by the rest of the narrative.

This is also, incidentally, the only time Effie is permitted a more feminine subjectivity including a powerful utterance of unbounded aggression, visibly expressing her jealousy of Iva (and thus hinting at her implicit attraction towards Spade) fairly overtly, asking him if he will marry her now that Miles is dead. “A trace of spitefulness” comes into her voice when she reminds Spade that there was a time when he’d been crazy about Iva; she repeatedly calls Iva a “louse,” adding that “I’d be a louse too if it would give me a body like hers”; and she keeps reminding Spade, not without bitterness, that Iva desperately wants to marry him.78 For the rest of the novel, her aggression is kept firmly in check by the constant denaturing of her female subjectivity into a quasi-male one, both by the use of descriptors that masculinise her body as well as by her boys’ club attitude of chumminess with respect to Brigid, whom she and her intuition seem to trust beyond all reason till the very end. She is so depressed upon hearing of Brigid’s guilt that she refuses to let Spade touch her, which could have been a potent expression of aggression were it not for the fact that she herself narrativizes this act as unreasonable (“I know – I know you’re right. You’re right. But don’t touch me now – not now”79), and is therefore effectively domesticated into a demonstration of petulance. So no more cigarettes for Effie Perine, and no more epistemological offerings from her.

78 Ibid., 27-28.
79 Ibid., 217.
This is not to engage in post hoc unreasoning and claim that the rolling and/or
smoking of cigarettes causes or creates greater subjectivity or an increased potential to fill in
narrative gaps. It is merely to point out certain resonances in epistemology that appear to
emanate from the act of rolling and/or smoking a cigarette. It is almost as if an association
with smoking is the only marker of a dominant epistemic subject-position. Effie occupies this
position briefly only while she’s rolling a cigarette for Spade. Cairo never occupies this
position, being clearly depicted as an effeminate homosexual who rarely sets things in
motion, epistemologically speaking; and he never smokes. Wilmer, the hired gun, is never
shown smoking, never contributes any decisive narrative information (his one act major act,
setting *La Paloma*, the boat bearing the Maltese Falcon, on fire, hardly influences the plot).

He is also referred to as a ‘gundel,’ a corruption of the Yiddish *gendzel*, literally ‘gosling,’ but
symbolizing a young homosexual boy who is the passive partner in anal intercourse.80

Literally, being acted upon. Gutman smokes and occupies (as a result?) a dominant subject-
position by categorically influencing the plot and the flow of knowledge, but his cigars mark
him as antithetical to Spade, as the power-hungry villain. And, in the end, his dominance
falters as the bird proves to be a fake. We also realise that Gutman himself has never seen the
statuette, but has only been narrativising about it; a somewhat compromised epistemic
dominance, then. Brigid tries but fails to smoke, and appears to occupy, for much of the
narrative, a position of knowledge, the mysterious female who the detective has fallen in love
with and who might, if only she were less enigmatic, hold the key to the mystery. But this too

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80 ‘Gunsel’ has now, as a result of its use in *The Maltese Falcon*, primarily come to mean ‘gunman’ or ‘hired
gun.’ ‘The editor of *Black Mask*, Joseph Shaw, was on guard against the use of vulgarisms by his writers.
Hammett, eager to slip one by, had a character describe his activity as ‘on the gooseberry lay,’ tramp lingo for
‘stealing clothes from clotheslines;’ its connotation larcenous but not vulgar. ‘Shaw wrote Hammett telling him
that he was deleting the “gooseberry lay” from the story,’ [Erle Stanley] Gardner recalled, ‘and that *Black Mask*
would never publish anything like that. But he left the word gunsel because Hammett had used it so casually
that Shaw took it for granted that the word pertained to a hired gunman. Actually, gunsel, or gonzel, is a very
naughty word with no relation whatever to a bodyguard.’” See William Safire, ‘Dirigiste’ (‘On Language’
[http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/30/magazine/the-way-we-live-now-4-30-00-on-language-
dirigiste.html?pagewanted=3](http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/30/magazine/the-way-we-live-now-4-30-00-on-language-
is thwarted at the conclusion of the tale when Spade literally silences her – “Wait till I’m through and then you can talk.” As Rabinowitz demonstrates, “On the surface, perhaps, the potential for dialogue continues.... But because she has already accepted the congruence of the stories, she can do nothing but confirm the correctness of his version of her story; she tries one last barter – with body, rather than text – but it's a futile gesture, and the doorbell rings just as she puts her arms around him.”

So Samuel Spade, the only character smoking cigarettes, is also the only character in control of the various vanishing strands of the narrative. Even the incident of his breaking into Brigid’s rooms while she lies sleeping in his own apartment after a night of lovemaking, and the omission of an explanation, which has entirely slipped out of the characters’ consciousnesses, to say nothing of the reader’s, is, obviously, known to him. Spade appears to be the unique bearer of hard knowledge among all the diverse characters in the text, and undeniably occupies the dominant epistemic subject-position in it.

**Thank You for Not Smoking II**

Which brings us back to where we started, i.e., why does Spade not smoke during two of the most critical sections in the text – the Flitcraft Parable and the climactic confrontation with Brigid? Or, rather, does the fact of Spade’s not smoking during these two points in the text indicate an excess of meaning that cannot be grasped by a mere ‘straight’ reading of *The Maltese Falcon*, but must be felt out vaguely, indeterminately?

Well, let us consider the more specific meanings that can be mined from the climactic scene first, and then think about the more abstract and general conclusions that we can speculate on with respect to the Flitcraft Parable. In that final confrontation, Spade’s ultimate life(-as-work)-affirming act is to turn Brigid in to the police, in spite of (probably) being in

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82 Rabinowitz, 172.
love with her. But if, as we suspect, he already realises that it must have been Brigid who killed Miles early on, shortly after Miles’s murder, then he is aware throughout the unfolding of the narrative that his love is doomed. Yet he pursues it, because it gives him the thrill of the exceptional, so far removed from his tired affair with Iva. And ending this brief interlude is Spade’s attempt at not following in Flitcraft’s footsteps. In turning Brigid over to the cops, Spade ensures that this exceptional episode remains exceptional without regressing into repetition. True, he returns to the repetitive in the form of his drab office and his relationship with Iva, but in doing so he keeps l’affaire Brigid alive as an exceptional event in perpetuity.

The lack of a cigarette between his lips during this confrontation is emblematic of his inability to extend the exceptional into the routine of the repetitive and his awareness and acceptance of the inevitable end of the exceptional. He does possess, in some ways, this knowledge that is perhaps denied Brigid or the reader, but the cigarette cannot serve its epistemic function in this case (unlike in the rest of the novel) because this knowledge is ultimately self-defeating. In other words, it is not an epistemic advantage for Spade, in the context of the narrative, to be in possession of this knowledge, because this knowledge does not contribute to the progress of the narrative. On the contrary, it has the effect of shutting down the narrative by inscribing in its very nature the conditions for closure: it signals a return to the repetitive, which means the high adventure of the detective narrative must come to a close, because the missing pieces have all been found. And because the wandering of the detective has effectively come to an end with the turning in of Miles’s murderer, the cigarette too has lost its potential to resonate with intimations of epistemic addition.

As a result, the last cigarette is smoked just before Spade calls Effie and asks her to deliver the statuette to his apartment, after Gutman, Cairo, Wilmer and Brigid have spent all night waiting for it. In fact, when Spade is shown smoking for the last time in the novel, he is described in terms of exceeding vitality –
Spade rolled and smoked cigarettes and moved, without fidgeting or nervousness, around the room. He sat sometimes on an arm of the girl’s chair, on the table-corner, on the floor at her feet, on a straight-backed chair. He was wide-awake, cheerful, and full of vigor.\textsuperscript{83}

It’s almost as if he is aware that the mysteries that have rendered his life exceptional and rescued him from the tedium of everyday existence are on their way to being solved, and these last cigarettes are an indicator of the few final moments of the exceptional Spade will enjoy.

So now, with the MacGuffin having been clearly uncovered as such, and the inevitable prospect of having to bring to an end this utterly remarkable and torrid affair with a murderess, Spade is not seen smoking, because there are no further epistemic contributions to be made to the metanarrative. True, this last confrontation adds knowledge to the \textit{reader} by disclosing Brigid’s as the original sin, but as far as Spade is concerned, \textit{his} excursus is at an end (because he already knows of Brigid’s guilt). And so too is his smoking, at least within the confines of this particular narrative.

Interestingly, in John Huston’s film version, \textit{everyone} can be seen smoking in the waiting scene in Spade’s apartment, and, even more interestingly, Brigid is seen smoking in her final encounter with Spade, who isn’t. This has, of course, much to do with the visual language of \textit{film noir}, which almost demands that swirls of cigarette smoke rise in every other scene. But it also coincides with the film’s rejection of the book’s digressions, as well as the rise in the 1930s and ’40s of the cigarette as a movie prop.\textsuperscript{84}

In the ’20s, when Hammett wrote \textit{The Maltese Falcon}, cigarettes were still very much in the minority in terms of the way Americans consumed their tobacco (chewing tobacco, pipes and cigars were all preferred to cigarettes). Gradually, however, with the emergence of aggressive advertising (especially that aimed at women) in the late twenties and, later, with

\textsuperscript{83} Hammett, \textit{The Maltese Falcon}, 200.
\textsuperscript{84} Brandt, 86-87.
the onset of the Second World War in particular, cigarette smoking had by the early ’40s escalated dramatically. So, when Hammett wrote his book in the late twenties, about a thousand cigarettes were consumed per capita, but by the early forties, when the film was made, this figure had more than doubled.85

Consequently, it is no wonder that many more characters smoke on screen than within the pages of the book, because, by 1941, cigarette smoking had acquired a far thicker veneer of acceptability than it possessed in ’29, when the book was first published in serialised form in the pulp magazine Black Mask. In many ways, the symbolisms that cigarettes contain in the ’20s slowly dissipate into mere mannerisms by the ’40s, which is perhaps also why Spade’s act of rolling a cigarette on screen is hardly ever a punctuation between or around other action; it happens far more cavalierly and the camera never really focuses on it unlike in the book. Thus, there occurs a subtraction in this translation from book into film with respect to the epistemic resonance to the narrative that the cigarette affords.

It is also no wonder that Brigid is now seen smoking frequently. In 1928-29, right around the time The Maltese Falcon was published, cigarette companies started aggressively escalating advertising aimed at women; this advertising reached its apogee with American Tobacco’s iconic ads for Lucky Strike that exhorted women to “Reach for a Lucky Instead of a Sweet.” This campaign, Brandt points out, was revolutionary in its pointed targeting of potential female consumers, as well as unusually aggressive in tone. “By suggesting that Luckies could help women assume ‘the modern form,’ it associated the cigarette with contemporary trends in beauty, fashion, and changing women’s roles.”86

So, by the time the film comes out, two things have happened. Middle-class women now constitute a large percentage of smokers, and the Second World War has made cigarette smoking acceptable and popular, even patriotic; cigarettes are even included in American soldiers’ C-rations, and smoking is at an all-time high. As a result, by the 1930s and certainly the early ’40s, the cigarette had become “an important prop in movies, used to invest characters and scenes with a range of meanings.”87 It is no longer the minor technology for smoking that it was even in the ’20s, and much of its associated mystique has evaporated by this time. As a result, more characters smoke in the film than in the book, and, significantly, Brigid smokes often, reflecting the relatively new demographic for whom it was now acceptable and even cool to smoke a cigarette.

However, regardless of how ubiquitous cigarettes had become on screen by the early 1940s, and how devalued their epistemic resonance had become because of this, it is still impossible for fragments of knowledge to not be contained within. When Spade gets on the

87 Ibid., 86.
phone with Sergeant Polhaus as soon as Gutman and Co. have exited (to inform him of the
gang and telling him that “Thursby and Jacobi were shot by a kid named Wilmer Cook”\(^88\)),
both book and film script have him giving details of the perpetrators, and then whirling
around to confront Brigid. All the while he’s on the phone, Brigid stands in the room looking
at him; in the book, she “stood by the table looking with uneasy eyes at him,”\(^89\) and in the
script, “Brigid watches him, a slight frown on her face.”\(^90\) At this point, as far as the written
word clues us in, Brigid does not realise that Spade has cottoned on to her. Yes, in both book
and film, she’s taken aback by the sudden intensity with which he approaches her after
replacing the telephone receiver, but she’s still self-assured and trying to make everything
right. It’s only a little later on, after they’ve gone back and forth trying to tie up all the events
of the case, that Spade lets on that he knows it must have been Brigid who killed Miles. And
it is then and only then, in both film and book, that she demonstrates clearly her sudden recoil
and fear at being found out.

The Book: Brigid O’Shaughnessy shrank back from him until the edge of the table stopped
her. She looked at him with terrified eyes and cried: “Don’t – don’t talk to me like that, Sam!
You know I didn’t! You know –”\(^91\)

The Film Script: Brigid shrinks back from him until the edge of the table stops her.

\[
\text{Brigid} \\
(\text{staring with terrified eyes}) \\
\text{Don’t – don’t talk to me like that, Sam!} \\
\text{You know I didn’t... you know –}^{92}
\]

Both almost exactly the same. And the film plays it out as it’s written too. But, and
here’s the rub! in the film, for a brief flickering moment, right at the instant Spade utters the

\(^{88}\) Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*, 205.
\(^{89}\) Ibid.
\(^{91}\) Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*, 209.
\(^{92}\) Huston, 148.
words “Thursby and Jacobi were shot by a kid named Wilmer Cook,” the camera zooms in on Mary Astor, playing Brigid O’Shaughnessy, who immediately starts stepping backwards with horror in her eyes and shivering all over. The very next shot, Spade has rushed towards her to ask her to spill everything she knows, and the visuals go back to following the script; Brigid is composed and starts talking, and it is as if that quick shot of her sudden horror never happened. But for that one hesitant shot, Brigid is visibly and suddenly recoiling.

Why this is, we shall never know for sure, but permit me to hazard a guess. Even though the script does not call for Brigid to be smoking in this scene, she can nonetheless be seen on screen doing so. And perhaps (and it is a big perhaps) this cigarette, which does not exist in the realm of the written word but only in the ephemeral signifiers of the image, confers some sort of epistemic advantage on her, so that when she hears Spade say the words “Thursby and Jacobi were shot by a kid name Wilmer Cook,” she immediately detects the lack of mention of Miles’s murder. Putting two and two together, she realises what this means.

This is not to say that this is an active mental process that happens within the dictated structure of the filmic narrative. It is very much an aberration, a sudden disturbance on the otherwise perfectly-sutured surface of the film. It is a Barthesian *rustle*, “the noise of what is working well... the noise of what, if it functioned perfectly, would make no noise.”93 The interaction between intoxicant and text makes visible this rustle in a disjunction of word and image, a sudden and soon-disappeared ripple that makes an excess of meaning evident, an excess that even the text is unaware of.

In this manner, then, the cigarette’s presence on screen contains an epistemic dimension much like in the novel; it is as an epistemic resonator that emanates clues of excess meaning. In this capacity, it also gives us the impression (and that is all it is, an

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impression, a scintillation, a vague resonance, not hard facts that can be moored to the signifier-signified constellation) that texts can, in various formats and diverse media, give off certain signals that break out of the usual channels of signification. These signals are apprehended by feeling one’s way around the indeterminacies of text rather than through the causal and visible links that keep texts ostensibly structured and meaningful. Look for them and they disappear, like Brigid’s unconscious enlightenment that is expressed in a recoiling that goes back on itself and forgets its own existence an instant later.

So Spade doesn’t smoke during his straying into the Flitcraft Parable, because the mere fact of this straying announces a leap of narrative into the other side of signification. The very act of the telling of the Parable is an acknowledgement of the excess of meaning inherent in text, and it foregrounds the importance of oblique heteroglossic resonances evaporating out of text as we know it. The cigarette, which is a marker of the break in the channels of signification, operates generally in the textual background, to be spotted if you can, missed if you don’t. But the Flitcraft Parable explicitly collapses the distinction between figure and ground, allowing us to see, in the gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka’s famous formulation, that “the whole is other than the sum of the parts.” There is no longer, at least for the duration of Spade’s telling, a separable background and foreground, which is why he is not shown rolling and smoking his characteristic cigarette. This is also the reason why Spade’s narration is structured like a voiceover, so that there are no traces of the present in it, and therefore no discernible difference between figure and ground.

But the presence of an excess of meaning also demonstrates that it is possible to have a deficiency of meaning, for if there can be additions outside of the usual configurations of signification, then why can there not be subtractions too? And in this strange and wildly unpredictable toe-dance of significatory and asignificatory transmissions, meaning is sometimes lost, a loss that manifests itself as epistemic incongruities, like the narrative gaps –
the death of Owen Taylor in The Big Sleep; the disappeared detail of O’Shaughnessy’s rooms being broken into in The Maltese Falcon – mentioned at the very start of this chapter.

The absent smoking is therefore of much significance, because it clues us in to the baroque operations of the narrative as well as giving us an idea of the intricate engagement that smoking has with the figure and ground of narrative play. The cigarette becomes an irreplaceable accoutrement of the narrative image of noir, and the verbalising detective talking around the cigarette in the corner of his mouth becomes the archetypal hardboiled pose.

But societally, smoking cigarettes, however important to subterranean narrative processes, would hardly elicit murmurs of disapproval at the time of The Maltese Falcon. Alcohol, though, is another story entirely.94

In Vino Veritas (Though Not Always)

Unlike cigarettes, alcohol in the ‘20s was a very delicate commodity. Legally, its manufacture, distribution and sale were all banned. This ban was, however, for all practical purposes, frequently broken.95 The Maltese Falcon, written towards the end of that decade, is situated firmly in the context of Prohibition (which was mandated by the passing of the Eighteenth Amendment and codified by the Volstead Act in 1920, and was eventually repealed in December 1933) and even makes sly allusions to it. Its illicitness gives it a certain mystique in the text that is not associated with cigarettes, but this does not necessarily

94 ‘Alcohol,’ for the purposes of this study, refers to distilled alcoholic beverages or ‘liquor,’ or ‘sprits,’ and is not used in its technical meaning of an organic compound where the hydroxyl functional group is bound to a carbon atom.

95 There is much debate in Prohibition historiography as to the ultimate successes or failures of Prohibition. For a view of Prohibition as having succeeded in its major aims, see John C. Burnham’s ‘New Perspectives on the Prohibition “Experiment” of the 1920’s.’ Burnham’s essay sets Prohibition in its contexts – it describes prevailing attitudes to liquor and the status of saloons as mostly “noxious institutions,” but also details the love-hate relationship the working class had with these saloons – they were sites of social evil, but could not be done without for many in large urban areas. For an opposing view that sees Prohibition as a massive failure, see Harry G. Levine and Craig Reinarman’s ‘From Prohibition to Regulation: Lessons from Alcohol Policy for Drug Policy.’
translate into some subversive quality. On the contrary, the drinking of alcohol in the
narrative imparts only certain symbolic punctuations and parallels to the plot, but not to the
larger metanarrative environment.

John Burnham, in his essay ‘New Perspectives on the Prohibition “Experiment” of the
1920’s,’ points out the limited nature of Prohibition, not in terms of its effects, but in terms of
its intentions. One often forgets that Prohibition was never intended to prohibit the possession
or consumption of alcoholic beverages; it was always “designed to kill off the liquor business
in general and the saloon in particular.... At a later time the courts held even the act of buying
liquor to be legal and not part of a conspiracy.”

At the same time, a new cultural idiom
comes about as a result of Prohibition – “New institutions and cultural practices appeared:
bootleggers and speakeasies, hip flasks and bathtub gin, rum runners smuggling in liquor, and
prohibition agents like Elliott Ness smashing down doors. Adulterated and even poisonous
alcohol was sold and many people were locked up for violating prohibition laws.”

This is the social backdrop against which The Maltese Falcon is set, but it is a
backdrop that seldom intrudes into the world of the text, other than in oblique symbolic
(pre)figurations. Thus, there is absent the standard hardboiled/noir trope of the lonely
detective getting drunk in a bar, the barman his only friend, philosopher and confidant (this is
a recurring trope in Raymond Chandler’s The Long Goodbye, which, published in 1953,
comes a full two decades after the repeal of Prohibition and can therefore actually inscribe
this trope within its textworld). Alcohol in Hammett’s book is always a private or semi-
private affair; the first time it is mentioned is when Spade returns home after having checked
out Miles’s murder scene. He is alone, sitting on his bed, smoking cigarettes and drinking
Bacardi when the doorbell rings and two cops enter, and Spade pours them both a drink of

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96 John C. Burnham, ‘New Perspectives on the Prohibition “Experiment” of the 1920’s,’ Journal of Social
97 Harry G. Levine and Craig Reinarman, “From Prohibition to Regulation: Lessons from Alcohol Policy for
Bacardi. While Sergeant Tom Polhaus, portrayed as affable and on a first name basis with Spade, downs his in a gulp, Lieutenant Dundy dithers over his, looks at it suspiciously, starts to accuse Spade of having killed Floyd Thursby (in retaliation for Thursby’s supposed killing of Miles), and doesn’t attend to his drink for the rest of the encounter until just before the two of them leave, when Spade has to actively prevail upon him to finish his drink to establish a no-hard-feelings end to the proceedings.

The scene is a succinct portrayal of the social and professional etiquette surrounding alcohol at the time, and Dundy’s reaction to the drink is surely a vague allusion to the shape of things in the outside world, a nod to the fact that most people, not least policemen themselves, were open to the idea of drinking liquor even during Prohibition. (Paradoxically, the “disease concept” of alcoholism, the idea prevalent among physicians in the late nineteenth century that alcoholism was a disease, went out of fashion during Prohibition\textsuperscript{98}).

The next time Spade drinks is after his first confrontation with Joel Cairo, alone in his office, two-thirds of a paper drinking-cup filled from a bottle of Manhattan cocktail. Later that evening, after the dramatic-comedic meeting with Cairo and O’Shaughnessy is concluded and Cairo has been escorted away by the police, he fixes sandwiches and coffee for himself and Brigid, intending to question her as they eat. To the coffee he keeps adding brandy, perhaps hoping to loosen her tongue; instead, Brigid feigns tiredness and comes on to Spade: “She put her hands up to Spade’s cheeks, put her open mouth hard against his mouth, her body flat against his body.”\textsuperscript{99}

The only other times alcohol features in the novel are during Spade’s two meetings with Gutman at the latter’s hotel. The first time (a meeting Rita Elizabeth Rippetoe calls, in

\textsuperscript{98} See E. M. Jellinek, \textit{The Disease Concept of Alcoholism} (New Haven, CT: College and University Press, 1960).

\textsuperscript{99} Hammett, \textit{The Maltese Falcon}, 89.
Booze and the Private Eye, “a symphony of staged pseudo-hospitality” \(^{100}\), Gutman himself alludes to the commonly known ability of alcohol to loosen the tongue and send it wagging when he pours Spade a drink of whisky – “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.” \(^{101}\) This characteristic of in vino veritas is constantly subverted in The Maltese Falcon. Little information is exchanged at this meeting, for instance. At their next meeting, Gutman uses the same whisky (doctored this time) to drug Spade, who becomes muddied and incoherent as he tries to fight the effects of the drug. Loquacity is once again arrested, disallowed.

Here, the effects of alcohol are always unhelpful, never contributing to the epistemic systems set up in the narrative. Octavio Paz notes how “drinking stimulates communication at first, and then turns it into stammering and fuzzy-headedness.” \(^{102}\) The narrative refuses to surrender knowledge to either Spade or the reader at the moments it is touched by drinking. It becomes resistant and alludes to Crusades, Orders and conspiracy theories, as when Gutman, having handed Spade the mickey, starts narrativising about the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, the mythology of the Falcon, its tortuous history and its lineage of violence. Words words words, which the plot has little use of, for it provides neither progressive revelation, nor a systematic digression that clues us in to other elements of the narrative. In Paz’s words, “it overvalues communication and destroys it.”

By the time we get to Chandler, though, a mere ten years later, alcohol seems to have been infused into the very capillaries of the American detective narrative. It begins to work in very different ways, and actively facilitates transmissions of knowledge, be they external transferences from one conduit to another (the detective and the informant in a bar, for


\(^{102}\) Paz, 100.
instance), or internal transmissions through the act of remembering. Because, after all, a good story cannot be devised; it has to be distilled.

**Raymond Chandler and the Art of the Bottled Lunch**

In early 1945, Paramount Studio’s biggest star, Alan Ladd, announced he’d be re-entering Army Service in three months. Paramount immediately realised they had not even a square inch of film of Ladd that they could release during his absence. A day or two later, one of Paramount’s producers, John Houseman, happened to be having lunch with his old friend Raymond Chandler, who told Houseman that he was stuck on a book and thinking of turning it into a screenplay and selling it to one of the studios. Houseman read the first hundred odd pages, and within two days Paramount had bought the unfinished script for *The Blue Dahlia*, their one condition being that the film had to be produced within three months (the average production time for an A-picture in those days was a year and a half). The project was quickly cast, a director hired, and filming began of the pages Chandler had already completed, when, sometime in the fourth week of shooting someone pointed out that “the camera was rapidly gaining on the script.”

Chandler was struggling with the ending; to wit, he had none. After repeated meetings with the production staff and the Paramount front-office people, he wrestled with himself and came to the conclusion that he could never finish the script... unless he were *drunk* (Chandler was a famous alcoholic who had by this point, also famously, become a teetotaller). To this end, he had a list of demands from the studio: that two limousines were to be in constant attendance at his home for fetching the doctor, taking the maid to the market, ferrying scripts to and fro, and other contingencies; that he’d have six secretaries in relay teams of two for emergency dictation, typing, etc.; and that a direct line to the studio be available to him day

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or night. Paramount and Houseman accepted, and for the next eight days Chandler worked on and finished the script in a perpetual state of drunkenness. If Houseman’s account is to be believed,

During those last eight days of shooting Chandler did not draw one sober breath, nor did one speck of solid food pass his lips...his doctor came twice a day to give him intravenous injections. The rest of the time, except when he was asleep...Ray was never without a glass in his hand. He did not drink much. Having reached the euphoria that he needed, he continued to consume just enough bourbon and water to maintain him in that condition.  

(The final script eventually began with three characters walking into a bar and ordering “bourbon with a bourbon chaser,” and ended with the line “Did somebody say something about a drink of bourbon?”). In this way, completely sozzled, Chandler managed to finish the script on time and production was completed with six days to spare. But his long starvation and perpetual state of drunkenness left Chandler severely weakened and it took him over a month to recover.

Chandler, then, clearly found – or at least managed to convince himself successfully that he found – inspiration in bourbon. And of course the sticky haze of booze pervades all his fictions, often performing certain instrumental functions at the level of plot, one of its recurring purposes being its use by Marlowe to loosen people’s tongues. But permit me to walk another path for a brief while and think about alcohol in relation to Chandler’s compositional style.

I am less interested in biographical detail and how/whether Chandler’s copious imbibing influenced his plotting 105 than in the unconscious relations alcohol as a system of production, consumption and intoxication has to his basic structural practice during the process of composing a novel. To track Chandler’s novelistic process, it is important to keep

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104 Houseman, 61.
105 Needless to say, it is almost without question that his own drinking had some sort of influence, however oblique, on his writing alcohol into his fictions; but trying with any degree of certainty to pinpoint the precise nature of such influences might veer into the realm of speculating uselessly about authorial intent, and, anyway, this is not the aim of this project.
his sentiment that gives this chapter its epigraph at the back of your mind – “A good story cannot be devised; it has to be distilled.”

**Cannibalization as Distillation**

In 1964, about five years after Chandler’s death, the short story anthology *Killer in the Rain* was published by his UK publisher Hamish Hamilton. *Killer in the Rain* was made up of eight short stories that Chandler had refused to be reprinted during his lifetime (they had originally appeared in the almost-forgotten pages of the pulp magazines) because they were ‘cannibalized.’

Chandler used to extensively rework his short stories, which were all published in the pulps (mostly *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*), in the creation of his novels, a process he termed ‘cannibalizing.’ He used in particular the eight stories that appear in *Killer in the Rain* and therefore wished them buried in the pages of the pulps they had first appeared in. They were finally collected and published after his death because, as Philip Durham explained in his introduction to the collection, “Apart from the pleasure Chandler’s audience will derive from the stories themselves, it is further hoped that his readers will realize that only a skilled craftsman could turn eight separately conceived short stories into three excellent novels.”

Durham collates and indicates the precise fragments, ideas, plots and characters from the precise short stories that went into Chandler’s novelistic vat. *The Big Sleep* (1939) is primarily composed of two stories, ‘Killer in the Rain’ (*Black Mask*, January 1935) and ‘The Curtain’ (*Black Mask*, September 1936), with lesser borrowings from ‘Finger Man’ (*Black Mask*, October 1934) and ‘Mandarin’s Jade’ (*Dime Detective*, November 1937). Of the thirty-two chapters in *The Big Sleep*, ten were from ‘The Curtain,’ eleven from ‘Killer in the Rain,’ and eleven were almost all new material. The borrowed chapters were, however, modified

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and expanded considerably from their original state. Of the twenty-seven characters in *The Big Sleep*, seven are lifted directly from ‘The Curtain,’ six from ‘Killer in the Rain,’ four are composites from the two stories, and only four others are entirely new creations (devised, therefore, and not distilled).


These cannibalizations occur at various levels. At the level of plot and its progress, for instance, there is the character of Dade Winslow Trevillyan in ‘The Curtain’ who kills his stepfather Dud O’Mara, and whose mother (daughter of General Trevillyan), to protect the family name, disposes of the body. Dade’s counterpart in ‘Killer in the Rain’ is Carmen Dravec, the dissolute adopted daughter of oil millionaire Tony Dravec, who, like Carmen Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*, incurs gambling debts and is being blackmailed over smutty photos. These two psychopathic characters, Dade and Carmen Dravec, are fused in *The Big Sleep* to create the figure of Carmen Sternwood, and the plots of the two stories become the twisting and turning plot of the novel, with the newly composed central portion of the novel.

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107 These were all pointed out by Philip Durham in his afore-cited introduction to *Killer in the Rain*. 
linking the two short stories into a unified whole. Similarly, the characters of Tony Dravec and General Trevillyan combine to become General Sternwood.

At other times, Chandler lifts “whole passages, changing only a word here and there to improve the syntax or vary a mood. More frequently, however, he [blows] up scenes for the novel.”

For instance, the opening lines of ‘The Curtain’ –

The first time I ever saw Larry Batzel he was drunk outside Sardi’s in a secondhand Rolls-Royce. There was a tall blonde with him who had eyes you wouldn’t forget. I helped her argue him out from under the wheel so that she could drive.

are transformed into –

The first time I laid eyes on Terry Lennox he was drunk in a Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith outside the terrace of the Dancers. The parking lot attendant had brought the car out and he was still holding the door open because Terry Lennox’s left foot was still dangling outside, as if he had forgotten he had one. He had a young-looking face but his hair was bone white. You could tell by his eyes that he was plastered to the hairline, but otherwise he looked like any other nice young guy in a dinner jacket who had been spending too much money in a joint that exists for that purpose and no other. There was a girl beside him. Her hair was a lovely shade of dark red and she had a distant smile on her lips and over her shoulders she had a blue mink that almost made the Rolls-Royce look like just another automobile.

The 45-word opening paragraph is terse and creates an image of Batzel as a drunk, succinctly describes his companion and gives us an insight into the kind of drunk Batzel is (the next paragraph has – “He remembered me. He was that kind of drunk.”). The 156-word opening of *The Long Goodbye* conveys much the same impression (though differing in detail), its long hyperbolic descriptions contrasting with the terseness of the previous lines. Both create similar moods, but in completely opposite styles.

Chandler would sometimes also cannibalize from one short story for another; the clearest instance of this is perhaps ‘The Curtain,’ which has significant parts from ‘Nevada Gas’ (*Black Mask*, June 1935). So, ‘Nevada Gas’ is refined and contributes to ‘The Curtain,’

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108 Durham, 9-10.
which is refined and contributes to *The Big Sleep* (and its opening is given to *The Long Goodbye*). In some ways, then, this process of cannibalizing becomes the equivalent of the process of alcoholic distillation.

Distillation is a method of purifying liquids and separating mixtures of fluids into their separate components. When a mixture of two liquids with distinct boiling points is heated, the molecules with the lower boiling point will vaporise first. This vapour is passed through a twisted tube into a condenser, where it is cooled and liquefies into a purer form of the liquid it is a constituent of. Obviously, repeating this procedure leads to progressively purer forms of the liquid, almost as if some essence of the liquid is reached. This is how alcohol is made, of course, by distilling fermented solutions, and this process of progressive refining is the image Chandler conjures up when talking about the creation of a “good story.” It “cannot be devised,” only “distilled.”

Chandler’s choice of concepts is interesting. Distillation, here, is quite distinct from the regular process of editing; it is not merely a way to change words and sentences and punctuation marks – the structural components of language and text – but, in a way, a process that attempts to arrive at the very essence of the text. Or, if that sounds too vague and dramatic, then at least a process that tries to achieve some sense of distinctiveness, a sense of the new, and more alcoholic, from the already-existing.

But in a manner of speaking, it is the essence – or an essence – that Chandler strives for. The American writer Mark Coggins, after examining two hundred odd pages of the original typescript with excised or rewritten scenes of *The Long Goodbye* at the Bodleian Library at Oxford, comes to the conclusion that “Chandler’s method of rewriting was radical” –

Rather than keeping most of what was in his current draft and making accretive changes to it, he started nearly from scratch, saving only the few words or phrases that resonated from the previous draft.... Chandler’s rewrites were truly more akin to
alternative takes where the director encouraged the actors to take a different line through the scene.\textsuperscript{111} [Italics mine]

Resonance is therefore important for Chandler’s process of creation. Certain resonances he felt in his short stories were refined and rewritten into the drafts of his novels, which would then be refined further, depending on further resonances, into the final finished product. This method of apprehending and then expressing these resonances is, for Chandler, the process of distillation to which he refers. And it is no wonder that he looks to the semiotic system of spirits for his meaning-making metaphor, because it resonates with him, this substance without which he cannot finish his screenplay.

This distillation/cannibalizing extends to the process of the formation of Philip Marlowe, the cynical, sentimental, wisecracking, hard-drinking, more-failure-than-success, knight-errant protagonist of Chandler’s novels. Marlowe’s evolution, from the cannibalized short stories to his fully-formed realisation in the first three or four novels, and then again his evolution into something rich and strange in \textit{The Long Goodbye} (Chandler’s last but one finished novel published in 1953, and for all practical purposes his last novel, since his actual final novel, \textit{Playback}, was written as an unproduced screenplay in 1947, and Chandler turned it into a book in 1958) also resonates with Chandler’s metaphor of distillation.

\textbf{Growing Out of Pulp}

\textit{“Marlowe just grew out of the pulps. He was no one person.”}\textsuperscript{112}

Chandler’s first published short story appeared in the pages of \textit{Black Mask} in December, 1933. Called ‘Blackmailers Don’t Shoot,’ it featured a very early prototype of Marlowe in the character of its private eye protagonist Mallory. Mallory differs in many ways from the Philip

\textsuperscript{111} Mark Coggins, ‘Writing the Long Goodbye,’ accessed October 16, 2012, \url{http://www.markcoggins.com/essays/WTLG.html}.

Marlowe we now know; in his background, he is a private eye from Chicago who comes to Hollywood for one case (and stays to solve one more in ‘Smart-Aleck Kill’); in his motivations, he is closer to Hammett’s Spade than Marlowe, rougher and more cynical; in terms of narrative device, the Mallory stories are told by a third-person narrator, unlike all of Marlowe’s first-person narratives.

Now, to fully grasp Chandler’s constant distillation of his protagonists into something of an essence of Marlowe, we need to pay careful attention to the publication history of his short stories. In 1950, Houghton Mifflin republished eight of the short stories along with the now-famous titular essay in a volume entitled *The Simple Art of Murder* – ‘Spanish Blood’ (*Black Mask*, November 1935), ‘I’ll Be Waiting’ (*Saturday Evening Post*, October 1939), ‘The King in Yellow’ (*Dime Detective*, March 1938), ‘Pearls Are a Nuisance’ (*Dime Detective*, April 1938), ‘Pickup on Noon Street’ (originally ‘Noon Street Nemesis’ in *Detective Fiction Weekly*, May 1936), ‘Smart-Aleck Kill’ (*Black Mask*, July 1934), ‘Guns at Cyrano’s’ (*Black Mask*, January 1936) and ‘Nevada Gas’ (*Black Mask*, June 1935). Also in 1950, Penguin (London) published *Trouble is My Business*, a collection of five short stories – ‘Trouble is My Business’ (*Dime Detective*, August 1939), ‘Red Wind’ (*Dime Detective*, January 1938), ‘I’ll Be Waiting,’ ‘Goldfish’ (*Black Mask*, June 1936) and ‘Guns at Cyrano’s.’ All these stories being from a period of approximately six years, between 1934 and 1939. By the time the two short story anthologies came out, Marlowe was well-established in the public consciousness, having already appeared in five novels. So, Chandler took this opportunity to recast some of his earlier protagonists as Marlowe in the stories where they looked and sounded enough like him. But this too was a process of constant negotiation; in ‘Smart-Aleck Kill,’ republished in the Houghton Mifflin anthology, the original detective, Mallory, is renamed Johnny Dalmas. Dalmas, the original detective in ‘Red Wind’ and ‘Trouble is My Business,’ then becomes Philip Marlowe in the Penguin
collection’s reprints. Dalmas is also the original protagonist of ‘Bay City Blues’ and ‘The Lady in the Lake,’ and is thus transformed into Philip Marlowe in *The Lady in the Lake*, which cannibalizes those stories extensively.

Similarly, the detective in ‘Guns at Cyrano’s’ when it was published for the first time in *Black Mask*, 1936, Ted Malvern, is renamed Ted Carmady when the story is published in *The Simple Art of Murder*. Carmady, meanwhile, the original protagonist of many of the short stories, is renamed Philip Marlowe in ‘Goldfish’ (in *Trouble is My Business*). Carmady is himself a transformation from Johnny De Ruse – the protagonist of ‘Nevada Gas,’ which is cannibalized to create ‘The Curtain’ (featuring Carmady) – and so goes on eventually to be morphed into Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*. Throughout these stories, i.e., the ones collected in *Killer in the Rain*, which were all cannibalized for the novels,

it is always obvious that Chandler’s protagonist is much more concerned with helping people than he is with making money. He protects the helpless whether or not they have money. In ‘Try the Girl’ Carmady moved in to clean up a messy social situation, after making it clear to the police that he, a free and independent man, has to do a job they could not accomplish. John Dalmas in ‘Mandarin’s Jade’ was passionately ethical, one who would not think of accepting money until he had more than earned it [much like Marlowe in *The Little Sister* – “I put Orfamay Quest’s twenty hard-earned dollars in an envelope and wrote her name on it and dropped it in the desk drawer. I didn't like the idea of running around loose with that much currency on me.” He later returns the money, even though it is well below his “forty bucks a day and expenses”].... It is at this point that the mission of the hero becomes the thematic core of all these stories.113

Like his plots and his moods, then, Chandler’s protagonist is also gradually distilled, from the unnamed detective of ‘Killer in the Rain’ through Mallory, Dalmas, Carmady, Malvern, finally to Marlowe, his creator tasting each successive distillation till he is satisfied with the spirit achieved. Ultimately, however, Chandler has to come to a halt in this process, perhaps because he realises that even he is incapable of creating a detective – or human

113 Durham, 11-12.
being, for that matter – who is purer than 150 proof or so, and the ideal he holds up in his celebrated ’44 essay in The Atlantic Monthly must remain forever unrealised.

Throughout the Marlovian canon, the distillation of character keeps tending towards the ideal hardboiled protagonist that Chandler writes about in ‘The Simple Art of Murder.’ In this essay, he analyses the art, the artifice and the failures of reading and writing detective fiction. After listing all his grievances with the classical detective fiction of the British Golden Age, including its frequent recourse to outlandish contrivances, its unrealistic problems and solutions, and its use of “hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare and tropical fish,” he goes on to detail the hardboiled world he inherits from Dashiell Hammett (“Hammett gave murder back to the people who commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse”), using another Prohibition metaphor:

The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities... a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket.... It is not a very fragrant world, but it is the world you live in, and certain writers with tough minds and a cool spirit of detachment can make very interesting and even amusing patterns out of it.115

But, Chandler writes, “all this is still not enough.” There must be some redemption in art, he says, and this redemption must be found in the figure of the hero, who must be refined from Hammett’s heroes, who are frequently cold, all-too-cynical and bleak, insensitive and unfeeling (if you remember, Hammett even describes Sam Spade as a “blond Satan”), into a more redemptive figure:

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.116

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115 Ibid., 17.
116 Ibid., 18.
It is this essence that Chandler keeps distilling Marlowe towards, from the unnamed detective of the short stories to the Marlowe of the novels. But Marlowe is not this man. While he does indeed possess a more socially conscious ethical code than his generic predecessors or his contemporaries, he is neither “untarnished” nor “unafraid.” “Despite the complex maps of social connection and corruption that Marlowe creates, little ever changes and few ever see his maps,” John Hiltgart notes in ‘Philip Marlowe’s Labor of Words.’

He lets murderers go free, and he conceals the larger picture he creates from public and police view, sometimes for the benefit of those he likes, but always under pressure to preserve his limited free-agency.117 [Emphasis in original]

Perhaps Chandler realised after a while that there was a limit point to his successive distillations of character into Marlowe. Or perhaps he realised this early on, that the essence of the hardboiled detective – “the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world” – was almost impossible to realise. In his very first novel, for instance, Marlowe ultimately fails to turn in Carmen Sternwood for the murder of her brother-in-law Rusty

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Later, Marxist critics take Marlowe to task for remaining in many ways tied to the lineage of the bourgeois detective. Ernest Mandel, for instance, recognizes important differences, but insists in the end that the American hardboiled detective still displays “an unmistakable continuity with the private detectives of the traditional sort” (34), in *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Feminist critics have also had their share of digs at Marlowe. Bethany Ogden disagrees with the ‘mythic’ view, feeling that “the antagonistic structure of the hard-boiled story is more in the nature of the fascist ‘us against them’ than the romantic ‘me against the world’” (84) in ‘Hard-Boiled Ideology,’ *Critical Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (1992): 71–87; Joyce Carol Oates stresses that in hardboiled literature, the “primary truth of the human heart is that men and women, though more frequently women (if they are beautiful), are rotten to the core” (34), in ‘The Simple Art of Murder,’ Review of *Stories and Early Novels and Later Novels and Other Writings*, by Raymond Chandler, *New York Review of Books* 42, no. 20 (December 21, 1995): 32–40.

Other critics, however, like John Hiltgart, Robert Merrill and John Paul Athanasourelis find in the figure of Marlowe a more complex expression of the tensions of his era, between a rugged American individualism and the myth of the frontier, and the pressing need to solve a web of societal problems collectively.
Regan; he realises that the gangster and casino owner Eddie Mars is the root of much of the evil and corruption in the text, but Mars remains untouched by the end of the story (Hawks’s film, on the other hand, forced by the constraints of the Production Code that dictated that Hollywood always depict a happy ending where the guilty are punished, has Mars being gunned down by his own men). Marlowe frequently stumbles up against this sort of ultimate powerlessness in the face of cosmic corruption, but in the earlier novels there is still hope in the private, in the small acts that Marlowe carries out, as when he decides not to let General Sternwood know that his own daughter, in an epileptic fit brought on by Regan’s rejection of her sexual advances, murders the son-in-law the old General was so fond of. That sense of greater moral corruption is somewhat balanced against this small act of private good that Marlowe, at this point, is still capable of doing.

Or perhaps Chandler thought he could distil his way into arriving at an eventually perfect Marlowe, the pure essence shown in practice of what thus far he could only tell in his non-fictional essay. But in The Lady in the Lake, there is an early premonition of the impossibility of this task. This happens when Derace Kingsley, the wealthy businessman who has hired Marlowe to find his estranged wife Crystal, articulates Chandler’s struggle, the paradox of his desire to make Marlowe the end-point of knowledge to effect change for the better and his creeping awareness that there is more often than not an excess of meaning in life (which is, after all, a procession of complementary and competing narratives) and that the detective’s quest can often be foiled – “Look here, Marlowe, I think I can understand your detective’s instinct to tie everything that happens into one compact knot, but don’t let it run away with you. Life isn’t like that at all – not life as I have known it.”

Thus it is that the use of the first-person narrative, and especially Marlowe’s extended voiceovers, undercuts Chandler’s desire perpetually. As I mentioned earlier in the context of

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the Flitcraft Parable, the voiceover often acts out the irreconcilability of contradictory narrative realities; in opening up and sustaining a heterotopia throughout the Marlovian canon, it constantly undercuts the desire for ultimate knowledge and the solution to the perceived crime. It expresses the fissures along which the detective realises he may not have the unquestioned command over the text that his unique position in it demands. Indeed, his abstraction from the world at the point of the voiceover, and consequently the niggling sense that he is, after all, not really in a position to change it, merely to be hurt by it and comment on it, becomes the philosophical core of the last novel Chandler wrote in the ’40s, *The Little Sister* (1949). Throughout the novel, Marlowe keeps arriving too late to prevent murders or apprehend the criminal. This phenomenon of getting too late to knowledge to clean up the corruption in the narrative, so to speak, is verbalised in the voiceover that comes a little less than halfway into the book. This whole chapter is given over to Marlowe’s bitter interior monologue as he drives through Hollywood at night. As he drives, “Marlowe fears that the exposures of his job have infected his voice – that his tirades are not an exorcism of the dirt but are themselves a measure of his having internalized it.”

I ate dinner at a place near Thousand Oaks. Bad but quick. Feed ’em and throw ’em out. Lots of business. We can’t bother with you sitting over your second cup of coffee, mister. You’re using money space.... Here we go again. You’re not human tonight, Marlowe.

I paid off and stopped in a bar to drop a brandy on top of the New York cut. Why New York, I thought. It was Detroit where they made machine tools. I stepped out into the night air that nobody had yet found out how to option. But a lot of people were probably trying. They’d get around to it.

I drove on to the Oxnard cut-off and turned back along the ocean. The big eight-wheelers and sixteen-wheelers were streaming north, all hung over with orange lights. On the right the great fat solid Pacific trudging into shore like a scrub-woman going home. No moon, no fuss, hardly a sound of the surf. No smell. None of the harsh wild smell of the sea. A California ocean. California, the department-store state. The most of everything and the best of nothing. Here we go again. You’re not human tonight, Marlowe.

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120  Hilgart, 373.
Note the rueful tones, the disillusionsed similes and the sense of resignation tempered with disgust. This is not the Marlowe of the earlier novels, the knight-errant who is “neat, clean, shaved and sober... everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be” in the very first paragraph of *The Big Sleep*. This is a changed Marlowe, and with him occurs a transformation in the way that alcohol is distilled into the text. Gone is the hardboiled pose that alcohol props up in the earlier novels, in which Marlowe takes a drink from his office bottle every time the narrative needs to press down a punctuation mark between episodes of frenetic activity. Gone is the use of alcohol as a tongue-loosener for informants – unlike the Jessie Florian of *Farewell, My Lovely*, no longer can crucial information be pried from alcoholic tongues with the promise of more gin. In some ways, we might even claim that Chandler’s novelistic arc has been mirroring the hazy progression of drunkenness, whereby the drink first inspires amber joy and a sense of well-being and can even be used productively (to make people talk, for instance), only to dovetail into a blurring of right and wrong, and a pronounced feel for sentimentality. Note also, therefore, the quiet reference to Marlowe’s drinking in the above excerpt. It inspires no comment, no thought. Indeed, the line immediately succeeding it takes the New York cut as its starting point to launch into a meditation on capitalist corruption. In the earlier novels, roughly, Chandler’s first four, *The Big Sleep, Farewell, My Lovely, The High Window* and *The Lady in the Lake*, the consumption of alcohol is often a narrative device – like being an aid to dialogue, for instance. And sometimes it even conveys the need to transcend a sort of Holmesian boredom; Dick Richards’s 1975 cinematic adaptation of *Farewell* begins with Robert Mitchum’s ageing Marlowe looking out over Los Angeles from his window with a drink in his hand and a cigarette between his lips while the voiceover expresses his deep sense of boredom with life and his profession – “This past spring was the first that I felt tired and realised that I was

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growing old. Maybe it was the rotten weather we’d had in LA; maybe it was the rotten cases I’d had, mostly chasing a few missing husbands and then chasing their wives once I’d found them, in order to get paid. Or maybe it was just the plain fact that I am tired. And growing old.”

But with the later Marlowe in The Little Sister and especially The Long Goodbye, booze becomes more an abstract marker of mood (of the total narrative, or of the society and culture surrounding the larger narrative, and not the mood of a specific character, which is what the opening lines quoted above do) and therefore needs no comment, no punctuating power. In fact, it is almost as if the detective can now only barely cope with his environment when intoxicated, and must therefore always be intoxicated. Thus, drinking is no longer an exceptional event, or one that has any visible effect on the detective’s effectiveness vis a vis the plot; it has, by the time of The Long Goodbye, become entirely assimilated into the mechanics of the language of Chandler’s discontent. Whereas in Hammett the drinking is inscribed within private actions, it now becomes a markedly public discourse, indeed, almost a condition of humanity. And whereas in Hammett it “overvalues communication and then destroys it,” in Chandler’s last great book its processes are more sophisticated, heading from loquacity into sentimentality and then bringing into focus a whole worldview, inscribing within itself a complex network of the creation and dissolution of friendship, respect, love, sexuality, betrayal, trust, danger, despair and the potential, however sentimentalised, for redemption.

**Too Early for a Gimlet, Too Late for a Goodbye**

Roland Barthes, in his celebrated and sometimes confusing essay ‘From Work to Text,’ delineates one major difference between the two concepts. The difference, he says, is this:

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123 Dick Richards, Director, *Farewell, My Lovely*, 1975.
“the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example), the Text is a methodological field.”¹²⁴ The work is defined in a process of “filiation,” i.e., it is defined by its relationship to its owner, whoever that may be (author, race, History, dominant worldview, etc.). The text, on the other hand, is unmoored from its owner; it functions less as an “organism” and more as a “network.” It “exists in the movement of a discourse... experienced only in an activity of production” [italics mine].

To trace the resonances of alcohol in a specific Chandler work, then, let us think through the movement of its discourse with respect to its incarnations in two distinct but connected texts. These are Raymond Chandler’s original book, *The Long Goodbye* (1953), and Robert Altman’s tongue-in-cheek cinematic adaptation of 1973 of the same name. A brief summary might be in order first, however, inasmuch as we can try and summarise a plot by an author who claimed famously to never care about his plots.

In Chandler’s book, Marlowe is now slowly entering middle age and has left his classic urban apartment living quarters, first at the Bristol Apartments on Bristol Avenue, then the Hobart Arms at Franklin and Kenmore, for a house on Yucca Avenue, a move that, for Fredric Jameson, “is the end of an era!”¹²⁵ Late in 1949, he meets a war-scarred drunk called Terry Lennox outside a club and helps him home. They soon forge an uneasy friendship over the next few months, meeting regularly for gimlets in the late afternoon, usually at a bar called Victor’s. “‘They don’t know how to make them here,’ he said. ‘What they call a gimlet is just some lime or lemon juice and gin with a dash of sugar and bitters. A real gimlet is half gin and half Rose’s Lime Juice and nothing else. It beats martinis hollow.’”¹²⁶

I like bars just after they open for the evening [Lennox would say]. When the air inside is still cool and clean and everything is shiny and the barkeep is giving

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himself that last look in the mirror to see if his tie is straight and his hair is smooth. I like the neat bottles on the bar back and the lovely shining glasses and the anticipation. I like to watch the man mix the first one of the evening and put it down on a crisp mat and put the little folded napkin beside it. I like to taste it slowly. The first quiet drink of the evening in a quiet bar – that’s wonderful.  

Early one morning, Lennox shows up at Marlowe’s house and asks to be driven to Tijuana, Mexico. Marlowe complies, but on returning to L.A. he finds out that Lennox’s rich and promiscuous wife Sylvia has been found dead, and the cops, who suspect Lennox of the murder, apprehend Marlowe in an attempt to get him to confess that he helped Lennox flee. 

Marlowe refuses to rat out a friend and is taken into police custody. Three days later, he is released, because it seems Lennox has been found dead in the small Mexican town of Otatoclán, an apparent suicide with a full statement next to his body confessing to the murder of his wife. The case is closed. 

Sylvia Lennox had been found beaten to death, her face bashed in brutally, and Marlowe refuses to believe Terry could have done it. He gets home to find a cryptic farewell letter in the mail from Lennox, with a “portrait of Madison” (a $5000 bill, in other words) attached. 

Soon after this, the novel’s ostensible plot comes into view when Marlowe is offered a case by a New York publisher called Howard Spencer, whose bestselling author Roger Wade has a drinking problem and has been missing for three days, and his breathtakingly beautiful wife Eileen is desperate to find him. Marlowe accepts the case after some initial dithering, and eventually locates the alcoholic novelist at a shady detox facility operated by one Dr. Verringer. He saves Roger Wade and brings him back home to his wife, who, strangely enough, seems to come on to Marlowe. He also learns that the Wades vaguely knew the Lennoxes (although the Wades’ stories about this acquaintance do not seem to match). 

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127 Ibid., 23.
Both husband and wife try to get Marlowe to stay at their house to keep constant watch over Roger and make sure he writes rather than drinks. Marlowe refuses, but ends up visiting the Wades off and on. On one such visit, he finds Roger drunk and unconscious outside the house and Eileen sitting next to him smoking. With the assistance of the Wades’ Chilean servant Candy, he puts Roger to bed, but Eileen at this point seems to come over in a trancelike state and tries to seduce Marlowe, apparently confusing him for an old lover who she believes died some years earlier in the Second World War and still appears to be in love with. Marlowe walks away.

Concurrently, various other things are going on. Marlowe has met Sylvia Lennox’s sister Linda Loring, and a respectful friendship grows between them. Linda introduces him to her father, the newspaper baron Harlan Potter, who wants the Lennox case closed for good to avoid unnecessary publicity, but Marlowe is hesitant. He is repeatedly threatened to lay off the case, not just by Harlan Potter, but by the police, by Eileen Wade, by the Wades’ servant Candy, and by a local gangster by the name of Mendy Menendez, who turns out to have been a friend of Terry’s since the war. At this point, Marlowe learns two things – that Terry Lennox, when he lived in England before the war, called himself Paul Marston, and that Roger Wade was having an affair with Sylvia Lennox before she was murdered.

Soon, Marlowe finds himself at the Wades’ again, lunching with Roger, who proceeds to drink himself into a stupor. So Marlowe goes out for a walk and returns to find Mrs. Wade waiting outside the house claiming to have forgotten her key. Once inside, they find Roger lying dead, the novel’s second apparent suicide. Eileen accuses Marlowe of having killed her husband, but the gumshoe grills her and argues that she had known Terry Lennox from way back when he was still Paul Marston: they were married before the war, and all these years Eileen had thought he had died, which is why when he reappeared in L.A., married to Sylvia, she panicked. He also accuses her of having murdered both Sylvia Lennox and Roger Wade.
The next day, we find out that Eileen Wade has killed herself – the only real suicide in a novel where every death is made to look like one – after having left a full confession.

Among the other strands going on through the novel, Linda Loring wants Marlowe to marry her, but he refuses even though he may be falling in love with her, realising he may become a kept man with such a phenomenally wealthy spouse. They end up making love in his house (the only time Marlowe has sex in the canon, other than with Helen Vermilyea in the almost-non-canonical Playback), and she leaves the next morning, presumably for ever (she will make her return in the final pages of Playback in the wires of telephone lines, and in the unfinished Poodle Springs – which was later completed by Robert Parker – she and Marlowe are married). There are also further encounters with Mendy Menendez, because Marlowe even now refuses to let the Lennox case lie.

At the very end, Marlowe gets a visit from a well-dressed Mexican in green sunglasses and knife scars on both sides of his face. He calls himself Cisco Maioranos and claims to have been present when Lennox killed himself. They talk awhile, but Marlowe accuses Señor Maioranos of lying when the Mexican says he went into Lennox’s room in Otatoclán while the latter was writing his suicide note, because, as Marlowe realises:

“You were already in there, chum – writing the letter.”

He reached up and took the dark glasses off. Nobody can change the color of a man’s eyes.

“I suppose it’s a bit too early for a gimlet,” he said.  

Lennox has, of course, had cosmetic surgery and become a different character. But Marlowe no longer wants him in his life. It is a poignant moment in the book, a moment where the usually cynical hardboiled private eye betrays a deeply sentimental sense of loss; not for a lover or a dear friend or family, because Lennox is none of those, but for a sense of trust that for Marlowe has been all too easily undermined. As he tells Lennox, “So long,

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128 Ibid., 374.
amigo. I won’t say goodbye. I said it to you when it meant something. I said it when it was sad and lonely and final.”

Altman’s film makes considerable changes to the Chandler’s book. When it first came out, it was greeted with reviews that might charitably have been called mixed. “Moviegoers were either openly hostile or indifferent; the film was pulled from release after poor attendance in Los Angeles, and did only mediocre business when it was re-released some nine months later.” For our purposes, let us concentrate on the differences in the discourses of drink that almost prop up the book, but merely flit around whimsically in the film. The hazy vapours of alcohol that pervade the book as themes and plot points are missing in the film. Indeed, it is as if the book is soaked in booze when it comes to its dominant – and unwritten – mood. Most of its events happen in bars, outside bars, and around drunken episodes and alcoholic blackouts. But in the film, Terry Lennox is no longer a war-scarred drunk whom Marlowe has known only for a year; instead, he is Marlowe’s old and perhaps dearest friend. While he appears only a few times in the book (in my edition, he disappears into Mexico on page 35 and reappears as Maioranos only on page 370, less than ten pages from the end), his presence, like Iva Archer’s in *The Maltese Falcon*, is even more spectral in the film; he shows up near the beginning and asks to be driven to Tijuana, after which he is glimpsed again at the very end. Marlowe and his semi-regular drinking sessions at Victor’s, which are points of great honesty and fellow-feeling for Chandler, are not referred to at all in Altman’s film. There is no Linda Loring, and therefore no bar where Marlowe first gets to meet her. Marlowe himself barely drinks, and never by himself. The only booze-related continuity evidenced in the film is the Hemingwayesque figure of the alcoholic writer Roger

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129 Ibid., 378.
Wade (played to perfection by Sterling Hayden, who far out-Hemingways Hemingway). In spite of these emendations and deletions, the narrative refuses to move forward without its alcoholic propellants.

Marlowe is shown drinking in the film thrice. The first time this happens, he is fresh out of jail and goes to his ‘office.’ In the books, this is a modest space in Hollywood with no secretary and there is always a bottle of bourbon (Four Roses or Old Forester) in the desk drawer, and he’s always “buying” himself drinks from the office bottle. In Altman’s reimagining, his office is actually a bar, and the only time Marlowe is shown there is in the glow of late-afternoon/early-evening, the same time of day he and Lennox would go to Victor’s in the book. They take down messages for him at the bar, and when he arrives there he is informed of a potential client who had called looking for him. He calls this person back from the bar; it is Eileen Wade, and she wants him to find her alcoholic writer husband. Marlowe thus gets his case, right from the bar counter.

With respect to Marlowe’s ‘case,’ we must keep in mind the operation of a sort of double-structure in Chandler’s narrative arc. Fredric Jameson notes that:

Raymond Chandler’s novels have not one form, but two, an objective form and a subjective one, the rigid external structure of the detective story on the one hand, and a more personal distinctive rhythm of events on the other, arranged...according to some ideal molecular chain in the brain cells, as personal in their encephalographic pattern as a fingerprint, peopled with recurrent phantoms, obsessive character types, actors in some forgotten psychic drama through whom the social world continues to be interpreted. Yet the two kinds of forms do not conflict with each other; on the contrary the second seems to have been generated out of the first by the latter’s own internal contradictions.\footnote{Jameson, ‘On Raymond Chandler,’ \textit{The Southern Review} 6 (1970): 624-650, 644.}

Some might say this double form is necessitated by Chandler’s basic mode of deception, whereby the reader is fooled into expending thought and effort into following one mystery or a certain case, whereas, all the while, it is actually a different mystery that is of central importance. As Chandler himself put it:
It often seems to this particular writer that the only reasonably honest and effective way of fooling the reader that remains is to make the reader exercise his mind about the wrong problem, to make him, as it were, solve a mystery (since he is almost sure to solve something) which will land him in a bypath because it is only tangential to the central problem.\footnote{Chandler, \textit{Raymond Chandler Speaking}, 69.}

Chandler thus realises the advantage of that old strategy of “progressive revelation” and “systematic digression” that we’ve discussed above and uses it ingeniously by creating a fundamental principle for the construction of plot. So there is the ostensible plot where he investigates a crime officially, as an ostensible crime or a visible problem – in \textit{The Long Goodbye}, this is obviously the Roger-and-Eileen-Wade plot – but, to refer back to gestalt’s terms, this is the figure that is meant to divert us from the operations being performed in the more important ground, which is the surface that contains the Terry Lennox disappearance/suicide. In the book, the alcohol serves to give flesh to, to thicken, Marlowe and Terry’s relationship, to intensify emotional resonances, and to allow for drunken detours of mood and content (note, for instance, the rambling note written by Roger Wade, which many critics see as Chandler’s meta-comment on his own craft and his own inadequacies as a writer – this is a function of the “subjective” form of the Chandlerian story that Jameson identifies, inasmuch that it is a projection of the author’s own “forgotten psychic drama”). This tactic opens up certain non-narrative spaces for the reader to inhabit, which are heterotopias in that they are removed from but contiguous with the spaces of both figure (the Wade plot) and ground (the Lennox plot). In the film, however, the operations of alcohol keep performing successive derailments which, at a deeper level, are essential to the successful unravelling of the central Lennox problem – whichever strand Marlowe attempts to hold on to at any given moment is given an arrhythmic shove and gets jarred and confused. So, the three times he drinks in the film are –
1. The first time, mentioned above. He is in the bar he uses as an office, when he gets the Wade case. This ostensibly takes him away from the Lennox plot and his investigation (that would have begun, one presumes, soon afterwards) to clear Terry’s name, but actually opens up a connection which becomes evident later on, i.e., he finds that the Wades and the Lennoxes were neighbours, and may have known each other fairly well in spite of the Wades’ denial.

2. The second time is with Roger Wade; they are both drinking chilled aquavit, and Marlowe learns of the Lennoxes’ and the Wades’ connections to Marty Augustine (who is Mendy Menedez in the book; here, Augustine is not an old friend of Terry’s but more of a business associate to whom Terry owes a fair bit of money). The narrative takes another rapid detour as soon as the symposium is complete – Marlowe gets the “Madison” in the mail and heads off to Otatoclán. Thus, the Lennox ur-case, if it can be called that, is thrown open (only to be shut temporarily when Marlowe is lied to by the Mexican authorities about Lennox’s ‘suicide’).

This is also the most intimate scene in the film, perhaps, and closest to the book’s running motif of drunken male comradeship. The camera, ever roving, keeps tracking a 360° motion around the two characters as they sit on the beach outside Wade’s house drinking and talking about Augustine, the Lennoxes and the structures of faces. Perhaps it is also relevant that the drink is aquavit – it is, after all, a spirit firmly rooted in ritual in Scandinavia, where it originates. Indeed, as Finn-Olaf Jones observes,

Aquavit’s strange attractions go beyond health. There’s a mystical quality to the elixir; it’s like a Scandinavian version of communion wine, fraught with ritual. The basic ritual goes like this:

Pour into a frozen aquavit glass (a special shot glass with a stem so your fingers won’t warm the contents). Lift glass toward mouth and pause. Stare into eyes of everyone else holding a glass. Say the obligatory Danish toast, “Skaal.” Drink — to empty or not to empty; that’s up to the individual. Look everyone in the eyes again. Set glass down.
It’s that staring ... silently ... into the eyes ... of ... everyone ... that can be awkward for novices. For Danes, famed for their uncommunicative style, this might be the most intimate act most will perform their entire lives.\textsuperscript{134}

Indeed, the camera even leaves the scene mid-sentence, as if to give the two men the privacy their drinking aquavit together demands.

3. The last time Marlowe is seen drinking in the movie is also at the Wades,’ after a party that comes to an unceremonious end as Dr. Verringer shows up and demands the money owed him from an increasingly drunk Roger Wade, culminating in Verringer slapping the novelist and cowing him sufficiently for a cheque to be written. The guests disperse, but Marlowe stays behind at Eileen’s behest to keep an eye on the now-unconscious Roger. Night falls, and the two of them go upstairs to have dinner and drinks while Roger sleeps his drink off.

   Upstairs, Marlowe and Mrs. Wade have both been drinking and eating, when the detective confronts her about her connections with the Lennoxes (earlier in the film, Eileen had lied to Marlowe about barely knowing the Lennoxes). It is at this point that we see Roger walking into the ocean below; both Eileen and Marlowe rush down to the beach and jump into the water to save him, but it is too late (note that in the film, Roger is explicitly shown committing suicide, whereas in the book he is murdered by Eileen in a way that is made to look like a suicide). Marlowe and Eileen are then shown huddled on the beach, while many neighbours keep drifting into the scene like it’s another Hollywood event and the coast guard and the police look for Roger’s body in the ocean. Someone keeps thrusting a bottle of bourbon into Eileen and/or Marlowe’s hands, and they are both visibly drunk and shaken (although Eileen is possibly acting, for Marlowe’s benefit). It is at this point, while they are both sipping from the bottle, that Eileen tells him about Roger’s affair with Sylvia Lennox. This derails the investigation once more, because it

leads Marlowe to suspect Roger Wade as Sylvia’s murderer, and for the time being it looks like the Lennox ur-case has been cleared. But, once again, like the previous representations of Marlowe getting drunk in the film, this sense of calm is destabilised in the very next sequence, when Marlowe is apprehended by Marty Augustine (who is looking for the money Terry Lennox owed him) and is being threatened when suddenly, as if miraculously, the money arrives. The ur-case is thus, once more, thrown wide open, and Marlowe catches on that there is more to it than Eileen’s neatly tied up explanation.

Repeated Negotiations

The constant destabilisation and re-stabilisation that occurs under the influence of alcohol in the film – the drinking facilitating the continuum between the objective and subjective forms of the narrative, so to speak – are emblematic of Chandler’s mode of fiction, which John Paul Athanasourelis calls a “particularly modernist fiction of negotiation.” He goes on to say that “Chandler’s fiction displays a conscious critique of omniscience and an assertion of negotiated and pragmatic reality.” The vapours of alcohol muddy the waters, blurring the boundaries between the two concomitant urgencies of Chandler’s plotting. Are we following the objective form now? Now the subjective? Is the murder of Sylvia Lennox and Marlowe’s knightly quest to clear his friend’s name (by going to such lengths as spending nights in jail) the central concern of the narrative? Or is it the story of the Wades that should preoccupy us most? Is it neither, but the motif of the wandering itself – or, indeed, of two wanderings, one to clear Terry’s name, the other related to the Wade business?

Chandler’s negotiation of reality in his fiction depends more often than not on certain repetitions. At the basic level, there is repetition of plot. Compare the plots of *The Big Sleep* and *The Long Goodbye*, for instance. As R. W. Lid notes in ‘Philip Marlowe Speaking,’ “[a]t

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the core of both *The Big Sleep* and *The Long Goodbye* lie precisely the same situation and some of the same characters, though the alignment of characters and their involvement in the plots of each novel are different.” In *The Big Sleep*, there is the millionaire General Sternwood and his two daughters; in *The Long Goodbye* there is the millionaire Harlan Potter and his two daughters. In one, Sternwood’s son-in-law initiates the action of the novel by disappearing; in the other, Harlan Potter’s son-in-law does the same. Both are likeable young men with whom Marlowe feels a special bond or, at the least, has a vague fondness for. Eddie Mars, the big businessman-gangster of the first novel, is succeeded by Mendy Menendez, the big businessman-gangster of the latter. In each novel, one of the daughters is a nymphomaniac. In both novels, Marlowe is attracted to the elder daughter.

*The Big Sleep*’s Carmen Sternwood, the younger daughter, is the locus of the physical and psychosexual corruption of the narrative; in *The Long Goodbye*, this is split between Sylvia Potter Lennox, who embodies the physical failings of the novel’s reality, and Eileen Wade, who symbolizes the psychosexual ones.

The repetitions inherent in Chandler’s work, then, are carried forward in Altman’s film, albeit in other, non-narrative ways. The film has only one melodic theme that is played in a variety of different styles and tempos – a Mexican funeral dirge, a cool jazz vocal, a string quartet version, a mainstream symphonic film score version, a seventies style rock version, and even in the electronic sound of a doorbell. The music in *The Long Goodbye*, endlessly repeating itself in constantly renewing discursive modes, is an apt mirror to Philip Marlowe’s stream-of-consciousness mumbling. This repetition is aided by another, Marlowe’s catchphrase – “It’s ok with me” – which becomes highly significant. A bit sentence improvised by Elliot Gould, it is symptomatic of the inescapability of the

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chronotope of the Chandlerian universe. All through the film, the protagonist wanders
dazedly through various layers of misinformation, and it’s always ok with him.

These repetitions keep alive the continuum traced from the work to the text through
the diegetic and non-diegetic scintilla of meta-principles governing the construction of the
narratives. But the deeper philosophical questions and sentiments that Chandler’s work
expresses through Marlowe and Lennox’s friendship and their drinking sessions at Victor’s,
and through Roger Wade’s alcoholism and writer’s block, are translated into the single,
powerful moment in the film when Roger walks into the sea to die. The murder of the book
has given way to a drunken suicide, as if compensating for the lack of the book’s first person
commentary. In this sense, this scene is Marlowe’s voiceover – no wonder, then, that it is
shot in very long shot, from far away, as if removing all presence of realism and reminding us
that we are watching a scene in passive motion, constructed after the fact, just like a
voiceover.

Altman’s film changes things around significantly, of course. So, in the end, it turns
out that Eileen was having an affair with Terry (not Roger with Sylvia, as in the book) and
that Terry did indeed kill his wife after she found out. Terry doesn’t visit Marlowe in the end;
it’s the other way round, and Marlowe does something that’s very uncharacteristic of him. He
shoots Terry Lennox dead. The very last shot has him walking away while Eileen Wade
drives by, obviously on her way to her lover, now that her husband is dead. Her smiles
changes to a look of concern as she passes Marlowe and recognizes him. Marlowe takes his
little harmonica out of his pocket and starts playing a little ditty.

This last shot is again shot much like the scenes of Roger’s suicide, in long shot and
expressing its obvious constructedness (for the first time, the film’s repeated theme melody
gives way to an old recording of Johnny Mercer’s satirical musical number ‘Hooray for
Hollywood’). It is, perhaps, Marlowe’s cynical closing voiceover.
And so Marlowe declines the drink offered by Terry, obviously because he’s been played for the loser he often is (“You’ll never learn. You’re a born loser,” Lennox tells him. To which Marlowe’s reply is “Yeah, I even lost my cat,” and a quick pull of the trigger) and is probably in no mood for a drink. But also because the plot has no further way to wend, no more bends in the road, no further derailment possible, ladies and gentlemen, so remember to take your jackets as you leave. Marlowe has been betrayed by a friend, and it’s not ok with him. This negotiation has come to an end.

**In Conclusion, or, To Say Goodbye Is to Die a Little**

*The French have a phrase for it. The bastards have a phrase for everything and they are always right. To say goodbye is to die a little.*

- Philip Marlowe, *The Long Goodbye*

*The Long Goodbye* is, ultimately, a text scattered with glimpses of the “little” – fragments of relationships, little pieces of sentiment, little favours done, little mysteries solved. There are hardly any big sweeping actions; the only constant theme dominating the narrative is the one that pulsates underfoot the ostensible telling of the tale, and that is the relationship between Marlowe and Terry. No wonder, then, that that is the climax the book arrives at, a book whose “mysteries” have been solved by the detective a good fifty pages before. And no wonder, also, that that is the pivot upon which the film resolves itself, with Marlowe shooting Terry in cold blood (lukewarm, at the very most, if not entirely cold).

So no wonder again that the uncertainty of fragments is emphasized. And, if one keeps in mind the textual continuum of *The Long Goodbye*+*The Long Goodbye* (book+film), a great many uncertainties arise, with respect to motives for committing crimes, characters changing character midway, so to speak (the most obvious physical manifestation of this tendency, of course, is Paul Marston’s transformation into Terry Lennox, and Terry Lennox’s transformation into Cisco Maioranos), and ultimate reasons for actions and deceptions. For
instance, we never really know if, in the film, Eileen Wade possesses the knowledge that Terry Lennox killed his wife; Robert Merrill, for example, says:

Critics sometimes wonder whether Altman’s Eileen was in conspiracy with Terry Lennox from the first, but I think the film makes it clear enough that Eileen did not know that Terry killed his wife (she in fact fears that her husband Roger killed Sylvia), did not know about Terry’s faked suicide until Terry sent her the money to return to Marty Augustine, and turns to Terry at the end only because her husband is now dead and Marlowe himself has rejected her.137

But this, of course, is also uncertain. From the way in which Terry narrates things at the climax of the film, it is as easy to conclude that Eileen has been in on it all the way, and her drunken admission of fear “that her husband Roger killed Sylvia” may well be an act for Marlowe’s benefit, now that Roger is too drowned to contradict her story.

These uncertainties are expressed, as mentioned above, in fragments of action, and different layers of the narrative often come unstuck, only appearing to be connected to each other when in reality they really are not. Linda Loring is the dead Sylvia’s sister, but that has almost nothing to do with how she meets Marlowe, how they fall for each other, and how he makes her leave him in the end.

Similar processes are at work in The Maltese Falcon, which inverts this way of functioning by making things that are seemingly unconnected fall into place as connections at the end; thus, it turns out that Spade has been trying to find his partner’s murderer all along. But, again, this is a narrative afterthought, for little else in the book or film shows evidence of this quest. And there too, fragments and set-pieces occupy pride of place – the two encounters in Gutman’s rooms; Cairo and Brigid in Spade’s apartment; the Flitcraft Parable; the climactic scene with all dramatis personae assembled at Spade’s; the other climactic scene with Brigid.

In this context, alcohol and cigarettes, two intoxicants far less transgressive than Holmes’s cocaine, lurk in the margins of the text, acting as behavioural fragments that link

137 Merrill, “Robert Altman’s The Long Goodbye: Adaptation or Travesty?”
action and epistemology, but also as resonators that indicate mood to the reader outside the page. They are the pivots upon which the narratives twirl themselves; this twirling is in the form of wandering away from the ostensible and the McGuffin to the barely-sensed and the never-articulated. Or it is in the form of a derailment, from one problem to another. So alcohol affects *The Long Goodbye* by thrusting upon it a drunk’s sentimentality; its comparative absence from *The Maltese Falcon* makes the latter perhaps more ‘hardboiled,’ more cynical and sharp, but without the keen humanity of the former. And the cigarettes keep providing information, be it Brigid’s lighting up and lying through the smoke, or Altman’s Marlowe chainsmoking his way through the film (he lights a cigarette in almost every single sequence); they become a non-verbal haptic stand-in for the many Eureka! moments most narratives of detection seem to indulge in. So, paradoxically enough, true to their physical natures, cigarettes and alcohol infuse smokes and vapours into the texts in question, obscuring and muddying; but they also subvert, derail, and lay out epistemes for interpretation. And the smoky, teetering stories of noir take sinuous detours through the shadowy corners of narrative, inviting interpretation here and obscuring judgement there.
CHAPTER III

TEXTUAL TRIPS AND PSYCHEDELIC REACTIONS:

HALLUCINATIONS OF POSTMODERNITY AND THE

METAPHYSICAL DETECTIVE

The Great Crash

SIXTH OF OCTOBER, 1966, Lunatic Protest Demonstration: a celebration to demonstrate opposition to legislative repression of chemical mysticism...

Six hundred to a thousand young souls (an educated guess) dancing with brave banners waving over their looney [sic] heads. Posters and placards in evidence. The one I loved best said: THE TRUELY INSANE ARE HELPLESS! I stood under that sign surrounded by the sanest people in San Francisco...

Young Beautifulls, young beggars and mummers, dancers and singers, laughing boys and girls – soon to be outlawed – that afternoon layed down their gentle message, loud and clear. LOVE.

For a few hours on October Sixth, they had their world their way.

– The Oracle of the City of San Francisco, Vol. 1, Issue 2, October ’66, p. 3

On the 6th of October, 1966, at around 4 or 5 in the afternoon, the ban on LSD came into effect, with California becoming the first state to deem it an illegal substance (other states, then other nations, soon followed). Legend has it that hundreds, maybe thousands, of hippies, freaks and fellow travellers waited for the clock to strike, and then dropped acid (LSD, from Lysergic acid diethylamide) at the precise moment it became illegal. Organised to time with this decree was the Love Pageant Rally that the Oracle feature quoted above describes in its own unique way. The Love Pageant was, in many ways, the first “gathering of the tribes,” in the panhandle of Golden Gate Park, right by the Haight. Produced by Allen Cohen and Michael Bowen – two of the founders of the iconic underground newspaper the San

1 The terms ‘acid’ and ‘LSD’ will be used interchangeably in this study.
Francisco Oracle – it was essentially a big party attended by such counterculture icons as Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, the Grateful Dead, and Janis Joplin. “A wave of media publicity about the gentleness of this mass turn-on resulted in an even larger gathering in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park in January 1967,” the Human Be-In, which proved to be a prelude to the West Coast’s “Summer of Love” and popularised the term psychedelic.

Interestingly, the responses seen here to LSD being banned are all vibrant, playful and optimistic – Be-Ins, Love Pageants, Gatherings of the Tribes, the popularisation of psychedelic art through the pages of the Oracle, and so on. But lurking round the corner from these bright reactions is their desperately dark other, a reminder that even the most hopeful of narratives can be violently derailed; for every turned-on hippie seeing the face of god, a tripped out crazy Meredith Hunter stabbed to death. And this is the dark other to the hopeful narrative after the ban of LSD – sleazy junkies, violent theft, guns, rapists, and heroin. The underground actress and Dreamlander Cookie Mueller, for instance, reminiscing about her time in the Haight district of San Francisco, wrote: “The golden age of the Haight did not last long. Late in 1968, a new element appeared in the neighborhood.... Heroin appeared on street corners where there previously used to be free LSD. The street got ugly.... Anyway, it all died in 1968. Even the tourist buses stopped coming.”

A striking parallel, if far more apocalyptic, is found early on in the pages of Philip K. Dick’s A Scanner Darkly:

Suppose everybody in California and parts of Oregon runs out the same day, he thought. Wow.

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3 Meredith Hunter was the teenager who was stabbed to death by the Hell’s Angels at the infamous Altamont Free Festival organized by the Rolling Stones at the Altamont Speedway in northern California on December 6, 1969. Hunter, who was high on methamphetamine, brandished a gun and attempted to climb onstage when he was stabbed.
4 Dreamlanders refers to the cast and crew of regulars used by John Waters in many of his films. The term comes from Waters’s production company, Dreamland Productions.
This was the all-time winning horror-fantasy that he ran in his head, that every doper ran. The whole western part of the United States simultaneously running out and everybody crashing on the same day, probably about 6 A.M. Sunday morning, while the straights were getting dressed up to go fucking pray.

Scene: The First Episcopal Church of Pasadena, at 8.30 A.M. on Crash Sunday.

“Holy parishioners, let us call on God now at this time to request His intervention in the agonies of those who are thrashing about on their beds withdrawing.”

This is a reverse of the love pageantry that transformed the banning of LSD into a celebration of the substance. The substance in question in Dick’s book is a drug called Substance D – otherwise known as Death, slow death – “the most dangerous drug ever to find its way on to the black market.” Like LSD, Substance D breaks down certain mental and emotional barriers. Unlike LSD, though, Substance D is far from life-affirming.

The concept of the Crash therefore becomes a visible metaphor for certain ruptures in the interaction between hallucinogens and our perception of reality (of our many and varied realities, really), an attempt to identify a moment in time and a location in space at which ‘drugs’ very visibly seep into perception. Because as a rule, drugs tend to resist what Avital Ronell calls “conceptual arrest... their strength lies in their virtual and fugitive patterns.”

They refuse to be separated from their illicitness even at the level of language; note Ronell’s use of words like arrest and fugitive, and the failure to arrest even while she’s attempting to talk about them. The idea of the Crash is similar, it too presents an absence, and we can identify the ontological presence of the drug-in-the-world, the existence of the abstract Drug, so to speak, by its very absence from its user at the moment of withdrawal. And so the End of

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Legal LSD, which is the beginning of its illicitness, is when it truly explodes onto a large collective consciousness. Its arrest sets it free, and its world/word becomes *psychedelic*.\(^8\)

Attempts to pin down drugs in language, then, if Ronell is to be believed, are both pointless and inescapable. They are eccentric beings, their very existence supposed on paradox. Perhaps this accounts for their ghostly and more often than not absent presences in many narratives of detection from the second half of the twentieth century. Maybe this also accounts for the increasingly serpentine and dissolving boundaries of these narratives, insomuch that the narrative itself begins to take on the hallucinatory qualities of certain drugs, blurring boundaries and resisting conceptual arrest. Just as hallucinogens allow for the breakdown of the barriers between distinct regimes of perception (by enabling synaesthesia, for instance), so too does the metaphysical detective story, with its use of “fabulous symbols, elaborate ironies, incongruous juxtapositions, and self-reflexive pastiche,”\(^9\) cause imbalances in the genre’s perception of reality, of easily-separated moral choices, and even of conventional ways of reading. What is virtual, and what is real? Hallucinations of (post?)modernity abound in the oblique structures and vague resolutions of such narratives of detection, and the textworld of the metaphysical detective becomes a surface of relentless paradox and a presence of absences, upon which the figure of the detective itself begins to slowly disappear and become shifty, nebulous and, dare we say it, inherently menacing to the reader. The detective, much like Ronell’s drugs, begins to resist conceptual arrest.

\(^8\) The word *psychedelic* was coined by the psychiatrist Humphrey Osmond in 1957 to describe the effects LSD has on the human mind. Osmond was a good friend of Aldous Huxley’s and wanted a suggestion for the naming of the LSD-induced experience; Huxley offered the word *phanerothyme*, from the Greek for ‘to show’ and ‘spirit,’ and sent a rhyme: “To make this mundane world sublime/Take half a gram of phanerothyme.” Osmond chose *psychedelic* instead, from the Greek *psyche* (mind or soul) and *deloun* (show), and suggested, “To fathom Hell or soar angelic/Just take a pinch of psychedelic.” He announced it at a meeting of the New York Academy of Sciences in 1957.

**Hallucinogenres**

*Hallucinogenres*

Dunraven, who had read a great many detective novels, thought that the solution of a mystery was a good deal less interesting than the mystery itself; the mystery had a touch of the supernatural and even the divine about it, while the solution was a sleight of hand.

– Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Ibn-Hakam al-Bokhari, Murdered in His Labyrinth’

The postmodern or metaphysical detective story is the slipperiest of customers, a genre (if it can be called that) of largely post-WW2 experimental writing “with a flamboyant yet decidedly complex relationship to the detective story, and a kinship to modernist and postmodernist fiction in general,” suggest Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney in their introduction to the volume of essays they have edited on the genre.¹⁰ These stories are usually preoccupied with the varied forms of narrative, the status of the reader, the blurring of generic boundaries, the nature of reality, subjectivity and the work of interpretation. For Merivale and Sweeney, a metaphysical detective story “is a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader – with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot.”¹¹

In some ways, this sort of story is a result of the interfacing of postmodernity with Romanticism and the Enlightenment, the two spiritual and intellectual contexts of traditional detective fiction. The figure of the classical detective is, after all, the figure of the arch-Romantic who contains all creative possibilities within himself (and it is male, more often than not, this figure) – think of a solitary Sherlock Holmes gazing upon the moors from a craggy rock, solving the most complex of problems all within his own mind, exemplifying the orientation of the traditional detective story towards, as Michael Holquist has pointed out, the Scholastic principle of *adequato rei et intellectus*, the idea that the mind, given enough

¹⁰ Ibid., 1.
¹¹ Ibid., 2.
time, can understand anything. Holmes is thus the eponymous isolated “Man upon the Tor” in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Similarly, the entire process of the unfolding of these traditional narratives of detection is dictated by the preoccupations of the Enlightenment, such as logic, reason, causality, categorization of objects of analyses, the notion of universal progress towards an end truth, the denial of divine prefiguration, and the scientific method. These two moorings of the genre, contradictory as they are, are played upon by a third, equally contradictory framework after the Second World War. As Holquist puts it in ‘Whodunit and Other Questions,’ “Post-Modernism exploits detective stories by expanding and changing certain possibilities in them, just as Modernism had modified the potentialities of myth.”

Names are important in this sort of writing, as we shall soon see, and the naming of the genre is also nebulous. In 1972, William V. Spanos called it the “anti-detective story,” “the paradigmatic archetype of the postmodern literary imagination... the formal purpose of which is to evoke the impulse to ‘detect’... in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime.” Since then, these stories have been identified variously, as “deconstructive mysteries,” in which stories within stories and embedded texts “‘deconstruct’ the crime-and-detection genre in parodic ways”; as “postmodern mysteries,” which is what Kevin Dettmar calls it while writing about James Joyce’s short story ‘The Sisters’ as an early example of the genre; as the “post-nouveau roman detective novel,” which seems to apply...
to very recent works only, and only in French, at that; as what John T. Irwin, in a paper presented in 1981 at the annual meeting of the Poe Studies Association and since expanded into *The Mystery to a Solution*, called the “analytic detective story,” a detective story that does away with the detective’s adventures and is preoccupied only with the search for meaning, often, self-reflexively, its own\(^{17}\), and even as the “ontological detective story,” a term coined by Elana Gomel to describe those (predominantly science fiction) texts “in which the world where the action takes place becomes an object of investigation, a mystery to be solved, a secret to be uncovered.”\(^{18}\)

The term “metaphysical detective story,” which was coined by Howard Haycraft in 1941 “to describe the paradoxical plots and philosophic-theological intentions of Chesterton’s Father Brown tales, and later revised by Merivale (in ‘The Flaunting of Artifice,’ 1967) and Holquist (1971-72), is the oldest and by now the most frequently used term for such literature.”\(^{19}\) This is the term we shall use here, because it is more wide-ranging than the others, it can be applied to texts that are not really considered postmodern per se, and also, as Merivale and Sweeney note, because age has its privileges.

Now, Holquist fleetingly mentions something in ‘Whodunit and Other Questions’ that might be of great significance to our study. Contrasting the postmodern or metaphysical detective story to the more traditional, “classical” detective stories, he notes that this kind of story “does not have the *narcotizing* effect of its progenitor” (italics mine).\(^{20}\) Holquist, of course, means to suggest that this kind of story encourages its reader to play a more active role in the textual process, whereby the end of story (the solution) is not necessarily the end (both completion and goal) of the reading; rather, the end of reading should be situated in the

20 Holquist, ‘Whodunit,’ 94.
very process of reading, and that the solution to the story, if it even has one, is not nearly as important as the experience of this process of reading.

But *narcotizing* also brings into play the other, more literal connection of the word to the thing. The narcotics swirling in the dark undercurrent of much of traditional detective fiction – mainly morphine, opium, cocaine, alcohol and tobacco\(^{21}\) – have given way, it seems, to headier and more metaphysical stuff. These new detective texts have discovered, around the same time as it is discovered in the popular urban consciousness of the extratextual world surrounding them, those troublesome gifts of the gods, psychedelics. And, indeed, as Holquist notes, these texts are not *narcotizing*, but soaringly, flamboyantly *hallucinatory*.

So a radical alteration in the trajectory of the detective takes place with the emergence of the metaphysical detective story. From opioid wanderings through cobbled Parisian byways and gaslit Victorian alleys in the nineteenth century, via drunken detours on sundrenched Californian highways during the former half of the twentieth century, the detective ultimately trips down the winding roads that lead to the very fabric of his existence. From the urban labyrinths of earlier detective fiction, suggested by the shock of modernity and the springing up of modern cities (and the arrival of urban policemen), the detective’s wandering shifts to the world-labyrinth. As suggested in the first chapter of this study, the armchair that denotes the phase space – where all possible states of the detectival/narratival system can be represented – morphs into the labyrinth. (This, of course, we can blame on Jorge Luis Borges). From wandering through the narrative epistemologically, as in the Holmes Canon, through a wandering *in* the ontological narrative, as in the Flitcraft Parable,

\(^{21}\) Of course, *narcotics* itself is a highly contested term. It is very imprecisely defined, both pharmacologically and culturally. It originally referred to any psychoactive substance that could induce sleep or sleep-like symptoms. Hence, typically, opioids, like morphine and heroin. Alcohol and tobacco have both been considered narcotics off and on, especially in the late-19\(^{th}\) and early 20\(^{th}\) centuries. Cocaine, while not really exhibiting the property of narcotizing and scientifically being a non-narcotic stimulant, is considered a narcotic both medically and legally. Hallucinogens, however, are never considered narcotics.
there now occurs a wandering through/in wandering itself. A postmodern trait of self-
reflexivity, no doubt, which imposes ontological concerns within the framework of a genre
fundamentally concerned with epistemology, but also the result of a hallucinatory narrative,
one that blurs the boundaries effectively between the various narrative components and
systems that integrate to make up a complex text.

Speaking of labyrinths, Umberto Eco links the labyrinth to the “structure of
conjecture” (i.e., the process and movement of narrative possibilities) and delineates a three-
fold progression in its evolution. In *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, he speaks first of
the classical labyrinth, “the Greek, the labyrinth of Theseus. This kind does not allow anyone
to get lost: you go in, arrive at the center, and then from the center you reach the exit. That is
why in the center there is the Minotaur,” for the “zest.” This model of narrative conjecture
gives way to “the mannerist maze: if you unravel it, you find in your hands a kind of tree, a
structure with roots, with many blind alleys. There is only one exit, but you can get it wrong.
You need an Ariadne’s thread to keep from getting lost. This labyrinth is a model of the trial-
and-error process.” This, of course, is the kind of maze that forms the epistemologic process
of many classic detective novels, including Agatha Christie’s, or Raymond Chandler’s. It is
this sort of maze that often combines with the earlier Greek labyrinth to allow for the
epistemophilia of the Holmes stories.

The third sort of labyrinth is the labyrinth inhabited by the metaphysical detective
narrative. This is the metaphor of “the net, or, rather, what Deleuze and Guattari call
‘rhizome.’ The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other
one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of

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conjecture is a rhizome space.” This is the labyrinth of the metaphysical detective
storyworld, which, while it can be structured, “is never structured definitively.”

Interestingly, this rhizomatic labyrinth-space of conjecture fits rather easily into the
narrative model that imposes itself on the consciousness of someone who has ingested
psilocybin, the naturally-occurring psychoactive compound found in certain mushrooms,
which are consequently called magic mushrooms. Psilocybin has been long used in
Mesoamerica as a substance to aid in spiritual and divination ceremonies, and more generally
as an entheogen. Its effects include euphoria, hallucinations, distortions in perception of time
and space, and what can only be described as spiritual experiences characterized by a deep
wandering inwards into one’s own soul: Dr. Albert Hofmann (who first synthesized LSD),
recalling his first psilocybin trip, said he felt “submerged in [himself].” The last time I
ingested psilocybin, I was assailed with a deep impression of ordering my thoughts as though
in the “mannerist maze” (one overarching thought or idea that I was focusing on), but kept
losing the Ariadne’s-thread, which resulted in the maze suddenly and frighteningly morphing
into the “rhizomatic labyrinth” (the overarching idea giving way to numerous other,
frequently unrelated, ideas which kept slipping through the cracks of my awareness). I was
frequently afraid I would not make it out of the labyrinth of my mind in a sane manner,
constantly losing the thread as I was. The way I see it, this experience finds its mirror in what
Eco has to say about these two distinct but related models of the labyrinth in his own
metaphysical text:

23 Ibid., 58.
York: McGraw-Hill, 1980). It should also be made clear that research on hallucinogens has been more restricted
than research on most other substances we would classify as ‘drugs.’ The Harvard Psilocybin Project, which
was run by Timothy Leary et al for a brief period at the beginning of the ’60s, the International Foundation for
Advanced Study in Menlo Park, California, and the CIA’s covert research on hallucinogens as potential
weapons of mind-control, are more or less the major – and ultimately aborted – studies. Most of the reports we
have about the effects of hallucinogens come from literary, rather than medical or scientific sources. Other
descriptions of the quality of the ‘trip,’ the effects, and the ways in which perceptions of reality are affected
come from my own (mindful) use of these hallucinogens. Consequently, many of these descriptors I have used
in this study may sound somewhat vague; there is, sadly, no other way.
The labyrinth of my library [in *The Name of the Rose*] is still a mannerist labyrinth, but the world in which William [of Baskerville; the detective] realizes he is living already has a rhizome structure: that is, it can be structured, but is never structured definitively.

This is perhaps the central spatial conceit of the metaphysical detective story – the world as an unending rhizomatic labyrinth, and therefore also an unending space for labyrinthine conjecture. This mental movement, made so abundantly clear in the seminal texts of this hallucinogenre\(^\text{25}\) – from Borges’s stripped down excursions into pure structure to Pynchon’s conspiracy trips through California, from Perec’s jigsaw-puzzle riddles to Philip K. Dick’s metaphysical almost-detective stories – is remarkably like that of the mind on psilocybin or mescaline.\(^\text{26}\)

Even more interestingly, mapping the origins of the postmodern imagination (both generally in the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century and in its relation to the metaphysical detective texts that we shall be interrogating) and that of one hallucinogen in particular (certainly the most powerful, and one which captured the popular postmodern imagination of the latter half of the 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century like no other) throws up some startling, almost Baudelairian *correspondances*.

**Correspondences: Acid Dreams/Forking Paths**

Lysergic acid diethylamide was first synthesized in November 1938 by a certain Dr. Albert Hofmann at the Sandoz Laboratories in Basel, Switzerland, as part of a larger research project on the medicinal uses of ergot, a fungus that grows on rye and to a lower extent on some wild grasses. This synthesis was shelved, for about five years, till the spring of 1943, when Hofmann, gripped by “a peculiar presentiment – the feeling that this substance could possess properties other than those established in the first investigations” – decided to take a

\(^{25}\) Avital Ronell coins this neologism in her breathless *Crack Wars: Literature, Addiction, Mania*.

\(^{26}\) Even today, perhaps the best descriptions of the mind on mescaline can be found in Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell*. 
second look and re-synthesized LSD-25, as he was calling it by then. In the final step of the synthesis, Hofmann was interrupted by some very strange sensations. As he wrote in a report later to his lab supervisor:

Last Friday, April 16, 1943, I was forced to interrupt my work in the laboratory in the middle of the afternoon and proceed home, being affected by a remarkable restlessness, combined with a slight dizziness. At home I lay down and sank into a not unpleasant intoxicated-like condition, characterized by an extremely stimulated imagination. In a dreamlike state, with eyes closed (I found the daylight to be unpleasantly glaring), I perceived an uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colors. After some two hours this condition faded away.

In a way, this unthinking inadvertent act of dosing – Hofmann was never certain how it happened, but surmised that the drug must have come into contact with his fingertips – that inaugurated LSD was appropriate, really; the drug is, after all, one that clarifies certain structures of feeling and mood, and induces in its user the ability, nay, the desperate need almost, to let go of the control we all seek to impose and frequently believe we exercise on our environment.

This “remarkable experience” got Hofmann thinking about the properties of this new substance he’d synthesized; perhaps it did have its uses. So, three days later, on April 19, 1943, a day that has since been immortalized in LSD lore as Bicycle Day, he decided to experiment on himself. He diluted 0.25 mg of LSD-25 in a little water and drank it; of course, having ingested about 3 or 4 times the size of what would now be considered a good strong dose, Hofmann started feeling very strange indeed, and had to be accompanied home by his lab assistant. They rode on bicycles, since there were wartime restrictions on the use of automobiles.

There is an interesting textual correspondence between the oft-unfinished nature of the metaphysical detective story – epitomized, perhaps, by Georges Perec’s Chinese-box.

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28 Ibid., 15.
murder mystery “53 Days”, a fatefuly unfinished manuscript (Perec died while writing it) of a detective narrative about an unfinished manuscript of a detective narrative about an unfinished detective narrative, its narrative structure that of “a box with four bottoms made up of mise en abyme and overlapping narratives”\(^29\) – and Hofmann’s attempt to textually inscribe this first ever intentional acid trip. His notes for this experiment read:

4/19/43 16:20: 0.5 cc of 1/2 promil aqueous solution of diethylamide tartrate orally = 0.25 mg tartrate. Taken diluted with about 10 cc water. Tasteless.
17:00: Beginning dizziness, feeling of anxiety, visual distortions, symptoms of paralysis, desire to laugh.
Supplement of 4/21: Home by bicycle. From 18:00- ca.20:00 most severe crisis. (See special report.)\(^30\)

And that’s as far as he got. There is no special report.

At around the same time, but on another continent, Jorge Luis Borges wrote ‘El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan’ (1941), which was the first of his works to be translated into English a few years later when it was published as ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ in Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine in August, 1948. It is perhaps the first clearly metaphysical/postmodern detective story ever published; it blurs boundaries between genres, and it articulates the genre’s preoccupation with ruined, incomplete, missing and purloined texts, all the while maintaining the idea of the text-as-world, or the world as text, wherein the detective’s chief objective becomes a problem of finding a way through the labyrinth that is the world/text/world.

The story is purportedly a found text (a favourite narrative artifice of Borges’s), the written deposition – with the first two pages missing – of a Chinese spy for the Germans in England during the First World War.\(^31\) Yu Tsun, the spy, has been found out, but before he can be captured, he must somehow convey to his superior in Berlin “the Secret – the name of

\(^{29}\) Merivale and Sweeney, ‘The Game’s Afoot,’ 15.
\(^{30}\) Hofmann, LSD, 15.
the exact location of the new British artillery park on the Ancre.” Already, names are of relevance, foreshadowing this hallucinogenic genre’s obsession with names and naming.

Yu realizes he must transmit this name before the maddeningly implacable British agent Richard Madden catches up with him. He finds in the phone book yet another name, that of “the only person able to communicate the information,” and boards a train to the village of Ashgrove. Once there, he wends his way – this movement is also in the form of a mannerist maze, as he is directed to “follow that road there to the left, and turn left at every crossing” to not get lost – to the house of one Dr. Stephen Albert. Albert is a sinologist who has, as Yu soon finds out, devoted his life to solving the riddle of Yu’s great-grandfather Ts’ui Pen, who “renounced all temporal power in order to write a [vast and intricate] novel… and construct a labyrinth in which all men would lose their way.” Ts’ui Pen sequestered himself for thirteen years in the Pavillion of Limpid Solitude to complete both these tasks, but was murdered, and “his novel made no sense and no one ever found the labyrinth.”

But Albert has solved Ts’ui Pen’s riddle: the “contradictory jumble of irresolute drafts” that is the book, and the labyrinth he wanted to construct, are one and the same. Ts’ui’s novel, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, is both a novel and a temporal labyrinth, where characters who died in one chapter carry on, alive and unscathed, in the next. Albert has pieced this together from a cryptic letter Ts’ui left behind saying “I leave to several futures (not to all) my garden of forking paths.” The forking therefore happens in time, Albert concludes, and not in space. In a prescient deconstruction of the “structural analysis of narratives,” characters in Ts’ui’s novel, when faced with possible alternatives, instead of choosing one and rejecting the others, choose all possible alternatives, thereby making *The Garden of Forking Paths* something of a proto-hypertext, almost infinitely unbounded. I say ‘almost’ because Ts’ui’s text, unlike our present hypertext-world, is constrained by its

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materiality (and hence Ts’ui’s qualification of several futures, not all). But in the text, the word and the thing become one, and the concept of the labyrinth becomes the substance that is *The Garden of Forking Paths*, in which “all men would lose their way.”

Generically, Borges’s narrative starts out as the explanation to a reference in a different framing text – Captain Liddell Hart’s *The History of the World War*, in which the good captain tells us that a certain Allied offensive in July, 1916, was postponed due to torrential rains. Yu’s embedded narrative, Borges informs us, will throw “unexpected light” on this case. At this point, we are uncertain of the thematic, structural or generic allegiances of ‘The Garden of Forking Paths,’ but soon it dawns on the reader that Yu is a spy. Presumably, then, the following story will be in the mode of a spy thriller, moving towards a certain climax that is at present shrouded in mystery (the convention that spy thrillers generally employ). Soon, while retaining this spy-thriller structure, the narrative goes metaphysical on us, more interested in the ludics of labyrinths, the possibilities of hypertexts and notions of time, all exemplified by the figure of the sinologist wandering, wondering, the labyrinths of the old Chinese text.

But the story is far from over. In the foreword to *The Garden of Forking Paths* (Borges’s *Garden*, not Ts’ui’s) – the book of eight short stories in which ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ first appeared – Borges classifies this particular fiction as “a detective story: its readers will witness the commission and all the preliminaries of a crime whose purpose will not be kept from them but which they will not understand, I think, until the final paragraph.” So after Albert concludes his unravelling of the mystery of Ts’ui Pen’s labyrinth/text, Yu looks out and sees Capt. Richard Madden approaching the house. Trembling with gratitude at Albert’s penetration of the Minotaur’s maze, the German spy

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33 This book exists outside of Borges’s fertile imagination and indeed refers to the postponed Allied offensive.  
asks to see Ts’ui’s letter again. Albert turns around to retrieve it, but Yu draws his revolver and kills the sinologist in cold blood.

This is the ‘crime,’ the central puzzle all detective narratives strive to solve as they progress, but it occurs in the penultimate paragraph of the story. Borges’s threat is not an idle one, and we have to read the very last paragraph to piece together the motive and the actual ‘detection’ that takes place here, which in terms of the actual time and space it occupies in the text is almost incidental to the story – as Yu points out, “the rest is unreal, insignificant.” Madden bursts into the room and arrests Yu, who is sentenced to hang. In this, though, Yu has “most abhorrently triumphed.” He has murdered a stranger by the name of Albert, which is the name of the new British artillery park, “the Secret” he spoke of earlier. His superior in Berlin, going through newspapers for word of his agents in the field, will read of the senseless murder of the eminent sinologist Dr. Stephen Albert by one Yu Tsun; seeing their names linked thus, he will solve the riddle. This is why, of course, in the fictional universe of the meta-text, the Allied offensive had to be postponed, for the Germans had found out about Albert.

The narrative, then, solves its central crime just a few sentences after elucidating it. The formal structure of the detective story is inverted. As Robert L. Chibka points out, “the character who ‘plays detective’ (deciphering past actions and motives, solving the mystery of Yu’s great-grandfather Ts’ui Pen’s apparently unaccountable literary behaviour) is the victim, Stephen Albert.”35 There are two detectives – on the surface, the Leader, Yu’s superior in Berlin, does the work of the detective in piecing together Yu’s coded message; but Yu may be considered the real detective, in the sense that he has to go through the motions of gathering clues (looking up names in the telephone book), following them carefully (eluding Richard Madden, taking the train to Ashgrove), and, indeed, finding the

solution to the central problem, the fulcrum that is the narrative’s *raison d’etre*, to wit, how to communicate the Secret to his superior. Not only has the ‘detective’ become the criminal, but the crime has also become the ‘solution.’ The (moral) criminal is the (textual) detective, while the narrative itself seems to have entirely done away with the criminal.

Borges’s story sparks off and sustains a general sense of uncertainty that bleeds into its literary successors, and it does so right in the middle of perhaps the greatest period of uncertainty in the 20th century. Coming as it did to an international audience right after the Second World War, when most of the Western hemisphere was being assailed by a general sense of unease with the Enlightenment project of rationality and the feeling that the modern notion of progress needed to be reconsidered in light of the genocides of the first half of the century, it deployed a certain structure of uncertainty that in retrospect feels peculiarly postmodern. The epistemological uncertainties of hardboiled fiction, exemplified in the intoxication of alcohol and cigarettes that links action and knowledge, an intoxication that acts as a resonator of mood and the barely-articulated,36 give way to profound ontological uncertainties in metaphysical detective fiction. These are not uncertainties about inauthentic selves or acts of betrayal; no, these are more disquieting anxieties about the very existence of humanity and the world. ‘The Garden of Forking Paths’ is generically uncertain and multiply generic. The central problem that the narrative obsesses over is not the commission of a murder and its effect (although that too is there), but the puzzle of multiple worlds in an age-old text.

This is remarkably like the self on acid, dissolving into numerous selves, sensing strange connections with everything around, from a tree in the backyard to the ray of sunlight streaming into view. And LSD is a remarkable drug, because it breaks down the fundamental barriers between the self and the world; like Ts’ui’s labyrinth, which exists both as word and

36 See previous chapter of this dissertation, ‘Shadows, Smokes and Vapours: Hardboiled Detours.”
thing, LSD lets its user perceive herself both as self and non-self, articulating as it does “a quiver between history [which is, more broadly speaking, a way of practising epistemology] and ontology.”\footnote{This is Avital Ronell’s phrase for the lived operations of a “being-on-drugs.” See \textit{Crack Wars}, 3.} Borges’s text interrupts and dislocates the expectations of a reader accustomed to the detective genre’s epistemic concerns by asking questions about the very nature of time and space, and thus about the nature of Being, which, after all, functions in the time-space continuum. The Being-on-acid experiences similar \textit{frissons}, where the very nature of thought takes on a curious and fluid aspect.

Consider, for instance, Michel Foucault, writing in \textit{The Order of Things} (in 1966, almost the precise moment when LSD explodes onto the mainstream Western consciousness, outside of the confines of the pure Academy) about the philosophical arc of the Western tradition at large in the middle of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Foucault describes how phenomenology moves away from the Kantian and Cartesian concerns with the \textit{cogito} towards a question of actual experience, and from there onto “an ontology of the unthought that automatically short-circuits the primacy of the ‘I think’.”\footnote{Michel Foucault, \textit{The Order of Things} (New York: Vintage Books, 1973 [1966]), 326.} (Also note the original French title of the book, \textit{Les Mots et les Choses} – literally “Words and Things”). Now consider Albert Hofmann’s description of the psychic effects of LSD:

\begin{quote}
In LSD inebriation the accustomed world view undergoes a deep-seated transformation and disintegration. Connected with this is a loosening or even suspension of the I-you barrier.\footnote{Hofmann, ‘Use of LSD in Psychiatry,’ in \textit{LSD: My Problem Child.}}
\end{quote}

Which, in essence, is also a short-circuiting of “the primacy of the ‘I think’.”

But the ontological uncertainties in Borges’s story (and in the Being-on-acid... and in life after the World Wars) don’t stop there. Robert Chibka uncovers a bizarre bibliographical quirk in ‘The Garden of Forking Paths.’\footnote{Chibka, 57-58.} In reading different English translations of the original Spanish work, he stumbles upon what at first appears to be a typographical error in
the opening fragment, which refers to Liddell Hart’s book on the First World War. Chibka’s Grove Evergreen edition of *Ficciones*, translated by Helen Temple and Ruthven Todd, begins:

In his *A History of the World War* (page 212), Captain Liddell Hart reports that a planned offensive by thirteen British divisions, supported by fourteen hundred artillery pieces, against the German line at Serre-Montauban, scheduled for July 24, 1916, had to be postponed until the morning of the 29th.

His New Direction edition of *Labyrinths*, he says, “contains a similar story, also called ‘The Garden of Forking Paths.’” Translated by Donald A. Yates, this one begins:

On page 22 of Liddell Hart’s *History of World War I* you will read that an attack against the Serre-Montauban line by thirteen British divisions (supported by 1,400 artillery pieces), planned for the 24th of July, 1916, had to be postponed until the morning of the 29th.

Chibka notes the difference in titles – *A History of the World War* and *History of World War I* – as well as the discrepancy in the page references (212 in one, 22 in the other), and finds in this something “mystical,” “the direction it has taken quite disconcerting.”\(^{41}\) Almost as if the text spread its tentacles outside the constraints of its materiality and infected the air with its disquieting Borgesian inaccuracies, blurring the boundaries of its inside and its outside.

Foucault and Hofmann both come to mind, surely?

Permit me to muddy the ontological waters of this already-wavering material creation by one J. L. Borges. My own Penguin Classics edition of *Fictions*, translated by Andrew Hurley, also contains this story (but is it the same story? With Borges, one wonders...) which begins:

On page 242 of *The History of the World War*, Liddell Hart tells us that an Allied offensive against the Serre-Montauban line (to be mounted by thirteen British divisions backed by one thousand four hundred artillery pieces) had been planned for July 24, 1916, but had to be put off until the morning of the twenty-ninth. [Emphases mine]

\(^{41}\) Ibid., 63.
Which all goes to show that some things must be destined to remain inexplicable. Feeling, some sort of sixth sense, an ability to be receptive to these changing contours of text, perhaps these are sometimes required to apprehend perception more than a logically reasoned argument can. The alternative, to quote Borges himself, is perhaps a far darker universal conspiracy: “No book is published without some discrepancy between each of the edition’s copies. Scribes take a secret oath to omit, interpolate, alter.”

And so the metaphysical detective story assails the American imagination around the same time that LSD does. At this point, though, the impact of both is more or less restricted to the sort of people who might best be described as being ‘in the know,’ mainly researchers and serious enthusiasts. For it to truly take off in the popular consciousness, we have to wait for the mid-sixties to arrive.

Further Correspondences: Set and Setting

“...just got this new hire in, name of Sparky, has to call his mom if he’s gonna be late for supper, only guess what – we’re his trainees! He gets on this ARPAnet trip, and I swear it’s like acid, a whole ‘nother strange world – time, space, all that shit.”

“So when they gonna make it illegal, Fritz?”

– Thomas Pynchon, Inherent Vice

“All over the country, in fact the world, there’s new computers gettin plugged in every day. Right now it’s still experimental, but hell, it’s government money, and those fuckers don’t care what they spend, and we’ve had some useful surprises already.”

“Does it know where I can score?”

– Thomas Pynchon, Inherent Vice

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42 Borges, ‘The Lottery in Babylon,’ in Fictions, 57.
43 Set and setting describes the context for the experience of psychedelic drugs. It was first articulated by Timothy Leary thus – “Set denotes the preparation of the individual, including his personality structure and his mood at the time. Setting is physical – the weather, the room’s atmosphere; social – feelings of persons present towards one another; and cultural – prevailing views as to what is real.” See Timothy Leary, Ralph Metzner, and Richard Alpert, The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead (New York: Citadel Press, 1995 [1964]).
When Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* was first published in 1857, it shocked and outraged much of the Second Empire. The poet was fined, and many of the poems in the volume were suppressed, their ban lifted in France only in 1949 (a year after the first English translation of ‘The Garden of Forking Paths,’ incidentally).

One of the central themes running through the collection is the Swedenborgian notion of ‘correspondences,’ a formulation of a fundamental relationship between different levels of existence, first articulated by the 18th-century Swedish theologian and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. For Swedenborg, there are oft-unknowable ‘correspondences’ that link the physical, spiritual and divine worlds; this leads him to believe that true knowledge can be gained not with thought per se, but through intuition:

> When, after a long course of reasoning, they make a discovery of the truth, straightway there is a certain cheering light, and joyful confirmatory brightness, that plays around the sphere of their mind; and a kind of mysterious radiation – I know not whence it proceeds... 44

It is this play of associations between the sensory, intellectual and mystical worlds that Baudelaire picks up on in his own poem ‘Correspondences,’ which makes a case for looking at myriad perceptions of reality synaesthetically (“There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children/Sweet as oboes”). In addition, *Les Fleurs du mal* itself is frequently concerned with the stultifying existential terrors of boredom and ennui, and how to keep them at bay.

Consider Baudelaire’s dedication ‘To the Reader’:

> If rape, poison, daggers, arson
> Have not yet embroidered with their pleasing designs
> The banal canvas of our pitiable lives,
> It is because our souls have not enough boldness.

> But among the jackals, the panthers, the bitch hounds,
> The apes, the scorpions, the vultures, the serpents,
> The yelping, howling, growling, crawling monsters,
> In the filthy menagerie of our vices,

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There is one more ugly, more wicked, more filthy!
Although he makes neither great gestures nor great cries,
He would willingly make of the earth a shambles
And, in a yawn, swallow the world;

He is Ennui! — His eye watery as though with tears,
He dreams of scaffolds as he smokes his hookah pipe.
You know him reader, that refined monster,
— Hypocritish reader, — my fellow, — my brother!  

This constellation of associations – correspondences, boredom, mysticism and hallucinogens (and, indeed, Borges, who, like Nabokov and Beckett, illumines that narrative continuity from modernism to postmodernism) – comes to a head in a strange way in that American decade of the 1960s. Timothy Leary, for instance, the high priest of LSD and other mind-altering drugs, taught at Harvard during the early part of that decade, established the Harvard Psilocybin Project in 1960, and would walk to class every day past the Cambridge Swedenborg Chapel; he later claimed as his own the Swedenborg-initiated “tradition of ‘wondrous internal paganism,’ a rebel history of transcendentalism, mysticism, and self-reliance.” The critique of boredom initiated in fiction by Sherlock Holmes and in poetry by Charles Baudelaire in the 19th century finds its realisation in the 60s counterculture’s rejection of the dehumanising effects of consumer capitalism and suburban contentment. And Western consciousness at large, with its dependence on reason, the certainty of knowledge, and the idea of teleological human progress, is overwhelmed by the disorienting shock of the postmodern.

The term ‘postmodernism’ in its current sense was first used, writes Andreas Huyssen, “emphatically in the 1960s by literary critics such as Leslie Fiedler and Ihab

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46 Along with Aldous Huxley and Richard Alpert aka Ram Dass. It was the most in-depth research into the entheogenic and reality-altering potential of hallucinogens ever conducted, with participation from such academic luminaries as the religious studies scholar Huston Smith, till it was cancelled in 1962 by the powers that be.
Hassan,” and by the early ’70s had gained wider currency in other fields of creativity and theory. Huyssen goes on to suggest that postmodernism in the 1960s was of a “specifically American character,” and that new media played a significant role in helping to disrupt certain representational processes and destabilised conventional notions of the limits of ‘the human.’ I would argue that in this context, acid began to function as a new medium of communicability and representation, as well as throwing open the doors of the perception that allowed other, non-verbal and “unthought” forms of apprehending the world. “In the form of happenings, pop vernacular, psychedelic art, acid rock, alternative and street theatre, the postmodernism of the 1960s was groping to recapture the adversary ethos....”

Of course, 1966 was the time to be alive in California. The Summer of Love was in full swing and LSD was ubiquitous and, odd though it may sound to our psychedelics-sanitized society today, strangely acceptable. Paul Lee, who was teaching at the University of California in Santa Cruz at the time and had founded it religious studies program, had organized a large conference in the summer of ’66, held in San Francisco, at which the noted religious studies scholar Huston Smith was to deliver a paper on ‘The Religious Significance of Artificially Induced Religious Experience.’ The Artificially Induced Religious Experience implying, of course, the being-on-hallucinogens, what Smith would later call “empirical metaphysics.” Lee remembers a preconference party at a mansion in Marin County, just on the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge, where the Grateful Dead was hired as the house band. At some point during the evening, Owsley Stanley, the Dead’s sound engineer and legendary underground chemist – he was the first private individual to manufacture mass

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49 Ibid., 190-92.
50 Ibid., 193.
51 Smith would go on to become a hugely respected voice on religions and drugs. For instance, when in 1990 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled the unconstitutionality of the use of peyote (a cactus that contains the psychoactive mescaline) as a Native American religious sacrament, Smith took up the cause of the Native Americans, and it was largely due to this that in 1994 Congress passed the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, in effect overturning the Supreme Court’s decision. See Huston Smith and Reuben Snake, eds., *One Nation Under God: The Triumph of the Native American Church* (Santa Fe: Clear Light Publishers, 1996).
quantities of LSD – started handing out acid to whoever wanted it. Soon, most of the attendees, many of them reputed academics and scholars, were tripping on acid and enjoying themselves thoroughly.\textsuperscript{52}

\section*{A Character in Search of Her Narrative}

\begin{quote}
The sign on his door read LSD INVESTIGATIONS, LSD, as he explained when people asked, which was not often, standing for “Location, Surveillance, Detection.”

– Thomas Pynchon,\textit{ Inherent Vice}
\end{quote}

The social and intellectual drug-ferment of the 1960s sketched but barely above is the context in which \textit{The Crying of Lot 49} appeared. Written by the notoriously reclusive Thomas Pynchon, it was published in April, 1966, and details its protagonist’s ‘trips’ all over California in an attempt to unearth what may or may not be a centuries-old international conspiracy involving two murderously-opposed mail distribution networks – the actual Thurn und Taxis, which did indeed enjoy a monopoly on postal services in western Europe since the late 15\textsuperscript{th} century, and its underground rival the Trystero (or Tristero), a concoction of Pynchon’s relentlessly postmodern imagination.

The novel’s heroine is the tantalisingly named Oedipa Maas, a suburban housewife who seems to be suffering from some sort of desperate ennui at the start of the novel, returning from a “tupperware party” to find she has been named executor of an old and now-deceased boyfriend, the real estate millionaire Pierce Inverarity’s will. Here too, names become significant. As Brian McHale notes in \textit{Postmodernist Fiction}, the name Oedipa immediately draws a connection to the genre of detective fiction – the founding text of detective fiction, as many would be quick to argue, may well be Sophocles’s \textit{Oedipus Rex}.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{52} Lattin, 137-38.

\textsuperscript{53} “The story of \textit{Oedipus the King}, as set down by Sophocles and first performed in about 430 B.C., draws together all of the central characteristics and formal elements of the detective story, including a mystery
Of course, the obverse to this is Terry P. Caesar’s claim that Oedipal Mass can be construed as “Oedipal, my ass.”\footnote{Terry P. Caesar, ‘A Note on Pynchon’s Naming,’ \textit{Pynchon Notes} 5 (1981): 5-10, 5.} Which would throw McHale’s contention in serious jeopardy.

Interestingly, Oedipa also appears to be an exception to Merivale and Sweeney’s dictum that “metaphysical detectives are almost invariably male.”\footnote{Merivale and Sweeney, ‘The Game’s Afoot,’ 2.}

“As in Chandler or [Ross] Macdonald, nearly everyone Oedipa encounters proves to have been complicit in the original crime, the crime itself meanwhile changing its identity, becoming in the course of her investigations larger, more ramified, more sinister – a conspiracy.”\footnote{Brian McHale, \textit{Postmodernist Fiction} (New York: Methuen, 1987), 22.} Oedipa appears to be giving form to a continuity, then, from the hardboiled heroes of the L.A. noir variety (although much of \textit{Lot 49} is set around the San Francisco Bay area); she too, like Philip Marlowe, makes detours through sun-drenched boulevards and dusty freeways attempting to piece together \textit{something}, to come up with a narrative that will make sense of the jigsaw puzzles that keep cropping up all around her. But this is no longer a California that is ensnared in the illicit vapours of alcohol, oh no. This is a place where the ’60s are well and truly under way, a place of hallucinatory portents and immediate transformations. Note the ‘crime’ itself – no inherently criminal act, it is rather the question of a few inconsistencies and the odd loose end in Inverarity’s will. But Oedipa’s ‘investigation,’ which she carries out with “exemplary private-eye’s assiduity,” as McHale puts it, takes on a complex and dangerous hue. What starts out as an epistemological quest (like Marlowe’s or Spade’s, for instance), soon becomes a process fraught with ontological implications.

As Oedipa investigates, each of these loose ends seems to lead ultimately to the Tristero, which may or may not be an underground postal system engaged in an international conspiracy. She pieces together a historical narrative that suggests that the Trystero was surrounding a murder, a closed circle of suspects, and the gradual uncovering of a hidden past.” John Scaggs, \textit{Crime Fiction} (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2005), 9.
defeated by the Thurn und Taxis postal system in the 18th century, after which it went underground and continued to exist into the present. To complicate things further, the Tristero may even be influencing Oedipa’s private sphere of being by serially depriving her of, “by means not stopping short of murder, everyone she has been relying upon for support, leaving her isolated with her disturbing knowledge.”57 Bit by bit, “everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven in the Tristero.”58

Something similar happens in Umberto Eco’s novel *Foucault’s Pendulum* (1988). In it, Eco chronicles the development of a literary joke that suddenly turns perilous – the three protagonists dream up wild theories about a grand global conspiracy (which they call the Plan) involving all sorts of secret occult organisations, and gradually the Plan starts to come true. Eco plays with “the notion that everything might be mysteriously related to everything else”,59 suggesting that we ourselves create the connections that make up reality. Like Eco’s protagonists, Oedipa gets increasingly intoxicated with an idea that starts to give meaning to her reality. And perhaps she can’t help it, existing as she does within a specific space at a specific time that is in the middle of expanding its consciousness in a systematic way that few other space-time assemblages in the Western past have experienced.

Because the nature of the ‘crime’ gets more and more blurred, Oedipa starts to flounder in a sea of clues, which keeps getting deeper and vaster as the clues accrue on top of each other. In the texts of classical detective fiction, functionally, the detective’s wandering is clearly distinct from his making a connection once a clue has been found, and the next wandering post-connection is clearly defined (for instance, if the clue points to a new suspect, then that suspect is investigated; the path of wandering changes, but the fact of wandering in order to make the next connection remains intact). Here, however, the connections are too

57 Ibid., 23.
many and too overwhelming. Before the path of wandering can change thanks to the newest connection made (i.e., the latest clue that is found), a new connection is made, a new clue is found. The sheer numerousness of connections causes a temporal short-circuiting in the detective’s narrative of movement. Perhaps this is why the book ends as it does, with Oedipa standing in an auction-room, waiting for the buyer deputed by the Trystero to declare himself – or not, as McHale points out. But the narrative ends before her wait can, because it has run out of time. The intensity of all these connections – much like the severe luminous intensity of the acid trip – may very well have been too much for it to handle.

The movement implied by the acid ‘trip’ is one that is never constant, nor linear. There is often doubling back, wondering about concepts that are easily left by the wayside when the senses are invaded by new stimuli, only for the wondering to return a little farther down the trip. Signs begin to get taken for wonders, jostling for space within. This is Oedipa’s fate as she trips along California, getting increasingly paranoid as she finds conspiracies abounding everywhere she looks. Her reality – all her realities, rather – become imbued with meaning. Clues overproliferate. The structural function of the clue in detective fiction, which is to act as a moment of connection to propel the narrative forward, is subverted with astonishing frequency here because of its overwhelming presence. It is almost as if the narrative is all connection, no wandering – even if Oedipa does, at a literal level, move all around the Bay area.

Now, our gallant protagonist, near the end of her narrative, comes to a fourfold and necessarily uncertain conclusion about all that has been happening to her. As she tells herself,

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60 McHale, 24.

61 While the novel is written in the third person, McHale points out that it uses a sort of internal discourse – “The Crying of Lot 49 represents the mediating consciousness of Oedipa, and through her the happenings in its fictional world. Except for a few discreet deviations toward narratorial omniscience in early chapters, the novel remains rigorously within this mode, using free indirect discourse to render Oedipa’s thought-processes. So the reader has no opportunity to view events from outside Oedipa’s consciousness, no way to check on her reliability as medium for this story; the reader is bounded by the limits of her mind.” McHale, 23.
Either you have stumbled indeed, without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, onto a secret richness and concealed density of dream; onto a network by which X number of Americans are truly communicating whilst reserving their lies, recitations of routine, arid betrayals of spiritual poverty, for the official government delivery system; maybe even onto a real alternative to the exitlessness, to the absence of surprise to life, that harrows the head of everybody American you know, and you too, sweetie. Or you are hallucinating it. Or a plot has been mounted against you, so expensive and elaborate, involving items like the forging of stamps and ancient books, constant surveillance of your movements, planting of post horn images all over San Francisco, bribing of librarians, hiring of professional actors and Pierce Inverarity only knows what else besides, all financed out of the estate in a way either too secret or too involved for your non-legal mind to know about even though you are co-executor, so labyrinthine that it must have meaning beyond just a practical joke. Or you are fantasying some such plot, in which case you are a nut, Oedipa, out of your skull.\textsuperscript{62} [Emphases mine]

\textit{Without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids.} McHale is of the opinion that this first among all four alternatives is by far of the most profound ontological import, because the other three all embody purely epistemological aspects. i.e., Oedipa is the victim of an elaborate practical joke/plot; she is going mad; she is hallucinating.\textsuperscript{63} The larger point McHale is making here is that postmodernist fiction has ontological concerns, while modernist fiction is preoccupied with epistemological questions. While there is some truth to this, I am inclined to disagree with his relegation of Oedipa’s second alternative – “you are hallucinating it” – to the realm of the purely epistemological. As we have noted earlier, the hallucination – or, at least, certain forms of hallucination, like those often visiting the acidhead – can open up, in Huxley’s memorable phrase, “the doors of perception” to other realities and other forms of existing.

The word ‘hallucination,’ interestingly, has a sense of wandering embedded in it. The sense in which we use it today, as in “to have illusions,” is of relatively modern origin, from sometime in the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. However, etymologically the word comes to English via the Latin \textit{alucinatus}, past participle of \textit{alucinari}, “wander (in the mind); ramble in thought.”

\textsuperscript{62} Pynchon, \textit{Lot 49}, 140-41.
\textsuperscript{63} McHale, 24.
Alucinari itself is derived from the even earlier Greek aluein, “a homeless wandering, a restless roaming.” This sense of wandering, then, that connects both the drug experience and the ferreting out of a solution to a problem in narratives of detection, has been buried in our modern usage. But what is buried is not absent, merely invisible. ‘Hallucination’ implies, certainly in the eyes of most who have tried psychedelics both thoughtfully and with what might poorly be described as ‘feeling’ – a more affective, sensuous dimension through which we relate to our environment – a certain visionary potential, where certain so-called ‘truths’ of organic relevance and beauty manifest themselves. This visionary component finds an etymological correspondence in the psychedelic visions that so many trippers experience. Note, for instance, Albert Hofmann’s insight after that Bicycle Day acid trip – “I failed, moreover, to recognize the meaningful connection between LSD inebriation and spontaneous visionary experience until much later, after further experiments, which were carried out with far lower doses and under different conditions.”

It is also very likely that the ending of the Latin alucinari was influenced by vaticinari, “to prophecy; prophesy.” The narratives being considered in this chapter are mostly situated in that period just before or at the very start of the West’s mainstream acceptance of concepts like natural medicine, yoga, transcendental meditation, and the like, all imported from the Oriental ‘East.’ Thus, they follow the psychedelic trajectory even in this regard – they too seem to be certain visionary texts, articulating certain ideas about our numerous realities, soon to be followed by the mainstream and public acceptance of the idea of our new and very strange postmodern condition.

So Oedipa’s “you are hallucinating it” is not necessarily a solipsistic epistemological cul-de-sac. The arse of this particular bag may well lead to visions of another bag, an alternative reality adumbrated by the frequent and overwhelming glimpses of the Tristero.

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post horn. So McHale dismisses this ontological dimension of Lot 49 – “But Oedipa does not break through the closed circle of her solipsism in the pages of this novel.... The Tristero remains only a possibility.”65 Is this because he refuses to engage with the psychedelic ontology of the unthought on its terms, and not only his own? And if indeed Oedipa is hallucinating, then she is projecting an alternative world after all (throughout the novel, she keeps asking herself, “Shall I project a world?”66), on a whole new postal-ontological register.

Without the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids. The first of Oedipa’s conjectural alternatives, that she has stumbled upon the alternative reality of an international postal conspiracy, is the only one McHale sees as permitting the light of ontological speculation in. If only, he seems to be crying out, thereby expressing his own desire for epistemic closure, Oedipa were to break through the closed circle of her solipsism within the pages of this novel! If only the Tristero were a certainty! This could be a good ol’ postmodernist text then! Granting him the benefit of the doubt, it appears that the ontological condition of the existence of ‘other worlds’ that McHale’s prescribed postmodernist texts should display hinges on a perception of another reality that is usually not attainable without hallucinogens (which is the subtext of Oedipa’s “without the aid of LSD” comment).

Why is this so? Is it because, in some strange way, the narrative itself operates with the aid of LSD or other indole alkaloids, thereby eliminating the need for its protagonist to do so? As Doc Sportello, the protagonist of Pynchon’s psychedelic noir Inherent Vice, believes, “if acid-tripping was good for anything, it helped tune you to different unlisted frequencies.”67 There is certainly no dearth of LSD and other indole alkaloids projected onto the metaphorical scrim that hangs at the back of the narrative stage. Oedipa’s psychiatrist Dr. Hilarius prescribes LSD, often to unwitting patients; he is helping run experiments – which

65 McHale, 24.
66 Pynchon, Lot 49, 64.
he calls The Bridge, for “the bridge inward” – on “effects of LSD-25, mescaline, psilocybin, and related drugs on a large sample of suburban housewives.” And knowing Pynchon’s penchant for sly allusion, this may well refer to the CIA’s Project MKUltra, the covert research operation to experiment on the behavioural engineering of humans by dosing them with hallucinogens.

Oedipa, the metaphysical (non)detective, wanders through a labyrinth of signs that themselves seem conjured in an acid trip. Entropy, which one of the characters describes as a metaphor that “connects the world of thermodynamics to the world of information flow,” a metaphor for the randomness in a closed system, may well signify the chemical processes taking place in the dynamics of communication in a world made primarily of a symbol, the repugnant post horn of the Trystero. Oedipa’s investigation is in the realm of the symbol; she is “just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts” as she tries to track down the full import of the Trystero in the purported Jacobean revenge drama The Courier’s Tragedy. But the profusion of signs is too much for her; just as “the private eye sooner or later has to get beat up on,” so is Oedipa beat up on by this “profusion of post horns, this malignant, deliberate replication” of clues, all of which may or may not point to the Trystero, which, as you’ll remember, may or may not exist.

Near the end of the narrative, Oedipa’s husband Wendell “Mucho” Maas is shown tripping on acid, which he has procured from Dr. Hilarius, and his use of which has begun to alienate her. Mucho’s descriptions of the being-on-acid are similar to Aldous Huxley’s writings about the mind-on-psychedelics:

“[Y]ou hear and see things, even smell them, taste like you never could. Because the world is so abundant. No end to it, baby. You’re an antenna, sending your pattern out across a million lives a night, and they’re your lives too.” He had this patient,

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68 Pynchon, Lot 49, 8.
69 See Martin A. Lee and Bruce Shlain, Acid Dreams: The Complete Social History of LSD: The CIA, the Sixties, and Beyond (New York: Grove Press, 1985).
70 Pynchon, Lot 49, 100-1.
motherly look now. Oedipa wanted to hit him in the mouth. “The songs, it’s not just that they say something, they *are* something, in the pure sound. Something new.”

This is Mucho’s theorisation: LSD causes profound ontological changes. But Oedipa does not want these changes in perception. Dr. Hilarius points out, in a piece of metanarrative perspicacity, that Oedipa may prefer to stay paranoid: “You know, with the LSD, we’re finding, the distinction begins to vanish. Egos lose their sharp edges. But I never took the drug. I chose to remain in relative paranoia, where at least I know who I am and who the others are. Perhaps that is why you also refused to participate, Mrs. Maas?” LSD threatens the previously taken-for-granted ontological stability of reality, Hilarius seems to be saying.

Does Oedipa’s distaste for acid, and her growing alienation from her husband – precisely because he has been using the drug to successfully vanquish his own inner demons, i.e., his nightmares about a parking lot, and “so much of him had already dissipated” – indicate a character at odds with her novel? Oedipa, vigorously anti-hallucinogenic, wanders against the grain of the hallucinatory narrative she is an intrinsic part of; indeed, a narrative that would not exist if she were not around to endlessly connect the signs. But the intoxicated narrative does not want that final connection made, an act that will close the text forever. The more Oedipa tries to pin the Trystero down, the more the narrative starts to resist, throwing everything short of the kitchen sink at her. So, the closer we get to the end of the novel, the more the narrative starts to hurl drug- and Trystero-related intensities at her – Mucho’s now-constant acid-tripping; Dr. Hilarius’s psychotic freakout; Genghis Cohen, the eminent philatelist Oedipa had hired to inventory Inverarity’s stamp collection, “once so shy, now seemed to come up with new goodies every other day – a listing in an outdated Zumstein

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72 Pynchon, *Lot 49*, 111.
73 Ibid., 118.
catalogue, a friend in the Royal Philatelic Society’s dim memory of some muted post horn...; one day a typescript, sent him by another friend in New York.”

At the same time, the more Oedipa tries to give up, to exit this narrative, the more it seeks to intoxicate her with possible connections. The once overabundant clues now, at the end, become a virtual deluge, because Oedipa is on the verge of quitting, and the narrative must prolong her involvement in it. So she continues her labyrinthine quest, eventually ending up at an auction of rare postage stamps, believing the Trystero’s agents might be present to bid on them. The novel ends as the auctioneer is about to begin the crying of Lot 49 (“We say an auctioneer ‘cries’ a sale,” Genghis Cohen informs Oedipa as they enter75). The narrative knows Oedipa is hooked; she is in a locked auction room, perhaps at significant risk to her own self, but she must know if the other world of the Trystero exists. Our intrepid heroine has finally come to the realisation that the labyrinth she has been negotiating is her own space of conjecture, spreading its tentacles rhizomatically in all directions. So she gives in. The narrative can stop now, a sentence before its denouement, because its own desire has been performed. What cares it for ours?

Circular Readings, or To End Where We Began, Uncertainly

_We walk on air, Watson._
_There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus._
_There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes._
– Sylvia Plath, ‘The Detective’

Where does the text end and the world begin? And does the intoxication of the narrative travel outwards when these worlds merge, injecting itself into the reader in the strange manner of the transmigration of souls? Q. D. Leavis wrote of how, in the 19th century in

74 Ibid., 142.
75 Ibid., 152.
Britain, lending libraries dispensing fiction were thought of as “tuppenny dram-shops,” and the reading of genre fiction itself considered an addiction:

The effect of an inordinate addiction to light reading was known (mainly by repute) to the nineteenth century; it came under the head of ‘dissipation,’ and to read novels, as to drink wine, in the morning was far into the century a sign of vice.... So a self-denying age guarded its sobriety...  

As we have seen – perhaps ‘vaguely, tentatively, experienced’ might be a better characterisation – the practices of discovering psychedelics and of decoding a new modernity carry on contiguously during the middle of the last century. And the labyrinthine processes of the metaphysical detective story appear to carry a strong undercurrent of these same psychedelics in their narrative textures, often implicating and impregnating its readers. The metaphysical detective is a reader-substitute, perhaps even a substitute reader, filling in for those of us unfortunate enough to be detecting from outside the covers of the book. The Islamic scholar Dr. Rudolf Gelpke once characterised his experiences on LSD and psilocybin as “travels in the universe of the soul”; the detective’s wanderings through the arc of the narrative allow us to travel too, for a short while, lost in a good book. Till we too must come crashing out when the text runs up against its last page:

The astronauts cannot remain in space nor the LSD experimenters in transcendental spheres, they have to return to earth and everyday reality...  

But the writers of postmodernity are readers too, and detest returning to earth like the rest of us – Borges, for instance, “himself seems to write little, and the things he writes tend to be glosses on his reading or stories about his or his avatars’ reading.” So they merge universes to try and prolong the experience of the text indefinitely. In Julio Cortázar’s

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76 Q. D. Leavis, Fiction and the Reading Public (London: Chatto and Windus, 1939 [1932]), 50.
77 Hofmann, LSD.
miniature masterpiece ‘Continuity of Parks,’ the idea of textual spaces and the space of the
text is violently upset when a man reading a mystery finds out only too late that he is the
murderer’s victim:

That afternoon... he returned to the book in the tranquillity of his study which looked
out upon the park with its oak.

That staple piece of furniture of detective fiction, the armchair, returns, pregnant with portent:

Sprawled in his favourite armchair, its back toward the door... [the reader] let his left
hand caress repeatedly the green velvet upholstery and set to reading the final
chapters.

The subterranean connections with a whole history of mystery and detection have already
been made already, with Dupin’s green glasses in ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ and
Holmes’s velvet-lined armchair. Soon, the reader is,

Word by word, licked up by the sordid dilemma of the hero and heroine, letting
himself be absorbed to the point where the images settled down and took on color and
movement, he was witness to the final encounter in the mountain cabin.

The book he is reading is obviously a narrative of mystery and crime, and he has arrived at a
crucial moment, with the murderer soon to commit the crime. We see that a meticulous litany
of pivotal components of such narratives has been checked off in the text within the text:

Nothing had been forgotten: alibis, unforeseen hazards, possible mistakes. From this
hour on, each instant had its use minutely assigned. The cold-blooded, twice-gone-
over re-examination of the details was barely broken off so that a hand could caress a
cheek.

The protagonists of the reader’s reading separate, and the murderer-to-be arrives at the house
where his victim waits. He enters:

The door of the salon, and then, the knife in hand, the light from the great windows,
the high back of an armchair covered in green velvet, the head of the man in the chair
reading a novel.

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79 Julio Cortázar, ‘Continuity of Parks,’ in Blow-Up and Other Stories, trans. Paul Blackburn (New York:
80 See Chapter 1 of this dissertation, ‘Pipe Dreams and Puncture Marks: Holmesian High and Lows.’
This sudden, shocking sentence is the end to both texts; the text called ‘Continuity of Parks’ by an Argentine writer called Julio Cortázar that we have been reading, as well as the unnamed text the reader-protagonist of our reading has been reading. The “threshold of embedding,” as Gerard Genette called it, has been transgressed in an act of unsettling *metalepsis*, i.e., the violation of different levels of narrative.⁸¹ And this sense of doubt is transferred to our own ontologically fragile selves – which narrative have we been reading, then? A murder story? A story about someone reading a murder story? Both? Like a recursive M. C. Escher lithograph, the end of the narrative defies a logical perception of narrative. Cortázar’s story must be experienced in some other, inarticulatable manner. Doc Sportello’s “different unlisted frequencies” must be tuned into to override the protestations of linear logic.

While these different unlisted frequencies manifest themselves overtly in narratives of the kind we have been talking about here, a case might be made that they exist in the reading of many kinds of narratives. Indeed, in a very important psycho-physiological study on ‘The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure,’ Victor Nell finds the correspondence of states of reading to states of dreaming and trance. In a surreal echo of Hofmann’s ideas on the worlds opened up by LSD and the process of returning to the listed reality after an acid trip, Nell observes that “like dreaming, reading performs the prodigious task of carrying us off to other worlds... alternative realities,” and a reader coming out of a reading “trance” appears to be “returning from another place.”⁸²

The reader in Cortázar’s story is entirely absorbed by what he is reading; Nell finds a parallel between this absorption experienced by readers and “the otherness of alternate states

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⁸¹ *Metalepsis*, according to Genette, occurs “when an author (or his reader) introduces himself into the fictive action of the narrative or when a character in that fiction intrudes into the extradiegetic existence of the author or reader.” Obviously, “such intrusions disturb, to say the least, the distinction between levels.” Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 88.

of consciousness..., as in [Aldous] Huxley’s account of a flower arrangement seen under the
influence of mescaline." The metaphysical detective story, with its refusal to bring the
narrative to an end (the *The Crying of Lot 49*), attempts to entrap its reader in a labyrinth of
perpetual motion, a hypertext reality that confounds notions of space and shifting ontological
bases (the shape-shifting page numbers in the different editions of ‘The Garden of Forking
Paths,’ or the textual labyrinth of *The Garden of Forking Paths*). In fact, Cortázar’s own
*Hopscotch* destroys the imposed space of the text by creating not one, but three separate
books in the space of one by exhorting the reader to read in two distinct ways – in the
traditional linear mode, from Chapter 1 to chapter 2 to Chapter 3 and so on, till Chapter 56,
“at the close of which there are three garish little stars which stand for the words *The End,*”
after which she can either stop reading (this becomes the 1st Book) or carry on reading till the
last numbered chapter, Chapter 155 (an extension of the 1st Book into a 2nd Book); and in an
authorially imposed zigzag pattern, “by beginning with Chapter 73 and then following the
sequence indicated at the end of each chapter” (this is the 3rd Book). These texts act like
hallucinogens on our readerly consciousness, profoundly disconcerting and utterly liberating
at the same time in their glimpses of bizarre otherworlds, other ways of reading.

And what happens when a text ends, as it must, constrained as it is by the materiality
of the book, or the author’s imagination, or simply a lack of time (an online text, for instance,
is not constrained by the space of its materiality, but by the latter two factors)? In some cases,
the narrative soldiers on, desperately resisting closure. In others, perhaps there is a Great
Crash, an equivalent of Dick’s Crash Sunday. It is brought about forcefully, very much
against the narrative’s hallucinogenic grain, by a sort of anti-hallucinogenic imposition. A
dreaded Substance D, perhaps?

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The drug of choice for the inhabitants of *A Scanner Darkly*, the amphetamine-like Substance D occurs naturally, being processed from a blue flower called *Mors ontologica*. The death of ontology, “death of the spirit. The identity. The essential nature.” No wonder, then, that at the end of the book, one of the bigwigs at New Path – which under cover of being a rehab facility for Substance D abusers actually puts its inmates to work harvesting the flowers, thereby operating a perverse cycle of creation whereby the addicts themselves unwittingly make more and more of the substance – invokes “Epistemology – the theory of knowledge.” The anti-psychedelic is set up against the psychedelic, epistemology against ontology.

But something curious happens here, at the end. Like Borges’s ‘The Garden of Forking Paths,’ which *becomes* a narrative of detection in its very last paragraph, *A Scanner Darkly* too *becomes* one, and in its very last few pages. This is when we find out that the narrative was not simply showing us the drugged wanderings of its protagonist, the undercover narc Bob Arctor, but that these wanderings were deliberately set off by other narcotics agents in an attempt to infiltrate New Path by getting Arctor hooked on Substance D and thence admitted to the facility. This is when we find out that Arctor’s girl Donna, whom we had considered a dope dealer throughout, is actually an agent. This is when we find out that New Path is responsible for the Substance D epidemic. This is when we find out that while Arctor thought his job was to infiltrate the Substance D users’ community and eventually trace the source of supply, his real function, unbeknownst to himself, has been to get addicted enough to the drug to be checked into rehab. So, while the diegetic level of the narrative has been engaged in the anti-psychedelic effects of Substance D, the extradiegetic level ultimately begins to function in the same psychedelic manner as Borges’s story, bombarding us with sudden connections and morphing into another self. The *Mors*

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85 Dick, 202.
86 Ibid., 216.
ontologica cannot penetrate this level of the narrative any more than it can stop the drug-addled Arctor, in the very last paragraph, from slipping a blue flower into his shoe; it is hinted that in the afterlife of the narrative, this will provide the proof the Sheriff’s department needs against New Path:

Stooping down, [Bob] picked one of the stubbled blue plants, then placed it in his right shoe, slipping it down out of sight. A present for my friends, he thought, and looked forward inside his mind, where no one could see, to Thanksgiving.87

And so it would seem that A Scanner Darkly, even though it was published in 1977, has in its narrative undercurrents and in the impulses that propel its denouement much in common with the psychedelic sixties, prompting Christopher Palmer to proclaim, for example, that “this is very much a sixties novel.”88 The correspondences between the acid dreams of the sixties and the hallucinatory metaphysical narratives of postmodernity seem to have lingered, even if barely felt. The intoxicated narrative of the metaphysical detective often does feel as if it is walking on air, Watson, mostly uncertain of itself, but deeply desirous of a continuation, a never-to-cease-ness. That last connection, which will halt the wandering of the narrative forever, is kept in abeyance eternally, because there are simply too many connections to be made. The clues never stop, and they are found everywhere. The world is a text to be deciphered; so everything in the world is a clue, after all. The moon, embalmed in phosphorous, is a clue. The crow in the tree is a clue. Watson is condemned to make notes stretching into everness. The clues never stop, because beyond the rational connections of this world lie other worlds, other realities, other connections. Just as on acid, everything is connected. As Borges once wrote, in the aptly-titled ‘Everness,’

And everything is part of that diverse
Crystal of memory, the universe;
Unending are the mazes it engenders

87 Ibid., 217.
88 Christopher Palmer, Philip K. Dick: Exhilaration and Terror of the Postmodern (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 182. Another point of convergence to be noted is that, like Oedipa, the police in A Scanner Darkly are drowning in a surfeit of information, which is too much for them to process.
Perhaps it is best to let Borges have the last word.

But there is no last word, is there?
OUTRO: UNFINISHED BUSINESS

There could be no question of ending well.
– Goethe, or Maurice Blanchot, The Book to Come

“You will reply that reality has not the slightest obligation to be interesting. I will reply in turn that reality may get along without that obligation, but hypotheses may not.”
– Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Death and the Compass’

Drug crazed abandon!
– Reefer Madness (1936)

In October, 2009, Dr. David Nutt, psychiatrist, neuropsychopharmacologist and chair of the UK government’s Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), was summarily sacked. His great crime had been to have given a talk to the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies at King’s College, London earlier that year, where he mentioned, referring to a paper¹ he had published in 2007 in the prestigious medical journal The Lancet, that the licit ‘drugs’ alcohol and tobacco were far more harmful than the illicit ‘drugs’ cannabis, LSD and Ecstasy.²

This incident, which led to numerous shows of solidarity, including resignations among his colleagues in the ACMD and the founding of the Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs, underlined again a pattern of behaviour that has almost become a fact of life with respect to government attitudes to ‘substance’ and the policing of substance-users. As Nutt wrote in a November, 2009 editorial in The Lancet, the government (in this

² Ecstasy is the street name for MDMA (methylenedioxyamphetamine). It releases serotonin from nerve endings, which results in powerful feelings of contentment.
case the UK government) often pays heed to scientific research and evidence “only when the evidence suits their political claims.”³ A year later, in December, 2010, the government proposed to do away entirely with the requirement for ministers to consult scientific advice when making drug classification policy in the future.⁴

This kind of political persecution of certain substances and their users, it seems to me, has gradually become one of the strongest motivations for ‘substance’ at large to assume the invisible, subterranean presence that it has. The War on Drugs launched by Richard Nixon in 1969 – but inaugurated unofficially at the wane of the 19th century, and in the US codified by the Harrison Act in 1914 and strengthened by the passage of the Volstead Act (which enforced Prohibition) in 1919 – has “resolutely” attempted to narrow “the range of the unthinkable.”⁵ Consequently, while this has hardly had an impact on actual drug use and supply, it has marginalised ‘substance’ as something alien and threatening, as the Other. It has also changed perceptions of language; outside of pharmacology, the word drug now typically refers to illicit substance, and conventional usage, for example, does not consider alcohol or tobacco as ‘drugs,’ even though they are powerful intoxicants.

The case of both alcohol and tobacco, with respect to the hardboiled fictions examined in Chapter 2, is interesting and paradoxical. Their status as ‘drugs’ was prevalent in officialese in the approximate period in which the texts are set – certainly alcohol during Prohibition, and cigarettes in their infancy, when they were still associated with the working class and deemed undesirable in polite society. Conversely, at the same time, these substances have rarely been considered outright ‘drugs’ in the mainstream. Perhaps this explains their heavy, almost overwhelming presence in these narratives at the level of story

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(unlike all the other substances-in-narrative looked at in this dissertation), as well as at the subterranean level of the discourse that narrates them.

Something similar can be seen if we consider the case of *The Moonstone* (1868), widely seen as the first full-length detective novel in English. Published well before opium use was outlawed in Britain (or even regulated legally), it was written by the lifelong opium addict Wilkie Collins and features the substance prominently in its story. Opium, in fact, is uncovered as the central plot device in the narrative when we discover that one of the main protagonists stole the eponymous diamond in an opium trance. It is also present throughout the tale, especially in connection with the character of Ezra Jennings (almost certainly based on the author himself), who suffers from an incurable illness, takes opium for the pain and gets hooked on it. In this novel, the fever dreams of opium infect the narrative at this level of plot, unlike in the Holmes narratives to come a quarter of a century or so later.

As a result, the intoxication of substance is identified with the reader’s intoxication with text far more overtly than in Doyle’s stories. In the Holmes canon, as I have pointed out, the reader is placed somewhat midway between Holmes’s pure detective and Watson’s pure observer/reader. In *The Moonstone*, on the other hand, it is almost as if the reader is made detective. There is a deep obsession with written text – much like Dupin’s obsession with text in Poe’s ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ (1842), in which he prefers to glean the details of a case from written newspaper reports rather than trust the Prefect’s oral testimony. So in *The Moonstone*, speech acts would nullify the need for textual acts. Any number of characters could have brought about the denouement, if only they had spoken out (Dr. Candy, who secretly administered the laudanum that brought about the narcotic trance; Rachel Verinder, who saw the thief in the act of stealing) or been spoken to (Sergeant Cuff, the detective, who insists from the outset that it must have been an inside job but keeps encountering a wall of silence in his investigations). But Cuff isn’t really the detective, even
though he fulfils the role of the professional detective in the text. Neither is Franklin Blake, although he occupies the position of the ‘gentleman detective.’ The inordinate textual prolonging turns the reader, ultimately, into a sort of Dupin, reading through various testimonies – the novel is narrated by multiple characters, after all – to finally arrive at a satisfactory solution.

What this demonstrates is that when an aggregate of legal, medical and public opinions converge to make a substance acceptable, it tends to act as a much more ostensible narrative pivot – as in The Moonstone, or The Maltese Falcon, or The Long Goodbye, or even The Crying of Lot 49, which was, remember, published when LSD was still legal – than a substance that the public eye frowns upon, like cocaine or LSD. But it is hard to deny substance in narrative, which keeps returning like Freud’s repressed. And narrative, ultimately, has been for a long time our primary method of organising the multiple and often-contradictory realities of our lives. It is well past high time, then, to accept this need for substance, to seriously reconsider official drug policy and the War on Drugs and to re-evaluate and change the public perception of substance and those who use it.³⁶

³⁶ Some strides are now being taken in this direction. In the U.S., the states of Washington and Colorado have legalized the use and possession of cannabis up to a certain amount, while 18 states have passed laws allowing some degree of medical marijuana use and/or decriminalization of marijuana. However, it is still illegal to use, buy, sell, possess or cultivate the substance at the federal level.

Portugal, in 2001, became the first European country to decriminalize use and possession of all illicit drugs, including heroin, cocaine, marijuana and methamphetamine. As a result, both illegal drug use among teens and the rate of HIV infections caused by contaminated needles have dropped. See Maia Szalavitz, ‘Drugs in Portugal: Did Decriminalization Work?,’ TIME Science and Space, April 26, 2009, accessed March 25, 2013, http://www.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1893946,00.html.

In this regard, Latin America, which has arguably borne the brunt of most of the drug violence in the world, seems to have taken the lead in changing attitudes and laws. In September 2012, Guatemalan President Otto Molina, supported by the Presidents of Mexico and Colombia (both countries have already decriminalized possession of marijuana, and Colombia is considering decriminalizing cocaine), proposed drug legalization at the U.N. General Assembly. Also in 2012, Argentina introduced a bill in Congress to decriminalize possession for all drugs; Chile is considering decriminalizing marijuana; and not only has Uruguay already decriminalized possession of marijuana, it is also considering controlled and regulated legalization whereby the state would have a monopoly on production. See Damien Cave, ‘South America Sees Drug Path to Legalization,’ New York Times, July 29, 2012, accessed March 25, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/30/world/americas/uruguay-considers-legalizing-marijuana-to-stop-traffickers.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. Also see Alfonso Serrano, ‘How Latin America May Lead the World in Decriminalizing Drug Use,’ TIME World, October 9, 2012, accessed March 25, 2013, http://world.time.com/2012/10/09/how-latin-america-may-lead-the-world-in-decriminalizing-drug-use/.
It is in reaction to this that I have used the term *intoxicated narrative*, rather than *drugged narrative*. The word ‘drug,’ with its negative connotations and its moorings (both etymological and in the modern context) in medicine, seems to me to be too narrow to adequately describe the subversive potential inherent in the process of intoxication, a potential that I have tried to describe by pointing out its movements in the narratives considered in the dissertation. It has been my hope, therefore, to reclaim the positive, affirmative, chaotic and perhaps even liberatory tendencies that are latent in the word *intoxication*, and in the state of being intoxicated, by giving glimmerings of the transformative effect it has on the movement of narrative. This in spite of its roots in the Latin for ‘toxicity’ and ‘poisoning.’ At the same time, I hope to have prodded an understanding of it that is closer to Baudelaire’s conception of intoxication, something that is deeply to be desired as an antidote to this machinic late capitalist existence, but not without its own unsettling after-effects.

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I have said above that narrative has been for the longest time our primary mode of ordering reality. According to Lev Manovich, however, the rise of new media and the emergence of the computer age have now introduced “its correlate – the database.” Manovich notices that in today’s age, we are bombarded with fragments of information but not enough structuring discursive formations to connect it all together. Narration has changed places with description, and the database has become the “new symbolic form of the computer age.”

Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end; in fact, they do not have any development, thematically, formally or otherwise that

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would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individual items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other.⁸

Manovich sees the database as being the symbolic ordering form of cyber-post-modernity, flourishing throughout the internet. Like Ts’ui Pen’s *Garden of Forking Paths*, the internet is always incomplete and predominantly hyperlinked. This, Manovich proclaims, “contributes to the anti-narrative logic of the Web.”⁹

Is this in some way the future of the intoxicated narrative? Has it finally transformed itself, from the apparent-but-not-really closure of the Holmesian narrative, through the epistemologically confused Hammettian-Chandlerian narrative, to the ontologically hallucinating labyrinthine metaphysical narrative, and finally to the anti-narrative database form of the World Wide Web?¹⁰ After all, the internet is the ultimate trip – a potentially limitless time-space continuum, where one can access an almost infinite amount of information in whatever “avatar” one desires. This is what Fritz realises in *Inherent Vice* when he tells Doc Sportello that the ARPANET, precursor to the modern internet, is “like acid, a whole ’nother strange world – time, space, all that shit.” And, indeed, with the growing acceptance of Internet Addiction Disorder and the recognition in a recent study that heavy users undergo withdrawal symptoms remarkably similar to those of ‘drug’ use, it seems entirely possible that the Web functions as one more substance.¹¹

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⁹ Manovich, ‘Database.’
¹⁰ A case could even be made, as David Denby indeed does, that the Hollywood blockbuster too is gradually being transformed into anti-narrative art (if it can be called art; Denby certainly does not think so). This can be evidenced in the numerically growing and temporally expanding CGI-enhanced action sequences in many of these films, to the point where narrative movement has merely become a device to connect one action sequence to the next. About *The Avengers* (2012), Denby says “it degenerated into a digital slam, an endless battle of exacerbated pixels, most of the fighting set in the airless digital spaces of a digital city.” He goes on to say how American commercial movies are now dominated by the “instantaneous monumental,” and that the “most common method of editing in big movies now is to lay one furiously active shot on top of another.” See David Denby, ‘Has Hollywood Murdered the Movies?’, *New Republic*, September 14, 2012, accessed March 24, 2013, [http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/107212/has-hollywood-murdered-the-movies](http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books-and-arts/magazine/107212/has-hollywood-murdered-the-movies).
Manovich writes that database “represents the world as a list of items and refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events). Therefore, database and narrative are natural enemies.”\textsuperscript{12} I think this last statement should be qualified a little; it appears from the investigations in this dissertation that intoxication might be a link between the two, because the intoxicated narrative appears to be historically tending towards the logic of the database. As Manovich observes in \textit{The Language of New Media}, the database and the narrative keep combining and forming hybrids. Ilana Snyder, for instance, finds the logic of the database in both Borges’s \textit{Labyrinths} and Cortázar’s \textit{Hopscotch}.\textsuperscript{13} And Manovich cites Borges’s story ‘On Exactitude in Science’ (1946), which mentions “a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it.” The database form of the internet, Manovich says, has exceeded this map which is equal to the size of the territory it depicts, since there is large scale repetition of data indices on the Web – porno sites especially, he notes, “exposed the logic of the Web at its extreme by constantly reusing the same photographs [and now, twelve odd years since Manovich’s book came out, videos too] from other porno Web sites.”\textsuperscript{14}

This gradual combining of the database and the narrative has tended then, on the internet, to also lead to a slow effacement of the logic of narrative in favour of database. A process parallel to the progressive abstraction of an entrenched cultural form can be observed in the transformation of the intoxicatory agent in the dissertation you have just read. If we begin with \textit{The Moonstone}’s laudanum, the substance is a tincture of macerated raw opium, mixed in an alcoholic solvent. Its materiality, therefore, consists of a solid dissolved in a liquid. From here, we move on to Holmes’s cocaine (and morphine as well). Both are

\textsuperscript{12} Manovich, ‘Database.’
\textsuperscript{14} Manovich, \textit{The Language of New Media}, 225.
originally in powdered form, although the great detective dissolves them (the cocaine, famously, in a seven per-cent solution) in liquid solutions for injecting. Again, therefore, their materiality consists of a solid dissolved in a liquid – in this age, of course, cocaine is typically snorted in the form of a white powder; its composition, therefore, is that of a powdered solid. All three substances are highly processed.

Next – tobacco, also used by Holmes, and by Spade and Marlowe. This is, of course, dried leaf; but it is typically flue-cured, which leads to the addition of traces of various other substances, so it cannot really be said to be entirely ‘natural’ or organic, at least not in the form our heroes used it. Moving on to alcohol, this is highly distilled spirit: note the gradual abstraction of materiality denoted by the word *spirit* itself. From where we go on to hallucinogens, many of which, like the psilocybin mushroom, or the peyote cactus, are completely organic, with very little processing performed on their natural states; LSD is completely synthetic, of course, but it is extremely purified, and a regular dose being the miniscule amount that it is, the substance is almost invisible to the naked eye. Its materiality, therefore, is barely present.

The intoxicating agent of the internet, of course, is entirely abstract. There is no physical ingestion/injection at all. Substance has been successively distilled into pure abstraction. The connecting links of narrative seem to have given way to ceaseless wandering. In cyberspace, no one can hear you overdose.

This notion of the progressive abstraction of substance into formlessness and narrative into database, with its strong ties to the ideas of connection and wandering, will hopefully lead us to think about new conditions of space and intoxicated movement through space, in terms of what Manovich calls “the poetics of navigation.”\(^\text{15}\) Intoxication, associated with wandering throughout this dissertation, is the middle ground of narrative and tends

\(^{15}\) Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 259.
towards the suspension of closure. In *Signs Taken for Wonders*, the sociologist of literature Franco Moretti makes an allied observation about the narrative of detection (Moretti is specifically talking about British detective fiction from 1890 to 1936, but if his interpretation holds for that particular chunk of fiction, it should hold doubly for the narratives of detection that come after, as has hopefully been made evident in this dissertation):

In detective fiction, as in the short story, the weight gravitates towards the ending. Detective fiction’s ending is its end indeed; its solution in the true sense. The *fabula* narrated by the detective in his reconstruction of the facts brings us back to the beginning; that is, it abolishes narration. Between the beginning and the end of the narration – between the absence and the presence of the *fabula* – there is no ‘voyage,’ only a long *wait*. In this sense, detective fiction is anti-literary. It declares narration a mere deviation, a masking of that univocal meaning which is its raison d'être. And yet detective fiction’s scientific loftiness *needs* literary ‘deviation’, even if it is only to destroy it[...]. Not merely anti-literary, therefore, detective fiction expresses an ambivalent desire for the literary.¹⁶

All of which finally brings us back to the intoxicated narrative, and its final form. Is the internet indeed the extreme logical conclusion these intoxicated narratives of detection have been wending their way towards? And is this indeed the reason these narratives have become the underlying structural obsession of postmodernity? Could it possibly be that the intoxicated narrative is the predecessor to the database form of the internet – perhaps not predecessor, but certainly an earlier component in the continuum from a narratival to a databasal form of ordering reality? Does the intoxicated narrative somehow predict our cyberspatial perception of reality? I hope this dissertation has been the first step towards locating answers to questions like these, and in explaining modernity’s intense love-hate relationship with intoxicants of all sorts. The peregrinations of intoxication are hard to map when one is stationary oneself, and it has been essential to destabilise my own methods of thinking and feeling, to have often felt lost and confused (and, with any luck, to sometimes have made my reader feel this way too), to be able to come up with a kind of proto-language

to map the errant wanderings of the intoxicated narrative. Which is why this study began, as
the ancient Greeks liked to, *in medias res*. And why it is necessarily and abruptly incomplete.
Ultimately, I have tried to look asquint at the intoxications underlying narrative in order to
sense the impulses and scintillations in real life that go towards the sum of the ‘fictions’ we
employ and unravel to make sense of it all. If my attempt has been somewhat ambiguous and
experimental, closer to a hesitant stumble through dark dank corridors of junk than a
straightworld stride into the glaring sunshine of epistemic clarity, it is only in keeping with
the objects and the subjects of my study.
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