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The Big Empty: Chandler's Transatlantic Modernism

Will Norman

We begin with the great paradox of Raymond Chandler's career, which is often noted in passing but rarely examined closely. The most famous practitioner of that typically American art form, hardboiled detective fiction, thought of himself as a British exile. "Incidentally, I still regard myself as an exile, and want to come back," he told his British publisher Hamish Hamilton in 1945, while he later described himself as "half British" to his friend James Sandoe.¹ Although born in Chicago, Chandler spent the years 1895–1912, between the ages of seven and twenty-four, living in South London, first as a schoolboy, then a civil servant, and finally as an execrable poet, essayist, and reviewer on the fringes of the late Edwardian and early Georgian literary scene. As he often reminded his friends and correspondents, he was also a product of the British public-school system, having attended Dulwich College: "One of the larger public schools," he explained to his publisher Blanche Knopf in 1940, although "not ranking with Eton, Harrow, Charterhouse or Marlborough" (*SL*, 15). Chandler's England, never fully dissociated from his public-school days, was a nation of cultural and educational tradition, ethical virtue, and refined taste. He dreamed of returning there from at least 1932, when he wrote a romantic poem eulogizing "the England I picture in the night hours / Of this bright and dismal land / Of my exile and dismay."² Only after the death of his wife in 1955 was he able to fulfill this desire, and he spent much of his remaining life once again in London, albeit often disillusioned with the cultural decline he discovered there.

How are we to reconcile Chandler's Anglophilia with his legacy in American popular culture and literary history?³ Understood as

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748 one of the key figures in the development of the hardboiled detective school, Chandler's legacy rests largely upon his reputation as a prose stylist working within the U.S. vernacular idiom.³ He made no secret of his apprenticeship as a pulp writer in the early to mid-1930s, inspired by the vernacular styles of Ernest Hemingway and Dashiell Hammett (his surviving notebooks contain exercises in imitation of Hemingway, "the greatest living American novelist").⁴ "My fiction was learned in a rough school," he told Knopf, in marked contrast to his English public-school education.⁵ Hardboiled crime fiction, like the dime-novel Westerns from which it evolved, is popularly supposed to be a native genre growing organically "like topsy" from the American literary and cultural environment.⁶ For some literary historians hardboiled fiction, along with the *films noirs* that adapted its aesthetic for the screen, constitutes America's own "pulp modernism" to rival that of the European canon, emerging out of the period's two characteristic mass phenomena: unemployment and the culture industry.⁷ Sean McCann has demonstrated how a genre that began as a marginal and subversive art form became, in the 1930s, an expression of "one of the exemplary faces of American popular identity."⁸ However, scholars of hardboiled fiction have sometimes tended to extend such claims into a kind of exceptionalist rhetoric. As Andrew Pepper writes, "There is no point in denying that the hardboiled is a predominantly American form or that it is best understood as a response to the particular social, economic and political conditions in the United States from the 1920s onwards."⁹ While it is undeniably desirable that hardboiled fiction is read in its historical contexts, we must also acknowledge that some of those contexts reach beyond the borders of the United States. It is true that Chandler once claimed that "Marlowe is the American mind," but the quintessential hardboiled detective was created by someone who repeatedly affirmed his distance from that American mind (*NB*, 56). The critical challenge that faces us, then, is to make sense of the writer's odd dialectic, which apparently combines two equally implausible but powerful national mythologies, the individualist popularism of the pulps and rarefied gentility of English high culture.

My aim in this article is to resituate Raymond Chandler as a transatlantic modernist whose characteristic hardboiled style and conflicted position in relation to mass culture derives from the idiosyncratic encounter he stages between his cultural adolescence on the British literary scene in the early years of the twentieth century and the unique emergence of modernity in Los Angeles from the 1920s to the 1940s. Chandler's temporally and geographically interrupted literary development has the effect of a map folded in such a way as to suggest an impossible continuity between the culture of aestheticism in *fin-de-siècle* London and that of violent pulp sensationalism in depression-era Southern California. Broad areas of this map are occluded, especially the great centers of cultural ferment which provided the foundations of canonical high modernism in the years following the First World War: the Paris of Joyce and Stein, the Berlin of the Dadaists, the New York of the Harlem Renaissance, and the London of the Bloomsbury Group. While Hemingway attended Stein's Parisian *salon* with other members of the "Lost Generation," Chandler was earning \$1,000 per month as vice-president of the Dabney Oil Company in Los Angeles, a significant player in the industry that began

the extraordinary transition of the city from back-water obscurity into the global city of today. Similarly, when he worked alongside America's other celebrity modernists, F. Scott Fitzgerald and William Faulkner, as a Hollywood screen writer in the early 1940s, he had arrived there having taken a very different course. The dialectic of Old Dixie and the New South of the 1920s that precipitated Faulkner's modernism or even Fitzgerald's uneasy geographic exchanges between his Midwestern roots and the East Coast during the Jazz Age, are structurally comparable to Chandler's own situation, and yet in both cases the aesthetic radicalism of the 1920s, experienced here in New Orleans, Paris, and New York, played an indispensable role in the development of their responses to modernity. Los Angeles, it must be said, provided a very different social and cultural environment. The Californian satirical journalist Morrow Mayo summed it up in 1933: "In the field of beautiful letters Los Angeles is virtually barren. A city one hundred and fifty-two years old, it has no more serious literary tradition or background or consciousness than Scranton, Pennsylvania. . . . It is not conducive, it appears from the results, to the creation of worth-while literature."¹⁰

Chandler's experiences of both modernism and modernity were thus marked by abrupt shifts and aporias that paradoxically excluded him from participation in the canon of high modernism while at the same time aligning him closely with the developing theoretical apparatus of modernist studies in the last decade. In 2008, Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz offered an overview of the field's evolution along three axes—temporal, horizontal, and vertical—a broadening of modernism's historical and geographical reach as well as a readiness to consider the vernacular modernisms of mass and popular culture.¹¹ The tracing of Chandler's modernism demands the superimposition of 1910 on 1939, of England on the West Coast United States, and of high culture on low. The chief result of such definitional transitions has been in the fruitful dialogue between modernist and postcolonial studies, and in particular the response to Homi Bhabha's understanding of modernism as the intersection of nonsynchronous temporalities.¹² While falling outside postcolonial studies, Chandler's transatlantic modernism demands in this respect a similar conceptual framework. It was in the postcolonial context that Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued that modernity "requires an alterity, a referent outside of itself—a pre-or nonmodern in relation to which the modern takes its meaning," and yet Chandler's notions of Englishness, though formed in the early twentieth-century, were primarily of a culture emptied of modernity, a timeless pastoral of the type he finally evoked in his strange short story, "English Summer: A Gothic Romance."¹³ In this sense, then, Chandler confounded the classic orientation of American modernism in its tendency to look west in search of models for modernity's alterity. Chandler's western gaze was a blank one, across the monotony of the Pacific Ocean which he describes in *The Little Sister* "trudging into shore like a scrubwoman going home."¹⁴ It was eastwards, across the land mass of the United States and the Atlantic Ocean, that he looked in search of a cultural tradition and an imaginary alternative to his dystopian vision of Los Angeles.

In rereading Chandler's work through the lens of his temporally disjunctive transatlantic modernism, we are given the opportunity to return to a question that vexed the

750 writer himself as well as the history of his critical reception. During the most productive part of his writing career, between 1935 and the late 1940s, the prestige of crime fiction within the cultural landscape of the United States was hotly contested by both writers and intellectuals.¹⁵ Chandler's insecure place in the canon of modern American literature dates back to precisely this debate, which continues in various guises up to the present day. In particular, scholarship on Chandler up to the mid-1980s repeatedly justified its critical work through defense of his literary "quality," understood as the ability to extend the boundaries of the genre and withstand comparative evaluation against canonical modernists such as Hemingway and Faulkner.¹⁶ The precedent for this comparative treatment can be traced to Chandler's own repeatedly expressed desire to be considered by reviewers and critics as a mainstream novelist (*SL*, 277). In order to understand the way he self-consciously positioned his fiction in relation to the stratification of high and low we need to consider the dramatic historical shifts in those categories that took place as American culture responded to the models of European modernism during the first half of the twentieth century while developing its own mass culture industry centered on Chandler's home town. His polemical 1944 essay "The Simple Art of Murder," which stakes a claim not only for crime fiction's value as art, but also for American hardboiled writing as qualitatively superior to the British detective tradition, represents only the boldest intervention among Chandler's continual negotiations of transatlantic differences in cultural prestige.

The fundamental component of such negotiations between cultural strata is found in Chandler's fiction at the level of style, the modernist preoccupation *par excellence* since Flaubert. His correspondence demonstrates the extent to which he identified himself as a stylist and understood stylistic virtuosity as the only quality capable of redeeming literature from the taints of genre conventions or the demands for socio-political engagement. "The most valuable thing in writing is style," he claimed in 1947, "and style is the most valuable investment a writer can make with his time" (*SL*, 88). Conversely, it was the public's "lack of a sense of style" that lay at the heart of his critique of Southern Californian modernity (*SL*, 181). Chandler's notebooks reveal that his style was itself the location of a crucial transatlantic encounter, and that he perceived the combination of his public-school education and his mastery of American English to be the source of his stylistic signature. In considering his style, however, we must go beyond the description, tabulation, and evaluation of stylistic trademarks—the outrageous similes and wisecracks for which he is so famous—in order to ask what style meant to Chandler and how it functions within the novels as part of a fluid economy of cultural stratification. At stake here will be Chandler's investment in British and French aestheticist notions of style and their transposition to the alien desert soil of Southern California. Among the dusty canyons and dilapidated bungalow courts of Los Angeles, Chandler's style emerged in his late work into a kind of decadent impasse, shuttling between extremes of burlesque and sentimentalism, marked by the compulsive reiterations of the rhetoric of dead ends and, above all, emptiness. In *The Long Goodbye* this sense of desolation and emptying out is finally emblemized by the private graveled road Marlowe drives down in search of the quack charlatan Doctor Verringer and the scene he finds there:

the cabins of a holiday camp betraying “that out-of-season look” with doors closed and windows “blanked by drawn curtains,” flanked by the classic topos of Chandlerian Los Angeles, the hollow form of the empty swimming pool: “and nothing ever looks emptier than an empty swimming pool” (*LN*, 515).

Chandler’s vernacular and the “Age of Taste”

The aesthetic implications of Chandler’s transatlanticism can be found encapsulated in two odd letters he wrote in 1937 to a little-known, genteel periodical published in Los Angeles. The editors of *The Fortnightly Intruder* must have been startled by the question posed to them: “Who, except those by life already defeated and wasting in the twilight, has any taste for such writing as yours?” (*SL*, 1). The problem, Chandler explained, was the “dead language” in which they wrote, and their fraudulent imitation of the “soft birdsong of the Oxford close”: “I’m afraid that . . . you come as a nostalgia for the Age of Culture, whatever that means,” he told them (1, 2). Without ever admitting his English past, Chandler’s letter is written out of startled recognition at his own adolescent culture appearing unexpectedly before him in 1930s Los Angeles. In a telling simile, he describes *The Fortnightly Intruder* as “a voice from an ancient chimney on a gusty October night” (1). The nostalgia for the “Age of Culture” was quite his own, and the scorn with which he treated the editors was that of a cultural guardian able to discriminate between the real and fraudulent. Despite their pretensions to Oxford English, Chandler accused them of writing “the flat language of a dehydrated New Englander” (2).

It is only in the second letter, responding to the editors’ indignant affirmation of the purity of their American language, that the real import of Chandler’s enigmatic posturing is revealed:

The best writing done in English today is done by Americans, but not in any purist tradition. They have roughed the language around as Shakespeare did and done it the violence of melodrama and the press box. They have knocked over tombs and sneered at the dead. (3)

The double maneuver represented in these two letters is the key to understanding Chandler’s transatlantic modernism: while he aspired to late-nineteenth century ideals of the literary artist as master stylist, his method of pursuing them was through a purge of outdated mannerisms and rejuvenation through the American vernacular rough-house. The reluctance with which he uses the term “Age of Culture” is belied by his admission to Alfred Knopf nine years later that a book by Max Beerbohm that the publisher lent him “belongs to the age of taste, to which I once belonged,” and that he believed himself to have been “born half a century too late” (*SL*, 62). However, in a gesture that recalls Melville’s claims, in “Hawthorne and his Mosses,” for young Shakespeares “being born on the banks of the Ohio,” Chandler found the “dead language” of the English literary tradition resurrected in American popular culture.¹⁷ This is a paradoxical but powerful model that evokes the cultural authority of Shakespeare in order to sanction knocking over tombs and sneering at the dead.

752 We are dealing here with a paradigmatic impulse in American modernism. Michael North has documented the appropriation of various forms of American vernacular, and especially African-American dialect, by T. S. Eliot, e. e. cummings, Gertrude Stein, and others, who had the ostensible objective of locating themselves outside the jurisdiction of bourgeois culture.¹⁸ This colonizing of the linguistic world of modernism's "others," beginning with Eliot's return to Conrad's ventriloquism in *The Waste Land*—"Mistah Kurtz, he dead"—has become one of the defining tropes of high modernism. Chandler, when he wrote his letter to *The Fortnightly Intruder*, was still writing for the pulps and had yet to find the more prestigious home of Knopf for his fiction. Yet we can see already how he was beginning to formulate a theoretical position comparable to his high modernist peers, but based on transatlantic rather than racial difference.¹⁹ For Chandler, then, the category of the American vernacular remained itself one of exoticism, objectified not only through class but also more importantly through national culture. As George Philip Krapp wrote in his 1925 book *The English Language in America*, "A British visitor in America, if he has any taste for the niceties of language, experiences something of the thrills of contact with a foreign idiom, for he hears and reads many things which are new to him and not a few which are unintelligible."²⁰

We should not be tempted, then, into conflating the kind of nativist sentiments associated, say, with William Carlos Williams's interest in the American vernacular with Chandler's affinity for the language of melodrama and the press box. Rather, it is to a British high modernist like Virginia Woolf that we must turn for a more accurate correlative: "The Americans are doing what the Elizabethans did—they are coining new words . . . all the expressive, ugly, vigorous slang which creeps into use among us, first in talk, later in writing, comes from across the Atlantic."²¹ As he wrote in 1950, "I arrived in California with a beautiful wardrobe, a public school accent . . . and a contempt for the natives which, I am sorry to say, has in some measure persisted to this day" (*SL*, 236). It was this sense of pseudo-colonial British cultural superiority, as well as his dedication to the ideals of aesthetic autonomy derived from the *fin-de-siècle*, that allowed Chandler to abstract the aesthetic potential of American language from the social reality of those who used it every day. One had to be English to make the American language fit for art.

If such chauvinism seems improbable, then we need only turn to Chandler's short essay, "Notes (very brief please) on English and American Style," which concludes by asking why the United States should be able to produce "writing as great as this age is likely to produce":

The answer is, it can't. All the best American writing has been done by men who are, or at some time were, cosmopolitans. They found here a certain freedom of expression, a certain richness of vocabulary, a certain wideness of interest. But they had to have European taste to use the material." (*NB*, 22)

Alone, the American is historyless and undisciplined with "no awareness of the continuing stream of culture . . . without manner or self control," while "such tradition as they have in the use of their language is derived from the English tradition" (*NB*,

20–21). Chandler here positions the transatlantic cosmopolitan as the privileged bearer of authentic literary culture in the age of modernism, a hybrid, detached figure able to transform, through European taste, the innovations and violence of American English into literature. It is appropriate, then, that early in Chandler's first novel *The Big Sleep*, Marlowe assures General Sternwood that he "went to college and can still speak English if there's any demand for it" and then immediately demonstrates his familiarity with the underworld vernacular the general uses in talking about Rusty Regan, remarking "you learned to talk the language."²²

Chandler's investment in an innovative and vigorous vernacular deployed for the services of art, evident in the writings we have discussed from the late 1930s and early 1940s, coincided with the pivotal period of what Michael Kammen has called "proto-mass culture."²³ This was a moment of transition from a commercial popular culture to a fully-fledged mass culture, when, as Kammen argues, the corporate commodification of cultural products was yet to achieve the totalizing reach that became possible with the erasure of regional difference and the introduction of television sets to most American homes in the 1950s. Alternatively, following Michael Denning's work in *The Cultural Front*, we could say that this was the last point at which it was still possible for intellectuals, artists, and writers to maintain a belief in the utopian cultural possibilities opened up by popular cinema and mass-produced paperback books, just as critiques by Greenberg, Macdonald, Adorno, and others appeared from the mid-1940s onwards.²⁴ In some ways, Chandler's enthusiasm for the vernacular, practiced both in his early hardboiled fiction and his Hollywood screenwriting, participated in this broader cultural optimism. Elizabethan drama, he explained, was also a form of mass entertainment, and he insisted that had Shakespeare been alive, he "would undoubtedly have written and directed motion pictures" (*SL*, 172). As late as 1947 he wrote in an essay for *The Atlantic Monthly* that "it might reasonably be said that all art at some time and in some manner becomes mass entertainment, and that if it does not it dies and becomes forgotten."²⁵ Whereas Adorno and Horkheimer, just three years earlier in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, had located mass culture as a unique response to late capitalism, Chandler at this point preferred to understand it as an ideal principle last realized in Renaissance England.

In this sense, Chandler offered a response to what Van Wyck Brooks identified in 1916 as the key problem in American culture: the widening gap between high and low. Brooks called for an integrated culture in which high and low could feed off each other and in particular the energies of American slang could be assimilated into the "pure style" of literary language.²⁶ As Susan Hegeman has demonstrated, this challenge was to echo through American art, literature, and anthropology in the succeeding two decades, and Chandler's aspirations for a vernacular hardboiled fiction, filtered through a discriminating European sensibility, offered one answer.²⁷ This perspective would see him placed alongside not only Hammett but also Duke Ellington, Orson Welles, and Billie Holiday as a figure exploiting a unique historical opportunity to break down cultural stratification in the United States following the demise of high modernism with the crash of 1929.²⁸ Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of Chandler's continuing

754 elitism, the limits of what Sean McCann identifies as his “sentimental populism.”²⁹ The seeming democratic idealism of this project is continually undermined in his writings by the conviction that, even if there should be a unified aesthetic culture available to all, it could only be produced by an educated elite. As he wrote to Hardwick Moseley in 1949, “We are dealing with a public that is only semi-literate and we have to make an art of a language they can understand” (*SL*, 173). We are still some distance, then, from the flowering of an authentic proletarian culture in the United States during the Depression and after, the years of the Popular Front. Chandler may have had an insight into the culture industry after being involved in both hardboiled pulp and Hollywood screenwriting, but he never discarded his own cultural adolescence in the British *fin-de-siècle*.

A sharper sense of how this temporally and geographically disjunctive structure operates can be gained through placing Chandler’s cultural politics alongside the views of the Victorian English poet, critic, and intellectual Matthew Arnold. We might begin by noting the superficial similarities in style and subject between Arnold’s poetic output and Chandler’s juvenilia, their mutual affinity for archaic language, conventional romantic imagery, and elegy. More pertinent, however, is the way in which Chandler’s cultural politics in the mid-twentieth century emerges as an untimely rearticulation of Arnold’s call for the restoration of aesthetics at the center of an authorized British culture. If Chandler’s vision of a unified aesthetic culture appealing across society appears in tension with his elitist impulses and thereby leaves him off beat with regard to American intellectual trends, it is because of the ground his vision shares with Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). Here Arnold set out his aspirations for the British masses to be brought within the civilizing influence of a national culture based on the reintegration of beauty and intelligence in poetry and religion. For Arnold,

[Culture] does not try to teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgements and watchwords. It seeks to do away with classes, to make all alive in an atmosphere of sweetness and light.³⁰

Whatever radical politics we might now associate with the notions of “do[ing] away with classes,” it is important to remember that, as for Chandler, equality is only relevant here insofar as the same culture is made available to all classes. The culture itself, however, is premised on the prior establishment of what Arnold described as “an authoritative cultural centre” capable of distinguishing “correct information, taste and intelligence” (*CA*, 82).

Reading Chandler alongside Arnold in this way provides a way of understanding the key transition in his thinking about the place of his writing within the broader contours of American culture. His optimism about the potential of mass culture was fundamentally conservative and nostalgic rather than genuinely utopian; like Arnold’s, it was a desire to return to mythical ideals associated with the English Renaissance. From this perspective, the increasingly rebarbative attacks on American materialism and intellectual vacuity that we see in *The Little Sister* and *The Long Goodbye*, as well

as in his correspondence and journalism, are entirely compatible with his rejection of cultural stratification and defense of popular arts. If Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* was an attempt to redeem British culture from the vulgarizing effects of the second industrial revolution, then we can understand Chandler's critiques after 1945 as a comparable response to the United States' development into a fully-fledged society of mass consumption in which aesthetics was subordinated to the logic of the market.³¹ It was at this point that the Arnoldian dream became pointedly unattainable, as Chandler's 1949 letter to Jamie Hamilton makes clear:

You cannot have art without public taste and you cannot have a public taste without a sense of style and quality throughout the social structure. Curiously enough this sense of style seems to have very little to do with refinement or even with humanity. It can exist in a savage and dirty age but it cannot exist in the age of Milton Berle, Mary Margaret McBride, the Book of the Month Club, the Hearst press, and the Coca-Cola machine. (*SL*, 181)

At the moment when the aesthetic realm can no longer define itself over and against the commercial, art can no longer exist. According to this logic, then, neither *The Little Sister* nor *The Long Goodbye* qualifies as an authentic work of art on Chandler's own terms. As we shall see, these two works, in their fraught, reiterative styles, betoken Chandler's reluctant lapse into complicity with the culture industry and the relinquishing of the cultural ideals set forth in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Chandler also echoes Arnold in his attacks on the legacy of American Puritanism. In *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold laments the failure of a classical, discriminating intelligence to correct the tendency towards dogmatic obligations to duty, self-control and work. This critique of excessive "Hebraism" finds its purest expression in his scornful evocation of the Pilgrim Fathers crossing the Atlantic carrying with them certain iconic figures of classical and renaissance literature ill-suited to their philosophy and way of life: "What intolerable company Shakespeare and Virgil would have found them!" (*CA*, 69). His polemic against the "narrow and inadequate" Puritan vision, which dictates the strictures of social conduct without sufficient consideration of the aesthetic component of universal judgments, finds its correlative in Chandler's own discontent at the "social significance twaddle" that he complained was peddled by the U.S. cultural establishment (*SL*, 238):

My argument is and always has been merely that there is no such thing as serious literature, that the survivals of Puritanism in the American mind make all but the most literate people incapable of thinking about literature without reference to what they call significance. (*SL*, 159)

Seen through an Arnoldian lens, then, Chandler's hardboiled fiction begins to emerge as the natural home for the British conservative aesthete seeking relief from Puritan literary didacticism in the mid-twentieth-century United States. Through such a generic choice, the socio-ethical imperatives of cultural production, which had been particularly pronounced during the Great Depression, could be discarded in favor of

756 more purely aesthetic aims. As we will see, Chandler's rejection of narrative plotting and his privileging of autonomous style needs to be understood in similar disjunctive contexts if we are to grasp his idiosyncratic transatlantic modernism.

American Decadence, or, the Art of Making Something Out of Nothing

In 1857 Charles Baudelaire wrote: "A nation begins in decadence and starts in fact where others end up. . . . Young and old at one and the same time, America chatters and drivels away with astonishing volubility."³² We are used to associating the notion of cultural decadence in the modern era with mid-to-late nineteenth-century Europe, and even, as in the orthodox reading of Henry James's fiction, defining a decadent Europe in relation to a young and vigorous United States. Indeed, David Weir asserts that "in America, the cultural conditions that produced the possibility of decadence in Europe simply did not exist."³³ In approaching Chandler's hardboiled novels, however, we are required to rethink such simple relational modes. For Chandler, as for Baudelaire, America's decadence paradoxically inhered in its deracinated modernity, in the absence of history rather than in its oppressive burden. This perspective develops out of a transatlantic interference of two temporalities, wherein the "sense of the past" that Chandler cherished in Europe is travestied and homogenized into an eternal present (*SL*, 11). While the United States is seen continually to appropriate the European tradition from its position at the margins of culture, its accelerated industrial and technological development in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries places it in the advance guard of monopoly capitalism, thus leaving it "young and old at one and the same time." This is the structure informing Chandler's defensive response to the assumed gentility of *The Fortnightly Intruder* in 1937, and his extraordinary counter-attack: "You are decadent in an environment which, for all its fancy-pants, is still provincial" (*SL*, 1).

Chandler's sense of an attenuated American decadence, and the temporal interference that produces it, is thus firmly attached to his local, "provincial" environment of Southern California from the 1920s and 1930s, during which he first worked in the booming oil business and then began writing for the pulps. This location is significant because of the particular circumstances of Los Angeles's development during this time, which correspond closely to the structural conditions giving rise to American decadence. In one sense, the narrative of Los Angeles's development was understood as a microcosm of American cultural and socio-economic evolution more generally. As one of the first great Californian writers, Louis Adamic, wrote in 1932, "Los Angeles is America. A jungle. Los Angeles grew up suddenly, *planlessly*, under the stimuli of the adventurous spirit of millions of people and the profit motive."³⁴ The consequences of the city's accelerated physical and economic expansion in isolation from the great cultural centers of Europe and the East Coast was elaborated by Morrow Mayo a year later, in his observation that since its attraction of thousands of "yokels" from the Midwest "the town has never been able to catch up with itself," with the result that, despite its size, "the place has retained the manners, culture and general outlook of a

huge country village. . . . Some day it will catch up with itself mentally.”³⁵ It is important to remember, then, that it was against this backdrop of immense and publicly noted disparity between Los Angeles’s cultural and economic development that Chandler made the decision to relaunch his abortive literary career and begin writing for the pulps. During the course of the following twenty years his fiction was to register the particular ways in which the city did “catch up with itself,” principally through the yoking of the aesthetic and the economic in the form of the culture industry, as well as through the geographic reorganization of the city in the 1940s.

Accordingly, it is in Chandler’s first novel, *The Big Sleep* (1939), that we can discern most clearly the structure of American decadence, which “starts where others end up.” As many readers have noted, the Sternwood mansion upon which Marlowe calls in the opening pages of the novel, with its ancestral portraits and images of chivalrous knights, derives straight from the European gothic tradition, uprooted from both time and place in order to be forcibly relocated to Depression-era Los Angeles.³⁶ The ageing General Sternwood, however, is no scion of ancient noble lineage. Rather, the Sternwood money was made exactly where Chandler made his own (albeit with considerably less success): the oil boom of the 1920s, the disused relics of which are still visible from their position up on the hill. The novel contains various references to this dual temporality, the most obvious of which is Marlowe’s observation on his last visit that “the whole estate looked like it had been made ten minutes before” (*SEN*, 747), designating it a floating historyless sign rather than authentic historical presence. Similarly, Marlowe jokes with the butler midway through the novel: “I met you a hundred years ago—or was it yesterday?” (*SEN*, 677). Even Carmen Sternwood herself embodies simultaneous age and youth in the uncomfortable blending of childlike innocence and corrupt sexuality which defines her function in the novel.³⁷ Sternwood’s American decadence operates, then, through a kind of temporal dysfunction that empties the past of significance and establishes a disorientating equivalence of late and early.

At the same time, Chandler self-consciously plays with the stock motifs of the *fin-de-siècle* European decadent literature he grew up with. The tropical flowers among which Marlowe first meets General Sternwood in his conservatory are familiar not only from Huysmans’s *À Rebours* but also from Zola’s *The Kill* and Maeterlinck’s *Hothouses*.³⁸ While Chandler’s memorable simile gives the plants “nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men” (*SEN*, 593), for Huysmans’s *Des Esseintes*, the hothouse orchids are “like hospital patients inside the glass walls of their conservatory walls,” thus neatly providing a correlative for General Sternwood’s own convalescence in the extreme heat and humidity, which causes Marlowe to sweat uncomfortably.³⁹ The artificial prolonging of the old man’s life among the hothouse orchids metaphorically speaks to the unnatural persistence of the European cultural tradition in this arid, foreign climate. Edmund Wilson, perhaps unknowingly, deployed a similar image in his essay on Californian writing, “The Boys in the Back Room”: “Los Angeles grew up, gigantic and vulgar, like one of those synthetic flowers, and tended to drain the soil and the imaginative life of the State.”⁴⁰ In *The Big Sleep*, though, the result, as even the general admits, is played out in the realm of sexual perversion—the plants’ perfume having “the rotten sweetness of a prostitute” (*SEN*, 593).

758 It is significant, then, that perversion provides Chandler's plot with its initial engine. Geiger's second-hand bookstore, with its air of pseudo-gentility, provides a veneer of respectability for the distribution and circulation of pornography. Marlowe, posing as a customer, requests a notoriously rare "full set" of James Audubon's works, thus placing an audacious order for one of the founding monuments of U.S. art. The book he eventually recovers, however, despite its appearance, provides an erotic travesty of *The Birds of America*:

A heavy book, well bound, handsomely printed in handset type on fine paper. Larded with full-page arty photographs. Photos and letterpress were alike of an indescribable filth. The book was not new. Dates were stamped on the front endpaper, in and out dates. A rent book. A lending library of elaborate smut. (609)

Chandler's oblique pun on "birds," which relies for its effectiveness on the reader's familiarity with American art history, tells us something interesting about the way Chandler positions himself in relation to American decadence. Not only does he distinguish his own art here from the salacious reputation earned by the pulp genre he was leaving behind with *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*, but he also begins to model his own ideal readership as discriminating artistic connoisseurs. The implication, meanwhile, is that this filthy book represents what happens to high culture in 1930s Los Angeles: "arty" but not art, a degraded tradition dressed up, however convincingly, as the real thing. The pointed contrast between the immaculate form of the book and its "indescribable" contents provides the first of many such instances of ritual emptying.

The problem that we will now consider, however, is the way in which Chandler's aestheticist dedication to an autonomous style pursued at the cost of narrative and plot brought his own novels perilously close to precisely this model of the brilliant but hollow American artwork. In this sense, the story of Chandler's mature writing career can be summed up as a continual struggle to resist complicity in the same vacuous decadence he critiqued, an effort that became increasingly strained as the rise of mass culture gained momentum after the end of the Second World War. By the late 1940s, after Chandler himself had served the movie business as a screenwriter, *The Big Sleep*'s "elaborate smut" was transmuted into the work of what he called in one letter "made writers": "Hollywood, of course, is full of them; their stuff often has an immediate impact of competence and sophistication, but it is hollow underneath, and you never go back to it" (*SL*, 79).

The process by which Chandler's odd preoccupation with emptiness impacts his prose is best introduced through a reading of his 1949 novel *The Little Sister*. In the short thirteenth chapter Marlowe decides not to return immediately home after visiting Mavis Weld's apartment and instead takes a large detour north out of Los Angeles, west along Ventura Boulevard, and then back to the city along the Pacific Coast Highway. It is one of the most well-known parts of Chandler's oeuvre because of Marlowe's cynical and yet strangely lyrical monologue on the commodification of California, "the department store state" (*LN*, 268). We read his observations of stressed commuters hurrying home to the cheap comforts of the radio and sports pages, restaurants run

by racketeers, and “circular drive-ins as gay as circuses with the chipper hard-eyed car hops, the brilliant counters, and the sweaty greasy kitchens that would have poisoned a toad” (267–68). Two years earlier, Chandler had admitted that he was “fundamentally uninterested in plot,” and, like many other passages in *The Little Sister*, this whole chapter is entirely superfluous to its advancement (*SL*, 87). No attempt is made to conceal this—the journey itself is a purposeless detour for which Marlowe offers us no explanation, a digression of art-for-art’s sake militating against a genre supposedly defined by its subservience to narrative.⁴¹ It is fitting, then, that Marlowe’s eventual return into Los Angeles is marked by his admiration for the magical formal illusion it brilliantly sustains in order to mask the poverty of its material contents:

I smelled Los Angeles before I got to it. It smelled stale and old like a living room that had been closed too long. But the colored lights fooled you. The lights were wonderful. There ought to be a monument to the man who invented neon lights. Fifteen stories high, solid marble. There’s a boy who really made something out of nothing. (269)

This moment provides us with an example of Chandler’s obsession with atmospheres, foregrounded in his art from the moment Marlowe enters the stultifying humidity of General Sternwood’s hothouse in *The Big Sleep*, and encompassing observations on the weather and light as well as the recurrence of olfactory imagery. Whether it is the “warm, foody air” which drifts into his office in the early evening in *The Lady in the Lake*, or “that peculiar tomcat smell that eucalyptus trees give off in hot weather” in *The High Window*, Marlowe apprehends Los Angeles through its omnipresent, intangible, and nebulous atmospheres.⁴² I intend the term in a more generally literary sense, too, however, since it is of course Chandler’s creation of the atmosphere of Southern California that has gained him entry into the canon, and loosened, if not untied, his bonds to genre fiction. Atmosphere in Chandler is constituted by those moments when his style is given room to wander, to make something out of nothing. This is the reason behind Marlowe’s grudging praise for the inventor of the city’s neon light, the closest 1940s Los Angeles comes to pure aesthetics.⁴³ If the thirteenth chapter is marked by ambivalence in finding a seductive quality in its commodification, it is because by the time Chandler wrote the novel he had realized the nature of his impasse: the emphatic style he had always relied on to distinguish his writing from its competitors in crime fiction or the realist novel was also that which threatened to disperse into the extravagant, decadent, but empty forms of Los Angeles and its culture industry. If *The Little Sister* is the novel Chandler most despaired of during its composition, it is because of this recognition: he complained to his British publisher that “there is nothing in it but style and dialogue and characters” (*SL*, 122).

Chandler’s engagement with ideas of style go back to his earliest writings for the London periodical *The Academy*, in which he published an essay called “The Phrasemaker” in June 1912 when he was just twenty-four. The essay offers a satirical portrait of a type of writer based on the nineteenth-century aesthete with a quiet bourgeois existence. The phrasemaker’s greatest horror is “the assertion that art is merely an adjunct of sociology. For him words and phrases live a perfect life of their own and

760 should not be plagued by outside interference.”⁴⁴ This view appears to anticipate, among other things, T. S. Eliot’s criticism of Algernon Swinburne ten years later, whose language, he asserted, lived an “independent life of atmospheric nourishment.”⁴⁵ This may have become a standard line of modernist criticism of the Victorian period, but the interesting fact is that the essay offers in some respects a description of Chandler’s own derivative poetry from the same period, which like the phrasemaker’s “take[s] little interest in the rough-hewing of large questions” and avoids any kind of social content, preferring instead to dwell on knights, quests, and fairy-land (75). As William Marling remarks regarding Chandler’s early essays, “He was guilty of the sins he damned.”⁴⁶ The suspicion arises that “The Phrasemaker” is to some extent a self-examination, Chandler’s attempt to define himself against a poetics he resisted and purge himself of fastidiousness. The chief criticism levelled at the phrasemaker is not of his faith in a transcendent aesthetics, but rather of his inability to “embroider both the mud-puddles and the rose-gardens of life into his art. . . . He shuts his eyes to everything but perfection” (76). This aesthetic selectivity leads to the essay’s concluding sentence, which places the question of style at the heart of the problem: “He is behind the times, a phantom of another age who still wanders pensively in search of that bubble of art which our grandfathers used to call Style” (76).

Reading this sentence against all Chandler’s mature writings about the absolute value and necessity of developing a literary style in fiction, as well as his comments about being born fifty years too late, it seems clear that this Victorian ghost was one he never exorcised. He looked back on the essays he wrote for *The Academy* and admitted their “childish petulence” and “frustrated attempt to be brilliant about nothing,” and yet it was precisely the attempt to transform the empty nothings of Southern California into brilliant style that distinguished his mature fiction, as he carefully cultivated the image of the European stylist marooned in the American cultural desert (*SL*, 36). Chandler ceased to capitalize the “s” of style, but his voluminous correspondence testifies to his unceasing devotion to it as an ideal, a kind of “magic with words” (*SL*, 59). The principal shift from his use of the term in “The Phrasemaker” is that the style he sought could not be described as existing in a bubble. Rather, he understood style to be transcendent, to the extent that, as we have seen, it transformed, in a kind of literary alchemy, the basest of vernaculars into pure gold, or as he put it in another early essay, it could “create beauty out of plaster and vile dust.”⁴⁷

It is not surprising, then, that Chandler looked to Gustave Flaubert in search of literary perfection. Three of Flaubert’s works, “Herodias,” “Un Coeur Simple,” and *Madame Bovary*, feature in the list he provided in 1949 of works he considered “perfect,” and it was Flaubert to whom he turned for comparison when lamenting the “second-raters” dominating the American literary scene (*SL*, 293, 203–4). From this perspective, Chandler’s admission that *The Little Sister* had “nothing in it but style” comes to resemble something more like bragging, given Flaubert’s famous intention to write a book about nothing, “*sans attache extérieure*.”⁴⁸ Chandler’s desire to write an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* called “The Insignificance of Significance,” arguing that “it doesn’t matter a damn what a novel is about, that the only fiction of any

moment in any age is that which does magic with words," seems directly inspired by Flaubert's well-known correspondence (*SL*, 59). However, my own argument here is that it mattered very much that Chandler wrote about the vacuous Los Angeles elite and the faceless grifters who creep in their economic shadow following the Great Depression; about boredom, loneliness, and belatedness; and, in *The Little Sister* and *The Long Goodbye*, about mass-consumption film and fiction respectively. All of these subjects themselves tend towards a hollowing of their own form and therefore present Chandler's "magic" style with its objective correlative. This is where Marlowe's driving tour in *The Little Sister* derives its power: the harmonies that Chandler orchestrates between his own writing and its ideal subject matter, as the two fall into a common rhythm. This consonance allows the prose to perform an apparent miracle of appearing to be "about" itself while at the same time providing a realist perspective on Los Angeles. While commentators have been quick to note how *The Little Sister* evidences his increasing disaffection with the emergence of American mass culture, they have tended not to acknowledge its balancing counterpart, seductive identification. After all, the chapter ends with Marlowe's return to the film actress he was supposed to have just left—a neat circular movement that begins in her apartment and ends at the movie theater where her film is showing. The detective is forced to admit that "she was good," but the film itself sounds like a parody of one of Chandler's own scenes from an elegant Los Angeles mansion, with immaculately suited men smoking endlessly, women ascending long curving staircases, and servants "carrying trays with drinks across the terrace to a swimming pool about the size of Lake Huron but a lot neater" (*LN*, 270).

"A Cabinet Full of Climate": Chandler's Empty Forms and Decadent Style

This process by which form is emptied of its content is to be found saturating Chandler's fiction at every level, from the grossly material dead bodies drained of life to the famous moment in *The Big Sleep* when Marlowe tears up his own bedclothes after they have been vacated by Carmen Sternwood, so recently that "the imprint of her head was still on the pillow, of her small corrupt body still on the sheets" (*SEN*, 709). Nowhere is it better expressed, however, than in the very emptiness of the vernacular he deploys in his dialogue. The sense of the American vernacular as a kind of improvised aesthetic play is articulated by Menken in *The American Language*, in which he admits that Americans were ready to "admit novelties for the mere sake of their novelty" and innovate new terms out of "a kind of linguistic exuberance, an excess of word making energy" that "relates itself to standard language very much as dancing does to music."⁴⁹ By the time Chandler came to write *The Little Sister*, his own trademarked wise-guy dialogues had been explicitly emptied of communicative meaning. In the chapter following his night drive around Los Angeles, Marlowe returns to his office to be confronted by Joseph P. Toad and a junky named Alfred. This episode makes the point forcefully:

"Come along, Alfred," the big man said to his companion. "And stop acting girlish."

"In a pig's valise," Alfred told him.

The big man turned to me placidly. "Why do all these punks keep saying that? It isn't funny. It isn't witty. It doesn't mean anything." (LN, 271)

It is a short journey from signs robbed of their signifiers to murder without motive; violence for the sake of violence. Alfred pulls a gun on Marlowe and pulls the trigger for no ostensible reason, but without consequence—Chandler's joke is that even the gun is empty.

In "The Simple Art of Murder," Chandler writes that "Hammett's style at its worst was almost as formalized as a page of *Marius the Epicurean*" (LN, 989). It is a rather incongruous transatlantic pairing, which finds the pioneer of hardboiled crime fiction paired with the great English aesthete Walter Pater. And yet, as I have been arguing, English nineteenth-century literary culture remained an important reference point for Chandler (if not for Hammett) throughout his career. *Marius the Epicurean* is Pater's philosophical novel, and an obvious choice for a writer of Chandler's generation in searching for an example of turgid and overwrought prose. However, as an aspiring *littérateur* in Edwardian England, Chandler would naturally have turned to Pater as the acknowledged theorizer of literary style, if not its greatest practitioner (Pater himself would give that honor to Flaubert, the "martyr of literary style"). Pater's 1889 essay "On Style" was the reference point for at least one generation of writers in raising style above what he called "mere matter" to the primary consideration in the production of art.⁵⁰ The ideal process he describes there, of "the transcribing, not of the world, not of mere fact, but of [the artist's] sense of it," leads the way to a notion of style as an intensely subjective and all-encompassing organizing force within the artwork, some distance from the "bubble" of style mocked in "The Phrasemaker."⁵¹ Pater makes clear that literary style is for him dependent on the personality of the writer:

Literary art, that is, like all art which is in any way imitative or reproductive of fact—form, or colour, or incident—is the representation of such fact as connected with the soul, of a specific personality, in its preferences, its volition and power.⁵²

When Chandler wrote of his own understanding of literary style in a 1947 letter, he demonstrated his debt to Pater's vision of style, whatever his views on *Marius the Epicurean*:

The most durable thing in writing is style, and style is the most valuable investment a writer can make with his time. . . . The kind of style I am thinking of is a projection of personality and you have to have a personality before you can project it. . . . It is a product of the quality of his emotion and perception; it is the ability to transfer these to paper. (SL, 88)

This paraphrase of Pater's "On Style" reinforces for us the extent to which Chandler continued to hold on to nineteenth-century ideals of literary style long after high modernism had declared them best forgotten. Eliot's famous review of *Ulysses*, one of

the key documents of high modernism, declared Joyce's work to have "not in a negative, but a very positive sense, no style at all," and claimed therefore that "Mr. Joyce's work puts an end to the tradition of Walter Pater."⁵³ One of the key developments in modernist thinking about style remains absent from the work of Chandler. What Peter Bürger identified as a key component in the aesthetics of dada and surrealism is also true of Joyce and the Eliot of *The Waste Land*: "There is no such thing as a Dada or Surrealist style. What did happen is that these movements liquidated the possibility of a period style when they raised to a principle the availability of the artistic means of other periods."⁵⁴ In the prose of Chandler, however, the dedication to a personal style remained unshakeable, to the point where, as he himself admitted, it became the only consideration in composition, beyond the minimum narrative requirements of the genre—the murder mystery and its eventual solution.

Perversely, then, so long as Chandler's fiction remained concerned with absence at the level of content—bodies emptied of life, vernacular speech emptied of meaning, Los Angeles emptied of culture itself—it realized by a kind of historical accident the modernist dream of finally reconciling form and content through style. The problem, however, is that trapped within the containing structures of the mystery genre, Chandler is left with nowhere to go. This impasse is evident not only through style, but also through the topographical motifs of the late work, in which post-war Los Angeles itself becomes a containing structure obliging Marlowe to circle back on himself again and again. The thirteenth chapter of *The Little Sister* takes the form of a circuit, in which Marlowe's attempt to leave the city is unrealized; even the route out of Los Angeles leads back into it. Written in the late 1940s, *The Little Sister* is the first of Chandler's novels to register fully the astonishing development of the city's freeway system during the war and its accompanying reorganization into what Norman Klein calls the "industryopolis," a decentralized network of "orbit cities" radiating from the old downtown.⁵⁵ In his previous novel, *The Lady in the Lake*, Marlowe is able to escape the summer heat of the city by driving into the mountains around Puma Lake, and even if he is forced to shuttle back and forth throughout the narrative, the old distinction between urban and rural is maintained. The transition into the late period at *The Little Sister* is marked, however, by an inability to leave the industryopolis, or even to locate its edges. The only moment of relief from the city is on the set of a film, where the deck of a pleasure yacht is simulated in the heart of Hollywood.

Carey McWilliams, California's own chronicler of modernity, documented breathlessly in 1949 that the years 1940–1948, roughly corresponding to the gap between *The Lady in the Lake* and *The Little Sister*, saw an extraordinary industrial boom in the state for which the journalist deployed nuclear imagery: "[It has] not grown or evolved so much as it has been hurtled forwards, rocket-fashion, by a series of chain-reaction explosions."⁵⁶ Marlowe's search for an alterity, a location outside the late-industrial development of Southern California, can be found only in nostalgic visions. The first of these is of Orfamy Quest's father "sitting in a rocker on the front porch back there in Manhattan Kansas, with his empty pipe in his mouth," an image he returns to vividly during his drugged hallucinations later in the novel.⁵⁷ In this case the Midwest, where

764 Chandler himself was born, forms a geographical alternative to the past. In the other vision, however, Marlowe resorts to Los Angeles itself, in a mythically pre-industrial age:

“I used to like this town,” I said, just to be saying something and not to be thinking too hard. “A long time ago. There were trees along Wilshire Boulevard. Beverly Hills was a country town. Westwood was bare hills and lots offering at eleven hundred dollars and no takers. Hollywood was a bunch of frame houses on the interurban line. Los Angeles was just a big dry sunny place with ugly homes and no style, but goodhearted and peaceful. It had the climate they just yap about now. People used to sleep out on porches. Little groups who thought they were intellectual used to call it the Athens of America. It wasn’t that, but it wasn’t a neon-lighted slum either. (LN, 357)

This is the Los Angeles Chandler knew when he first arrived there in 1912 with a public-school accent and a contempt for the natives. Scholars of the city’s cultural geography, such as McWilliams, and later Mike Davis and Norman Klein, have shown how the city’s urban landscape was utterly reconfigured in the process that first began with the de-centralization strategies of the early 1940s and the destruction of the historical districts in downtown. The Bunker Hill area in particular, which featured in *The High Window* as the flyblown and dilapidated gothic remnant of nineteenth-century Los Angeles, was quickly erased and eventually became, in a fitting irony, the location of the Bonaventure hotel and thereby Jameson’s classic diagnosis of a historyless post-modernity.⁵⁸ It is the phrase “Athens of America,” however, that I want to dwell on, since it returns us once again to Chandler’s recurrent transatlantic comparison, which finds his work emerging from that formative encounter between his education in the classics at an English public school and his experience of Southern California. It is important for him that Los Angeles was not the Athens of America, but that it wanted to be, since this allowed him to preserve his own hybridity and cultural superiority over the likes of *The Fortnightly Intruder*. If, at that time, Los Angeles had “no style,” then Chandler himself could provide it through his European cultural sophistication and classical education. The development recorded in *The Little Sister* is that, in the intervening period, Los Angeles had got style, only it was produced for profit as a function of the culture industry. This is the point at which the art of “creating something out of nothing” brings together Paterian aestheticism and the neon light, Flaubertian aesthetic autonomy and the crudest reproduction of the American dream.

Chandler’s style is defined finally by the paradoxical task it is set: to occupy the hollowed out forms scattered through his fiction without either succumbing to the vulgarities of plotting or refining itself out of existence. One of the first responses to such a challenge is to make a literalized metaphor of the problem itself, which is precisely what Chandler does in *The Big Sleep*, when he mentions Marlowe’s filing cabinet “full of California climate.” The preoccupation with climate, atmospheres, and smells that we have already noted in Chandler’s oeuvre also provides the opportunity for similar variations on this imagery of replete emptiness, ways in which hollow spaces can nevertheless be understood as full—of light, moisture, odor, or the smoke particles emitted by the endless cigarettes and pipes smoked by his characters (smoke rings,

disintegrating into “frail wisps,” appear first in “Spanish Blood” and are later recycled in *The Big Sleep*.⁵⁹ Concurrently, narrative time itself is purged of event, resulting in the temporal equivalent of the smoke-filled room: the long, heavy periods of waiting for suspects to leave their apartment buildings, for the next drink, for the phone to ring. It is no coincidence that Chandler’s desertion of the pulps in 1939 was signaled by a story he sold to *The Saturday Evening Post* named “I’ll be Waiting,” which takes boredom as its subject and structural principle. Several years later, the scenario of Marlowe waiting alone in his office reaches its apotheosis in *The Lady in the Lake*:

I pushed things around on the desk. My hands felt thick and hot and awkward. I ran a finger across the corner of the desk and looked at the streak made by the wiping off of the dust. I looked at the dust on my finger and wiped that off. I looked at my watch. I looked at the wall. I looked at nothing. (LN, 171)

Here we are able to discern the stylistic notes of aimlessness, indirection, and reiteration that became dominant towards the end of Chandler’s career. This is a particularly suggestive quotation, however, because of the sense it gives of language as well as time in the process of reification, as words themselves are made to feel “thick . . . and awkward,” presenting the “material density and resistance” that Fredric Jameson noted in Chandler’s style.⁶⁰ Passages like this one, which become increasingly common in the later works, represent analogues to what Peter Nicholls has called “the petrification of language” in process throughout the great decadent works of the late-nineteenth century.⁶¹ Chandler may have begun *The Big Sleep* with the explicit intention of portraying and criticizing a particular form of American cultural decadence, but the late style, continually bogged down in its own narcissistic circuits, comes to represent a literary decadence of its own.

This development towards gratuitous and unintegrated style is understood by Keith Newlin as a sign of Chandler’s decline, following the achievements of *Farewell, My Lovely* and *The High Window*, where a gentle sense of self-parody represented through his characteristic wisecracks and light burlesque constitutes his “comic style.” *The Little Sister*, by contrast, is “overdone,” its style tipping into “overabundance.”⁶² Newlin reminds us of how Chandler made lists of similes in his notebooks during the writing of the novel and ticked them off as he used them.⁶³ Indeed, the outrageous simile, in its calculated performance of independent self-sufficiency, is in one sense the clearest indicator of Chandler’s inhabitation of a classically decadent style as theorized by Paul Bourget in 1876:

A decadent style is one in where the unity of the book is broken down in favour of the independence of the page, where the page is broken down to allow the independence of the phrase, and [similarly] the phrase in favour of the word.⁶⁴

In fact, the publication of Chandler’s notebooks has revealed that he treated not only similes but also titles and items of vernacular language in the same way: as resources to be deployed when the occasion allowed, each providing a virtuoso performance of its

766 own, and relief from the tedium of a tangled plot out of which even the author cannot find his way. Most striking of all is the list of “Chandlerisms,” made up of aphoristic sentences and phrases conveying the author’s caustic cynicism. One of these testifies explicitly to the relinquishing of Arnold’s cultural ideal, discussed earlier, and its compensatory substitute, the wisecrack: “He wanted to buy some sweetness and light and not the kind that comes through the east window of a church” (*NB*, 48). Together, these lists betoken a hardboiled version of the cult of the rare word observed in European decadent authors of the late-nineteenth century, rehearsing Huysmans’s description of Barbey D’Aurevilly’s prose as “full of twisted expressions, outlandish turns of phrase and far-fetched similes.”⁶⁵ This, then, is another sense in which Chandler’s work overlooks the asceticism of high modernism in order to seek alternative lineages in the earlier phases of European modernism.

In 1944 Adorno and Horkheimer wrote of how “the development of the culture industry has led to the predominance of the effect, the obvious touch, and the technical detail over the work itself.”⁶⁶ The ambivalence of Chandler’s decadent style towards that development can be measured by the difficulty faced in judging whether or not his own works fulfil these same criteria. Adorno and Horkheimer argue that, while in the “period from Romanticism to Expressionism,” the detail “asserted itself as free expression, as a vehicle of protest against the organisation,” in the new era the culture industry “crushes their insubordination and makes them subserve the formula, which replaces the work” (125–26). There can be no doubt that Chandler intended his personal force of style as an alternative to the mechanized “made writers” he associated with Hollywood and the culture industry. According to this perspective, the hollow forms and coruscating aphorisms function in resistance to the mass genre of the detective story itself. This is the logic behind J. B. Priestley’s review of *The Little Sister*, in which he compared reading the novel to “cutting into an overripe melon and discovering that it has a rare astringent flavour.”⁶⁷ On the other hand, the suspicion remains that his decadent tendencies mark not heroic resistance but the moment at which aestheticism becomes just another marketing formula. According to this view, his “Chandlerisms” are simply components of the author’s own brand, what Adorno and Horkheimer described as “like all the other details, ready-made clichés to be slotted in anywhere; they never do anything more than fulfil the purpose allotted to them in the overall plan” (125). Chandler’s one-time mentor Hammett said at the end of his career that “I stopped writing because I was repeating myself. It is the beginning of the end when you discover you have style.”⁶⁸ From this perspective, then, Chandler’s dogged cultivation of his personal style was always a kind of ending, a “long goodbye,” even if it was one that he transformed into an aesthetic event in itself.

The approach I have been taking in this essay has been to make room for a reading of Chandler’s works that, in taking account of his transatlantic career, exceeds the historical and political boundaries conventionally allotted to hardboiled fiction. This approach has also allowed us to evade the binary thinking implied by the “great divide” famously proposed by Andreas Huyssen, and to position the aesthetic values of high modernism as a single component within a dialectic process.⁶⁹ The “hard and clean and

cold and ventilated” modernist prose that Chandler craved—notably in a letter written in the early 1940s—was constantly compromised by the notes of gamey decadence, anachronistic kitsch, and burlesque that crept into his style. While the conventional critical narrative of hardboiled fiction tells of an authentic American voice emerging from the white working-class, we have found instead a set of English aestheticist ideals constantly dramatized in their own failure to survive export into Californian modernity. “The cult of failure,” he wrote to Charles Morton in 1948, “is embedded in all highbrow aesthetics,” and it is for this reason, I would argue, that Chandler chose to make his own failures extravagant through mordant self-irony and stylistic excess.⁷⁰

If as Stephen Ross has argued modernist studies has always been reluctant to acknowledge its own stakes in the cultural field and its accrual of cultural capital through the taming of complex and difficult texts, then Chandler’s transatlantic modernism presents a challenge.⁷¹ The case I have been making has set out to show how his sense of cultural capital was itself determined by the disjunctions of time and space arising from his migrations between the U.S. and Britain. This series of encounters between non-contiguous spheres—*fin-de-siècle* London and post-Depression Los Angeles; Arnoldian ideals and the emergence of the culture industry; rarefied European aestheticism and the vulgar decadence of American civilization—determines the peculiar chords, discords, and unexpected harmonies we recognize as modernism in his work. It is, perhaps, the very cultural legitimacy that high modernists fought and won for themselves, replicated as scholarly legitimacy by the New Critics in ways that persist into the present, that is most responsible for the persisting disciplinary confusion over what precisely modernism is and was.⁷² In speaking of Chandler’s transatlantic modernism, then, I am not contributing to the expansion of the field associated with the “New Modernist Studies” so much as inviting a reconsideration of its most seductive mythologies.⁷³ What do we do with a modernism that isn’t difficult, that professes its own cultural elitism and yet sells hundreds of thousands of novels, that isn’t even intentionally experimental? Chandler’s obsessive preoccupation with the hollowing out of aesthetic form can be said to extend to his retrospective effect on our sense of modernism: stripped of its aesthetic autonomy, principled intellectual rigor, and heroic self-authorship. Perhaps most striking of all, though, is Chandler’s resolute *untimeliness*, his yearning for an “age of taste” receding into the past, evoking precisely the Victorianism popularly understood to have been disavowed by Pound, Eliot, and Joyce.

Notes

1. Raymond Chandler, *The Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler*, ed. Frank MacShane (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 61, 128; hereafter cited in the text as *SL*.

2. Frank MacShane, *The Life of Raymond Chandler* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), 21.

3. See, for example, William Marling, *Raymond Chandler* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 152.

4. Raymond Chandler, *The Notebooks of Raymond Chandler*, ed. Frank MacShane (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 23; hereafter cited in the text as *NB*.

5. MacShane, *The Life of Raymond Chandler*, 73.

6. Leonard Casutto, for example, sees the three main influences on the development of hardboiled writing as the plot of the mystery story first pioneered by Poe, determinist models of American natu-

768 realist fiction such as that of Theodor Dreiser, and the vernacular styles of Hemingway and Hammett. *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality: The Secret History of American Crime Stories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 4.

7. Paula Rabinowitz, *Black, White and Noir: America's Pulp Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 6.

8. Sean McCann, *Gumshoe America: Hardboiled Detective Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 147.

9. Andrew Pepper, "The Hardboiled Genre," in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, eds. Charles Rzepka and Lee Horsey (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2010), 140.

10. Morrow Mayo, *Los Angeles* (New York: Knopf, 1933), 325–26.

11. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The New Modernist Studies," *PMLA* 123, no. 3 (May 2008): 737–48.

12. See Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, "Introduction: The Global Horizons of Modernism," in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, eds. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 4. Brooker and Thacker also discuss the notion of a "disjunctive" modernism emerging from colonialism, postcolonialism, and globalization in their introduction to *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces* (London: Routledge, 2005), 2.

13. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot," in *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies*, eds. Bruce M. Knauft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 222.

14. Raymond Chandler, *Later Novels and Other Writings*, ed. Frank MacShane (New York: Library of America), 268; hereafter cited in the text as *LN*.

15. See, for example, the flurry of responses to Edmund Wilson's famous attack on detective fiction as "literature" in 1944. Wilson, "Why do People Read Detective Stories?" and "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?," in *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (London: W.H. Allen, 1951), 231–43 and 257–65. Bernard de Voto's response was published as "Easy Chair," *Harper's Magazine* 190 (1944): 34–37. See also André Gide, "American Writing Today: An Imaginary Interview," *New Republic* 7 (February 1944): 184–86; Somerset Maugham, "The Decline and Fall of the Detective Story," in *The Vagrant Mood* (London: Mandarin, 1993), 76–101.

16. See Marling as cited; Peter Wolfe, *Something More Than Night: The Case of Raymond Chandler* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1985).

17. Herman Melville, *Pierre, Israel Potter, The Piazza Tales, The Confidence Man, Uncollected Prose, Billy Budd, Sailor* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1161.

18. Michael North, *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language and Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

19. Fredric Jameson, in his seminal 1970 essay on Chandler, notes that "it was his distance from the American language which gave him the chance to use it as he did." Jameson, "On Raymond Chandler," in *The Critical Response to Raymond Chandler*, ed. J. K. Van Dover (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995), 66.

20. George Philip Krapp, *The English Language in America*, vol. 1 (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1925), 114.

21. Virginia Woolf, "American Fiction," in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, ed. Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), 278.

22. *Stories and Early Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 594; hereafter cited in the text as *SEN*.

23. Michael Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes: Social Change and the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1999).

24. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996).

25. Raymond Chandler, *The Raymond Chandler Papers: Selected Letters and Non-Fiction, 1909–1959*, eds. Tom Hiney and Frank MacShane (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2000), 71.

26. Van Wyck Brooks, "America's Coming of Age," in *The Early Years: A Selection from his Works, 1908–1921*, ed. Claire Sprague (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 79–158.

27. Susan Hegeman, *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 74ff.
28. Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 42–43. On the left avant-garde of this period in their “war of position” against the cultural establishment, see also Walter Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Cultural Critique* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
29. McCann, *Gumshoe America*, 149.
30. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, ed. Jane Garnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 52; hereafter cited in the text as *CA*.
31. On the emergence of a fully-fledged mass culture in the immediate postwar, see Kammen, *American Culture, American Tastes*, 57ff.
32. Charles Baudelaire, “Notes on Edgar Poe,” in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1992), 189.
33. David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain 1890–1926* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 1.
34. Louis Adamic, *Laughing in the Jungle: The Autobiography of an Immigrant in America* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1932), 219.
35. Mayo, *Los Angeles*, 267–68.
36. These motifs are most fully worked through in Charles Rzepka, “I’m in the Business Too: Gothic Chivalry, Private Eyes, and Proxy Sex and Violence in Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 46, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 695–724.
37. See also Stanley Orr, *Darkly Perfect World: Colonial Adventure, Postmodernism and American Noir* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010), 75.
38. On tropical plants as decadent motif in European literature, see Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Houndmills: MacMillan, 1995), 53.
39. *SEN*, 593; Karl Joris Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Richard Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), 98.
40. Edmund Wilson, “The Boys in the Back Room: Notes on California Novelists,” in *Classics and Commercials*, 47.
41. As de Voto wrote, crime fiction was supposed to be “the only current form of fiction which is pure story.” De Voto, “The Easy Chair,” 37.
42. *LN*, 116; *SEN*, 1055.
43. On Chandler and the neon light, see William Brevda, “The Double Nihilation of the Neon: Raymond Chandler’s Los Angeles,” *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 41, no. 1 (March 1999): 70–102.
44. Raymond Chandler, “The Phrasemaker,” in *Chandler before Marlowe*, ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1973), 75.
45. T.S. Eliot, “Swinburne as Poet,” in *Selected Essays 1917–1932* (London: Faber, 1932), 313.
46. Marling, *Raymond Chandler*, 9.
47. Raymond Chandler, “Realism and Fairyland,” in Chandler, *Chandler before Marlowe*, 67.
48. *Correspondance 1850–1859, Oeuvres complètes de Gustave Flaubert*, vol. 13 (Paris: Club de l’Honnêt homme, 1974), 154.
49. Menken, *The American Language*, 94, 556–7.
50. Walter Pater, *Three Major Texts*, ed. William Buckler (London: New York University Press, 1986), 156.
51. Walter Pater, “On Style,” in *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (London: MacMillan, 1889), 6.
52. Pater, “On Style,” 6–7.
53. T. S. Eliot, “Contemporary English Prose,” in *Vanity Fair* 20 (1923): 51.
54. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984), 18.
55. Norman Klein, *A History of Forgetting: Los Angeles and the Erasure of Memory* (London: Verso, 2008), 43.
56. Carey McWilliams, *California: The Great Exception* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 25. Williams calculates that three million people moved to California in the years 1940–47, one million of those to Los Angeles (18).

57. LN, 214, 330.
58. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 39–42.
59. SEN, 192, 609. Smoke rings also appear in “The Goldfish” and *The High Window* (SEN, 357, 1129).
60. Jameson, *On Raymond Chandler*, 66.
61. Nicholls, *Modernisms*, 57.
62. Keith Newlin, *Hardboiled Burlesque: Chandler’s Comic Style* (Madison, IN: Brownstone Books, 1984), 36.
63. Newlin, *Hardboiled Burlesque*, 37. NB, 65. Examples include “As much sex appeal as a turtle.”
64. Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, vol. 1 (Paris: Plon, 1924), 20. Cited in English translation in Nicholls, *Modernisms*, 59.
65. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 169.
66. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (London: Verso, 2008), 125.
67. J. B. Priestley, review of *The Little Sister* by Raymond Chandler, *The New Statesman*, 9 April 1949, 39. A similar argument concerning Chandler’s stylistic rebellion against his own genre is advanced in Jerry Speir, *Raymond Chandler* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981), 142.
68. Dashiell Hammett, interview with *Washington Daily News*, 1956. Cited in Steven Marcus, ed., *Complete Novels*, (New York: Library of America, 1999), 958.
69. Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (Houndmills: MacMillan, 1988).
70. Raymond Chandler, *The Raymond Chandler Papers*, 113.
71. Stephen Ross, “Uncanny Modernism, Or Analysis Interminable,” in *Disciplining Modernism*, ed. Pamela Caughie (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 33–52. I follow Ross here in deploying Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of the cultural field, cultural legitimacy, and cultural capital, as set out in his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1986).
72. This confusion was effectively conveyed by Susan Stanford Friedman, for whom the terminology of the discipline becomes “a critical Tower of Babel, a cacophony of different categories that become increasingly useless the more inconsistently they are used.” Stanford Friedman, “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 8, no. 3 (September 2001): 497. In 2009, Friedman’s essay provided the opening contribution for Caughie, ed., *Disciplining Modernism*, a collection of essays that demonstrated that consensus on definitional questions remained unattainable.
73. Key texts for mapping the co-ordinates of the “New Modernist Studies” include Mao and Walkowitz, “The New Modernist Studies,” as well as their “Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New,” in *Bad Modernisms*, eds. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 1–18. Caughie, ed., *Disciplining Modernism*, also indicates the expanding definitions of modernism, to include, for example, classical Hollywood cinema. See also Doyle and Winkiel, “Introduction: The Global Hoizons of Modernism,” 1–14.