

Hardboiled Literary History: Labor and Style in Fictions of the Culture Industry

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Author accepted manuscript. This article has been accepted for publication in the journal *American Literature*.

1. Something from Nothing

A third of the way through Raymond Chandler's 1949 novel, *The Little Sister*, Philip Marlowe takes some time out from the missing person case he is working on, and drives around Southern California at night. Chapter 13 serves no obvious purpose in advancing the plot of the novel. There are no investigations, no epiphanies, no breakthroughs in the case. No one gets kissed, shot, beaten or poisoned. Rather, Marlowe's late-night tour of Los Angeles and its environs serves as the occasion for a bitter meditation on its commodification, and on the relentless drive to maximize the profitability of its spatial resources. He eats dinner at a restaurant 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" (Chandler 1995a, 268). After stopping for a brandy he steps out into the night air "that nobody had yet found out how to option." California, he reminds us, is "the department-store state. The most of everything and the best of nothing." And then, as he returns from Malibu towards downtown, he notices the neon lights: "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).

Marlowe's mordant remarks crystallize a set of concerns that preoccupied Chandler and a number of other novelists in the 1940s, about the development of what later become widely-known, chiefly after Theodor W. Adorno's appellation, as "the culture industry," but which Chandler himself described less elegantly as "congeries of entertainment trusts" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94-136; Chandler 1988, 162). Novels representing the culture industry, such as Chandler's *The Little Sister*, Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941), and Frederic Wakeman's *The Hucksters* (1946), made visible the intellectual labor of producing the cultural commodities upon which the industry subsisted, while at the same time struggling to identify and preserve regions of culture as yet unsullied by the market. They achieved this double effect by materializing in their fictions the abstract components of creative intellectual labor, rendering them intelligible as part of a larger economy at midcentury. In what follows, I will argue that, by tracing historical shifts in the way cultural work and cultural commodities were conceived in the United States in this period, we might arrive at a new understanding of an old literary-historical term, *hardboiled*. Loosened from its constricting generic frame, with the associated conventions of mystery plot and economical vernacular language, *hardboiled* at midcentury can be understood more capaciously, and indeed productively, as naming a certain disposition towards the commodification of culture and a particular style of undertaking cultural work. This alternative sense of *hardboiled*, I will suggest in the final section of the essay, can help us to understand the labor of producing literary-historical scholarship in the academy today.

To begin with, however, we need to return to the neon lights that Marlowe admires as he drives East from Malibu toward downtown Los Angeles, and to ask how the odd phrase he uses to describe their inventor, "a boy who really made something out of nothing," might be related to labor in the culture industry. The idea of creating something from nothing was consistently deployed by Karl Marx in his economic writings, most notably in the *Grundrisse*

and *Capital*, as the heart of the riddle to which those works respond. Chandler's view of the process matches Marx's insofar as both understand the process as a kind of trick intended to fool the observer. For Marx, the appearance of having produced something from nothing is the deception practiced by capitalists in purporting to have created profit without having taken into account the surplus labor expended by their employees. In the *Grundrisse*, he had noted that there was "nothing more absurd, then, than to conclude that . . . *capital* can make something out of nothing, make a plus out of a minus, make a plus-surplus value out of a minus-surplus value or out of minus-surplus labour time, and that it possesses, therefore, a *mystical* wellspring of value independent of the appropriation of alien labour" (Marx 1973b, 547). Capital, in Marx's analysis, is only fructiferous in the sense that its fruits grow from the creation and appropriation of surplus value, that which, as he puts it in *Capital*, "for the capitalist, has all the charms of something created out of nothing" (Marx 1973a, 325).

Chandler was likely more familiar with the old proposition that *nihil fit ex nihilo* from his boyhood education in the classics, and from his reading of Shakespeare.¹ However, we can be assured that he was indeed referring to the supposed magic of invisible labor as he wrote those sentences in *The Little Sister*. The neon light that made something out of nothing was for him a symbol for the culture industry, in the sense that its owners extracted as profit the surplus intellectual labor of people like himself. It was a process to which he gave much thought, especially after his stint working as a Hollywood screenwriter during the mid-1940s, an experience upon which he drew heavily in his treatment of the movie business in *The Little Sister*. Hollywood is described in the novel as the stage for a kind of commercial alchemy, which really can "make a plus out of a minus," "the only business in the world in which you can make all the mistakes there are and still make money" (306). However, one must turn to Chandler's extraordinary essay "Ten Percent of Your Life," published three years later in 1952, in order to grasp the precise sense in which his writing conjures invisible

labor, holding its absence, as it were, up to the light. The object of Chandler's attention here is the literary agent, whose function, he argues, is "a personification of something that in an ethical society would not need to exist. If people could deal with one another honestly, they would not need agents. The agent creates nothing, he manufactures nothing, he distributes nothing. All he does is cut himself a slice off the top" (Chandler 1988, 158). "Ten Percent of Your Life" is Chandler's unmasking of the culture industry as an extension of the literary agent's essentially parasitic role on a grand and unprecedented scale, in which, rather than creating something out of nothing as it appears to, the industry extracts its profit directly from the intellectual worker's income in the form of commission.

The most remarkable element of Chandler's essay lies in the way that the world of creative writing and publishing in the postwar United States itself assumes the characteristics of a hardboiled novel. This development is presented explicitly in terms of a shifting structure of social relations distinct from individual behaviors. The decline in the ethical standard of agency, he explains, "is not a question of individuals stealing money, but of something in the nature of a personal service profession turning into a hard-boiled business, and a pretty big business at that" (160). We are invited to consider, then, the historical relationship between a hardboiled novel and a hardboiled business, and to examine the process by which Chandler's genre fiction takes on, among other functions, that of self-consciously allegorizing the dynamics of the cultural field. Read from this angle, the "personal service profession" nostalgically evoked in the essay comes to signify, not the old-line literary agency under pressure from the entertainment congeries, but Marlowe's outmoded private detective agency, an institution committed to ideals hopelessly at odds with the "mail-order city" described in *The Little Sister*, just as the old-line agent's dedication to recognizing "quality beyond mere saleability" appears risible in the age of a fully-fledged mass culture (Chandler 1995a. 358; Chandler 1988, 160). Notably, the relationship Chandler describes between the

writer and the increasingly rare small-time agent resembles that assumed between Marlowe and several roguish but ultimately likeable characters in the novels, such as Harry Jones in *The Big Sleep* (1939) and Moose Malloy in *Farewell my Lovely* (1940), who operate beyond orthodox social and legal norms but nevertheless conform to Marlowe's personal ethical code. "You didn't blame him," Chandler says of the agent, "and wouldn't have, even if you had known what was in his mind. You needed the money too. Besides, you rather liked the guy" (163). Both the detective and the literary agent refuse to relinquish entirely the possibility of non-commodified human relationships in the world of cultural labor, whether those relationships are mediated by a shared sense of aesthetic value or simply by positive sociality itself, the feeling that "you rather liked the guy."

The figure of the detective and the small-time agent are aligned here with the values of an old middle class, which was in the process of disappearing at midcentury as part of a move in the United States toward white-collar work. As Andrew Hoberek argues in *Twilight of the Middle Class* (2005, 1-32), the valorization of personal agency in work at the moment of its supersession by institutionalized mental labor shaped the middle-class imagination of the postwar United States. I'd like to emphasize, however, that in the case of the hardboiled Marlowe novels, this world of mental labor *is* the totality of the world presented to us. As the opening to *The Little Sister* makes very clear, when Marlowe is not working he is waiting to work, filling the long empty hours in his office drawing his finger across the dust on his desk, or killing flies. It is particularly appropriate, then, that like Chandler, whose productivity as a writer was severely limited by his frequent descents into disabling alcoholic binges, a large portion of Marlowe's life as an intellectual worker is spent doing what appears to be absolutely nothing. In this sense, his work identifies one of the defining features of mental labor, and the source of its seeming invisibility. This invisibility can be understood as both a strength and a weakness, since while it facilitates certain myths of romantic creativity, which

allow the worker when desired to present the production of intellectual commodities as effortless and autonomous, it nevertheless presents considerable difficulties when it comes to negotiating pay. These difficulties become a theme in *The Little Sister*, in which the twenty dollars that Orfamay Quest pays Marlowe on their first meeting is passed back and forth between them until even Marlowe admits that he has lost count of the transactions. Marlowe is extremely ambivalent about his pay, sometimes requesting money and sometimes refusing it. Despite demanding a rate of forty dollars a day plus expenses, he accepts twenty from Orfamay. At a second meeting, she remarks, "I understood that was in payment for a day's work. It doesn't seem to me that you've done a day's work." "Don't bother about the twenty bucks," he replies, "I didn't even bruise it" (Chandler 1995a, 231). At the novel's conclusion, however, Marlowe reminds her of his invisible and unpaid labor, exclaiming bitterly that "I did a lot of work for you, for a very low fee of no dollars net" (399).

To approach Chandler's fiction in this allegorical fashion, as he invites us to, seems now a familiar move. Developments in the sociology of culture over the last few years have seen scholars such as Mark McGurl (2011) and Jerome Christensen (2011) read twentieth-century narratives in US fiction and film as engaged in the process of rehearsing through allegory their own position-taking in the cultural field. My objective in this regard is a reorientation of such approaches, in which the affective stakes of historical shifts in cultural labor, lost or obscured in the turn to Bourdieu in the US academy, are recovered in the realm of style. The allegorical approach to Chandler has led us to consider hardboiled fiction at midcentury as representing a tension in intellectual labor, between culture as straightforward business on one hand, and as the redeeming memory or promise of freedom from that business on the other. Hardboiled style is the rendering visible of this dialectic, a crystallization of that which had otherwise remained unseen in solution. By style here I intend to evoke more than the distinctive manners of hardboiled literary language, the

apparently careless but deeply studied use of the vernacular which Joseph T. Shaw, the first editor of *The Black Mask* magazine, called “economy of expression” (Pronzini 1995, 9).

Hardboiled style is also a way of orientating oneself towards cultural work and towards other people in the sphere of labor relations. This orientation combines indifference and deep investment, resembling a misanthropy that nevertheless retains the latent potential for unalienated human sociality and pleasurable cultural work.

In its close relation to questions of class and labor, the hardboiled style I am tracing at midcentury develops out of that manifested in classic US crime fiction of the 1920s and 30s. Much of the best scholarship on classic hardboiled detective fiction has emphasized the way the labor of detection bears a metaphorical relationship to the working practices of its readers, and how the detective navigates larger shifts in US class structures. In its earlier period in the pages of pulp magazines during the 1920s and 30s, as Erin Smith (2000) has persuasively argued, hardboiled crime fiction offered displaced models of autonomous labor practices for its working class readers at exactly the moment when such ideals were becoming unrealizable. Sean McCann (2000, 4-5), meanwhile, has shown how hardboiled crime fiction become, after the onset of the Great Depression, “a metaphorical account of the possibilities for public life in a society newly acquainted with the power of the mass media and with the preeminence of a national, professional elite.” In the early 1940s, however, following its establishment and even reification as a mass genre, the style of classic hardboiled crime fiction began to be decoupled from its typical plot features, and used in novels such as *What Makes Sammy Run?* and *The Hucksters*, as a way of articulating the virulent alienation of intellectual workers in the culture industry. These fictions take as direct content what Chandler allegorizes in his mystery fiction: the total commodification of culture, and the accompanying crisis by which intellectual labor comes to reveal itself as such.

In using the term *intellectual worker* in reference to the 1940s I am drawing on the contemporaneous work of the sociologist C. Wright Mills, and in particular his 1944 essay “Powerless People: The Social Role of the Intellectual,” where the more old-fashioned meaning of the term *intellectual* as a class of autonomous public thinkers is brought into conflict with the developing idea of the *intellectual worker* (Mills 1963). The function of the intellectual worker is broader in scope, belonging more generally to the realm of ideology and social reproduction, where her or his freedom to think critically is hobbled by commercial and institutional demands, by the market and by managers.² In “Powerless People,” Mills was still able to articulate a distinction between intellectuals and mass culture, even as he observed the distance between the two categories gradually diminishing. “The independent artist and intellectual,” he claimed, “are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely lively things” (299). Such optimism, however, was belied by his comments about the increasing number of intellectual workers who “find themselves in the predicament of the Hollywood writer: the sense of independent craftsmanship they would put into their work is bent to the ends of a mass appeal to a mass market” (296). It is precisely this situation, which unambiguously places Hollywood screenwriters at the vanguard of intellectual laborers, that Budd Schulberg took up in his 1941 novel, *What Makes Sammy Run?*

2. *What Makes Sammy Run?*

What Makes Sammy Run is one of a number of midcentury novels that made a huge impact in both commercial and critical terms at the time of their publication, but which have received limited attention from literary historians. Bennett Cerf gave Schulberg a print run of just 2,500 copies for the novel, arguing that the worlds of film and literature were too far

apart for it to be commercially successful, but he was proved wrong, as *Sammy* became one of the year's runaway bestsellers (Jagoda 2014, 511). Now it is most commonly categorized as a minor Hollywood novel, one of a cycle composed in the late 1930s and early '40s, but lacking either the surrealism of Nathanael West's *Day of the Locust* or the lyrical exuberance of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon*.³ What makes it important to us in this context, however, is the intensity of its focus on the affective and temporal dimensions of intellectual labor in and for the culture industry. In addition, it is also distinctive in its own periodizing logic, which traces those problems back to historical labor disputes in 1930s Hollywood, but also projects their consequences forward in the form of a new personality-type being mass-produced by culture industries, what its narrator calls "a blueprint of the way of life that was paying dividends in America in the first half of the twentieth century" (Schulberg 1992, 282). In this last sense, I would argue, *What Makes Sammy Run?* manifests the predictive quality that Raymond Williams (1977, 131-33) associated with "structure of feeling," by which a social experience is articulated by the literary text whilst still "in process," before its general recognition as a reified object of analysis. As we will see when we turn to Frederic Wakeman's *The Hucksters*, *What Makes Sammy Run?* cleared territory that would later become more familiar, in its representation of the alienated cultural worker operating in an increasingly corporate and financialized world.

The novel is narrated by Al Manheim, a writer for a New York newspaper who then moves to Los Angeles to work as a screenwriter. Al is a middle-class Jew who attended Wesleyan; he is cultured, reflective and in several senses a transparent cipher for Schulberg himself, who as the son of a film producer had had his own comfortable upbringing and education at Dartmouth College before embarking on a writing career in Hollywood. Al tells the story of his relationship to Sammy Glick, a newsboy in his New York office, whose ambition and unscrupulous methods help him to achieve rapid professional success and

promotion in the culture industry, first at the newspaper and then in the Hollywood studios, where he eventually surpasses Al and rises to the level of producer. Although Sammy is also an ethnic Jew, his background is distinct from Al's, and indeed it is Al's investigation into Sammy's childhood in the Lower Eastside slums that provides one of the turning points in the novel. Its title gives some indication as to the significance of this investigative process, pointing as it does to the mystery element of the narrative, and, albeit obliquely, to its kinship with hardboiled detective fiction.

Al is a version of the small-time, old-fashioned private eye, but the mystery with which he is presented is neither a whodunit nor a missing person case. Rather, the question of what makes Sammy run is a sociological and a scientific one. As Al remarks, having articulated this question for the first time, "Don't you see, it's the answer to everything . . . I guess it's something for Karl Marx or Einstein or a Big Brain; it's too deep for me" (3). In this sense, the novel begs an analysis that it is ultimately unable or unwilling to give, a fully scientific account of the relations of production that make a Sammy Glick run. "Run," is to be understood in several ways. The first directs us toward the functioning of machinery, and that idea of the "blueprint of the way of life" which Al offers us as the closest he gets to a solution to the mystery. Sammy is presented as a machine playing a role in a dehumanizing system of cultural production, a film-maker who understands that "we're in the canning business" (254), but is blind to his own instrumentalization by his Wall Street financiers. On the other hand, "run" also directs us toward the novel's emphasis on speed in Sammy's working methods. One of the most unsettling features of Sammy's characterization is the way he is described as an entity in constant acceleration in order to maintain his rate of success. The clearest indication of this structure is contained in Al's meditation on Sammy's special form of aging, in which there was "no mellowing, no deepening of understanding. Maturity to Sammy meant a quickening and a strengthening of the rhythm of behavior" (13). In this way,

Sammy comes to embody the principle that Moishe Postone (1993, 289) calls the “treadmill effect” of capital, by which isolated increases in productivity increase the amount of value per unit of time only to the point where the increase is generalized, when it simply becomes a new base level for productivity and a new determination of the social labor hour. Sammy must keep running faster in order to remain in the same spot, but this process of speed-up takes place in an abstract temporality emptied of human growth or development.

It is precisely the invisible processes distinctive to intellectual labor that allow Sammy to short-circuit the screenwriting market in the way that he does, and to achieve wages far in excess of those available to his competition. Midway through the narrative, we learn that, whereas unknown newcomers to Hollywood earn \$35 a week, and Al himself makes \$150, Sammy takes home \$500. Sammy makes clear to Al that speed of assembly is the key to his success, explaining “when they really make you start writing out here they don’t fool. I had to do my last one in three and half weeks. One day I even dictated twenty-seven pages of screenplay. What I say is, writing either comes easy to you or it doesn’t” (45). Although Sammy is able to lay claim to the old myths of individual creative genius here, it transpires that success in the writing market turns on the practice of plagiarism, which allows Sammy to produce scripts at a much faster rate. While Al works “26 hours a day” to get his script ready, we witness Sammy giving a story by Somerset Maugham what he calls “the switcheroo” in a matter of minutes, by rearranging narrative components into a new order and later plagiarizing a story wholesale from Julian Blumberg, a junior writer. The reason that writing comes easy to Sammy is that he covertly appropriates the labor power of other writers to his own production without paying them for it. When Al says to him “you’re looking for something you can lift,” Sammy grins in reply. “‘You’ll be alright out here,’ he said. ‘You learn fast’” (46).

“Hollywood is a showman’s paradise,” Chandler wrote in his 1945 article, “Writers in Hollywood.” “But showmen make nothing; they exploit what someone else has made” (1995b, 994). Sammy’s own working practices mirror the widespread exploitation of cheap intellectual labor in the film industry, or what the novel calls “the other side of Hollywood, the ten-men-for-every-job side, the seasonal unemployment, the call-again-next-month side. The factory side” (112). The irony, however, is that if the film industry really were a factory producing canned goods, it would not be able to exploit intellectual labor in the way that it does. One naïve character falls for a “familiar poverty-row economy gag” in which “the producer encourages as many as a dozen aspiring writers to work on his idea. They knock themselves out over his story for two or three weeks in return for nothing but the vaguest of promises. Then the producer comes out of it with enough free ideas to nourish the one writer he finally hires” (112-13). It is the flexibility built into the structure of the creative economy that creates such opportunities to transform labor into profit.

The novel struggles, then, to articulate the labor practices of the culture industry while using the language and concepts of the previous era, that of the early Depression, when writing could more legitimately be understood as a form of labor comparable to that of physical work. This, indeed, is how Al conceives of his labor, describing writing for Hollywood as “ditch-digging work” (48). Schulberg’s indebtedness to the labor struggles of the 1930s is perhaps what Chester E. Eisinger (1963, 102) had in mind when he described the novelist, in what remains one of the most penetrating assessments of his work, as “a child of the thirties who never outgrew his childhood . . . a young writer carrying worn intellectual baggage into a new time.” Certainly, much of the central portion of the novel is taken up with a representation of the historical Hollywood labor disputes of the mid-1930s, which Schulberg had witnessed first-hand, when the studios refused to enter negotiations with the Screen Writers Guild, who were challenging practices such as the “poverty-row economy

gag” described above. As in the novel, the studios set up their own rival organization, the Screen Playwrights, to which Schulberg gives the fictional name of the Author’s League.⁴ For our purposes, however, it is sufficient to note how the disagreements over unionization in the novel are articulated through the distinction between manual and intellectual labor. One conservative writer tells Al on hearing of the Author’s League, “it seems there are some writers left who are still more interested in the better things than in forming a union like a bunch of plumbers” (137). Such views, that unionization was demeaning to intellectual workers, were expressed frequently during the labor disputes, for example by one the biggest producers, Irving Thalberg, who proclaimed that “unions are for laborers, not dignified people like writers” (Ceplair and Englund, 1979, 40). While Al wants to maintain some sense of shared identity with physical laborers in a gesture towards the politics of the Popular Front, Sammy, along with the producers and the Author’s League, aims to distance intellectual labor from the blocs and solidarities forged under the New Deal, so as to maximize his profit. This is the logic behind Sammy’s sneering joke about his chef, “in the kitchen going crazy carving cheese into flowers . . . I think he’s a fugitive from the WPA Artists’ Project” (63).

While such representations of labor strategies are made explicitly available to Al and to the reader as one possible trail of clues to the mystery of *What Makes Sammy Run?*, what interests me here are the two ways in which the novel relinquishes the Marxist analysis it flirts with in the early and middle stages of the narrative, as the labor dispute plot is resolved and Sammy continues his rise. Both the romance sub-plot and Al’s return to New York to investigate Sammy’s childhood could be understood to represent Schulberg’s own concessions to the demands of popular middlebrow fiction in the late 1930s, when the novel was composed. In this sense, Schulberg’s attempt to repurpose the themes of Popular Front fiction for a commercially successful Hollywood novel brings about the distraction of the detective from the task at hand by a set of red herrings. Al’s developing love affair with Kit is

presented as their compensation in the private realm for Sammy's rise in the professional, and the one prize that Sammy himself cannot achieve.⁵ "He would have liked to have someone," Al remarks in the final pages, "but it was impossible, it was absolutely physically, psychologically, economically impossible" (280). Here, the socialist vision that impelled the earlier stages of the narrative is transformed into a classically liberal one, of private domestic happiness for Al and Kit. It is Kit, moreover, who first suggests that the solution to *What Makes Sammy Run?* is not a question for Marx after all, but rather one of a Freudian return to the primal scene of Sammy's childhood. Al discovers in the slums of the Lower East Side the original scene of the crime in Sammy's Oedipal family romance, his relationship with his adoring mother and his betrayal of his pious father by selling newspapers on the Shabbat. He concludes, along with Kit, that Sammy's compulsions are the result of anti-Semitic trauma, the shame of poverty, and familial conflict experienced in this environment, that his extreme individualism is the result of "a disease he had caught in the epidemic that swept over his birthplace like a plague; a cancer that was slowly eating him away" (281). Thus are the limits of capitalist critique in the novel marked by a strange and contradictory turn to social Darwinism, by which it is the disease that causes survival and the healthy are left, presumably, to extinction.

It remains to consider the ways in which *What Makes Sammy Run* offers its readers a hardboiled structure of feeling. I began with the claim that hardboiled named a historical tension in intellectual labor at midcentury that is made visible in fiction through style. That tension in *What Makes Sammy Run?* arises from the dialectical relationship between the dominant form of alienating intellectual labor in Hollywood, represented and embraced by Sammy, and Al's stubbornly humanist and Romantic view, which refuses to relinquish entirely the possibility of achieving authentic sociality through creative work. This vision of unalienated labor, after all, is what brings Al and Kit together – not sexual attraction, but a

shared experience unavailable to Sammy, “the joy of writing that first line on the pad . . . the tremendous pleasure and labor of creating something you believe in” (161). Their paradoxical inversion of social Darwinism is the necessary counterpart to such pleasure in unalienated work, articulating as it does that such pleasures, though healthy enough, are also soon to become historically obsolete in the wake of the culture industry’s growth at midcentury. *Hardboiled*’s historicity, then, is constituted by an insistence on a set of labor values that guarantee their own redundancy (we may remember here Marlowe’s refusal of payment from Orfamay Quest).

Schulberg’s achievement in *What Makes Sammy Run?* is to crystallize these tensions throughout in Al’s voice, which the novelist himself described as “hardboiled” (Breit 1950). This voice feigns ignorance of its own literariness through throwaway vernacularisms, while simultaneously bearing witness to a pride in sincerity that correlates with his professional “pleasure and labor in creating something you believe in.” Robert Van Gilder’s notice in *The New York Times Books Review* captured something of this quality in his description of the novel’s language as “unsweated, but colorful” (30 March 1941: 6). The tension between indifference and affective investment runs parallel to a similar structure in Al’s relationship with Sammy, by which the impression he creates of having given up on Sammy as a human is belied by his continued fascination with him, and ultimately by his rehabilitation of Sammy’s fragile subjectivity as a damaged victim of childhood trauma. Al’s hardboiled quality, in other words, is made visible by fissures in his performance of indifference to the increasing alienation of cultural labor. For that reason, the novel has frequent recourse to moments when Al is confused not so much by Sammy’s behavior as by his own feelings towards him, leading to self-conscious crises of verbal expression:

I can’t exactly explain it, but . . . the faster you try to get away from him the more you run towards him. I couldn’t understand it. In the first place I hadn’t even figured him

out, and in the second place I couldn't understand why I felt I had to figure out such an inconspicuous little copy boy, and in the third place I couldn't figure out why I gave a damn in the first two places. (12-13)

This passage is instructive for us in the way that it allows us to glimpse the intellectual labor of “figuring” as both the effort of vernacular prose writing and as the difficulty of conceiving of one's fellow laborers as human subjects with their own complex histories comparable to one's own. This is a kind of writing, Al later makes clear, that is already impossible in Hollywood, where “if I were trying to tell this as a picture story instead of just putting it down the way it happened, my hate for Sammy Glick would have to be exalted into something noble and conclusive” (59). In the novel, however, it remains possible – with great labor – to represent human sociality, even if only in compromised form: “Most of us are ready to greet our worst enemies like long-lost brothers if we think they can show us a good time, if we think they can do us any good or if we even reach the conclusion that being polite will get us just as far and help us live longer” (59).

The desire to move from the charades of screenwriting to honest fiction, as Schulberg himself did in the late 1930s, was a common enough move for Chandler to discuss it in “Writers in Hollywood,” where he evokes screenwriters who “would like to have force and integrity and imagination – enough of these to earn a decent living at some art of literature that has the dignity of a free profession” (1995b, 995). William Faulkner had talked of his screenwriting time in Hollywood as his “sojourn downriver,” and the work “like chopping cotton or picking potato bugs off plants” (Blotner 1967, 294). Schulberg himself (1959, 154) compared the feeling of moving from screenwriting to literary fiction to “the exhilaration of a runaway slave safely emerging at the northern end of the underground railroad.” It was common enough, then, among novelists-turned-screenwriters at midcentury to appropriate the history of slavery in the United States in seeking metaphors for the transitions between

different elements of their own professional lives. To enter the world of screenwriting, we might say, represented for such white novelists a figurative blackening of their cultural labor. Such blackening was to be claimed insofar as it made visible the effort of labor, while simultaneously serving to conceal the sense in which the business of novel writing was itself simply another arm of the culture industry. If laboring black bodies are all but completely absent from novels of the culture industry, these white authors inhabited them in their imaginations, in order to maintain fantasies of fiction as a dignified, “free profession.”

3. *The Hucksters*

Like Schulberg’s *What Makes Sammy Run?*, *The Hucksters*’ fictional milieu derives from its author’s previous engagement with a particular cultural industry, in this case the advertising business. Wakeman had worked at several agencies before military service, a stint as a screenwriter for MGM, and then fiction writing.⁶ His first novel, *Shore Leave* (1944), an exposé of military life away from the theatres of war, had been a commercial success, but few would have predicted the impact *The Hucksters* would make on both the fiction and movie trades. It sold 700,000 copies in the six months after its publication by Rinehart, receiving wide attention in the broadsheet reviewing press, while the film rights earned him a further \$300,000 (Newman 2004, 175; Borneman 1946, 342). In its narrative about the alienation of Vic Norman, a New York radio advertising executive, *The Hucksters* self-consciously addressed itself to a contemporary public debate, and in doing so seemed to tap into the zeitgeist. 1946 marked the peak popularity for commercial radio in the United States before its eclipse by television as an entertainment medium, but it was also the time at which it attracted the greatest public criticism, as a result of the way radio advertising had come to dominate programming to the extent that advertising executives dictated which shows were

produced and how.⁷ As Kathy M. Newman explains (2004, 4), in the 1940s, radio's chief preoccupation became the production of the "audience commodity," a body of consuming listeners who could be sold to sponsors. It is a moment comparable to Marx's "real subsumption," at which the goal of capital changes from the production of commodities to the production of surplus labor itself, in the sense that radio in 1946 had become a means to a means, a commodity that produced commodities as part of a never-ending chain of expansion.⁸ Both are historical moments at which expansion in the scale of capitalist production develops into a dramatic qualitative shift in the relations of production.

Wakeman's publicly proclaimed intention in writing *The Hucksters* was to intervene in the debate over radio production's domination by the idea of the consumer commodity, arguing in one contemporary interview that "you radio people should take back your programs from the hucksters. Take back your networks. Take back your stations and do your own programming without the benefit of what any sponsor thinks any program should be" (Wakeman 1946b, 103). In another, he offered a utopian vision of radio fulfilling its cultural promise, "the opportunity to build on top of the current mass entertainment base a vast number of limited audience programs of great cultural value. Radio deserves to be more than a continuous vaudeville show, with news on the side. It can be" (Wakeman 1946c, B2).

It must be admitted, however, that *The Hucksters* largely undercuts such ebullience. Vic Norman's reluctant aptitude for the radio advertising world brings him material success by the close of the novel, as he prepares to become a new partner in the agency having satisfied his powerful corporate client, Beautee Soap. However, this success comes at the cost of both his sense of cultural standards and his ability to maintain a relationship with the woman he has fallen in love with, and her two children. The conclusion to the novel, abandoned as unacceptably bleak in the film adaptation, finds Vic's self-disgust at his degradation by his intellectual labor reach full pitch in a phone call to his lover following a

successful meeting with Beate Soap. Here, he explains that they cannot be together: “‘If we did this thing,’ he said, ‘I don’t think I’d like myself. And if I didn’t like myself I don’t think I’d be good enough for you and Hal and Ellen’” (Wakeman 1946a, 306). This masochistic deferral of authentic sociality in order to preserve it as an unattainable pure object of desire in another world, is where the repressed romanticism of hardboiled fiction manifests itself as melodrama. Its clearest correlative is Sam Spade’s renunciation of Brigid O’Shaughnessy in Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*, memorably captured by Humphrey Bogart’s breakthrough performance in Howard Hawks’ 1941 film adaptation. While in *What Makes Sammy Run?*, the romance plot between Al and Kit is permitted to develop so long as they are contented in their labor and Sammy is denied either fulfillment, in *The Hucksters* the two plot strands of cultural labor and heterosexual romance emerge in the final stages of the novel as rivals, each forbidding the successful completion of the other. This configuration of the novel’s plot structure and its resolutely unhappy ending, however, only represent the concrete negative completion of a movement set in motion by more nebulous components of mood and style, the affective texture of a hardboiled structure of feeling that saturates the work and belies the superficial positivity behind Wakeman’s professed intervention into cultural politics.

Reviewers noted *The Hucksters*’ hardboiled qualities. Ralph M. Williams, for example, warned readers of *The Chicago Tribune* (26 May, 1946: 3) that “It is hard boiled. It is told in the language of its often odious characters – and no punches are pulled.” Hardboiled here denotes that studied facility with the vernacular that we have already observed in the case of Schulberg’s writing, but *The Hucksters*’ hardboiled language is also distinctive in the way it bleeds across the border separating the two plot strands. This transgression, in turn, indicates the difficulties raised by intellectual labor in the period. The second half of the novel, set in Los Angeles, is structured by alternate episodes addressing Vic’s work and leisure hours respectively, his meetings with performers, agents and lawyers on one hand and

his private liaisons with Kay Dorrance on the other. The two worlds, hitherto carefully separated, are brought into collision when Kay accompanies Vic to a Hollywood party he wishes to attend “for business reasons” (Wakeman 1946a, 240), leading to a telling exchange:

Then she said, “You have changed my conversation. I’ve learned a new vocabulary since Thursday. You don’t think I talk too dirty? I never talked this way before.”

“I like dirty-talking little girls,” he said.

“I don’t want to shock my love.”

“Especially you,” he said, ringing Figaro’s doorbell. “It would take a champion to shock me. You haven’t even learned the real dirty words yet. All you’ve got is the inclination. You’re just an amateur dirty-talker!” (241)

The distinction between the amateur and the professional “dirty-talker” is moot in *The Hucksters*. Kay’s amateurish use of vernacular slang implies Vic’s professional use of it in the world of the culture industry, where it symbolizes the grubby materialism and sexual license lurking behind the scrubbed, clean surface image presented by Beatee Soap. Kay’s emergence as an amateur dirty-talker then represents her initiation into the culture industry, and her contamination by it. It is a moment that anticipates her eventual rejection by Vic in his attempt to save her from it. For Vic, on the other hand, this exchange serves as a reminder of the dangerous permeability of the amateur and the professional under the regime of intellectual labor. Mirroring the party itself, Vic’s use of the hardboiled vernacular intersects the worlds of labor and leisure, leaving him, like Philip Marlowe, somehow always at work, even when idle.

One such episode of enforced indolence, in which Vic travels across the United States from Chicago to Los Angeles on the Super Chief train, forms the thematic as well as the affective center of the novel. As Vic passes the time by reading and writing, playing cards and chatting with his fellow passengers, the novel offers us in modernist collage style a series of snatches of conversations abstracted from their contexts, which build a cumulative impression of the lifeworld of the culture industries:

“So he asked me for a treatment on spec. I said, Bert, when it comes to writing, I’m a whore. I won’t lay a finger on my typewriter unless I get paid for it – in advance.”

“No record company is any bigger than it’s [*sic*] artists. Don’t forget that, Joe, I’m warning you.”

“This is what Hollywood needs. This script’s got America in every line of it. Cheap sets too. You can do it for peanuts.” (120)

Like *What Makes Sammy Run?*, *The Hucksters* expends considerable narrative energy on the economic system maintained by the cultural industries. These conversation fragments, taken together, sketch out the economic foundations for the novel’s concerns with how the realm of culture absorbed the structures of industrial capitalism. The questions raised, after all, are the same ones asked in *Capital*, where Marx too wonders at the way the labor commodity is advanced by the laborer to the capitalist by credit, without receipt of its price until pay day, and analyzes the various fixed capital expenditures that must be accounted for in the production process, albeit cheap machinery rather than cheap sets.⁹ The most striking among these resonances, however, is surely that which evokes *Capital*’s great riddle, of how an industrial process can appear to produce a value greater than the sum of its parts. Marx’s solution, which lies in his identification of the peculiar qualities of the labor commodity as

one which produces value in the process of its consumption, leads us directly back into the question of how money is made in *The Hucksters* (Marx 1973a, 300-1).

While in *What Makes Sammy Run?* creative labor can still be described as “ditch-digging work,” in analogy with unskilled wage labor, *The Hucksters* is notable for Vic’s gradual transition from salaried worker to part-owner of the agency, signaling a shift not only to the status of capitalist but also away from the labor theory of value towards finance capitalism as the most promising mode of accumulation in the 1940s. As his prospective partner Maag explains to him over a drink in a Los Angeles bar, “a smart feller like you is a sucker to work for a salary”:

He explained about stock. How you could declare capital gains on stock held over six months, and only pay a twenty-five percent tax on it. Also how you could let cumulative stock, such as K and M stock, such as K and M stock, just sit and increase in face value until one day, you woke up with a fortune on your hands. (168-69)

This is the way to conjure “something from nothing” in the culture industry, then, by projecting value into the future through incorporation and investment. Vic is a fast learner, since later in the novel he advises the comic performer Figaro Perkins in much the same way as Maag had advised him, suggesting he take payment in the form of company stock and thereby avoid exploitation by talent agencies seeking to skim ten percent of his salary, while also earning enough from the stock increases to “tell every sponsor to go screw” (247). The turn to incorporation, investment and projected earnings, unexpectedly enough, offers the only positive note about the culture industry that *The Hucksters* can muster, a glimpse of long-desired aesthetic autonomy for cultural workers in the future that finally addresses, if not satisfies, Wakeman’s utopian vision for a radio culture free from reliance on corporate sponsors.

This is the moment to consider more carefully the distinctions between the different forms of cultural labor at play here, for it is significant that Vic's bitterest moments are those at which he compares his own work, which consists of preparing radio shows that will satisfy his corporate clients' desire for audience commodities, with that of the novelist:

“Oh, everyone in the ad game is intelligent. They have to be. You see, ad men are half-creative. For example, disappointed novelists do very well in what I call the ad game. So they have liberal ideas. But since their life consists in keeping reactionary old men who control bluechip companies happy, they have to be smart enough to keep those ideas well hidden.” (129)

This passage sketches the essential outlines not of a hardboiled vernacular style, but of a hardboiled style in the more capacious sense that I wish to argue for in this article, a cultural laborer's realization of and disposition towards the newly commodified world of culture. There is a sense, after all, in which the concern of detectives in classic hardboiled fiction was always about keeping rich, reactionary, old men happy, whether Elihu Willson in Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1929) or General Sternwood in Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939). What makes the difference in this case is the way the culture industry acts to repress the creativity of the novelist, leading to compromises and accommodations with capital. It would not be too much to argue that a workable definition of hardboiled fiction becomes possible here, as the performance of that process of repression and compromise, in which the tensions and strains created by it are transformed into the aesthetic object itself. Given the trajectory of Wakeman's own career, we might well reverse Vic's claim and argue that it is disappointed ad men who do well in the fiction game.

It is important for the *Hucksters*, however, just as it was for *What Makes Sammy Run?*, that some division be maintained in the cultural field, whereby the form of the novel is

found in the 1940s to retain some access to the restricted sub-field (using Bourdieu's terminology), in which commercial success is not a criteria for legitimacy.¹⁰ Evan Brier (2010) has shown how, in the following decade of the 1950s, novels such as Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* articulated themselves as resistant antidotes to mass culture at the very moment at which they embraced the mass market. In these fictions of the culture industry in the 1940s, we find a similar structure of disavowal and embrace of market values occurring *prior* to the full eruption of the mass culture debates of the early 1950s. Indeed, the way these bestselling fictions present the market for culture in such negative terms anticipates those paradoxical developments in the succeeding decade, in the sense that the institution of the serious novel is held to be a special case, retaining an autonomous status lost to other forms. Diana Trilling, reviewing Wakeman's third novel, *Saxon Charms*, affirmed the tendency for his fictions to valorize their own form, noting drily how "clearly Mr. Wakeman believes that the writing of novels is a superior pastime: he provides opportunity for everyone in his book to say so" (Trilling 1978, 222). Similarly, in *The Hucksters*, Vic believes that there are some areas of cultural production that have yet to be entirely commodified, having still what Chandler called "the dignity of a free profession":

"You see, Kay, a real honest-to-god artist has an easy out – his ivory tower. It's we characters who haven't any ivory tower to run to that are really trapped. And we find out too late that a thousand dollars a week won't help us much either . . . I told you I am not an artist," Vic said. "I don't feel like an artist. I don't have any position about life that is even slightly artistic. And worst of all, I don't burn to capture some interpretation of experience. Having a flair for words is no yardstick. You either feel as an artist or you don't." (132)

In reference to this passage, Trilling's review of *The Hucksters* for *The Nation* assured its readers that "actually we have no reason to accuse Mr Wakeman of supposing that *The*

Hucksters is even slightly artistic” (Trilling 1978, 173). Despite their facetious tone, we should take her comments seriously because they indicate a truth about the vexed position of hardboiled fiction at midcentury. In Vic’s words we can discern the increasingly narrow cultural space within which Wakeman and the hardboiled novel more generally must confine its operations, gesturing to the deferred possibility of uncommodified feeling such as might be appropriate labor for “an artist,” while at the same time avoiding the “easy out” represented by the ivory tower.

Indeed, the distinction itself between “feeling” on the one hand, and “flair” or “talent” on the other, does much work in *The Hucksters*. It forms part of a repurposing of Coleridge’s famous distinction between fancy and imagination, by which Vic describes his work on radio shows as a mechanical process of “just rearranging the same old crap” (162), much as Sammy Glick does with movie scripts in *What Makes Sammy Run?*, while genuinely imaginative creativity as feeling goes on elsewhere.¹¹ “I have a kind of disdain for writers, too,” he tells Kay. “Not the few good ones. But I’m not of that class” (132). One could go as far as to say that the objective achieved most successfully by *The Hucksters* is the hollowing out of the very idea of talent as fancy, or mere facility with signs and symbols, what Vic calls “a flair for words” (132). Nowhere is this more in evidence than in the ironic name for the performers’ agency that Vic uses in Los Angeles, Talent Ltd, for in the novel talent itself is a limited concept, having been appropriated, drained of its content, and sold on by showbiz agencies. Just a few months before *The Hucksters* was published, Chandler had reflected on the idea of talent in Hollywood, claiming that “the interesting point about Hollywood’s writers of talent is not how few or how many they are, but how little of worth their talent is allowed to achieve” (1995b, 996). Nevertheless, despite the limits imposed on talent by the industrialization of culture in the Hollywood system, he was able to summon some tenuous optimism by the end of his essay through the classically hardboiled appeal to deferred

authenticity: “What in the long run – the very long run – they can never defeat is talent, even writing talent” (998-99). The problem that *The Hucksters* is unable to overcome is its chief character’s accommodation with the limitations on his talent. His acceptance of an empty “flair for words” means that Vic’s own wisecracks and vernacularisms will never manifest their own positivity, and that hardboiled language, which at its best is alive with fractures and contradictions in the work of Schulberg and Chandler, is reduced to mere obscenity, or “dirty talking.”

4. The Baby and the Bath Water

The preceding arguments make a case for a more capacious use of the term hardboiled than has previously been realized, so long as it had been read as a generic sub-category of US crime narratives. Indeed, as we have seen in the case of *The Hucksters*, there was a form of midcentury fiction that was and can still be understood profitably as hardboiled without necessitating recourse to the familiar expectations of a murder or missing person, detective, underworld milieu and so on. This is not to say that the hardboiled style I have been elucidating didn’t often find a comfortable home among such noir conventions. A further discussion of the way 1940s hardboiled primarily developed as a response to shifts in the culture industry would have to take into account numerous novels in which, like Chandler’s *The Little Sister* and *The Long Goodbye*, elements of the mystery genre were brought into collision with the representation of cultural labor of different types: genteel belles-lettres and advertising copy in the case of Vera Caspary’s *Laura* (1942), magazine editorship in Kenneth Fearing’s *The Big Clock* (1946), and even the writing of mystery fiction itself in Dorothy B. Hughes’ *In a Lonely Place* (1947). Nevertheless, it might be suggested that narrowly-conceived genre criticism has tended to obscure rather than illuminate the precise literary-

historical logic of hardboiled fiction at midcentury, as well as to ensure that novels like *What Makes Sammy Run?* and *The Hucksters* remain almost completely cut off from our critical purview.

What, then, of hardboiled literary history, a term that I have used in order to hold open the possibility not only for a new literary history of hardboiled fiction, but also for literary history itself to be seen as a hardboiled endeavor. The practice of literary history is a form of cultural labor, after all, and even if the economy of literary history has its own distinctive features, related for example to the accrual and exchangeability of institutional prestige, it also maintains several of the same anxieties that we have been observing at midcentury, including concerns over the invisibility of labor, its elastic temporality and the commodification of thought performance.¹² It is not too much of a stretch, perhaps, for literary historians in the academy to imagine themselves to be semi-autonomous hardboiled protagonists of the type we have been examining, constantly adapting to the relentless corporatization of their institutions, searching out ways to identify and preserve the remaining pleasures of unalienated labor and collegiality. We all know, I suspect, a Sammy Glick. Such facile identifications are, of course, as unhelpful as they are seductive, and comparable to that dangerous condition of “left melancholia” proposed by Walter Benjamin and rehabilitated for our neoliberal times in Wendy Brown’s well-known 1999 essay. The danger to be identified in this confluence is the fetishizing of non-commodified relations and values as belated objects of mourning, as in Chandler’s nostalgia for the old-time publishing agency. My argument has not only been that such fetishizing is a feature of midcentury hardboiled fiction, but also that midcentury hardboiled fiction’s negativity *is* that process made visible in the form of the novel. Accordingly, the task for the literary historian is then not to rehearse this reification, but to make sense of the way in which hardboiled protagonists of this period appear to us as both contemporary and dated at the same time, as both our peers and our

distant ancestors. It is not simply that they registered as crisis the very conditions we now regard as normal – the demands for self-entrepreneurship and self-branding, the instrumentalization of cultural labor, even the zero-hours contracts described in *What Makes Sammy Run?* – but that hardboiled style itself contributed to the normalization of that crisis as part of its coping function.

I do not wish to suggest, however, that we should abandon the project of searching out in our literary histories traces of non-commodified values and relations, remnants of impulses and longings now extinguished or seen as hopelessly utopian, conflicts long-since assumed to have been settled. To conduct our work in that way, by pursuing an arid sociology of literature by which culture is reduced entirely to the jostling for position in the cultural field, would result in an evacuation of the human stakes from our object of study, or, as Bernard Lahire has recently put it in a perspicacious critique of Bourdieu, a “stripping away [of] all the existential depth from works of literature” (Lahire 2015, 405). As such, this would contribute to a further degradation of our labor. In *Minima Moralia* (1951), Adorno perceived a comparable danger in the tendency of Left intellectuals to impugn culture as pure ideology that “serves to keep alive the bad economic determination of existence” (Adorno 2005, 47). As he points out, however, we should not “throw out the baby with the bathwater,” since “to act radically in accordance with this principle would be to extirpate, with the false, all that was true also, all that, however impotently, strives to escape the confines of universal practice, every chimerical anticipation of a nobler condition, and so to bring about directly the barbarism that culture is reproached with furthering indirectly” (47-8). In the sociology of literature after Bourdieu, despite the new insights we have gained, the bad economic determination of existence threatens to find its own perverse fulfillment in the narrow confines of its dominant metaphorical tropes, those of economics and games.¹³ What hardboiled literary history has to offer us in terms of methodology is an exhortation to return

to style with a renewed grasp of its status as the product of labor and the terrain upon which concrete historical struggles are actively worked through, albeit in provisional, reactionary and often unsatisfactory ways. Seen in this way, some of the older and more pernicious divisions of literary-critical labor begin to break down. The analysis of stylistic idiosyncrasy, once reserved for complex high-modernist artifacts, and the mining of mass genres for allegories of macrocosmic socio-cultural trends, become several faces of the same problem, demanding to be undertaken simultaneously in order to do justice to either.

Notes

Warm thanks to Mark Eaton, Adam Kelly and the participants at the Post-45 UK conference at the University of York in July 2016, for their comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this essay.

¹ On Chandler's education in the classics and his interest in Shakespeare, see Norman (2013).

² As such, Mills' "intellectual worker" belongs to the "professional-managerial class" (PMC) described by Barbara and John Ehrenreich (1979, 12), "consisting of salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations." For an alternative account of intellectual workers in the culture industry that draws explicitly on Mills' legacy, see Denning (1996).

³ See, for example, Rhodes (2002); Cerasulo (2010, 148-59). *Sammy* is also addressed briefly as a Hollywood novel in Fine (2000, 169-72); Friedrich (1988, 68-70).

⁴ For an account of this dispute, see Ceplair and Englund (1979, 16-46); for a summary of its relation to *Sammy*, see Cerasulo (2010, 158-59).

⁵ On the way in which hardboiled fiction continues to rely on the domestic tropes of sentimental fiction even as it disavows them, see Cassuto (2009).

⁶ On Wakeman's biography in relation to *The Hucksters*, see Newman (2004, 166-92).

⁷ On the "revolt against radio" and broader public criticism of radio broadcasting in 1946, see Pickard (2014, 9-37).

⁸ For expository commentary on "real subsumption," see Postone (1993, 182).

⁹ On the worker allowing credit to the capitalist, see Marx (1973a, 278-79); on constant capital and variable capital see Marx (1973a, 307-19).

¹⁰ On the restricted field of cultural production, see Bourdieu (1993, 29-73, 176-91).

¹¹ For his classic statement on the distinction between fancy and imagination, see Coleridge (1983, 295-306).

¹² For an analysis of the logic of academic labor in the contemporary academy, see Shapiro (2009).

¹³ For a survey of the sociology of literature (up to 2010), including the significant legacy of Bourdieu, see English (2010). See also Felski (2015).

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