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Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality
Fredric Jameson.
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What does it mean to be a Chandlerian? The fiction of Raymond Chandler, easily one of the finest ever hardboiled crime writers, occupies a curious position in the cultures of literary criticism. There are reports that T. S. Eliot read Chandler with pleasure, though he never wrote about him. W. H. Auden admired his work, as did Edmund Wilson, though reluctantly, as an exception to the mystery genre. Among French intellectuals during the 1940s, Chandler and his predecessor Dashiell Hammett represented the very future of American fiction, but the New York Intellectuals of the same period found them embarrassing. For them and countless others, hardboiled fiction was and is beyond the pale, unworthy of sustained critical attention. However, reading Fredric Jameson's *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality*, we gather very quickly that this extraordinary scholar is, among other things, a seriously committed Chandlerian. "Inveterate rereaders of Chandler," he tells us, "will know that it is no longer for the solution to the mystery that they do so" (p. 57). Jameson fits into the authentic tradition of Chandlerians by virtue of his

recognition that “it is for the episodes themselves that you reread; in this, as in a few other features, Chandler participates in the logic of modernism generally, which tends towards an autonomization of ever smaller fragments” (p. 58). In this, Jameson follows Chandler’s lead in forgoing the pleasures of a well-oiled mystery plot. Indeed, Chandler admitted in a 1947 letter that he was “fundamentally rather uninterested in plot,” and wrote two years later of his novel *The Little Sister* that “it has nothing in it but style and dialogue and characters” (*Selected Letters* 87, 122).

To be a Chandlerian is not just to reread his work, then, but also to develop a taste for isolated moments in the fiction, gamey flashes of vernacular slang, descriptions of objects, smells and weather, that obtrude however briefly from the surface, demand our attention, and then pass into ephemera. For Jameson, it is precisely Chandler’s uncertain canonical status as an author of mass genre fiction that enables him to access “fragmentary perceptions which are by some formal paradox somehow inaccessible to serious literature . . . like objects at the edge of my field of vision which disappear when I turn to face them head on” (pp. 3-4). A Chandlerian is a kind of connoisseur for such objects. Jameson’s book is certainly for those who know the work thoroughly and therefore take pleasure in considering its distinctive seductions. The value of *The Detections of Totality* is in the way it transforms such apparently instinctive and subjective responses to the work into objects of strenuous critical reflection.

It should be noted at the outset that much of this slim volume has appeared elsewhere, and long ago. Of its three chapters, the first, “Shill Game” is lifted more or less intact from one of Jameson’s earliest essays, published 47 years ago in *The Southern Review* as “On Raymond Chandler.” The third, “The Barrier at the End of the World,” is a lightly revised version of “The Synoptic Chandler,” which appeared in a collection of essays entitled *Shades of Noir* in 1993. As far as I can tell, only the hinge of the book, “Mapping Space,” comprises

of new material. The way the older and newer parts of the book are stitched together presents a few problems. There are moments of repetition, in which claims are unnecessarily rehearsed, and also inconsistencies: Chandler's best novel is *The Big Sleep* in one chapter, *Farewell my Lovely* in another. As a sustained argument about Chandler's art, the book doesn't always quite hang together, and there are places where Jameson's dialectical turns meander rather than grip. Furthermore, there will always be those alienated by his dense critical prose, which relentlessly dissolves the view of the object at hand as soon as it comes into focus, only to reconfigure another perspective from another position. All this is offered merely in mitigation, however, since Jameson is surely Chandler's greatest reader. Correspondingly, Chandler emerges from Jameson's scrutiny a better writer than he was before.

Jameson was one of the first critics to note the way in which Chandler's distinctive accomplishments as a stylist were closely related to his self-identity as an Englishman marooned in the Southern Californian cultural desert. Like Vladimir Nabokov, Jameson notes, Chandler was necessarily a stylist by virtue of his distance from the American tongue, feeling therefore in his adopted language, "a kind of material density and resistance: even those clichés and commonplaces which for the native speaker are not really words at all, but instant communication, take on outlandish resonance in his mouth, are used between quotation marks, as you would expose some interesting specimen" (p. 2). There is plenty of evidence in Chandler's notebooks and letters, published since Jameson first made these claims, that he was indeed preoccupied with the particular character of American English. Nothing came naturally to Chandler. There are parodies of Ernest Hemingway's prose, lists of vernacular phrases carefully noted for recycling in the fiction, and even an essay, "Notes (very brief please) on English and American Style," which shows him working through the difficulties of negotiating the rival claims of two languages. American English, he writes, is

“a fluid language, like Shakespearean English, and easily takes in new words, new meanings for old words, and borrows at will and at ease from the usages of other languages”

(*Notebooks*, p. 20). Whatever its fluidity, however, in Chandler’s sentences the American vernacular becomes paradoxically outlandish and estranging, approaching occasionally the territory of surrealism. One particularly arresting example comes in *The Little Sister*, when a young tough named Alfred rebukes his companion with the oblique remark, “in a pig’s valise.” His companion rejoins: “Why do all these punks keep saying that? It isn’t funny. It isn’t witty. It doesn’t mean anything” (*Later Novels*, p. 271) Such observations echo H. L. Mencken’s remarks in *The American Language*, that the U.S. vernacular tended 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.”¹ Chandler’s rare ability was to tame and objectify that exuberance sufficiently enough to be able to fix it in his style.

For Jameson, however, the acknowledgment of Chandler’s transatlantic style represents only the first move in a vast critical narrative that addresses successively an array of concerns, including for example the role of the detective figure in negotiating the alienated social structures of Depression-era Los Angeles, which in turn anticipates the development of postwar American society itself. He discusses in the first chapter alone the importance of the U.S. Constitution in determining the relation of the abstract and the concrete in Chandler’s dealings with political corruption, and explores the role of commodity culture in explaining the nostalgic lens through which Chandler’s charm is often framed. In the second chapter, he begins by introducing what he calls “the scopic impulse” (p. 37) in Chandler, a particular compulsion towards the act of voyeuristic looking, as a way of navigating the reader through the public and private realms of the novels’ worlds. He then goes on to ask a seemingly innocuous question that guides the second half of the entire book: how is it that *The High*

Window, which of all the novels contains some of Chandler's most memorable set-pieces, is nevertheless a failure overall?

In pursuit of an answer, Jameson plunges us into Chandler's obsessions with the Los Angeles weather as a "unifying mechanism of these novels, in a far more concrete fashion than the plots themselves" (p. 49). Chandlerians will certainly recognize Jameson's concerns here as legitimate: as indicated by the odd image of "hard, wet rain in the clearness of the foothills" that he chose to open his first novel *The Big Sleep*, Chandler's meteorological imagination provided him with an idiosyncratic claim to regionalism in an era when "local colour" was fast becoming a discreditable literary concern in the United States (*Stories and Early Novels*, p. 589). It is a strange regionalism that we find in this opening, though, because it inverts the more conventional imagery deployed in Los Angeles fiction, of fire threatening the city. In 1939, the year in which *The Big Sleep* was published, Nathanael West offered in *The Day of the Locust* a dramatic vision of Los Angeles consumed by a great apocalyptic fire. Another of the great LA novels, Joan Didion's *Play it as it Lays* (1970), makes repeated reference to the wildfires surrounding the city, and even creates her own lyrical passages in apparent homage to Chandler's style: "In the aftermath of the wind the air was dry, burning, so clear that she could see the ploughed furrows of firebreaks on distant mountains."² In Chandler, however, it is water rather than fire that dominates, whether the fog and rain in *The Big Sleep*, the lake containing Muriel Chess's dead body in *The Lady in the Lake*, or the Pacific Ocean in *Farewell my Lovely*, where the novel's denouement takes place on board a ship anchored off the coast. There is a perverse irony in Chandler's watery Los Angeles, of course, given the city's perennial and potentially catastrophic water shortages, but Jameson's interest here is in the way Chandler's fiction distinguishes between "cultural" and "natural" space, and the role that weather and bodies of water play in that distinction. It is one of Los Angeles' more distinctive characteristics, he observes, that the urban and natural landscapes

co-exist together, and Chandler takes up this opportunity to juxtapose them as “radically distinct systems” before projecting one onto the other, “the axis of geography or nature onto that of society” (p. 51). This projection, he argues, is how Chandler manages to confer on his fictional worlds any sense of completeness, in the face of his own ideologically blinkered view of the social realm. It is the absence of a clear demarcated axis of nature in *The High Window* that explains its shortcomings.

It will be evident enough from my summary above how much Jameson’s book is indebted to a structuralist mode of analysis, albeit his own Marxist-inflected one. Jameson’s reading of Chandler is in large part organized through the identification of sets of formal oppositions in the work, which can then be systematically spatialized and mapped. A. J. Greimas’s semiotic square is deployed explicitly as one means by which such a mapping might be attempted, and Roman Jakobson’s axes of selection and combination appear as another. In this sense, the book demands that we return to Jameson’s early career and consider it as belonging to the same period as his 1972 study *The Prisonhouse of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism*, a move that makes sense when we remember the 1970 essay which is reworked to make up most of the first chapter. Some of the methodology used in *The Detections of Totality* can then be said to presage the more fully developed theoretical systems articulated later in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), with its attempt to reconcile the structuralism of Frye, Greimas and Lévi-Strauss with a properly dialectical critical practice.

It is to Martin Heidegger, however, that Jameson finally turns in search of an opposition capable to supporting his evolving reading of Chandler. Here he finds pairing of World and Earth, in which World can be understood as an alternative term for history itself, being “the ensemble of acts and efforts that human beings have attempted, since the dawn of the human age, to bring meanings out of the limits and constraints of their surroundings.”

Earth, on the other hand, “is everything meaningless in those surroundings and what betrays the essence and inertia of sheer Matter as such and extends as far as what human beings have named as death, contingency, accident” (pp. 79-80). We can see now how Jameson might take Chandler’s “cultural” and “natural” spaces as playing out this grander philosophical opposition, and then push further into a focus on those spaces in Chandler that seem to represent an absolute limit to the world he represents, beyond which no form of human activity can be understood as meaningful. His key example here is the ocean in *Farewell my Lovely*, in which “the liquid element . . . is not within the narrative world, not part of its semiotic system, but rather what lies beyond it and cancels it as such” (p. 84). The way in which Jameson concludes *The Detections of Totality* echoes arguments in *The Political Unconscious* about the representation of death in narrative as a figuring of absolute historical horizons. The rhetorical treatment of mortality, as he claims there in discussing Joseph Conrad, is “but a disguise for the sharper pain of exclusion by history” (p. 238). Bearing this in mind, his interpretation of the sea in Chandler as a spatial representation of death, the “big sleep” of the first novel, begins to make sense as attempt to identify, in negative fashion, the limits of historical representation in this macabre oeuvre.

However one reads details like these, one need not to go to the Pacific Ocean to find oneself brought up, as Jameson puts it, “against the reality of death itself” in Chandler’s work (p. 87). It seems strange that Jameson does not devote more attention to the author’s special ability to describe, with great pathos, bodies emptied of life in a style both realist and grotesque. The one that haunts me is that of Marilyn Delorme in the short story “The King in Yellow,” strangled in a shabby boarding house room and discovered lying on her side on the floor, “legs scissored out as if in running. One mule was on, one off . . . Her face was a dark plum color, her eyes had the faint stale glitter of death, and her mouth was open so far that it foreshortened her face” (*Stories and Early Novels*, p. 431) Passages like these remind us that,

as Sarah Trott has recently detailed in her study *War Noir*, Chandler saw many dead bodies in the trenches of the First World War, in which he fought for the Canadian Seventh Battalion. The gaping mouths of the dead, which seem to increase in number every time one reads Chandler, are perhaps the template from which the authors many images of emptiness are copied – empty rooms, empty buildings, empty swimming pools, even empty words. In “The King in Yellow,” Marilyn Delorme’s purple bag is discovered next to her, mockingly imitating her face, “gaping like her mouth.” Jameson’s conclusion, itself a startlingly literary and even lyrical piece of writing, does however seem to invite us eventually into that vacuous space encompassed by the deceased’s skull. We find ourselves stranded in “this opening onto the not-World, onto its edge and its end, in the void, in non-human space, in death” (p. 86). It is a moment of consummate negativity, and also of kinship with his subject. In the image of “graves beneath the bright sunlight” (p. 87) with which Jameson takes our leave, he appears for all the world to have segued into his own Chandlerian reverie.

Notes

¹ H. L. Mencken, *The American Language: An Enquiry into the Development of English in the United States*, 4th edition (New York, 1941), p. 64.

² Joan Didion, *Play it as it Lays: A Novel* (New York, 1970), p. 77.

Further Reading

Raymond Chandler, *Stories and Early Novels*, ed. Frank MacShane (New York, 1995)

Raymond Chandler, *Later Novels and other Writings*, ed. Frank MacShane (New York, 1995)

The Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler, ed. Frank MacShane (London, 1995)

The Notebooks of Raymond Chandler, ed. Frank MacShane (New York, 2006)

Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY, 1981)

Sarah Trott, *War Noir: Raymond Chandler and the Hard-Boiled Detective as Veteran in American Fiction* (Jackson, Miss., 2016).