

Derek Mahon

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for Terence Brown and Gerald Dawe

Author's Note

When *Journalism* (1996) came out from The Gallery Press the novelist Aidan Higgins wrote to offer, with characteristic subtlety, congratulations on 'a fine vein of captious equivocation'. Praise indeed; but, as we know, old-fashioned literary journalism is on the way out, what with the internet and so on. We salvage what we can. Some of these pieces have expanded from review to essay length. Others — Swift, Dylan Thomas — were written as introductions in the Faber Poet to Poet series. The Jaccottet piece introduced *Words in the Air*, a translated selection of his work, the MacDonogh piece (re)introduced his *Poems*: both of them Gallery books, 1998 and 2001 respectively. 'The Strings are False' prefaced a reissue (Faber 2007) of Louis MacNeice's book of the same title. But the present selection is not about writing only: photography, art and travel are here too. It could even be read as random fragments of autobiography. As it took shape I realized it was starting to look like a book of memoirs.

Ghosts in the Sunlight

There was a series of daring high-profile break-ins a couple of years ago in the Bel-Air and Beverly Hills neighbourhoods of Los Angeles. (Charlize Theron was one victim.) A police spokesman acknowledged ‘an increase in burglaries in the area between Sunset Boulevard and Mulholland Drive’, adding: ‘The problem we have in the area is large and expansive. We have long dark streets, a lot of foliage, and a lot of service trades in and out of there.’ It was always like that. No one can walk down a dark street in safety, said Raymond Chandler in ‘The Simple Art of Murder’, a famous magazine piece. His ‘mean streets’ weren’t only in south-central Los Angeles but in swankier quarters too, where ‘mean’ could mean more than just underprivileged, though the same anarchic principle applies: ‘The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule cities and almost rule nations, in which a screen star can be the finger man for a mob and the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money-making.’ There’s a touching innocence here, but the innocence is implicitly attributed to the presumptive reader, a respectable citizen shocked to hear the system is corrupt; he himself had no illusions. He postulates, as an agent of redemption, the Philip Marlowe figure ‘who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid, a common man and yet an unusual one’, a ‘shop-soiled Galahad’ who possesses ‘rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham’; the story is his ‘adventure in search of a hidden truth’.

Chandler’s ambition was to write ‘mysteries’ that were at the same time ‘real novels of character and atmosphere with an overtone of violence and fear’. As he wrote frankly to his London publisher Hamish Hamilton: ‘I am not just a tough writer. I am the best there is in my line and the best there has ever been. I am tough only incidentally; substantially I am an original stylist with a very daring kind of imagination.’ His best work is indeed as serious as he

claims and even his toughness is literary: ‘When I split an infinitive, God damn it, I split it so it will stay split.’ Comparing ‘English and American style’ in the *Notebooks*, he writes quite snobbishly (this was the 1930s) that American English ‘has no awareness of the continuing stream of culture’, for which he blames ‘the collapse of classical education’ and ‘a lack of the historical sense’. American education is a flop, he says: ‘Such tradition as they [*sic*] have in the use of language is derived from English tradition, and there is just enough resentment about this to cause perverse use of ungrammaticalities, just to show ’em.’ This reads datedly now, but demonstrates very forcefully how English were Chandler’s own background and guidelines. Educated at Dulwich College, he started out as an English (and indeed Latin) poet, a student of the Elizabethans and the Romantics, and the deep structure of that inheritance gives body and weight to his steel-harsh and steel-bright romances. He would have read Malory and Spenser.

To say that Marlowe is a knight errant is not just a figure of speech; the phrase identifies in his work a ghostly cultural presence going back many centuries. But he knew Los Angeles too like the back of his hand, and kept an eye on the local news. ‘Montemar Vista’, for example, with its 280 steps up from the Pacific Coast Highway, first came to sinister prominence not in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940) but in crime reports five years earlier about the death of the ‘screen idol’ Thelma Todd, a friend of Lucky Luciano. About this time the Hollywood *Citizen News* commented, ‘The real causes of death of many well-known figures, past and present, will never be known because of cover-ups by an oligarchical community, police and citizens alike, protecting its own and the millions of dollars in revenue such knowledge could harm.’ Todd was part-owner of ‘Thelma Todd’s Sidewalk Cafe’ beside the steps, a joint that also features in the novel: ‘I gave it my business to the extent of using its parking space.’

Each of the four great novels, first published between 1939 and 1953, has Marlowe as its protagonist. No ‘development’, technical or otherwise, takes place during the ten or a dozen years between *The Big Sleep* and *The Long Goodbye*. Marlowe remains the same sceptical, hard-drinking, solitary man in his thirties or forties, in whom we can divine some secret hurt — a self-employed private investigator who dislikes the rich in principle but is apt to be lenient

in particular cases. He himself is poor, unmarried, and spends lonely evenings playing chess against himself — until the phone rings, or a blonde walks into the office. Typically a Chandler novel begins on the steps of a big house, where he has been summoned by an elderly person to sort out a family problem to do with blackmail or the like. Or he may run into trouble in a public place and get himself involved. In either case he finds himself working among the rich, some of them okay, some of them monsters; in the underworld, where he invariably gets knocked about; and in competition with the police, who treat him with derision or with grudging respect according to temperament. This is all pretty familiar stuff; but it must be remembered that it was Chandler who started it. All clichés were invented by someone: ‘It was about eleven in the morning, mid-October, the sun not shining and a look of hard wet rain in the clearness of the foothills. I was wearing my powder-blue suit with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them. I was neat, clean, shaved and sober, and I didn’t care who knew it. I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be. I was calling on four million dollars.’

I need to correct myself. To say there was no ‘development’ in the work, other than plot development, is not quite true. There’s a development in Marlowe’s own character, a development some found sappy and unbecoming in a solitary and self-reliant hero, but the fact is he falls chivalrously in love. It doesn’t amount to more than an innocent romance, but it dispels his cynicism, if that’s what it is, at least for a time. Always, you notice, a sucker for the serious, bespectacled ‘librarian’ type (though he claims to prefer ‘smooth shiny girls, hard-boiled and loaded with sin’), he allows himself to dream of fireside slippers in the house of Anne Riordan, a second-generation Irish girl whose father got fired by the cops for honesty. He resists the attraction (‘I’ve had too many women to deserve one like you’), though the attraction is real and obviously heartfelt: ‘She had gray-blue eyes, dark red hair, and fine bones in her face.’ But cynicism prevails: ‘An occasional light winked from the hills through thick trees. The homes of screen stars. Screen stars, phooey. The veterans of a thousand beds. Hold it, Marlowe, you’re not human tonight . . . I drove on to the Oxnard cut-off and turned back along the ocean . . . No moon, no fuss, hardly a sound

of the surf. No smell. None of the harsh wild smell of the sea. A California ocean. California, the department-store state. The most of everything and the best of nothing. Here we go again. You’re not human tonight, Marlowe’ (*The Little Sister*). Despite their narrow focus and genre mannerisms, the Chandler books are so obviously more than thrillers: there’s a rough poetry there, and a satirical edge, that make us want to know more about their creator. He did indeed write verse in his time. A promising classical scholar in youth, he wound up as an oil executive until a drink problem led to his resumption of literature. He married a woman twenty years his senior, kicked the booze, and led a life of almost valetudinarian seclusion until her death. His life thereafter was one of rapid alcoholic decline. It was during the reclusive years that he wrote his best work — a solitary, anomalous figure, a rather formal Englishman (albeit Chicago-born) in a swirl of California kitsch; a poet *manqué* in an ivory tower rising out of the meretricious and violent raw material of his art.

It was his declared intention to take the detective story into the street. He is initially deceptive. You think you’re dealing with an innocent little matter of blackmail, theft or murder, and in no time at all you’re up to your eyes in hard drugs, seriously kinky sex and phoney psychiatry. Only gradually, as a complex and generally bizarre situation is laid bare, does the full extent of it strike home. He was obsessed with evil, in particular with the corruption of innocence — a recurrent American theme, but one handled by him in a recognizably un-American manner. Nowhere does he suggest that it’s American innocence which is at risk. On the contrary, Chandler’s America (the mean streets of LA) is inherently evil, owing perhaps to its lack of constraint and surfeit of money. His innocents are either European or quasi-European: a stuffy New York publisher, a Norwegian sailor, a Filipino houseboy, Anne Riordan. There’s also his sense of a European culture from which, as he saw it, so much of America had chosen to cut itself off, though he is always nice about ethnic minorities and the underprivileged generally, with a special soft spot for ‘the poisoned kitten dying in agony behind the billboard’.

Cultural nostalgia is evident at a number of points: the Rembrandt self-portrait on the office calendar ‘who looked as if he might do a little work in a while if somebody made a down payment’; the

reproduction of a balcony scene by some forgotten Italian artist in a Bel-Air mansion; the English origins of Terry Lennox, the disappearing murder suspect in *The Long Goodbye*. This one tells us, I think, a good deal about the author for whom Lennox seems to have been, not exactly an *alter ego*, but a shadow, an imaginary buddy, a ghost in the sunlight. Lennox is an elfin war hero, a drunken charmer, a weak man once strong, married to a rich tramp in the Chandler mode. She gets dead and Lennox, realizing the vulnerability of his position, takes the first plane to Mexico, where he fakes his own death, and I'll tell you no more in case you haven't read it. But present here are several aspects of Chandler himself, idealized to be sure: the alcoholism, the barely concealed homo-eroticism, the marital eccentricity. Also the English origins, including the war record, carefully investigated by the English-sounding Marlowe — name of a playwright who, a mystery man like Lennox, liked to fight in bars and tended to lose. Also the death wish, whose presence is there somewhere at the heart of all Chandler's work; Keats-like, he was half in love with easeful death. This is true too of the Chandler screenplays, like *Double Indemnity* with its fatalistic voice-over.

There's a lyrical plangency about certain passages which reminds us that we are reading, not pulp, not even good pulp, but 'literature'. Rusty Regan was an Irishman murdered by . . . well, murdered, and sunk in oil: 'Me, I was part of the nastiness now; far more a part of it than Rusty Regan. But the old man didn't have to be. He could lie quiet in his canopied bed, his bloodless hands folded on the sheet, waiting. His heart was a brief, uncertain murmur; his thoughts were as gray as ashes. And in a little while he too, like Rusty Regan, would be sleeping the big sleep.'