Thrillers

John Fraser

Thrillers

John Fraser

Copyright 2014 John Fraser
All rights reserved

Published in eBook format by eBookIt.com
http://www.eBookIt.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-4566-2212-1

Except for quotations in discussions of it, no part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author or his estate.

The material here has largely come from http://www.jottings.ca/john/voices/index.html, where it was posted in 2002.

Cover design: John Fraser and Barbara Bickle.

The falcon's head comes from the Web, where it is out of copyright.

This book is without the customary scholarly apparatus. If anyone needs information about quotations or allusions, please address enquiries to fraserj@eastlink.ca.

Thrillers is for Benoit Tadié and Raymond J. Peters.

Contents

Introduction

The Best Thriller

A Philosophical Thriller

Writer at Work

A Bit of Theory

Lagniappe and Leftovers

Coda

Appendix

About the Author

Introduction

I

In a well-known passage in Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer* (1961), the narrator explains how for him the really memorable poetic moments in his life have been things like John Wayne killing the three badmen with his carbine during the showdown in *Stagecoach* or the kitten (cat, actually) rubbing up against Orson Welles' feet in *The Third Man* as he watches from the shadows. I know what he was talking about.

I also know what Richard Usborne was talking about in his entertaining *Clubland Heroes* (1953), when he recalls feeling like one of those Rolls-driving Dornford Yates characters *entre-les-deux-guerres* when in 1950 he headed south in France, with family and sleeping bags, in a Ford 8.

I myself once caused my wife, the artist Carol Hoorn Fraser, some bemused merriment by dragging her around Chicago in the August heat to find locations in the thrillers of Jonathan Latimer. Later, though, she herself had a large map of Australia up on a wall on which she could see the various locales in Arthur Upfield's Bony books, which she read and reread and was expert in. Sje also loved Modesty Blaise and Willy.

And Provence for me is still partly the Provence of John Welcome's *Stop at Nothing* (1959), with its Fifties Bentley, and *pastis*, and shimmering heat, and dramatic hither-and-yonnings, along with the actual Provence where in the mid-Sixties we spent a couple of summers in the hill village of Seillons-Source-d'Argens and I found an orange Penguin of the book in squeaky-clean Aix.

Years later, on a stretch of two-lane Mexican road with drop-offs on either side, I came a lot closer than I cared for to replicating, in a loaded-down Rabbit slowly overtaking a exhaust-belching bus, a memorably thrilling bit of driving by Welcome's Simon Herald.

II

Like Usborne, I began reading thrillers early. 'Sapper's' best Bulldog Drummond book, *The Black Gang* (1922), on our family shelves, was

the first, and I was nine at the time (this was North London in 1937), and it was the first grown-up book that I read. After which, goodbye to boys' books, and sword-wagging costume dramas by Stanley Weyman and the like. From then on until I was sixteen and started becoming an intellectual of sorts, my favourites too were Buchan, 'Sapper,' and Dornford Yates, though I also gobbled up anything by Edgar Wallace, Leslie Charteris, Bruce Graeme, Francis Beeding, and others that came my way.

I returned to thrillers in the early Fifties when I arrived in New York to go, briefly, to Columbia. And after a while, for many years, hardly a day went by when I didn't read one. Doing a doctorate at the University of Minnesota was wonderful in that regard. Around the corner from our Dinkytown apartment in Minneapolis was a used bookstore with heaps of paperbacks, and down on Hennepin, near the train depot, was a deep narrow store with row upon row of them. The University library, bless it, had a section of crime and espionage novels in its Tudoresque reading room.

III

In *The Allegory of Love* (1936), C.S.Lewis reports that perfect happiness for him would consist of sitting in a window seat with a view of the sea and reading Italian romance epics eight hours a day.

I despised the statement when I came upon it as an undergraduate. But I've sometimes thought that for me it would be a pretty good happiness to sit in that tiny Seillons front garden after a day's writing, with a *pastis* at hand and an inexhaustible supply of good new thrillers by the likes of Geoffrey Household, Peter O'Donnell, Martin Woodhouse, Jonathan Latimer, Simon Harvester, Richard Stark, Ross Thomas, Adam Hall, and more recent comers like Barry Eisler, Lee Child, and Don Winslow, along with all the ones that have escaped my notice.

And it wouldn't be "mindless" escape.

IV

Thrillers sustained me while I was engaged in some reasonably strenuous intellectual activities—getting a Ph.D. in English with an

unthrillerish dissertation on "George Sturt ('George Bourne') and Rural Labouring Life"; accumulating forty-plus rejections from professional journals ("There have been too many articles on *Wuthering Heights*"); and doing three books for Cambridge University Press.

The well-received *Violence in the Arts* (1973), originally a long article drafted in the friendly air of Seillons, had come easily. *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (1982), which I'd conceived of as a quickie follow-up with lots of clever generalizations, bogged me down in week-in, week-out slogging for seven years. I had, it emerged, some catch-up to do. When I started I thought of Stonewell Jackson as a laughing cavalier like Robert E. Lee.

At least, though, when we were driving down to Mexico in 1969 and reached Vicksburg, we made the circuit of the fortifications, and saw in the imagination the dead and wounded piling up on the slope in front of that gap in the ramparts (a gun-port?) that the Union besiegers were never able to force their way through. And ten years later, clutching the railings in an attack of vertigo, I climbed the metal lookout tower at Gettysburg and saw for myself the gentle, deadly upward slope of Cemetery Hill.

The thrillers that I particularly enjoyed weren't just Action. They were discourse, they were individuals engaged in ongoing problem-solving, with attendant risks. They were modes of intellectual being. While relaxing with them, I was more focused and *there* than during the realworld muddles of the professionl day.

Wittgenstein relaxed with *Black Mask*, and despised the Dorothy L. Sayers kind of "classic puzzler."

V

Some "real" novels have mattered greatly to me, among them, in no particular order, *The Great Gatsby, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Adolphe, Howards End, Death on the Installment Plan, Good Morning Midnight, Great Expectations, Ulysses, The Death Ship, The Rainbow, The Red Badge of Courage Story of O, Wuthering Heights, Women in Love, Nostromo, To the Lighthouse.*

And apart from unsuccessful attempts to interest a BritLit class in *The Ipcress File* and *Orient Express* I taught more or less standard works, including, with freshmen, Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women.*

But there's been enough realworld substance in thrillers for me not to have needed to go for my private reading to the salmon-rush of more or less realist contemporary fiction—enough love, courage, violence, predation, ingenuity, wickedness, group dynamics, organizational in-fighting, interesting foreign parts, best booze, etc.

In the first three chapters that follow, roughed out on the shores of Lake Chapala in 1990, and revised later for my website, I talk about works that in their different ways essentialize for me some of the strengths in thrillers, including the application of truth-seeking intelligence.

They're followed by polemics about the supposed gap between "real" novels and "mere" entertainments, plus a final medley of bits and pieces. The one called "Styles" is pretty funny.

VI

"The Best Thriller" concerns a novel that's like rice when you've got the amount of water just right and it's all been absorbed into the grains, and you've fluffed it out, and the dish or saucepan is beautifully dry. This is total intense thriller action, without any left-over authorial reflections about life and values, and yet rich in problematic values and doings. And the author, Ted Lewis, is brilliant in his plotting, and flawless in its execution, down to the smallest details of phrasing. The book affects me like a kind of dark English *Gatsby.*

Is it really-and-truly The Best? Have I read everything? Of course not. But I can't conceive of any other thriller's being better.

Jack's Return Home (1970), an uninviting title that didn't acquire an aura the way *The Last House on the Left* did among horror movies, and which was replaced in paperback with *Carter* and *Get Carter*, is an intensifier like *Singin' in the Rain*, going on from DangerTown novels like *Red Harvest* (1929), *Solomon's Vineyard* (1941), and *Blue City* 1947), and ebulliently opening up new possibilities for others.

A classic. A masterpiece. And its author died, ravaged by alcohol and self-contempt, at forty-two.

VII

In “A Philosophical Thriller,” we have just that—an existential situation in which, with no possibility of help, a violence-averse mature woman, alone on a small yacht out on the Pacific with a madman, must think and *act* her way out of looming disaster and save not only herself but her husband, powerless aboard a sinking boat way below the horizon. And a number of thriller conventions about good guys and bad guys and the use of violence are brought into question, and complexities uncovered.

Charles Williams had obviously been affected by his experiences of French intellection during his script-writing stint in France. And he’d written noirs himself, like *The Big Bite* (1956). But there’s nothing noir or doomish about the existentialism of *Dead Calm*.

“Closed” situations go back at least to *Wuthering Heights* in fiction and *The Tempest* in drama, with Conrad’s *Victory* (1915) and thrillers like Joseph Hayes’ *The Desperate Hours* (1954) and Macdonald’s *The Executioners* (*Cape Fear*, 1958)) along the way. What do you do, what does one do, what ethical convictions do you summon up to sustain and energize you in self-defense and the defense of others when Threat comes calling and there is no Elsewhere to appeal to, no Them to shift responsibility onto for the done or undone? The subject never grows stale.

Dead Calm is a remarkable *philosophical* novel—and so unpretentious and thriller-readable that I imagine I was the first to attach that label to it.

VIII

“Writer at Work” deals with a college-educated author in the post-war Forties who, lacking the fertility of John D. MacDonald and the moral certitude of Spilllane, was trying to break into the thriller market without compromising his own already strong set of civilized values.

In the postwar Forties, Donald Hamilton put young, and not especially physical, let alone violent, professional males into dangerous situations

with problematic young women, in which they discover a lot about themselves. Later, with *Death of a Citizen* (1960), he would be launched by Gold Medal Books, four years ahead of John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee, on the twenty-seven-book series about counter-assassin Matt Helm, preceded by those outstanding thrillers *Line of Fire* (1955) and *Assignment: Murder* (1956) and five excellent Westerns. He had made it as an action writer.

But the thought that had gone into his Forties fiction obiously helped to make possible his sustained forty years of still thoughtful creativity, with their satisfying realworld activities away from the typewriter. One can't imagine the keyboard-pounding MacDonald surfing in Hawaii, or deer-hunting, or deep-sea sailing, as Hamilton did in pursuit of authenticity and for personal pleasure. But then, it would take a Max Beerbohm to get Henry James up on a surfboard. And John D. had come out of the OSS as a Lieutenant-Colonel, so maybe he had had his fill of action.

IX

In all of these works by very different writers— an art-school graduate, an ex-merchant seaman, a former research chemist—we are at a blessed distance from the corrosive cynicism and pretentious (claimed) expertise of a John Le Carré. They are books about problem-solving by the exercise of intelligence linked to other strengths, including courage, and you don't finish them feeling depressed.

Apart from adding a few names to the list of authors at the outset of "The Best Thriller," I've not tried to update the main chapters, which first appeared on my website in 2002.

I hadn't known, while working on Ted in Ajijic beside Lake Chapala, that he was already tragically dead. Hamilton was still alive when I put what I did about him online, and he may have known of it. The screen lights up like a pinball machine now when you google for him, which is great. But I've not attempted any catch-up. These articles of mine are partly about writing—about trying to find your bearings while working on works that are serious but not solemn (Ezra Pound's phrase), and that have mattered a lot to you.

I've avoided technical terminology. Writing with its assistance is easier than trying to speak accurately about what's happening in specific relationships and passages, particularly if one's memory for the details of episodes is as bad as mine is. And I've quoted a lot. It's in its texture that a work lives.

I've not provided any scholarly apparatus or page numbers. But when I'm guessing I say so. Otherwise, all the biographical. information about Hamilton is taken from trustworthy-feeling sources, on which see Google.

My thanks to Raymond J. Peters, ultra-generous Hamilton *aficionado* and lovely guy. And a tip of the hat to Keith Wease's novel *Matt Helm;The War Years* (2012), in which we're convincingly given by Helm a lot more information about those off-the-record doings of his after he joins Mac's team of precision killers.

My thanks, also, to Benoit Tadié, perfectly bilingual author, among other things, of *Le polar americain, la modernité et le mal* (2006), "*polar"* here meaning detective fiction—wholly un-*snob*, his gaze intently focused on the human content of a work, and lucidity itself in his prose—with whom I've had the pleasure of exchanging enthusiasms for a decade.

And to Steve Lewis, who published me on Hamilton and Latimer in his *Mystery*File,* and David Vineyard, vastly read in crime-and-espionage fiction, and with lots of realworld facts to test fictions against, and Morgan Wallace, with his scholar's passion, and Frank Loose, aficionado.

And, once again, to Michael Black, the then editor-in-chief of Cambridge University Press (U.K.), without whom *Violence in the Arts* (1973*), America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (1982), and *The Name of Action; Critical Essays* (1984) would not exist.

And to Margaret Foster in our lovely local Bookmark, who knows the difference between Bang Bang, Run Run, and Talk Talk, and who wondered to me, speaking, she said, as a mother, about the state of Jack Reacher's underwear.

There is more on my website (jottings.ca) about thrillers that I've enjoyed (see "Quickies" in "Thrillers"), and a lot about the "Mushroom Jungle.". Recently the online journal *Transatlantica* (literary editor Nathalie Cochoy) carried my long "Portals and Pulps; Orwell, Hoggart, 'America,' and the Uses of Gangster Fiction," comissioned by guest-editor Benoit.

2014

The Best Thriller

> With all his honours on he sighed for one
> Who, say astonished critics, lived at home,
> Did little jobs about the house with skill….
>
> *W.H. Auden*

> “Yes,” [the Vicar] said, “Things are changing. But not quickly enough to my mind. One day, though, all this will be gone. And then, thank Heaven, people will have somewhere decent to bring up their children. Somewhere they’ll want to go home to instead of the street”
>
> I said: “Always assuming what they replace it with will be better.”
>
> “Oh,” he said, “but it must be. It’s bound to be.”
>
> “Is it?” I said.
>
> *Ted Lewis*

I

In the second of his two delightful books *The Best* (what is the best beer? the best boondoggle? the best evidence that Britain isn’t part of Europe?), Peter Passell has an exemplary mini-essay in which he picks the best film noir.

It is not a major exercise in revaluation. He is not out to demonstrate that people have been wrong in their fondness for movies like *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Big Sleep*.

He writes as an *aficionado* who feels that the genre “contains some of the most transcendent movie moments of all time,” and who is concerned to provide readers who aren’t at home in it with a quick tour through its doom-laden delights, ranging from the ultra-familiar (yes, *The Maltese Falcon)*, through high-prestige specialist movies *(Kiss Me Deadly)*, to “lesser-known novelties” like *Ride the Pink Horse* and *The Big Clock*.

His list seems to me a very satisfactory one, apart from his curious omission of BretaigneWindust’s *The Enforcer* (in England *Murder, Inc*).

And when he arrives finally at *his* best noir and settles down to describing it—*Out of the Past*, with "the greatest star in the noir pantheon, Robert Mitchum"—you have some idea of where he is coming from, just as you do when, after short-listing Anchor Steam ("almost certainly America's best bottled beer"), Thomas Hardy's Old Ale ("a newly opened bottle simply explodes with the scent of hops"), and two or three others, he picks the glorious Pilsner Urquell as "the quintessential beer."

This is not Camp criticism, the equivalent of Trivial Pursuit. And a serious disagreement with his judgments—I mean about the noirs, though it would obviously be true of other things too—would take one deeper and deeper into the particulars of various works, rather than ending before it had begun in the impasse of "taste" (you Mitchum, me Bogie) or dwindling away into the desert of theory.

II

All this is by way of preamble to a judgment of my own, the one indicated by my title.

I have read and reread a great many thrillers over the years, and derived a great deal of pleasure from them, and some seem to me much better than others.

Some thrillers simply *impose* themselves on a first reading, and go on being re-readable, while others are put-downable after the first page, sometimes after the first book-rack-browsing sentence. ("Loren McMurphy, Larry to his friends, sat in the beat-up Ford Falcon and restlessly lit his tenth cigarette of the morning as he waited for his target to emerge from the portals of the First National Bank.")

And others fade. You *want* them to go on working their magic, but you are increasingly conscious of longueurs, of that gaping hole in the plot that your eye slid over the first two or three times, of strained metaphors, of dialogue that rings less and less true, of irritatingly "period" conventions.

The novel that I am going to name in a minute is the one that works best for me however often I read it—the densest, the richest, the most grounded in reality, the most stylistically flawless.

III

First, though, some of the works that it *isn't*. Not for me, anyway.

It isn't one of the two best manhunt novels, John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male*. Or coarser but effective ones like David Morrell's *First Blood* and Frederick Forsyth's *The Day of the Jackal* (which of course is also an assassination novel, and a from-the criminal's-perspective novel; categories overlap).

It isn't one of the classic private-eyes (Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, say, or Raymond Chandler's *Farewell My Lovely*), or a semi-humorous one like Jonathan Latimer's *The Lady in the Morgue*, or James Crumley's fine post-Sixties *The Last Good Kiss*, or Dennis Lehane's densely layered and ultimately tragic *Gone, Baby, Gone*.

Or something from John D. MacDonald's counter-predator Travis McGee books, such as *Darker than Amber.* Or from the Dave Robicheaux series of James Lee Burke, doing for hot, humid, corrupt Louisiana what MacDonald did for Florida (for example, *In the Electric Mist with Confederate Dead*).

Or *The Enemy* (with *The Killing Floor* as an alternate) from Lee Child's Jack Reacher series, Child's villains even scarier than MacDonald's, and Reacher himself more punitively vicious than Trav.

Or Peter Temple's *Bad Debts*, thrillingly demonstrating that the private investigator novel can still engage the full attention of an enviably knowledgeable social observer.

Or Stanley Ellin's magisterial New York detective-agency novel *The Eighth Circle*. Or Derek Raymond's *The Devil's Home on Leave*, for my money the best of his dark, intense London police series. Or one of Chester Himes' over-the-top Harlem novels like *A Rage in Harlem*, featuring Detectives Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, with their shiny long-barreled revolvers.

Nor is it one of the multitude of espionage novels—Buchan's Great War *Greenmantle*, say, or Eric Ambler's *Cause for Alarm* set in Fascist Italy, or high-style Sixties affairs like Len Deighton's *The Ipcress File*, Adam Hall's *The Quiller Memorandum*, and Martin Woodhouse's *Bush Baby*, or one of Donald Hamilton's Matt Helm books, such as

Death of a Citizen, or Simon Harvester's too little known "Road" Series with the estimable Dorian Silk, especially *Red Road* and *Zion Road*, or Graham Greene's best "entertainment" and probably most durable novel, *Our Man in Havana*.

And no, since I suppose I have to mention them somewhere, not Somerset Maugham's dreary *Ashenden,* or one of the Bond books (I read them at the time, but didn't hold the smoke in when I inhaled), or anything, for me at any rate, by everyone else's favourite *serious* spy novelist, John Le Carré. Or a Mickey Spillane (at his best, perhaps, in the non-series *The Erection Set)*. Or an Elmore Leonard (sorry, I just couldn't get interested in the characters in the handful I tried). Or Mario Puzo's operatic *roman-à-clef*, if it can be considered a thriller.

Nor did what little I have read by Big Canvas writers like Alastair Maclean, Jack Higgins, Tom Clancy, Robert Ludlum, and Ken Follett encourage me to go further —I mean, they just weren't my cup of tea —, though there was a creepy fascination to the slightly manic Geoffrey Jenkins and his eye for strange locations and physical phenomena.

Again, *my* best thriller isn't either of Peter O'Donnell's two best freelances-in-the-service-of-government capers, *Modesty Blaise* and *Sabre Tooth*, or Brian Cleeve's intense *Vice Isn't Private*, or James Mitchell's generously plotted *Smear Job* (both about ex-criminals *unwillingly* in the unpleasant service of government). Or the best of Gavin Lyall's Major Harry Maxim series, the very fine Whitehall-and-desert-doings *Uncle Target.*

It isn't a power-machine novel, the machine either more or less tolerated, as in Dashiell Hammett's *The Glass Key* and Donald Hamilton's elegant variation on its central situation in *Line of Fire* (man of honour associated with city boss); or temporarily cleaned up, as in Hammett's *Red Harvest*, Ross Thomas's *The Fools in Town Are On Our Side* (both brilliant), Michael Gilbert's *Fear To Tread* (sinister black-marketeering in post-war London), and Jonathan Latimer's ultra-tough *Solomon's Vineyard* (a.k.a. *The Fifth* Grave).

It isn't one of the books in which things are viewed in whole or in part from a criminal perspective, such as E.W. Horning's *Raffles*, Richard Stark's super-caper *Butcher's Moon*, Jim Thompson's always fresh *The Getaway,* Eric Ambler's delightful *The Light of Day* (a.k.a. *Topkapi*),

James M. Cain's depressing *The Postman Always Rings Twice,* John McPartland's scary *The Face of Evil*, and Boris Vian's deliberately offensive *I Spit On Your Grave*.

Or books in which someone's name must urgently (and riskily) be cleared, like MacDonald's *Death Trap*, Charles Williams *Talk of the Town* (both set in hostile communities), and Jonathan Latimer's gorgeous *Sinners and Shrouds* in which a Chicago reporter has to take part in a manhunt for himself.

Or Adam Hall's drenched-in-equatorial-heat *The Volcanoes of San Domingo*. Or John Welcome's charming neo-Buchan fast-cars-in-Provence *Stop at Nothing*, Or Arthur Upfield's outback-Australia *The Bushman Who Came Back*, a.k.a. *Bony Buys a Woman* (his best book). Or Charles Williams vividly nautical *Scorpion Reef* (a.k.a. *Gulf Coast Girl*) and *Dead Calm*, the latter with its classic situation of a non-violent individual having to cope unaided with someone very dangerous.

Or Don Wnslow's brilliant interweaving of California crime and surfing in *The Dawn Patrol.*

Or— oh why not? why not? an affectionate tip of the hat—that leisurely small-boat Edwardian classic of "secret service," Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands.*

IV

No, the best thriller, *my* best thriller, is Ted Lewis' *Jack's Return Home* (not the greatest of titles), first published in 1970, paperbacked the following year as *Carter*, and compellingly filmed the following year by Mike Hodges as *Get Carter*, with Michael Caine superb in the role of Jack Carter, the sergeant-at-arms of a couple of London mobsters who returns to his home town to find out who has killed his non-criminal brother.

It is not a "nice" book, any more than movies like *Kiss Me Deadly* and *The Enforcer* are nice movies. But like them, and even more like Carol Reed's infinitely re-seeable *The Third Man*, it is a brilliant one.

V

Some works are quintessential and culminatory, whether or not they come at the end of a line—"literary" novels like *The Great Gatsby*, *Decline and Fall*, *The Catcher in the Rye*; "popular" ones like Conan Doyle's *Sir Nigel (the* becoming-a-knight novel), Rafael Sabatini's *Captain Blood (the* gentleman-buccaneer novel), Owen Johnson's *Stover at Yale (the* college novel), Wallace Smith's *The Captain Hates the Sea (the* cruise-ship novel, and endlessly rereadable); movies like *Casablanca*, *Chariots of Fire*, *The Long Good Friday*; records like *Sergeant Pepper* and *The Last Night at the Proms*.

Jack's Return Home is one of them. And it is more than "merely" a thriller, but without being that exasperating phenomenon an anti-thriller or "art" thriller, like John Le Carré's pretentious exercises or Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer books after *The Barbarous Coast*.

It is not depressive or formulaic. It does not play against and undercut the thriller conventions. ("Look at me, I'm a *serious* writer being serious in an unserious genre.") Its seriousness comes by way of its sheer generous thrillerish abundance.

VI

Like *Red Harvest*, Kenneth Millar's *Blue City*, Latimer's *Solomon's Vineyard*, and Stark's *Butcher's Moon*, *Jack's Return Home* offers us the delights of entering into a zone of danger—the corrupt town—, stirring things up, solving a mystery, and punishing guilty parties.

Jack Carter is completely *there* as he makes his way through the maskings, lyings, misdirectings, menacings of the nameless Lincolnshire town ("too big for a town, too small for a city") that he left eight years before.

And so are all the richly individual crooks with whom he has dealings —"governors" like Cyril Kinnear and Cliff Brumby; fellow heavies like Eric Paice, Con McCarty, Peter the Dutchman; his Kray-like bosses Gerald and Les Fletcher, back in the Smoke; small-fry like Albert Swift and Steelworks Thorpey.

The violences are completely convincing and always fresh. There are a couple of fine bits of expert car driving, and a superb poker game that

you don’t need to be a card player yourself to enjoy. And sex, of course, including prostitution and blue movies and hints of S-M cavortings. And drugs.

So much is packed into the book that it comes as a shock to realize that the action occupies only two-and-a-half days. The writing is so taut that there are only a couple of pages that could be excised without significant loss. And the book is frequently very funny.

All the necessary elements are there, and they are all handled superbly. Who (among thrillers readers at any rate) could ask for anything more? But there is more—much more.

VII

A good many years ago, Andrew Sarris announced that Alfred Hitchcock was the greatest movie craftsman and therefore the greatest movie-maker. Both claims seemed to me untrue, but there are indeed works whose pre-eminence is inseparable from their craftsmanship.

The Great Gatsby, for example, if talked about in the way that I have been talking about *Jack’s Return Home*, would sound like the quintessential romantic novel—Truer-than-True Love, class distinctions, money money money, *enormous* parties, fast cars, bootlegging, murder, suicide, and so forth.

And what makes it a classic (which it was far from being recognized as when it appeared) isn’t simply the addition of Big Themes to all that melodrama. It is the brilliance, the writerly brilliance, with which everything is done.

VIII

So too with *Jack’s Return Home*. It is not only by far the best crafted of all thrillers. It is the nearest thing that we have to an English *Gatsby*, in ways that seem to me much more than merely coincidental.

(What's that? Have I read all the thrillers? Don't *niggle*. But if you know of a better crafted one, please tell me.)

I am not talking about imitation. I don’t mean that there are any pastiche effects, like all those pastiches of Chandler in private-eye

novels. There is no literariness, no nudge-nudge wink-wink alerting of the sophisticated reader to clever appropriations. Lewis's eye is wholly on what is in front of him and on the Conradian business of making you "see,"and hear, and feel, and touch.

The relationship is like that of Arnold Bennett in *The Old Wives' Tale* to Maupassant's *Une Vie*, or of Katherine Mansfield to Chekhov, or of Fitzgerald to Conrad in *Gatsby*, a novel that could not have been what it was without *Heart of Darkness*, but which never sounds Conradian.

Fitzgerald had done certain things supremely well with respect to romantic aspirations to stylishness, grace, fullness of being—aspirations that were more than merely American.

Lewis was writing *Jack's Return Home* in an increasingly "American" decade in England. And he learned a great deal from Fitzgerald about the art and craft of writing.

Like *Gatsby*, too, *Jack's Return Home* has the feeling of being one of those novels, written with great care, commitment, and love, into which a writer has been able to put *everything*, and in which he has found the right central figure and right fable, so that everything can be transmuted into art in a book that is much more than merely personal.

And, like Fitzgerald, Lewis would do nothing nearly as good subsequently.

IX

Jack's Return Home is a culminatory Sixties novel, full of the energies of that transformational decade, the decade of the Beatles, Carnaby Street, swinging Soho, the Kray Brothers (metamorphosed into the Piranha Brothers in *Monty Python)*, the decade of "style," money, possibility, shiftings and loosenings with regard to class, the new sexual freedom, drugs—the Twenties returned; but the *American* rather than the British Twenties.

It has the speed and buoyancy of the best Sixties thrillers—Deighton's, Hall's, O'Donnell's, Woodhouse's especially— which Deighton initiated in *The Ipcress File* when he took the flabby, snobbish knowingness of the Bond books ("*I* know the right food to order in my

club, but *you* are never going to get into it") and transformed it into witty high style; into *play*, including the play of intelligence.

And some important developments with respect to class were involved.

X

Behind the humourless, *ersatz* figure of Fleming's Bond lay inner-directed and high-energy gentlemen heroes like Buchan's Hannay and the anonymous narrator of Household's *Rogue Male*, for whom there were lots of things that they would never stoop to doing, but who were cavalier about legal niceties, and more or less contemptuous of suburban respectability.

They were free spirits, knowledgeable, poised, and able to move around with complete self-confidence in their social worlds, with no desirable activities from which they were automatically precluded by lack of money or the wrong accents and manners.

And they stood in dramatic contrast to all the hemmed-in, envious, and pettily ambitious murderers, usually poisoners, who infested the suburbs, country towns, and villages of the so-called classic puzzlers of the Twenties and Thirties and of depressing from-the-criminal's-point-of-view works (much better done, in their narrow way) like Francis Iles' *Malice Aforethought* and C.S. Forester's *Plain Murder*.

The TV series *The Charmer*, with Nigel Havers, brilliantly and nastily encapsulated those attitudes, and all the attendant class envies and exclusions—the pain of feeling that one was the right kind of person and entitled by virtue of one's sensibility to good food and drink, good clothes, good cars, good accomodation, and travel ad lib , but was shut out from their enjoyment as by a wall of unbreakable glass.

XI

What happened in Deighton's *The Ipcress File* (1962) was a quantum leap whereby the wrong kind of person, no doubt a grammar-school boy, was unshakably *inside* the Establishment—or as much of it as he desired—and able to dominate his environment by virtue of his games-playing intelligence and knowledgeability, confidently putting a

Minister in his place in the opening pages, and equally unintimidated by his public-school-educated and Latin-quoting boss.

Moreover, he had a *voice*, a narrative voice, that had the same kind of self-assurance and authority as those of Buchan's and Household's first-person-singular narrators.

And after that you had a variety of (in class terms) not really kosher heroes—Hall's Quiller, Woodhouse's Giles Yeoman, O'Donnell's Willie Garvin especially—who were energetic, sardonically critical of pretensions, at home in a variety of situations, quite untroubled by the question of how they stood socially in relation to their bosses, and unconcerned with rising any further because there was nothing desirable that rising would bring them that they did not already enjoy.

We had come a long way, as we did with the Beatles, from the blockings, thwartings, angers, envies, guilts of "serious" class works from the Fifties like *Look Back in Anger*, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning,* and *Room at the Top.*

XII

Lewis takes things a stage further.

Jack Carter is a working-class provincial (his home town is on the northern edge of Lincolnshire, near the Hull estuary) who has done very nicely for himself professionally in London (a natural lieutenant, not a boss), and who is perfectly comfortable with himself, outside the Establishment system altogether.

Jack has *become* Jack Carter—poised, intelligent, articulate, sardonically witty, socially adaptable (like Willie Garvin, he would obviously be unfazed by a classy restaurant), respected in his work, and not bent on rising further, acquiring more name-brand goods and chattels, and improving his social standing.

He is, in effect, a Gatsby figure without Gatsby's anxieties and self-doubtings, a success-story epitomization of the all-is-possible promise and momentum of the Sixties.

And since we learn a lot about his past in the course of the novel, and about his attitudes and values, the novel is both a thriller and a study of

the dynamics of aspiration: of certain kinds of aspiration. And of defeat—ultimately, self-defeat.

XIII

Like Gatsby, Jack is a criminal—a working criminal, not a reformed one like Willie Garvin, or Brian Cleeve's Sean Ryan, or James Mitchell's Callan, all of them more or less in the service of government.

Jack's Return Home goes on from movies like Joseph Losey's superb *The Criminal* (with Stanley Baker the essence of poised and smiling recidivism) and Cammell and Roeg's *Performance* (with James Fox as another convincing tough, and some persuasive glimpses of violent London gangdom).

And in conjunction with Mike Hodge's gripping screen adaptation the following year, it made possible a number of other high-energy crime movies over the years, especially John Mackenzie's triumphant *The Long Good Friday* fifteen years later.

But when *Jack's Return Home* appeared, as in the classic American crime movies, crime still wasn't paying, at least for the man of sensibility.

(That it could pay for Richard Stark's Parker in the great Parker series, and in John Boorman's 1967 filming of the first of them, *Point Blank*, with Lee Marvin as the perfect Parker, was due essentially to the limited quality of Parker's sensibility, the number of emotions that he didn't feel and things that he has no interest in.)

There is nothing depressive about Jack's final defeat, however, or about the narrative that leads up to it. And here we come back to the matter of craft.

XIV

Like *Gatsby*, *Jack's Return Home* is above all a novel about discovery, a novel of progressive uncovering and disclosure.

It involves us in arriving in an unfamiliar locale, and learning more and more about it, like Nick Carraway in the alien East. We partake in

the solving of a puzzle. Who killed Frank Carter, and why? And along the way, for this is Jack's Return Home, we learn a good deal about what Jack himself was like as a kid.

It is a novel about seeing, perceiving, recalling, comparing, assessing.

XV

And these activities are more purposive and urgent than in *Gatsby*, which is a novel of *distanced* recollection, Nick's endeavour, back home again in Minnesota, to define and make sense of his experiences in the mysterious East.

In *Gatsby* it is Nick—Nick the recaller-observer—who provides the focus and precision. (Gatsby's gaze, insofar as we see it in action, is chronically imprecise.)

But Jack isn't detached at all, he is right in the middle of things and always at risk, and it is he who during the compressed action of his sixty hours has to define and "place" things as they come at him, and do so swiftly and accurately if he is to win out.

And since, in contrast to a third-person narrative like Mitchell's *Smear Job*, there is no disjunction between the sensibility of the protagonist focussed on action and the broader and more "civilized" sensibility of the author-narrator, we admire simultaneously the precision and grasp of Carter and of his creator.

For they *are* admirable. Very admirable.

XVI

The town, as I have said, is "there," and as Henry James remarked of himself and one of the characters in the *The Awkward Age*, Lewis could obviously have stood "a pretty stiff cross-examination" on it.

It is there, hemmed in by the blast furnaces, with its pubs, its terrace houses, its posh residential districts, its tracts of waste land, its football grounds and swimming baths, its single main street "where there was everything you needed and everything just dribbled off towards the ragged edges of the town," its Oxford Cinema, and Eastoes Remnants,

and Walton's sweetshop, in the doorway of which the school-kids used to hang around before going to the movies.

XVII

Naturally, it is the criminal infrastructure that we see most of, at times frontally, at others in highly charged glimpses.

The technique at times is like that of the kind of all-too-uncommon movie—Earl C. Kenton's *The Island of Lost Souls* was a shining example—in which an elaborate set has been built and then ignored as a totality (things occur *here* and *here* and *here* but there is no Cecil B. De Mille concern to show the whole set)

What is mentioned brings with it a strong sense of the *not* shown, as in a throwaway allusion like "Remember that fracas at Skeggie?" (Skegness), or a prostitute talking about the blue-movie scene ("One time they went too far with a little coloured girl"), or Jack's initial conversation with nice young Keith Lacey, Frank's fellow bartender whom he cons into helping him:

> "Right," I said. "You've heard of World Haulage Limited?"
>
> He nodded.
>
> "Chap called Marsh runs it, doesn't he?"
>
> Keith nodded again.
>
> "Well, he doesn't. Guess who does? And who owns the wog houses in Jackson Street and Voltaire Road and Linden Street? And the gambling clubs and the brothels and Greaves' Country Pies and Sausages Limited?

XVIII

But the town isn't just peopled by members of the criminal fraternity.

It has civilians in it too: barmen, landladies, cab-drivers, housewives in pinnies and curlers, clergymen, undertakers, the nouveaux-riches at night-spots, crowds leaving football matches.

And some of them—a housewife coming home with her groceries, "a pair of fat smoothies who looked very municipal"—are usually around when something is going on between criminals.

XIX

Moreover, Lewis has a Fitzgerald-like ear for speech and names.

There are occasional regionalisms, especially the omitted article ("I saw it on telly"), but by and large the regionalism comes across (at least to a London ear) as a matter of rhythms, whether in a barman's "Oh well, that's very kind of you sir, I'll have a Mackeson if I might," or in extended stretches of dialogue.

And it all feels *right*, as do names like Pecker Wood, Arthur Coleman, Piggy Jacklin, Nezzer Eyres, some of those kids in that remembered sweetshop doorway. And yes, the snooker hall where Jack and Frank played from time to time would indeed be managed by "an old twat named Waller Haverford." And the women would indeed have names like Glenda, Doreen, Edna, Rae, Muriel.

In an especially nice touch, a couple of sisters are called Lucille and Greer, and you know within a movie year or two when *they* were born.

XX

But none of this is regional-depressive. There is nothing drearily sociological about it, none of the *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Room at the Top*, *This Sporting Life* graininess.

The book has the multiperspectival openness of the essence-of-Sixties *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, with its interweaving of dream, escape, camaraderie, nostalgia, spectacle, as against Wallace Stevens' "malady of the quotidian."

XXI

Like so many good thrillers, *Jack's Return Home* is a first-person narrative.

It is the mode that draws you the most readily into the feel of physical action, and makes it harder to get away with prose like, "For the next three weeks McMurphy devoted all his waking hours to breaking the code. From time to time Rawlings called his office, but he had given instructions to his secretary to say that he was temporarily out of town."

Here, for example, is Jack in action, having just made a run for it through one of The Cecil's doors:

> The trouble was there was a man standing at the top of the steps and his leg was stretched out in front of me.
>
> I didn't touch a step. I made sure I landed OK and began rolling out of the impact, but that didn't do me much good because at the bottom of the steps there was another man who began kicking at me even before I hit the floor. I managed to get an anklehold on him and twist him over but not before he'd given me a few handy ones in my ribs and in the small of my back. But at the same time as he went over the man who'd been standing at the top of the steps was now on the tarmac and he began the whole process all over again. I went back on my shoulders and gave him a double-legged kick in the flies. He went green and spewy. I was getting up as Con and Peter came boiling down the steps. Con had his knife out. He was smiling broader than at any other time during that day.

XXII

Since first-person narrative (except for the kind of inspired cheating in Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard)* normally implies that the narrator has survived the experiences he's describing, it makes easier a certain jauntiness of tone.

It is also, and importantly, more convenient with respect to the unsaid, unseen, and unknown.

What makes the Agatha-Christie-type classic puzzler so exasperating is that one knows the writer is arbitrarily withholding information as she or he skips from mind to mind. The only mind that is really *there* is the catch-you-out mind of the writer engaged in a game of misdirection with respect to the conventions of the genre.

In the first-person-narrative thriller, in contrast, if we are ignorant or deceived at any point it is because the protagonist is too.

And distinguished third-person thrillers like Harvester's or the early novels of Donald Hamilton still stay very close—as does a novel like *The Red Badge of Courage,* which Fitzgerald had obviously read with profit—to the immediacies of a single experiencing consciousness.

There is something special about Jack's narration, too.

XXIII

Jack, like Stark's Parker, is not just a professional criminal, he is a professional *violent* criminal, a heavy.

But from the first page of the novel his voice is a broad-spectrum voice, intelligent, observant, ironical, sophisticated, sensitive, and performing in a variety of modes, as Nick's does in *Gatsby*.

At times a conversation may be as free of he-saids and I-saids as anything in Hemingway or James M. Cain.

> "How many blokes have you had, Doreen?"
>
> "Now look..."
>
> "How many?"
>
> "Mind your bloody business."
>
> "Did your dad know?"
>
> "Nowt to do with anybody but meself."
>
> "Did he?"
>
> "Shut up."

At others, it will have the full contextual texture—body English, the social facilitatings of cigarettes and drinks, etcetera.

XXIV

Similarly, some stretches of recollection are straightforward flashbacks, like the admonitory-euphemistic conversation that his employers have with him in Gerald's flat before he leaves for the North, "Gerald in his county houndstooth and his lilac shirt, sitting at his Cintura-topped desk, the picture window behind him, Belsize Park and Camden Town below him and Les sitting on the edge of the desk, in his corduroy suit, thumbing through a copy of *Punch."*

Where Frank is concerned, on the other hand, the regressions are much more associational and dramatic, as Jack's mind moves back and forth to things in the past charged with meaning for him.

In a page-long paragraph after the bit about the sweetshop doorway, for example, we move from changes in a shop front ("and instead of Players' Airman showcards and Vimto signs there were poove clothes and military uniforms and blow-ups of groups"), to the street of "villa-type bay-windowed houses" that leads away from it, to the waste land at the far end of the street where "Valerie Marshbanks showed everybody her knickers and charged a penny a wank, in the bushes, one at a time with Christine Hall who liked to watch," to Frank's silent disapproval when Jack got home afterwards , and how "I wouldn't be able to get to sleep for ages because he'd be there awake and I'd be awake because I hardly dared breathe knowing he was thinking about me."

XXV

More subtle shiftings go on too.

Jack's voice, the narrating voice that we are listening to, is not a uniform one like that of the normal thriller.

It is a Wittgensteinian "family" of voices, like those families of voices that we agree to call "Huck Finn" or "Gulliver," the modulations between styles done so skillfully that there is never any sense of incongruity.

The effect begins right at the start of the novel:

> The rain rained.
>
> It hadn't stopped since King's Cross. Inside the train it was close, the kind of closeness that makes your fingernails dirty even when all you're doing is sitting there looking out of the blurring windows. Watching the dirty backs of houses scudding along under the half-light clouds. Just sitting looking and not even fidgeting.
>
> I was the only one in the compartment. My slip-ons were off. My feet were up. *Penthouse* was dead. I'd killed the *Standard* three times. I had three nails left. Doncaster was forty minutes off.

XXVI

The first two paragraphs, down to "fidgeting," could be (almost) anyone; an intellectual even. With the third we have (in class-cultural

terms) a slight shift downwards. And a few lines later there is a further shift:

> Gerald and Les were the blokes I worked for. They looked after me very well, because that's what I did for them. They were in the property business. Investment. Speculation. That kind of thing. You know.

A few lines after that we move up again stylistically—distinctly up:

> Doncaster Station. Gloomy wide windy areas of rails and platforms overhung with concrete and faint neon. Rain noiselessly emphasizing the emptiness. The roller front of W.H.Smith's pulled down.

And at the end of the two-and-a-half brilliant introductory pages, in which all the essential concerns of the novel have been touched on, we have the outright lyricism of:

> At first there's just the blackness. The rocking of the train, the reflections against the raindrops and the blackness. But if you keep looking beyond the reflections you eventually notice the glow creeping into the sky.
>
> At first it's slight and you think maybe a haystack or a petrol tanker or something is on fire somewhere over a hill and out of sight. But then you notice that the clouds themselves are reflecting the glow and you know that it must be something bigger. And a little later the train passes through a cutting and curves away towards the town, a small bright concentrated area of light, and beyond and around the town you can see the causes of the glow, the half-dozen steelworks stretching to the rim of the semicircular bank of hills, flames shooting upwards—soft reds pulsing on the inside of melting shops, white heat sparking in blast furnaces—the structures of the works black against the collective glow, all of it looking like a Disney version of the Dawn of Creation. Even when the train enters the short sprawl of backyards and behinds of petrol stations and rows of too-bright street lights, the reflected ribbon of flame still draws your attention up into the sky.

It all works. All of this is Jack Carter.

XXVII

But if we are all the time conscious of a voice, the novel never becomes talky.

There is none of the egotistical airlessness of “serious” novels like *The Adventures of Augie March* or *Under the Net*.

As in *Gatsby*, everything, including the recollectings, has been converted into stretches of action.

Attitudes are embodied in clothes, modes of speech, body language, the environments that individuals have created around themselves.

Dialogues are always agonistic and purposive, the speakers engaged in persuading, conning, interrogating, intimidating one another.

There are no dead spots that you can skim over, and only one stretch—the two-and-a-half-page pub conversation with unsavoury Old Rowley, smelling of the Guiness-and-cider tipple that has swollen his belly to balloon-like proportions—that could be cut out without loss to the action, since it has a merely thematic importance.

And Lewis’s skills in these regards are both macro and mini, wide-angle and close-up, structural and stylistic. Which is why the novel could so easily be translated into movie images.

XXVIII

Like Fitzgerald, Lewis has used a relatively small number of settings, most of them multipurpose.

The enormous pub The Cecil, where Frank had worked behind the eight-pump bar, is not only the place where Jack quizzes Frank’s sluttish girl-friend Margaret, cons Keith into helping him, and does a face-off with Con McCarty and Peter the Dutchman.

It is also the glamorously rough pub that Jack had started going to as a kid “as soon as they let me up to the bar,” and now the site of a tacky strip show (“‘Ladies and Gentlemen, may I present Miss . . . Jackie . . . Du . . . .Val’”), and of a rolling-around-on-the-floor fight provoked by it (“The woman on top of Miss Jackie Du Val was trying to bite one of

Miss Jackie Du Val's titties, while Miss Jackie Du Val was trying to remove both of the woman's eyes.")

So too with settings like Jack's bed-and-breakfast and the squalid little house, stuck out on its patch of waste land, where the one-time heavy Albert Swift lives off the sexual earnings of his wife Lucille, whom we see "wearing a man's tartan dressing gown. I wouldn't know what she was wearing underneath. Her hair was ginger and naturally it was in curlers. She was already halfway down a Woodbine."

XXIX

Episodes too are multipurpose.

Jack's high-comedy late-night visit to the posh home of the "fiddling slot-machine king" Cliff Brumby to "do" him on the strength of information squeezed out of the little rat Thorpey not only fills us in on how crime *does* pay and on the ordinary-citizen side of a "governor's" life (teen-age daughter throwing wild party while Daddy is off at the Police Ball dressed up "like Henry Cabot Lodge just come from the White House").

Brumby's singleminded bellowing fury about the party havoc ("It was a wonder the double-glazing stayed intact"), and his blankness when Jack comes in, make it clear to Jack that he has been conned. And the dowdiness of Cliff's fat wife—dowdy despite her expensive dress and mink coat—ties in with the later revelation of his love-nest with sexy Glenda.

Likewise, a flashback to a take-over episode in a Paddington nightclub makes clear why Eric Paice has no particular reason to feel friendly towards Jack, gives us our only glimpse of Jack's professional doings in London ("There had been no boys left to help Jimmy [the Welshman] because since five minutes and three hundred pound ago, three of them had started working for us and a fourth was lying in the toilet presently not working for anybody"), and indicates that Jack's Isolde, Gerald's wife Audrey, who applies the lighted tip of her cigarette to the tender person of Eric's girlfriend in return for former attentions to herself, isn't in line for any award as Mrs Suburban Niceness of the Year.

Or again.

With the marvellous poker game in Eric Kinnear's inner sanctum at his Casino nightclub, Lewis not only brings Jack into contact with Glenda, who will become crucially important later on a couple of occasions. He also avoids the Chandleresque cliché of the enquiring hero visiting the unfriendly/evasive nightclub boss sitting behind his desk.

And we get to see in action the immensely fat and pseudo-jovial Kinnear ("the kind of man that fat men like to stand next to"), displaying the psychological skills that have enabled him to become a governor—a much more formidable one than his rival Brumby.

XXX

The settings and characters in the novel are built up with the kind of cinematic crispness and freshness that Fitzgerald displays in *Gatsby* even when dealing with a run-down garage beside a city dump, and that leaves you with a vivid impression of something that doesn't depend on a methodical description of it.

Like Gatsby's car, for example:

> It was a rich cream color, bright with nickel, swollen here and there in its monstrous length with triumphant hat-boxes and supper-boxes and tool-boxes, and terraced with a labyrinth of wind-shields that mirrored a dozen suns. Sitting down behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory, we started to town.

Or the exterior of the Buchanans' place at East Egg:

> Their house was even more elaborate than I expected, a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay. The lawn started at the beach and ran toward the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sun-dials and brick walks and burning gardens—finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run. The front was broken by a line of French windows, glowing now with reflected gold and wide open to the warm windy afternoon. . . . .

XXXI

Like Fitzgerald's, Lewis's decriptions are asymmetrical and "open"—quite a bit of detail here, a mere (and self-sufficient) sketch there, with the focus essentially on the quality of the kind of living and aspiring that is embodied in objects.

While we are given full-frontal descriptions of The Cecil and The Casino's penthouse, practically with an interior decorator's floor plans, the exterior of The Casino comes to us simply as:

> It looked like the alternative plan to the new version of Euston Station. White, low and ugly. A lot of glass. A single piece of second story that was a penthouse. A lot of sodium lighting. Plenty of phony ranch-house brickwork. Probably the worst beer for seventy miles.

And a whole mind-space is encapsulated, *Gatsby*-fashion, in the contents of Frank's bookshelves in the home that he has so lovingly created for himself:

> There were rows of *Readers' Digest*, of *Wide World*, of *Argosy*, of *Real Male*, of *Guns Illustrated*, of *Practical Handyman,* of *Canadian Star Weekly*, of *National Geographic*. They were all on the bottom shelves. Above were the paperbacks. There was Luke Short and Max Brand and J.T.Edson and Louis L'Amour. There was Russell Braddon and W.B. Thomas and Guy Gibson. There was Victor Canning and Alistair Maclean and Ewart Brookes and Ian Fleming. There was Bill Bowes and Stanley Matthews and Bobby Charlton. There was Barbara Tuchman and Winston Churchill and General Patton and Audie Murphy. Above were his records, Band of the Coldstream Guard, Eric Coates, Stan Kenton, Ray Anthony, Mel Torme, Frankie Laine, Ted Heath, This is Hancock, Vaughan Williams.

XXXII

People too are present in the finer details of their clothing—a barman's "Irish Tony Curtis" haircut, the very different attires of Jack's two fellow heavies, Con with his leather trilby "and a single-breasted leather coat with a tie belt," Peter the Dutchman with his men's-wear-ads gentility, whom his employers have sent to bring Jack back to the

Smoke, “even if you don’t particularly want to come”—and in other Fitzgeraldian formulations.

One of the players in Kinnear’s poker game “looked as though the trousers to his dinner suit should be tucked into gum-boots”, and thereafter (like Fitzgerald’s Owl Eyes, so dubbed because of his glasses) becomes simply Gum Boots.

The drunken-seeming Glenda watching the game has a “private oh-so-clever-oh-so-knowing-but-oh-isn’t-everything-a-drag- smile.” Cliff Brumby, caught out in a lie, “twisted his head slowly, in jerky stages, until he was looking at me.”

And when Jack goes calling on Albert Swift, now ravaged with TB,

> he sat there for a bit staring at me and the room while it sank in that Jack Carter was actually there standing in the room, living and breathing. Then when it finally got through he started to get up. No, that’s not quite right.—an exaggeration. He gave the impression he was going to get up but there was no movement significant for you to be able to guess that that was what he was going to do. His shirt front might have creased a little but that was about all.

XXXIII

The verbal precision extends down to minutiae like the “clank and groan” of the steel mills, or the excitement of summer bicycling with Frank when they were kids, “the dry road *crackling* under our tires, the warm wind *flicking* the collars of our open-neck shirts” (italics mine) or the way in which, during the funeral drive to the crematorium, in one of those touches like the maid spitting with great deliberation out of the window of Gatsby’s mansion, “an old josser on a bike just as old gave us the right of way at a junction and slowly and gravely raised his hat.”

XXXIV

Moreover, everything *flows* in the novel.

If it is cinematic, it is cinematic like the crucial chapter 8 of *Gatsby* in which Fitzgerald segues effortlessly from Nick’s blazing hot train ride,

to the mundane social exchanges at the Buchanans, to the drive into town (with a stopover at WiIson's garage along the way), to the initially social chit-chat in the hotel room, its escalation to the showdown between Tom and Gatsby, the drive back home, the roadside death of Myrtle Wilson.

And a couple of things help to combine flow and structure.

XXXV

One is the Fitzgeraldian or E.M. Forsterian "stitching" provided by recurring objects, functioning in a variety of ways.

A cigarette can be something a cabbie offers you when he's trying to be ingratiating, or that you offer a fifteen-year-old niece as a token that you recognize her maturity, or that someone holds elegantly as a sign of relaxed social poise, or that affects the body (Kinnear's voice sounds as if it had been "honed on a million cigarettes"), or that Albert Swift, looking death in the face, desperately sucks on in a effort to subdue his gasping terror and nausea, or that Audrey Fletcher tortures another woman with.

Cars can be weapons, they can be armour to shelter behind when you are being shot at, they can be means of escape or pursuit, they can be "cages" for victims.

Phones keep opening things up, making events possible, bringing up North events occurring in the parallel world of the Smoke.

And the shotgun that Jack and Frank had bought clandestinely with two years' worth of saved-up pocket money when they were kids and still on friendly terms, and that Jack finds now in the back of the wardrobe in Frank's bedroom, is of major plot importance on a couple of occasions now.

XXXVI

There are distinctions between beer in a mug and beer "in a thin glass," and between offering someone scotch rather than beer, or scotch in a bottle rather than a glass ("Joy, Joy, look give Jack another drink, no, give him the bloody bottle, that's better, you can't offer a man like Jack drinks in pissing little glasses like that").

And drink can loosen tongues and lower guards; and it can be used as part of the process of killing someone. Killing Frank. Killing... well, I don't want to give too much plot away for those who don't already know it.

XXXVII

The other flow-assister is Lewis's feeling for micro-stretches and closures.

You can see it in a passage like the following, with its cool, deft, elegant progression from the prosaic first sentence, the continuation at that level, but with a bit more infusion of the personal, at the outset of the following sentence, and then the springing of the delayed-information trap, not once but twice.

> I'd sat in the leather stud-back chair with the round seat, and Audrey had poured the drinks and passed them round. She'd been wearing a culotte skirt and a ruffled blouse, a sort of Pop Paisley, and I'd wondered what would happen if Gerald found out that this time next week I'd be screwing her three thousand miles away instead of under his nose.

And there are crescendos and diminuendos in some of the runs of paragraphs that are part of the whole effect of a voice speaking and *shaping* as it speaks. Such as in the deft bit of inserted plot-information in the opening pages:

> I wondered if I'd have time to get some fags from the buffet at Doncaster before my connexion left. If it was open at five to five on a Thursday afternoon in mid-October.
>
> I lit up anyway.
>
> It was funny that Frank never smoked. Most barmen do. In between doing things. Even one drag to make it seem as if they're having a break. But Frank never touched them. Not even a Woody to see what it was like when we were kids down Jackson Street. He never wanted to know.
>
> He didn't drink scotch either.

> I picked up the flask from off the *Standard* and unscrewed the cap and took a pull. The train rocked and a bit of scotch went on my shirt, a biggish spot, just below the collar.
>
> But not as much as had been down the front of the shirt Frank had been wearing when they'd found him. Not nearly so much.
>
> They hadn't even bothered to be careful; they hadn't even bothered to be clever.

Which brings me to those deeper aspects of the novel that I mentioned earlier.

XXXVIII

Jack's Return Home is a novel of shaped and ordered energies, the shapings and orderings of a single psyche. And these are always related to action.

In *Gatsby*, as I have said, the precision is that of Nick, the observer. Gatsby's own gaze is blurred and his shapings imprecise.

He misreads social gestures, such as the merely formal, not-to-be-taken-up invitation to visit the upper-crust couple on horseback who drop by his house. He offends Nick by offering him, too obviously for services rendered, a business "connection." He misunderstands the relationship between Daisy and Tom. And he overdoes things—buys shirts by the bushel, fishes for Daisy with parties that are the equivalent of dynamiting the pond.

Jack's gaze, in contrast, is always precise, and like Hammett's Op in Personville, or Quiller, or Willie Garvin and Modesty Blaise (and *unlike* Chandler's Marlowe fumbling and wisecracking around in the dark in *Farewell My Lovely)*, all his energies are bent towards achieving a definite end. And he knows to a large extent who he is, and who the individuals he is dealing with are, and the kinds of behaviours to be expected of them.

Nevertheless, there are questions with respect to the nature of his energies and drive; which is to say, with respect to the values that are animating him and pulling or driving him forward.

XXXIX

Where Jack's and Frank's boyhood good times together are concerned, the novel is dense with aspiration.

And the aspirations of the two kids are essentially *American* ones, which is to say that they are formed and felt in terms of those shifts in sensibility that were starting in the Forties and Fifties and came into full flower in the Sixties.

America in the Thirties, as seen from England, had been strange, mythical, *alien,* not something that an English kid could easily aspire to go to.

It had been a clutter of disparate images and symbols—gang violences (often in evening clothes), lynchings, chain gangs, cowboys, gimmicry (waffles, milk shakes), riverboat gamblers, black mammies, belles in ringlets and crinolines, comedy that, whether Chaplin's, or Fields', or the Marx Brothers', somehow went over the top into grotesquerie.

Jazz, thanks to the conservatism of Lord Reith's B.B.C., was virtually not *there* except occasionally in a watered-down anglicized version. And American comic-strip figures—Superman, Mutt and Jeff, the Katzenjammer Kids, Smokey Stover—were simply *weird*.

With the Forties, America became more intelligible and easy to assimilate—war movies, G.I's in the flesh, the jazz of the American Forces Network (Glenn Miller, the Dorseys, Harry James), the *noirs*, the shift of movie crews out into actual American streets, the simpler comedy of Abbot and Costello, Bing Crosby and Bob Hope, Red Skelton, the thigh-displaying *sexy* musicals like *Cover Girl* and *Reveille with Beverley*, and so on and so forth.

XL

"As a kid," Jack recalls, "it had always struck me that [the town] was like some western boom town."

It was an American kind of freedom that he and Frank were creating for themselves in the late Forties or early Fifties when they were out together with their treasured double-barrelled shotgun, "placing it in the crook of the arm, just so, like cowboys" at a time when it was highly unusual for urban working-class kids to own real guns.

> You could walk to the top (and there was a top, a small flat plateau covered in grass that whipped about in the wind) and you wouldn't turn round until you got to the plateau and then you'd look down and over the tops of the trees and you'd see the town lying there, just as though it had been chucked down in handfuls: the ring of steelworks, the wolds ten miles away to the right rising up from the river plain, the river itself eight miles away dead ahead, a gleaming broadness, and more wolds, even higher, receding beyond it. And above it all, the broad sky, wider than any other sky could be, soaring and sweeping, pushed along by the north winds.

The rhythms of that lovely passage recall, without being in the least pastiche, the famous long paragraph in *Huckleberry Finn* about watching the dawn come up on the "monstrous big" Mississippi, "sometimes a mile and a half wide. . . and more paleness spreading around . . . and you see the mist curl up off the water, and the east reddens up, . . . and next you've got the full day, and everything smiling in the sun, and the song-birds just going it!"

XLI

And when they lie on their backs looking up at the sky, "with its pink flashes in our eyes," Frank talks, half to himself:

> Jack, he'd say, those seventy-eights I got yesterday in Arcade, don't you reckon that one by the Benny Goodman Sextet *Don't Be That Way,* was the best? That drumming by Gene Krupa. Hell, wouldn't it be great to be able to do that? But if you could, you couldn't do it in this hole. Nobody's interested! They'd say it was a row. You can do things like that in America. They encourage you because they think jazz is dead good. America. That'd be the place, though, wouldn't it?

"Imagine," he goes on:

> Those cars with all those springs that rock back and forwards like a see-saw when you put the brakes on. You can drive one of them when you're sixteen over there. Just think, our kid. Driving one of them along one of those highways wearing a drape suit with no tie, like Richard Widmark, with the radio on real loud listening to Benny Goodman. Cor! I reckon when I leave school I'll go to America. Work my passage. I could easy get a job. Even labourers

> out there get fifty quid a week. Electricians and that can get two hundred. They can. And you can go to pictures at two in morning and see three pictures in one programme. You could get one of those houses with big lawns and no fences.

The free creativity of jazz; those marvellously sprung cars; the insouciance of one of the quintessential good-guy-bad-guy actors (only one other actor is mentioned in the novel; there is no Camp nostalgia here); the free-standing American-suburban houses, so different from the fenced-in, walled-in English ones; the plenitude of triple-feature midnight shows; the fabulous money—a whole culture, in its magical allure, comes alive for us here, as it did for the two brothers.

XLII

But just as Nick Carraway's eye hovers again and again over examples of *pretentious* aspiration—the pseudo-*Hôtel de Ville* palace that Gatsby has rented, the snobbish tacky accumulation of status symbols in Myrtle Wilson's apartment, the haughty Manhattan Blacks in their limousine, and so on—, so too there is a bitter irony at work when the passage that I have just quoted is followed by "I drove down the hill past the houses with the big lawns and no fences."

Jack, in the present now, is "bathing in the rateable value of the yellow street lights," as he passes the "California-style houses," with their curtains "well drawn back to inform the neighbours of the riches smugly placed within"

And his contempt for the upwardly-mobile inhabitants of such houses whom he has observed in Kinnear's Casino is total:

> The clientele thought they were select. These were farmers, garage proprietors, owners of chains of cafés, electrical contractors, builders, quarry owners; the new Gentry. And occasionally, though never with them, their terrible offspring. The Sprite drivers with the accents not quite right, but ten times more like it than their parents, with their suède boots and their houndstooth jackets and their ex-grammar school girlfriends from the semi-detacheds trying for the accent, indulging in a bit of finger pie on Saturday after the halves of pressure beer at the Old Black Swan, in the hope that the finger pie will accelerate the dreams of the Rover for him and the

> mini for her and the modern bungalow, a farmhouse-style place, not too far from the Leeds Motorway for the Friday shopping.

As he remarks, “They were the kind of people who made me know I was right.”

XLIII

But what, then, *is* that rightness that Jack feels “right” about?

Well, the way of life that he has opted for is obviously a chivalric-martial one.

He is a professional man of violence, a warrior, the equivalent of those free-lance mercenary soldiers before the days of national armies, who gave loyal service to their employers but remained free to change employers when it suited them; the equivalent too, of the hired gun in the fiction of the American West, who might remain for a considerable while in the employ of the big rancher and then move on.

There is nothing *chivalrous* about Jack—none of the Gatsbyish idealization of women, let alone the self-sacrificing spirit that leads Gatsby to take the blame for the death of Myrtle Wilson. Jack is unconcerned about fair play, takes every advantage he can, has no hesitation about hitting women when necessary.

But his violences *as* a professional are not wanton or sadistic, any more than are those of the normal professional soldier.

Nor are they machismic, a matter of constantly proving himself, or informed by the ethnic intensities of the Mafia.

XLIV

Like Richard Stark’s Parker, or Jim Thompson’s Doc in *The Getaway*, or the intelligent, and articulate British thief, ‘Robert Allerton,’ whose conversations are transcribed in Tony Parker’s *The Courage of His Convictions* (1959), he is a professional who, qua professional, only uses violence when necessary, and to the degree necessary.

When he wants to immobilize a yobbo at the Baths who tries to stop him walking off with the captive Thorpey, he does so with a short deft punch to the gut. And after doing the same later that night to Cliff

Brumby, he says, and obviously means, "Sorry about that . . . . Some things go against the grain."

XLV

And if the criminal structure inside which he operates is an "American" one—bosses, corrupt cops, handguns, violences at times of an atrociousness that would have been inconceivable in pre-1939 England (compare the crimescape here with that of Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*), it is also one in which a good deal of non-violent and up to a point civilized socializing is possible, in a distinctly English manner.

It is, in fact, curiously dandyish in its way, with its expensively tailored clothing, its rituals of hospitality and deference, its at times oddly formal but credible-sounding turns of phrase ("Protecting my goods and chattels," "Just the occasional friendly persuasion [Brumby is speaking] with owners of property I don't own").

So it is possible for Jack and smiling Con McCarty—there, switchblade in pocket, to fetch him back to the Smoke "even if you don't particularly want to come"—to relax temporarily in the neutral ground of The Cecil and talk good humouredly about football. Which doesn't, of course, prevent Jack, later on that evening, from immobilizing Con too:

XLVI

In effect, Jack has found his niche and role inside a system whose structures, players, and rules are known, and in which if one is good at what one does, there is no need for any deep anxieties.

He himself is *very* good—strong, fast, ruthless when needs be, physically fearless, skillful at psychological manipulation, a rapid and effective improviser, a games-player alert to the games-playing of others, like Cyril Kinnear at the poker game:

> He never looked at me, but I knew, and he knew that I knew. He didn't like anything very much at the moment, from the way I'd got in [to the Casino penthouse] to the way I was sitting. But he was forced to give me this old pals routine not because he wanted

> to save face in front of his mateys, but because I knew he was narked.

Like Kinnear genially taking Gum Boots for a thousand pounds, Jack is an *expert*; the real thing. And he is content with being an expert. His plan to be in South Africa in a few days' time, "Working for Stein. In the sun. With Audrey getting brown all over. And no rain." is simply more of the same.

You can see why, too.

XLVII

The way of life that Jack has attained to isn't a conventionally hedonistic one. We never see him eating, for example ("'I don't eat breakfast,' I said"), and he never comments on the quality of the (unnamed) scotch that he consumes.

No, what he really enjoys is his ongoing alertness, his functional knowledge, his integrated seeing and doing, a condition in which he is never at a loss for a response and in which nothing is formless.

It is an essentially comedic and agonistic mode of being, in which he is sardonically aware of the divided nature of others ("Whether it was the scotch or genuine feeling that was breaking Eddie up didn't really matter because whichever way it was, right now Eddie believed completely in the sincerity of his words"), and in which violences are often games-like in a contact-sport way—problem-solving activities requiring a lot of skill, and satisfying because solutions are indeed possible.

XLVIII

The piece of driving by which he insolently immobilizes Peter's car ("He loved his shiny red motor. He kept it looking very nice") is high comedy.

> My car picked up speed. It wasn't going fast, but it was going fast enough for what I wanted to do. I kept it going straight for the Jag. Straight for where Peter the Dutchman was dangling his legs over the edge of the bonnet. He didn't move. He was still staring into my eyes. I kept on going straight, right up until the last second, and

> then I wrenched the steering wheel over. The car drifted broadside on to the Jag. The back of my car began to gain momentum. Peter the Dutchman moved. Backwards over the bonnet. His legs up in the air, his cigarette still in his mouth. I pulled the steering wheel back again and straightened the car up. At the same time, I pulled the hand-brake on and immediately let it out again. The boot of my car waltzed into the side of the Jag and waltzed back again into the straight. I'd hit the Jag between the bumper and the front wheel. I took off down the road … .

And the savagery with which he copes with a car-load of heavies has the speed and crispness of the great Chaplin shorts:

> Three doors opened … . The bloke who'd wanted to get on with it started to climb out of the front seat. I grabbed the door handle and pulled the door wide and with all my force slammed the door into him before he could do anything about it. I timed it just right. He was halfway in and halfway out. The top edge of the door caught him on his forehead and on part of the bridge of his nose and the side edge caught a kneecap. He was very hard hit. He fell back across the front seats and started being sick. I jumped on to the bonnet and kicked the driver on the side of his head before he'd had time to turn round completely after getting out of his seat. He went over … . "

XLIX

As will be obvious by now, this is not a novel that you would recommend to everyone.

But there is nothing gratuitous about the violences.

And in the all-the-way commitment of Jack's mind-set, we have something very unusual in British fiction, something in fact more Franco-American than British in its rigour and sustained intensity.

It is what Thom Gunn was feeling his way towards in his poetry in the Fifties, with his voiced contempt for guilt-ridden depressiveness and British literary flabbiness of the Stephen Spender variety ("I think of all the toughs through history/ And thank heaven they lived, continually").

Jack, like Gatsby, is a self-created figure, and the self that he has created, after "half killing our Dad" and leaving Frank behind in "this hole" with the encapsulated dreams of heroic action on his bookshelves, is essentially a Nietzschean one.

L

But the book is by no means a simple-minded endorsement of Nietzscheanism.

On the contrary, it is an exploration of instabilities within it, instabilities of a kind (though I won't refer any more to him here) that D.H. Lawrence was a good deal concerned with.

Like Gatsby, Jack's poise is unstable and vulnerable, and not just in the sense that if he misstepped and got sorted out, his jaunty momentum ("One is always nearer by not standing still," as Gunn put it about California bikeriders) could skid to a crippled halt. Or because, like Gatsby, he wears a mask that can be torn off, or nurses a bubble of illusions that can be burst.

What we have, rather, is the re-opening in him, during this return *home*, of a whole zone of feeling that he has successfully covered over.

The figure of Frank is crucial here, and with it an implicit deep critique of Jack himself.

LI

Jack's compulsion to find out who murdered Frank ("He's my bloody *brother*") and kill them is not a rationalk one.

The two brothers have had nothing to do with each other for years, and Frank himself, self-controlled and, despite his martial reading, pacifistic, would emphatically not have wanted that outlaw vengeance from a brother whom he had cast out into the wilderness.

Moreover, it is ironical when Jack tries indignantly to elicit *moral* reactions to the murder from others. Frank's girlfriends's, Margaret's, "Look, I'm me, right? You're not. We're what we are, like it or not" is, in effect, a voicing of Jack's own dominant ethos.

But the visceral intensity of Jack's crusade, and the savage disproportionality of a couple of his punishings or would-be punishings, is psychologically convincing, all the more because he doesn't analyze his own motives.

And it's not just the evinced local contempt for Jack-the-gone-to-London-lad ("They hadn't even bothered to be careful; they hadn't even bothered to be clever") that keeps him thrusting on.

LII

For all his Nick-Carraway-like poise, charm (when he needs it), and social adaptability, Jack's, like Nick's, is essentially an alienated consciousness.

He moves manipulatively among the weaknesses of others, and with a strong sense of those weaknesses—the pretensions, the self-deceptions, the muddle-mindedness, the bad taste, the crumminess, even in his own profession.

The only fellow-criminal who he isn't critical of is smiling Con McCarty, and the only satisfactory woman—satisfactory to him—is Audrey Fletcher.

All the others are whores, dullards, sexual flaunters, or, like his forty-ish landlady, Edna Garfoot, with her green underwear and OK bum, "muscular but not as big as it would have been if she didn't look after herself," sexual over-demanders. His mother is virtually not mentioned at all.

But it is a *dangerous* affair that he is having with Audrey, who is as little innocent as himself, and who is capable of "marking" another woman—stripped, tied—with a lighted cigarette. And what Gerald would do were he in fact to find out (as he does) that Jack has been screwing her under his nose doesn't bear thinking about.

LIII

No, where the gentler emotions are concerned, it is Frank above all who counts, the Frank of boyhood warmth, openness, and shared enjoyments and hopes at a time when Jack himself was still innocent ("before I met Albert Swift. Before the fight between me and my dad.

Before the driving. Before Ansley School. Before a lot of things")—Frank and now, to some extent, Frank's daughter, the grieving Doreen, who may in fact (given Jack's pre-nuptial seduction by Frank's sluttish wife Muriel) be Jack's own daughter.

If the novel is about success, it is also about loss, about a shutting out, in the interests of that success, of a stabilizing tenderness. In a sense, Frank has been both Jack's Nick Carraway and his Daisy.

And what increasingly emerges is that Jack's own values have been involved in the killing of Frank.

LIV

As a kid, he was emotionally on the side of the tearaway Albert Swift, who became his role-model and criminal employer, when Albert humiliated Frank in the club where Jack and Frank were enjoying a nice quiet game of billiards together ("it was really snug, the green cloth had that silent cosiness and we were really enjoying ourselves, saying nowt, taking our time, watching the nice straight angles the billiard balls were tracing on the table.").

And things blow apart for Jack now as he learns how the sexual corrupting of Doreen by Albert and others in the blue-movie business has led, with an implacable logic of consequences like that of the billiard table, to Frank's death in the crashed car "off top road," with scotch down the front of his shirt.

The savagely punitive violences of the last quarter of the novel, after Jack has shifted into top gear, are very different in spirit from the agonistic ones that I have spoken of. In effect, the personal finally and fully overrides the professional.

Reading the last quarter of the novel is a strange, compelling, in some ways unique literary experience.

LV

Jack, as I have said, is a convincing man of violence. (Can we imagine Gatsby, Daisy's Gatsby, *our* Gatsby standing in front of a fellow bootlegger and, Jimmy-Cagney-like, pulling the trigger? Let alone stabbing him?)

And Jack is *very* violent in these pages—knifes one man in the solar plexus (slowly; twice), shoots a crawling man in the buttock before shooting him in the face, prepares to throw another off a balcony, punches and half drowns a woman, some of this done deliberately, some of it furiously.

LVI

As the attacks on the early Bond books testified to, there is a strong English tradition of hostility to "nasty" violences by heroes.

It is a tradition in which George Orwell played a major role in his 1944 polemic against the Americanized "fascism" of James Hadley Chase's *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*.

"In another of Mr. Chase's books," he reports,

> the hero, who is intended to be a sympathetic and perhaps even noble character, is described as stamping on somebody's face and then, having crushed the man's mouth in, grinding his heel round and round in it."

Chase had lifted the incident—as he lifted other things from the Americans—from Jonathan Latimer's *Murder in the Madhouse* (1935).

LVII

Thriller heroes normally are people to whom dreadful things are *done*, or almost done, or *may* be done—Quiller, Giles Yeoman, the anonymous narrators of *Rogue Male* and *The Ipcress File*, Bond in that seatless chair in *Casino Royale* with the carpet-beater flipping up under it.

It was very unusual, in the pre-Spillane years, when John Weather in Kenneth Millar's *Blue City* snapped both of a gunman's wrists across his knee ("I was getting pretty sick of Garland").

Or when Latimer's private detective Karl Craven in *Solomon's Vineyard* (published in England in 1941) beat a clubfooted gangster's face to a pulp after jamming his head between the bars of a jail cell. ("At last he slid down on the cement, his head still sticking out the

bars... I kicked his head a few times; but it wasn't worth it. He was out cold.")

And though it is common to refer to the imitators of Spillane, there is still only one Mike Hammer. Figures like Jack Baynes' Morocco Jones were non-starters.

LVIII

Normally the atrocious is something out there—something done by the villains: by the crime boss Kersh in *Blue City* methodically slashing the face of his wife; by the soft-spoken Belgian in Brian Cleeve's powerful *Vice Isn't Private* calmly supervising the *strappado* dislocation of a man's arms; by IRA kneecappers; by sjambok-wielding South African police agents; by the Mafia "soldiers" of *The Godfather*; by the various at times quite frightening villains of John D. MacDonald and John McPartland.

When the narrator engages in atrocities, we normally want either a villain-victim so unpleasant that no punishment is too bad for him, or else an obvious authorial disassociation from what is going on.

It can be very disturbing to be drawn into the vortex of a first-person narrator when neither of those condition obtains, such as with the appalling small-town sheriff of Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* or the Black-passing-as-White revenge-seeker of Boris Vian's 1946 Sadean pseudo-American *J'Irai cracher sur vos tombes* ("I have never in my life heard a woman scream like that....")

And something else makes the last part of *Jack's Return Home* different and special.

LIX

A problem that has obviously faced a number of writers of first-person narratives in which crime finally doesn't pay is this: What do you do with a narrator who during most of the novel is confidently describing the confident doings of an earlier self, but who by the end is describing a self for whom that kind of confidence is no longer possible?

James M. Cain more or less coped with it in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity* by sticking to a relatively grey and

nasty style throughout, but blew things in *Serenade* by unconscionable stylistic shifts.

Jim Thompson in *The Killer Inside Me* had his narrator more or less obviously crazy throughout, so that the shift into an intensified prison-cell craziness at the end didn't come as too much of a shock.

And Vian's *I Spit on Your Grave* was so artificial throughout in its pseudo-Americanism and its deliberate scandalousness that even a shift from first-person to third-person narrative in the final chapter didn't wreck it.

But that intelligent and very conscious craftsman Charles Williams simply blew it in novels like *River Girl* and *A Touch of Death*, where he was quite unable to harmonize the firm and lucid prose during most of each book with the crack-ups at the end. And John D. MacDonald fell into much the same pit in his Williamsish *Soft Touch*.

These problems become more acute, too, the more unpleasant the violences in a book become. There aren't, of course, problems for a writer who is totally behind the violences of his narrator-hero, as Spillane is behind Hammer's. But if you are a "civilized" writer...?

LX

In contrast to Fitzgerald, who as he ruefully acknowledged in a letter, allowed Gatsby in effect to split into two characters—the bootlegger who "may have killed a man" (only one? how innocent those days were) and the nice, romantic, self-improving Midwesterner—, Lewis displays a remarkable and courageous integrity.

The novel remains wholly Jack's, an absolutely consistent working out of his vengeance and the dynamics of his anger, so that at every point you feel that, yes, this is exactly what he *would* do, however unpleasant or "unfair."

There is no discreet authorial withdrawal from the narrator, no apologetic shrugs or raised eyebrows in the direction of the civilized reader. And Jack's voice too never changes or falters.

Which is to say that Lewis's envisioning of events, and his grip on details, never falters either, as the momentum builds.

LXI

Jack's fury on several occasions is not *described* furiously.

Both the comedic and the everyday aspects remain alongside the punitive ones.

After the intense shoot-out at Albert Swift's house,

> I squealed the car on to the road and as I straightened up I noticed a group of people walking down the opposite side of the road towards the waste ground. There were two women and two kids and one of the women was pushing a pram. Lucille and Greer and the kids returning from the afternoon's shopping. Well, there'd be more than *Dr. Who* to look forward to when they got home.
>
> I was going hard but so was the patrol car. I overtook Eric and Con and we all exchanged impassive glances as I turned right at the top of the road.

And when Jack furiously beats some of the truth about Frank's killing out of Glenda, "She was up against the bath now, pressing herself against *the simulated marble*" (italics mine). Subsequently she sits beside him in her car "pressing the plaster she'd put on her lip to make sure it was sticking" .

The violences have the unexpectedness, the uncliché freshness, of Tom Buchanan's breaking of Myrtle Wilson's nose with "a short deft movement of his open hand," or the discovery of Myrtle's body crouched in the road, one breast hanging down like a flap.

LXII

The momentum does indeed build, pulling the reader along with it in rather the way that a poem with strong syntax pulls you along without any stopping-points along the way.

But the intensification doesn't come from a simple speed-up of the action—more shooting, more fast driving, etc.

And though things are going wrong for Jack, they are not going *hectically* wrong; not permeating his consciousness with a sense of doom.

He is more intent, focussed, concentrated than ever, and more effectively manipulative in conversation, as he uncovers the full facts about Frank's death and sets in motion the machinery of his vengeance.

The intensification is more complex and subtle.

LXIII

After the superb thirteen-page shoot-out at Albert's house, everyone is after Jack or can be assumed to be after him—the button men (the scuffers, the cops), now in action for the first time, Kinnear and his heavies, Con, the Fletchers.

So that there is less and less time in which he can do what he set out to do, and less and less room for error.

Unlike Hammett's Op cleaning up Personville by an increasingly intricate series of manoeuvres that set crook against crook, or the narrator of Ross Thomas's brilliant *The Fools in Town Are on Our Side* (1970) doing the same in Swankerton, down off the Gulf Coast, Jack cannot retire to his hotel room at night, pour himself a drink, and stretch out on the bed.

Everything that he does in this part of the novel has to be done, and is done, unhesitatingly.

And as he concentrates on what is in front of him, taking the next step, and the next, and the next, an increasing number of things hover unresolved: unclosed in a novel of closures.

LXIV

Jack himself does not allow the elsewhere to flood into his consciousness, even after he has learned about Audrey's dreadful fate at the hands of the enraged Gerald .

In his long, patient, fact-finding conversation with Cliff Brumby, he can note how "He walked past me and went into the lounge and sat down on the divan and placed the briefcase on the table the way he'd done earlier. I sat down opposite him, just to complete the picture."

And later, waiting for the small hours of the morning, he is able to fall asleep for a couple of hours in his car.

But the reader is increasingly conscious of time's wingéd chariot, and of the rapidly dwindling future that awaits Jack's attention, a future without Audrey "lying in the sun. Getting brown all over." A future in fact, with Eden lost, that will almost certainly be a brief and/or highly unpleasant one for him.

And there is a mounting backlog of ethical problems.

LXV

Not only have four of the persons involved in Frank's death become increasingly *non*-monstrous in the disclosure of their dreads, anxieties, entrapment. (Albert's killing is especially horrifying.)

The very decent Keith Lacy, who Jack has conned into helping him by appealing to his feeling for Frank, has been savagely beaten, as Jack knew from the outset he would be ("They'd marked him very well. They'd made a point of it. They'd done a proper job....").

And as a result of his quest, Audrey, whom he likewise assured that she had nothing to fear, is "a write-off," her face slashed by Gerald beyond repair.

LXVI

Yet there is no conventional crime-doesn't-pay authorial dissociation at work here.

And when at the end, in virtually his only moment of inattentiveness in the novel, Jack makes a fatal error, we do not feel that he is deservedly being "punished" by his creator, any more than we do with Hamlet, or Macbeth, or Othello, or other Shakespearean screw-ups.

We do not feel that his whole mode of being has been finally, and properly, negated, his crimes and their just desserts showing up the wrongness of all that he has aspired to.

Any more than we feel that Gatsby's aspirings have been negated by the revealed foolishness of his fixation on Daisy, or Nick's by his decision to give up what he hoped for in the East and return home.

Like Fitzgerald, Lewis is able to deal with defeat without becoming depressive.

LXVII

Just as there was a grim and intricate logic at work in the events leading up to Frank's death, so there is a poignant *les jeux sont faits* feeling to these last darkening pages.

Jack is indeed, in part, behaving monstrously himself.

After a lyrical stretch recalling bicycling with Frank along the summer road ("The expectation, the excitement,... the marvellous feeling of the mudguard warm from the sun under my palm" of that symbol of adult success and freedom, a Lagonda parked by the side of the road), we jump back to the present in which

> There was a movement behind me. A shoe scraped against one of the rear doors. Nothing happened for a minute. Then there was more movement. The movement became frantic. Lips fought against sticking plaster. Wrists ground against rope and against each other. The moment reached its climax and then there was an exhausted silence.

And when he catches a couple of hours' sleep with terrified exhausted Margaret still there behind him (whom actually he *isn't* planning to kill), it is to dream of

> lying on a beach with Audrey and she was wearing a bikini and she had a handkerchief over her face to keep the sun off. But it was very cold and the wind kept rippling the edge of the handkerchief and I was panic-stricken in case the wind blew the handkerchief away from her face. But I couldn't let her know how I felt so I had to lie there propped up on my elbow, looking at her, saying the kinds of things to her that she used to like me to say. Finally I couldn't take it any longer and I got up from her side and ran towards the sea and kept running until the sea was over my head.

LXVIII

But in a brilliant piece of authorial irony, it is in these end-game pages that we are also given our only glimpse of conventional Sixties

romanticism when Jack visits the Lennon-looking dope-pusher Storey, with his "very long hair, parted in the middle," his "flowered shirt with a high collar, a kipper tie patterned with fleur de lys, a grey herring-bone suit and black boots," his "circular glasses with gold rims" on the end of his nose.

> On one wall there was an original poster for *King Kong*. On another there was Humphrey Bogart. There was a fruit machine behind his desk that had been painted in pop colours. I wondered if it was one of Cliff's.

For all the fault-lines in his psyche, Jack the driven moralist—and he *is* a moralist; he has been judgmental throughout, even if not conventionally—has been as far from that kind of flabby *tout comprendre* self-indulgence as he has from the upwardly mobile conformism of the new gentry with their California-type houses with the big lawns and their "terrible offspring."

And as in *Gatsby*, the stylistic values displayed in the novel remain untarnished to the end—the values of intelligence, "grasp," sensibility, a sense of form, a valuing of truth and closure. And the last page of the novel, impeccable in its tone, has a genuine all-passion-spent calm.

I won't quote it, though, not wishing to spoil things for readers not yet acquainted with the book.

LXIX

Like *The Great Gatsby*, *Jack's Return Home* is both a classic and classical—shaped, built, thought-through, cared for at every point, formally impeccable.

But classics can be hard-won, and like *Gatsby*, into which Fitzgerald had put so much work and so much of himself, *Jack's Return Home* is unique in its author's oeuvre.

The remarkableness of what Lewis has accomplished in it becomes even clearer when viewed in the light of his subsequent works.

A number of the same concerns are apparent in them—self-affirmation, guilt, alienation, manipulation, violence, the persistence of the past in the present—, and some of the writing is excellent.

But there are odd disjunctions in them, and at times exasperating, at times puzzling, failures of execution.

LXX

It isn't that, like poor Fitzgerald agonizing his alcoholic way through *Tender is the Night* and deluding himself about a comeback with *The Last Tycoon*, Lewis has been attempting things that simply couldn't be brought off.

One book, admittedly, was doomed from the start—*Boldt* (1976), with its corrupt-cop *American* narrator. Ironically, in contrast to Deighton and Woodhouse, Lewis had no ear for American speech, and the American city scene is so thinly there that one can only conclude that Lewis either hadn't been in the States or hadn't been there long enough.

Another, *Jack Carter and the Mafia Pigeon* (1977), set largely in Majorca, is simply a short story, and not a particularly interesting one, stretched out unconscionably to novel length.

But *Plender* (1971), *Billy Rags* (1973), and *Jack Carter's Law* (1974) all had the potential of being finished up and brought at every point to the kind of clarity that Lewis achieved in *Jack's Return Home.*

LXXI

With its alternating narrators bound increasingly tightly in a master-slave relationship with its roots in the sexual and social humiliation of schooldays, *Plender* is remarkably unpleasant reading, awash in the guilt feeling and explicit sexual malaises of which *Jack's Return Home* is so free. And the hugger-mugger ending is simply a cop-out, leaving crucial issues and relationships unresolved.

But there is a good deal of daring in Lewis's thoroughgoing self-projection into two psychological cripples, and into the working out of a vengeance much crueller than Carter's.

Billy Rags is brilliant in its prison parts, with its continuous psychings-out and power-challenges, its carefully observed cast of criminals, and its narrator who is not identical with Carter but who has the same kind of sardonic jauntiness.

Its strengths recall the prison section of Losey's *The Criminal* (1960)..

But the prison narrative is irritatingly intercut with underwritten present-tense episodes from the past that show the potentially good Billy Cracken on the road to becoming the notorious heavy that we see now.

And after his successful prison break, the novel collapses into a mediocre doomed-man-on-the-run narrative made even worse by the would-be warmth of Jack's relationship with a colourless wife and even more colourless son Little Timmy, and a gratuitously punitive ending.

The novel should have stayed a prison novel and culminated in Cracken's escape. It could have been a prison classic.

LXXII

Jack Carter's Law, which has the look of being a return to where the money was after the depressiveness of *Plender* and *Billy Rags* is a prequel to *Jack's Return Home*, and Lewis solves certain problems neatly by having it told in the past-present tense that he also used at the end of *Jack's Return Home* ("I am sitting in the car, and he comes up to me and says . . . .," that kind of thing), though at the cost of leaving out any remembrance of things past.

It is narrated with verve, though in a slightly coarser voice than that of the original Carter, contains a good deal of effectively handled violent action, and in its presentation of a consistently grubby and tacky criminal London where police corruption is a normal part of the scene, is probably closer to actualities than is the first Carter book.

But it has too much the feel of having been done fast with an eye to a second Michael Caine movie.

In parts it is underwritten, at times to a point where one has trouble figuring out the first time through what is going on. It is abominably copy-edited, with inadequate punctuation, typos, and solecisms on far too many pages. And Lewis not only scaled the look of Gerald Fletcher downwards, but rewrote the character of Peter the Dutchman to bring it into line with the dyed punk hair, maxi-coat, and pink-tinted glasses of the movie.

LXXIII

With the pathologically sadistic husband-and-wife gang leaders of *GBH (Grievous Bodily Harm)*, we move even further downwards, and away altogether from the comedic. It is Lewis's blackest book, with nothing in the least amusing about its violences.

And it has a kind of defiant integrity. Lewis must have known that he was writing something that almost no-one would like, let alone approve of.

But it too is underwitten in places, as if he simply couldn't be bothered to flesh out fully what was quite clear to *him*. And the ending is a first-person-narrator collapse into derangement, compounded by a gratuitous injection of the supernatural. Apart from *Jack's Return Home* and *Jack Carter's Law*, Lewis has always had trouble with his endings.

LXXIV

As I said, it is an odd pattern.

In part, no doubt, Lewis was working with moral and emotional problems that, outside of *Jack's Return Home*, he couldn't fully order. (A "serious" critical study would no doubt devote a fair amount of attention to the relationship between *Jack's Return Home* and *Plender*.)

In part too—and relatedly—there must have been strains involved in going so dead against the grain of the Orwellian tradition with respect to violences, though I think that Orwell himself would have read Lewis sympathetically.

But for those very reasons, in addition to his large natural talent, he was by far the most interesting British thriller writer of the past quarter-century.

Like Fitzgerald, you feel that he is always working close to the horns. (It is easy to forget how much risk-taking self-revelation there was in works like *Tender is the Night* and *The Beautiful and the Damned*.)

And he has done things that no-one else had done, and made fresh work by others possible—movies like *Get Carter* and *The Long Good*

Friday ; the TV serial *The Widows*; novels like the interesting if uneven thrillers of Derek Raymond. He is still, as writers go, a young man, and it is to be hoped that he still has work to give us.

In the meantime, *Jack's Return Home* remains what I have said it is—the best thriller for many years, and the nearest thing to an English *Gatsby*.

Drafted in Ajijic, Mexico, 1990
Revised and put online in Halifax Nova Scotia, 2002

Postscript, 2002–2013

i

When I wrote this article down in Mexico in 1990, Ted Lewis was only a name to me. I was not even aware that he had died eight years earlier. What I have learned about him since, especially from Brian Green's three articles online and Paul Duncan's "All the Way Home: Ted Lewis" in *Crime Time* #9 has only increased my regard fo him, though without changing my estimation of the books.

What follow are simply a few jottings.

ii

Life was obviously very difficult for him, and it seems miraculous that he accomplished what he did.

For all the exuberant energy recalled by persons who knew him as a lad, when he may have been trying a little *too* hard to be one of the big boys, there must have must have been something in him earlier (and feared by him?) of the all-too-believable drippy protagonist of *The Rabbit*, hopelessly enmeshed in oedipal resentments, desperate for his father's approval, incompetent with girls, and unable to cope with "rough" boys from further down the social ladder.

How marvellous that he could have remade himself and become the totally authoritative author of *Jack's Return Home*, authoritative beyond the reach of parental irony or disapproval.

But what a shocking moment it is, as told by Paul Duncan, when his Dad turns to Toby Eady, Ted's agent, at a get-together in Toby's flat before the premiere of *Get Carter* and asks Eady, "When's Ted going to start doing some proper work then?"

Maybe he was being humorous? The father in *The Rabbit* seems a bit smarter and more alert than the protagonist (or almost the author) seems aware of. But of course that only makes him more of a psychological threat.

iii

Ted's marrying Jo must have been enormously important for him, strengthening him, giving him life-courage, enabling him to *dare*, to reach for the brass ring. As Zelda had done for Scott.

> *Then wear the gold hat if that will move her;*
> *If you can bounce high, bounce for her too,*
> *Till she cries "Lover, gold-hatted high-bouncing lover,*
> *I must have you."* [Epigraph to *Gatsby*]

And what a marvellous woman Jo comes across as in Duncan's account.

Marvellous to have a wife who not only reads the whole of the novel because she's typing it, without continually wincing and in good protective wifely fashion trying to make him tone things down ("for his own good," naturally), but actually comes up with a detail like having Jack throw Brumby, well, *start* to throw Brumby off the balcony outside his and Glenda's love nest.

It must have been exhilarating for Ted to feel that she was looking at *everything* that the darker recesses of his creative mind contained, without disapproving of him and wanting him to be nice and normal and tame and dull like others.

> *Everything of which he could control the locality he did in front of her all that afternoon. Never once did he look up at her. He made it stronger that way, and did it for himself, too, as well as for her. Because he did not look up to ask if it pleased he did it all for himself inside, and it strengthened him, and yet he did it for her,*

> *too. But he did not do it for her at any loss to himself. He gained by it all through the afternoon.*
>
> Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*

Plus the almost immediate approval of Michael Caine—Michael *Caine*, Lem Deighton's Harry Palmer onscreen—, willing to take a co-producer chance and play with fierce conviction, and no regard for his *Alfie*-type image, the Carter of the 1971 movie. (Though with a sidelining of Ted himself during the filming, when he must have been conscious of things being done just a little on the cheap.)

iv

Ted couldn't but have known, as a reader of thrillers himself who saw with an artist's eye, how good, how really good, how *there* his novel was.

After which, the Fitzgeraldian slid by down from the sunlit peak, cursed with the seeming blessing of a contract requiring virtually a book a year from someone who was no John D. MacDonald or James Hadley Chase and couldn't just pump them out, especially after having, like Fitzgerald in *Gatsby*, already dealt with so many themes and problems, reaching to the outer edges of his interior life, so that creative energy was lost.

So, Fitzgerald again, he drank and drank, partly in the hopes of increase the creative flow, and partly to deaden the pain of knowing that what he was doing was not as good as what he had done, and also, probably, to degrade himself into a beast from whom a continuing tenderness toards Jo and the kids couldn't reasonably be expected. A pattern that helped to kill Hemingway.

But one has to be grateful as a reader for what one can get, so how do the remaining books hold up?

Well, there are *no* good parts in *Jack Carter and the Mafia Pigeon* or *Boldt*. But the prison portion of *Billy Rags* is still fine, and *Plender* is still powerful and painful enough in my mind for me not to want to re-immerse myself in it.

Jack Carter's Law gets better on each rereading as familiarity fills in the information missing on a first reading. and feels like Ted giving

himself the go at movie writing that he hadn't had when preparations were being made for filming *Jack's Return Home*. It would make a great movie.

Jack's voice is interestingly different, too, from the earlier one—more sardonic, more knowing, more unillusioned; older. Like Ted's own inner voice by then, perhaps, with more knowledge now about the grubby London crime-and-police-corruption scene. Post-Sixties, you might say. The open-faced friendly Ted on the back of *Jack's Return Home* has been replaced by the mean looking guy with sideburns sitting at a bar on *Jack Carter's Law*. He had probably sat at a good many pub and club bars and become acquainted with actual gangsters (British style), like the East End Krays, and the south-of-the-river Richardsons, and no doubt "Mad" Frankie Fraser. My own amateur take on the Richardsons (see mmmm) is that they were much less sinister than Ted made of them in *Billy Rags* and *GBH.*

But he was really *working* at it, too, lots of good settings, powerful scenes, well-honed dialogue, good details. An almost hallucinatory vividness, often. Things absolutely there for him in his mind's eye, so that he only has to write them down.

And generosity of incident. The *writing* isn't cynical, he's really trying for the brass ring again. Which of course makes it all the more a pity that an editor hadn't been able to take care of the blips that I mentioned. But you learn to ignore those after a bit, st last if you haven't been pencilling in the margins.

v

Curiously, the book may be longer than it seems, since dialogue is often run on inside a paragraph, rather than the speakers being set one below the other in the normal fashion as it was in *Jack's Return Home*.

And I still haven't been able to decide whether the at times very long paragraphs are long because an editor hadn't done his work or because Ted *wanted* them to be that way, wanted things to be just a bit blurry at times, a bit running-on, not all neat and crisp and tidy.

After all, things aren't neat and crisp and tidy for Jack, he's in the middle of things, trying to figure out what the *hell's* going on. And I

can’t say I’ve noticed spots where this or that long paragraph could be naturally divided.

vi

It must really have got to Ted that the book wasn’t filmed. It would have made a marvelous movie, as he certainly knew, Maybe it was ahead of its time. Movies like *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* were in the future., Transposed with sufficient rigor, it could have been a great ong-Kong movie

There had been media squawks about the violence in *Get Carter*, an outraged review in *Time* making me determined not to miss it. *Jack Carter’s Law*, if done properly, wouldn’t have earned any bouquets, and I imagine that Michael Caine, whose courage as actor-producer had made *Get Carter* possible, wouldn’t have wanted any further aggro.

Which would have caused an obvious problem since for many of us he *was* Carter. I still see him and hear him, or someone very like him, when I am reading the book.

But a curious thing about *Get Carter* was how, while some of the actors simply *were* the characters in the book—I mean, when you’re reading it you’re seeing the Thorpey, Con, Edna, Keith, Doreen, Eric of the movie— others, especially John Osborne as Kinnear, were entirely different and yet still absolutely right. As were some of the other transposition, such as the ferry replacing the waste-land brothel.

I’d thought at one point that Edward Woodward might have been OK as Carter.

Was there a problem with the name, I wonder, President Jimmy having been elected just after it appeared?

vii

GBH [Grievous Bodily Harm] becomes even more intense when you think of Ted alone now, or living at his mother’s maybe, and away from all the drama and high hopes and daring of his own brief London glory days, and drinking or trying not to drink, and writing about the minimalist present experiencings of George Fowler hiding out and

alone in the out-of-season seaside town, intercut with the sequence of errors and misinterpretings that had resulted in the eventual loss of everything, including the only person he ever loved, during his days as gangland boss.

Jack losing Audrey through his own doings, George Fowler losing Jean. Allegories of the mind? And self-(authorial)-condemnation and self-punishing at the end of it. A bleak, stern, uncompromising book, a work of strong integrity, with no apologies and no prettifyings, and what I have come to feel is admirable prose.

viii

One reason why I go on enjoying *Jack Carter's Law* is that, uniquely, there *isn't* self-punishment at the end, perhaps because this one time the hero is using all his energies in the service of others.

And it's a success story. And it ends with a joke. Like the buoyant Bill Crane novels of Jonathan Latimer in the Thirties, or *Solomon's Vineyard*, which Ted must surely have read before he wrote *Jack's Return Home.*

More and more, Latimer and the Hammett of *Red Harvest* seem to me the classic tough private-eye novelists who last. As Lewis lasts. While Chandler fades like old smart-ass Forties copies of *Time* magazine

But here's yet another admirable thing about *Jack's Return Home, Jack Carter's Law*, and *GBH*.

Though I'm sure Ted read *Red Harvest*, and *Solomon's Vineyard*, and *Blue City*, and presumably other thriller writers, such as (chancing my arm) Brian Cleeve, James Hadley Chase, and Gold Medal authors like Charles Williams, John McPartland, and John D. MacDonald, I simply can't detect any pastiche in his prose, or any borrowed incidents.

There are passages in Derek Raymond, especially in *How the Dead Live*, that are pure Lewis, but also perfectly effective in their own right, so that it's a pleasure recognizing the overlapping of two independent minds.

But I can do no stylistic matchings for Ted Lewis in his three best books, not even with *Gatsby*.

ix

He was all his own self. He was amazing. And he died invisibly at forty-two, a year or two younger than Scott Fitzgerald, preserving till the end, like Fitzgerald, and despite all the wastage, his artistic integrity.

For he *was* an artist. How many "real" novelists from those years, I mean English ones, come within streets of him? Or will last. As he has lasted.

> *What thou lovest well remains,*
> *the rest is dross*
> *What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee*
> *What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage*
>
> Ezra Pound, *Canto LXXXI*

x

Thanks to the documentary movie-maker Will Fraser (not a relative), I was able in 2004 to read Ted's first novel, the first-person-narrative *All the Way Home and All the Night Through* (1965). It is surprisingly good.

The events are a long way (except geographically) from those of *Jack's Return Home*. Basically, this is just a narrative of the sexual relationships of someone at a provincial art school where the students, at least those whom we see, appear to have no strong curiosity about anything except who is getting into whose pants. (Ted himself had gone to Hull Art School.)

But he already has a remarkable ear for speech, his protagonist is much brighter, more manipulative, and taken more seriously by his peers than the wimp of *The Rabbit*, and when he becomes involved in a relationship with a nice girl that temporarily taps into a deep reservoir of romantic idealism in him, you read along with a queasy fascination. Obviously, at least if you've read the later books, it will all go smash. The question is how, and in answering it, Lewis takes us all-too-believably into a divided consciousness that must have been essentially his own, and from which you can see Jack Carter evolving.

The narrator is already drinking far too much, and is clinically aware of the screw-ups that result, and of the rottenness of his own behaviour, especially to the nice girl, who really does love him. In his awareness of what's going wrong, and his inability to do anything about it, the book reminds me of Scott Fitzgerald's second novel, *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922), in which Fitzgerald was already diagnosing what would in fact go wrong between him and Zelda.

But this isn't Midlands-drab. The feel for speech is excellent, the paragraphs of self-analysis are clear and shapely, the lyrical descriptions of land-and-sea-scapes recall the lyrical passages in *Jack's Return Home*, and throughout there is the drama of knowing that this is by the author-to-be of that masterpiece, with the Furies lying in wait for him down the road.

A Philosophical Thriller

1. Introduction

I

Among the movies that came and went in 1989 was the wide-screen—the *very* wide screen—Australian thriller *Dead Calm*. It starred the Australian actor who *wasn't* Mel Gibson (Sam Neal) and a Sigourney Weaver look-alike (Nicole Kidman), wore what might be described as a mid-Pacific look (it took me awhile to realize that it *was* Australian), and was described in the ads as taking us on a voyage of terror. Its central situation had the simplicity that budget-conscious movie-makers must love.

Two yachts are becalmed half a mile or so away from each other under the hot sun. One is crewed by a young naval officer and his wife, the latter still shaky after a car accident that took the life of their child. From the other comes a rowboat propelled by a desperate young man with a tale of nautical disasters that left him the sole survivor aboard a sinking vessel.

When the young man has been put to bed, the husband rows over to take a look at the other boat, whereupon the young man comes back up on deck, knocks out the wife, who has just started up the auxiliary motor, takes the wheel, and heads the boat off into the blue.

The husband is left alone on what is indeed a sinking vessel. The wife is alone with a homicidal paranoiac who blanks out any suggestion that they return to pick up the husband, and who sooner or later will presumably start to take a sexual interest in her.

What, from a movie-maker's perspective, could be nicer—which is to say, nastier?

II

Unfortunately the movie didn't live up to its terror-inducing promise.

It was watchable, but it wasn't another *Duel* (Steven Spielberg plus innocent motorist plus highway plus homicidal truck driver) or another

Alone in the Dark (blind Audrey Hepburn alone in house with sadistic games-playing killer).

It veered uneasily between being a “quality” thriller of character and an exploitation movie, and its nastiness—floating corpses below deck, a mouthful of cockroaches, hints on the sinking boat’s elaborate video system of unsavoury goings-on before disaster struck, and the likelihood of rape—had obviously been toned down in the interests of distribution prudence.

I don’t suppose the movie pleased anyone very much.

Which was all the more regrettable because *Dead Calm* was based on a thriller of high distinction, a thriller that at one point Orson Welles had wanted to film, with Jeanne Moreau, Orson himself (presumably before he got his girth), and Laurence Harvey as the nut-case. I am referring to Charles Williams’s novel of the same name.

2. Author

III

None of Williams’ twenty-three novels is in print as I write, and he didn't earn a mention in Julian Symons' *Bloody Murder*, or Chris Steinbrunner and Otto Penzler’s *Encyclopedia of Detection and Mystery*, or Jerry Palmer’s *The Thriller*, which may still be the best book on the genre.

But he had been a highly visible presence in the galaxy of paperback writers during the golden age of the American thriller, along with John D. MacDonald, Mickey Spillane, John McPartland, Donald Hamilton, and others, publishing three novels during his first three years as a writer at the start of the Fifties, and a dozen more during the rest of that decade, three of them in a single year.

When *Dead Calm* appeared in hardcover in 1963, the *New Yorker* reviewer called it “first-rate,” the one for the *Columbus Dispatch* opined that it was “something to marvel at. A-plus,” and Anthony Boucher, in the *New York Times Book Review*, considered it “A superb story of peril, suspense, and unexpected terrors … Brilliant, breathtaking, spectacular.” I am quoting from the cover of my 1965 paperback copy.

It was presumably also Boucher who considered Williams (in another quotation) “one of the best of all the specialists in suspense.” In those days Boucher was the most influential reviewer of crime-fiction in the country.

On the back of the Dell paperback of *Gulf Coast Girl*, the publishers announce, “7 Books—4 million copies sold.”

Williams was taken up in France, too. Nineteen of his novels were translated into French; he wrote the screenplay for René Clement’s *Les Felins*, with Jane Fonda and Alain Delon (1964, a.k.a. *The Joy House)*; and François Truffault’s last movie, *Vivement Dimanche* (1983) was an adaptation of *The Long Saturday Night* (1963).

There are also at least a couple of American movies of his books, one of them Dennis Hopper’s 1990 adaptation of *Hell Hath No Fury* (1953) as *The Hot Spot*, with the undervalued Don Johnson.

IV

Like Conrad, Williams came to writing late, at the age of forty-two, after serving as a Merchant Marine radio operator for ten years and a Radio Inspector for eleven years after that.

He had obviously read and reread Conrad before turning writer himself (*Scorpion* Reef, 1955, a.k.a. *Gulf Coast Girl)* contains several conscious appropriations and allusions), and his work, apart from one or two unsuccessful attempts at humorous fiction, was always characterized by the Conradian concern to make you *see*.

Even in his first year of publishing he was writing the kinds of sentences that John D. MacDonald, for all his narrative power, was never capable of. “Beyond the wall of the oaks along the bank I could see the sky in the east growing coral now, and across the vast and breathless hush of early morning I heard the explosive smack as a bass hit something among the pads along the other shore” (*The Catfish Tangle*, 1951).

Like MacDonald before he pieced together the persona of Travis McGee in *The Deep Blue Goodbye* (1964), Williams wrote a variety of thrillers.

But in general he was at his best—his most comfortable—when working inside a limited and more or less thoroughly knowable space. Close quarters and the progressive uncovering of the past in them, with explosive consequences for those trapped there (whether on shipboard or in small Florida towns), were his *querencia*.

Like MacDonald, too, he knew certain locales intimately, small Florida towns especially, and water—rivers, lakes, the sea—, and what it was like to use your body energetically.

And he almost always filled a scene to the maximum, a necessary maximum, as if he *knew* what it would be like swimming deep down into the water below a dock at night in search of a body, or cleaning up a motel room after it had been methodically trashed by acid-pouring vandals.

He could be very generous with his plotting, too, particularly in *Scorpion Reef* (1955) and *Talk of the Town* (1957), where he went way beyond the conventional demands of thrillers in his progressive disclosure of past events and their bearings on present ones.

V

As a writer, Williams remained a conscientious craftsman until the end, though the fact that he published only three books in his last twelve years, and the references to drinking in one of them, suggests that he may have had problems. But his last two books (he took his own life in 1975) were scrupulously plotted and crafted.

He looks at me now, half in shadow, from the small photo on the back of *The Catfish Tangle* (1951)—big-shouldered and not unhandsome, in a long-distance-trucker, merchant-marine way—the sort of man who in his time probably got into brawls in bars.

But the head is tilted forward slightly, the eyebrows have a faintly quizzical lift to them, the eyes below them are watchful, and if there is a hint of a smile at one corner of the mouth, it is a diffident, a perhaps apologetic one.

It is the face of a serious writer. And *Dead Calm*, his best novel, is a very serious book.

3. Conrad

VI

Like *Scorpion Reef*, *Dead Calm* is Conradian: Conradian after the manner of "Typhoon" and "The Secret Sharer." It is one of those Homeric works—permeated by the sea and its dangers and demands—that is gripping both for its action, and as a study of the workings of mind; a book about values.

And as with the best works of Conrad, and of Stephen Crane from whom Conrad learned so much, and of Hemingway who learned so much from both of them, it exists partly in terms of the kinds of books that it refuses to become.

Dead Calm is pervaded by a consciousness not only of conventional thriller attitudes and expectations but also of the kinds of intellectual problems that Conrad was so concerned with.

It deals with the fragility of knowledge, the uncertainty of communication, the unforeseen and unwanted outcomes of worthy endeavours, the nature of authority, the question of what can sustain moral conduct when there are no supernatural underpinnings for it, the menacing power of nihilistic cynicism, the lurking void.

But Williams has not created an *anti*-thriller like John Le Carre's odious *The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, in which your normal assumptions and expectations as a reader of thrillers—your *trust*, essentially, in some of the human decencies and their ultimate triumph—are shown up as naive and groundless, and all that's left are the gratifications of a knowing irony.

And he gets beyond Conrad philosophically in some ways, as D.H. Lawrence got beyond Nietzsche, not only because he has had Conrad to build on, but because he knows more than Conrad did about the other half of the human equation—about women, different *kinds* of women.

4. Nihilism

VII

Williams himself was obviously well acquainted with tooth-and-claw nihilism.

Early novels of his like *Hell Hath No Fury* (1953*), Nothing in Her Way* (1953*), A Touch of Death* (1954*),* and *The Big Bite* (1956) with their embittered ruthless male protagonists on the make and their even more ruthless—and smarter, and deadlier—female protagonists, could indeed make you feel, as one reviewer put it, that everything was sliding into a big black hole in the middle of the floor.

> "Look. It's a jungle. They throw you into it naked, and sixty years later they carry you off in a box. You just do the best you can."
>
> She smiled a little mockingly. "Ah. The beginnings of thought. You're a nihilist."
>
> "That's out of style," I said. "Nobody's been one for years."
>
> "You *are* surprising. I didn't think you'd know what it meant."
>
> "Duh," I said. "I saw it in a comic book." [*The Big Bite*]

It was presumably that side of Williams that French intellectuals were taken with, the side that related him to depressive writers like David Goodis, Cornell Woolriich, and the uniquely powerful and disturbing Jim Thompsonm in whom at times the hole expands to take in the whole floor.

No doubt, too, Williams would have been acquainted with a book or two by the truly nasty Patricia Highsmith, whose *The Talented Mr. Ripley* had been filmed by Clement in 1960 as *Purple Noon*, also with Alain Delon.

VIII

What do I mean here by nihilism?

Oh, at bottom, the feeling that nothing really *matters*, particularly when it is happening to you and not to me;

> — that all the large mental constructions—societal, religious, philosophical—are empty and incoherent fictions, without any

> authority sustaining them or giving them any moral authority over us;
>
> — that everything, fundamentally, is really only a question of power—power-seeking, power-withholding;
>
> — that for the perceptive, the individuals who see through the sham and are unimpressed by the masks of virtue, all that matters is doing what gives you yourself pleasure, however trivial, cruel, violent, or disgusting that may be. Who is anyone else, that they should judge *you*?

IX

In E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, the old liberal-minded Englishwoman Mrs. Moore is taken to visit a set of caves, the Marabar Caves, where there is a curious flat echo. Afterwards, as she sits outside them, waiting for others in her party to emerge.

> No, she did not wish to repeat that experience. The more she thought over it, the more disagreeable and frightening it became … Coming at a moment when she chanced to be fatigued, it had managed to murmur, "Pathos, piety, courage—they exist, but are identical, and so is filth. Everything exists, nothing has value." . . .
>
> But suddenly, at the edge of her mind, Religion appeared, poor little talkative Christianity, and she knew that all its divine words from "Let there be Light" to "It is finished" only amounted to "boum." Then she was terrified over an area larger than usual; the universe, never comprehensible to her intellect, offered no repose to her soul, the mood of the last two months took definite form at last, and she realized that she didn't want to write to her children, didn't want to communicate with anyone, not even with God. She sat motionless with horror …

In effect, she has experienced what T.S. Eliot was pointing to in the line "And cold the sense, and lost the motive of action."

She has lost the energizing conviction that some things are *worth* doing, that there are obligations to do them, because of the claims of empathy inside a shared system of values.

—has lost the capacity for moral indignation, which, after all, can always be turned upon oneself.

—has found the anomie of Wallace Stevens' "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" ("The Snow Man").

The experience of an abrupt draining away of value and meaning comes up in a number of thrillers, John Buchan's, Eric Ambler's, Donald Hamilton's, and Simon Harvester's among them.

Usually it is the result of extreme fatigue or incipient illness, and it soon goes away.

But you can see why it should be a presence in thrillers, especially spy novels.

Individuals in them are operating under great pressure (from without and, worse, within), alone, and at risk, in pursuit of complicated goals that only they may have figured out.

And the value systems that they serve are frequently under threat intellectually, whether from the opposing system of the Adversary, or from persons on their own side who disapprove of anyone's engaging in such activities in the first place.

Which of course raises the question of why one should persist in doing something that may be absurd, and a subject for irony, given the unlikelihood of achieving one's goal, or the questionable nature of the goal itself.

X

There may be analogies here between the experience of the secret agent and the experience of the writer/artist.

And in fact the *expression* of nihilistic attitudes seems to be, by and large, something that goes on particularly in and through art, *hostile* art.

There's not much point to being a nihilistic bus-driver. But a performance artist? A thriller writer like Patricia Highsmith?

XI

But there is no nihilism in *Dead Calm*, and no programmatic irony, as distinct from particular ironies, of which there are plenty.

It is a thriller, a consummate thriller, a distilled essence of nail-biting thriller.

And it is a morally affirmative philosophical novel in which knowing, communicating, willing, hoping, and achieving are indeed possible, and not just because of any ignorance of how things "really" are.

As such, it is more interesting and timely now, after all the trendy North American posturings about "fictiveness" and "undecidability" (reaching their nadir in the cult of that curiously naive linguistic muddler Paul DeMan) than when it first appeared.

It is also an intelligent interrogation of thriller attitudes and values with respect to violence.

5. Situation

XII

As in the movie, the situation of Rae Ingram alone on the forty-foot ketch-rigged *Saracen* with a dangerous madman is a familiar one.

It is what Conrad put the ironist Axel Heyst and Lena into in *Victory*, when languid, deadly Plain Mr. Jones and his two murderous henchmen come to Heyst's Pacific island retreat in search of the wealth that they have been told (falsely) that he has accumulated.

It is the situation of movies like *The Desperate Hours* (from Joseph Hayes' novel of that name) in which escaped convicts take over a household, and *Cape Fear* (originally John D. MacDonald's *The Executioners*), with its sociopathic ex-army sergeant bent on destroying the family of the former officer responsible for his imprisonment for rape, and *Straw Dogs* (originally Thomas Lawrence's *The Siege of Trencher's Farm*), and, oh, others, others.

XIII

The civilized person—in a sense the Innocent—is brought face to face with the reality of violence and compelled to cope with violent men without help from any of the normal taken-for-granted structures and institutions of civilized order.

He has lost that *made* order which Conrad's Marlowe in *Heart of Darkness*, with his experience of the Congo behind him, suggests to his well-heeled companions on the Thames yacht that they may be taking a bit too much for granted.

> "Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another, excellent appetites, and temperature normal—you hear—normal from year's end to year's end."

And Williams has set up the situation without any cheating.

And without clichés.

XIV

His book is far more solid than the movie.

There are no horror-movie melodramatics, no corpses and cockroaches, no splintered doors, no wide-angled runnings around by the heroine on a boat that feels at times the size of a small cruise ship, no intrinsically insoluble mysteries.

Everything, in a manner of speaking, is very well lit.

And we *feel* the equatorial Pacific, the sun, the absence of wind, the movements of bodies in space:

> Far to the northward a squall flickered and rumbled along the horizon, but here they [on *Orpheus]* appeared to hang suspended in a vacuum while the sun beat down and the oily groundswell rolled endlessly up from the south. The air was like warm damp cotton pressing in on them, muggy, saturated, unmoving. Perspiration didn't evaporate. It collected in a film over the body, a film that became rivulets, now running, now stopping momentarily, now moving again with the irritating feel of insects crawling across the skin. It ran down into his already sodden and clinging shorts and dripped into his sneakers. His back ached from crouching under the boom.

At one point, Rae and the reader do experience "a quality of horror" as the enraged Hughie Warriner silently and murderously pushes against the door of the forward cabin that she has barricaded against him.

And it is chilling earlier when Ingram, desperately rowing back towards *Saracen,* and trying in vain to communicate with Rae, sees from a couple of hundred yards away the figure of Hughie appearing on deck behind her.

But so long as Rae behaves herself (Hughie's fury has been triggered by her attempt to immobilize the engine), her life is in no danger from him, nor is rape ever a possibility. Twenty-seven-year-old Hughie—nice-looking, well-bred, an artist—is friendly, respectful, and obviously without any sexual interest in her.

XV

Nor is John Ingram aboard *Orpheus*, ketch-rigged and a bit larger than *Saracen*, confronted with an insoluble mystery, a clutter of unwholesome fragments.

He is there with the two people whom Hughie has abandoned in a locked cabin—Lillian Warner, Hughie's dark-haired, aristocratic-handsome, wife, whose money had enabled him to buy the boat, and bull-necked, stubble-chinned outdoors writer Russell Bellew, both of them very much alive.

Orpheus is perfectly normal, too, apart from the fact that it is slowly but inexorably taking in water because of dry-rot in the hull.

XVI

The dangers are real enough—frighteningly real.

But the fear comes from their *not* being arbitrary and melodramatic, which is why the book does not fade on rereading.

The waterlogged *Orpheus* is inevitably going to sink in a day or two, ever if the weather remains calm.

The chances of rescue by some other boat are infinitesimal. As Ingram puts it to Lillian Warriner, "There's not a chance in a million we'll be sighted by a ship, not where we are. And even if one happened to pick us up on radar, there's nothing to indicate we're in distress."

The radio of *Orpheus* is defunct. And unless Rae can get *Saracen* turned round within seven hours, it will have passed the point of no return.

The nearest land, the Marquesas, is twelve hundred miles away.

XVII

These facts, which I have been tidying up for convenience' sake, emerge piecemeal, in convincing detail, as they come up in the minds of John, and Rae, and Lucille Warriner, or are brought out in conversations.

The nautical matters are firm for us because they are what Ingram, as an experienced sailor, knows (for example, about their position away from the sea-lanes) or discovers, as he does when he finally puts on a mask and goes over the side to see why their efforts to pump out *Orpheus* are having so little effect

And his opinions are tested out for us in his exchanges with the intelligent and realistic Lillian Warriner and the sardonically challenging Bellew.

XVIII

The prose of the novel has the patient expositional clarity that Williams displayed in the best of his earlier novels and that distinguishes, in their respective "English" and "American" ways, the best novels of Eric Ambler and Donald Hamilton.

The door of the cage that Williams' characters are in is not just locked, it has been welded shut. The characters are absolutely alone with each other and with their approaching fates.

And what will become of them depends almost entirely upon Rae, alone with Hughie Warriner on a *Saracen* that, with Hughie at the helm, is taking her ever further away, in a dead-straight line, from the *Orpheus*.

6. Self-Preservation

XIX

Here, as Ingram outlines them to Lillian, are the essentials of Rae's nautical situation:

> "Even if she does get control of the boat, it's nowhere as simple as it sounds. She may never find us again. They're over the horizon now, and unless she knows the course he was steering when he left here, she can't come back because she won't know which way *back* is. Also, at the speed they were going, somewhere around midnight tonight about a hundred miles from here they're going to run out of gas, and she can't make it back unless she gets some wind. In these conditions, it could take days. Also, at that distance, the accumulated errors of trying to make a good course while she's fighting fluky breezes and calms become so great that after a while she won't know within twenty miles where she is herself.
>
> She can't call for help, to get a search organized, even if there was anybody out here to look. We've got a radio-telephone, but it won't reach land from here, and you can't call a ship because they stand their radio watches on five hundred kilocycles and not the phone bands.
>
> So if she ever finds us again it'll be within the next twelve hours or so, because if they get any further away there's practically no chance."

XX

As the novel progresses, it increasingly looks as if the only way in which they can all be saved is if Rae, a genuinely nice woman, will cease being "civilized" and resort to violence, all-the-way violence—ultimately, if needs be, the violence of killing.

A woman.

Not just a wimpy male like Dustin Hoffman in *Straw Dogs*, that wildly implausible transposition into rural England of the nightmare type-situation of a New York Jewish intellectual assailed by homicidal hillbillies.

An *American* woman, by tradition a nurturer, a tamer of small boys, a preserver of civilized values, a bulwark since frontier days against the crazy violence and disorder of macho men.

XXI

Actually there were a number of different kinds of women in thrillers in those paperback years.

There was the Black Widow, the Damsel-in-Distress, the Girl Friday, the Sexpot, the Good Scout (with or without freckles), the Fellow Professional, the Tough Old Bird, the Golden-Hearted Whore, the Equal Partner, the Spoiled Rich Girl, the Fallen Sparrow (usually first seen with a drink in front of her). And others.

MacDonald, McPartland, Hamilton, Williams, Wade Miller, and so on —you can construct a whole sexual typology from the great American thrillers that began appearing in the later Forties.

But the classic thriller situation in *Dead Calm* is that of the *decent* woman faced with dreadful options.

XXII

So what will happen? Will we get yet another demonstration, like Donald Hamilton's in the Matt Helm books, of the inadequacy of those pacific values to the violences of the *real* world? Will the "womanly" values and virtues have to give way, if only temporarily, to the "masculine" ones.

And what will motivate that woman, *really* motivate her, to act decisively. And, if she does, what if anything will the changes in her have to say about those "masculine" values? Are they simply the aberrant kill-or-be-killed values of war, viewed as a breakdown (because of male aggressiveness) in the natural state of peace?

Nor is this just a problem for women.

In *Victory*, Lena's self-sacrifice, from her love of Axel Heyst, still leaves Heystian irony pretty much where it was before.

What could have motivated Heyst himself into action, life-or-death action? Seemingly nothing.

XXIII

Williams himself had memorably adapted the *Victory* situation eight years earlier in *Scorpion Reef,* sending the narrator (another sailor) and an untrustworthy heroine out onto the Gulf of Mexico in her yacht, under the gun of a cool, intelligent, tweed-jacketed, and deadly professional criminal and his thuggish assistant, who want him to navigate them to a sunken small plane with diamonds aboard it.

The search, as Bill Manning knows, is impossible, given the vagueness of the marking on the chart he's been provided with. And after a point the woman will probably be tortured to encourage him to stop procrastinating. And both of them will be killed in any event.

But Manning is a physical type, quick with his fists, and the problem for him is a straightforward matter of self-preservation, even if solving it requires considerable ingenuity.

It is essentially *his* problem (he doesn't want to be killed), he owes the criminals nothing, and things would be the same morally were Shannon Macaulay not on the boat at all.

All that Shannon does is complicate the dynamics of the situation, not only because of the possibility of rape and the growing certainty of torture, but as an energizing presence for him.

And when the crisis comes,

> Oddly, it wasn't fear I felt now that it was actually here. It was rage—a strange, hopeless, terrible sort of anger I'd never felt before. I turned and looked at her, thinking how it could have been if they had just left us alone. She was all I'd wanted since the first time I'd seen her. I hadn't asked for anything else, and she hadn't asked for anything except a chance to live, and now they were going to take her away from me.

And he does, successfully, explode into action.

7. Challenge

XXIV

What had happened between the two books to complicate and deepen Williams' thinking, I surmise, is that in 1960 Gold Medal Books had brought out the first of Donald Hamilton's Matt Helm series, *Death of a Citizen*, and that the series changed some of the moral rules of the game.

XXV

The conception of Helm had evolved slowly.

In the later Forties, while returned veterans like Mickey Spillane, John D. MacDonald, John McPartland (who appears to have been a genuine hard doer himself), and Kenneth Millar (especially in *Blue City*), were going for strong action and forceful heroes, Hamilton (who hadn't been overseas himself) had opted for a different approach.

In those very intelligent early thrillers *Date with Darkness* (1947) and *The Steel Mirror* (1948), he had explored the situation of the well-brought up and pacific-minded *male*, drawn on initially by romantic curiosity, who is backed into corners where violence becomes necessary.

> He watched the man come forward and made certain plans, on a purely theoretical basis. He had not fought with, or struck, another human being since he was sixteen years old. The man outweighed him by well over fifty pounds and was at least four inches taller. He felt his stomach as a tight knot of nausea just below his ribs.
>
> "Look," he said weakly. "Look Sheriff, Miss Nicholson's been sick. She lost her head. She didn't mean—" [*The Steel Mirror*]

In his two major thrillers in the Fifties, *Line of Fire* (1955) and *Assignment: Murder* (1956; a.k.a. *Assassins Have Starry Eyes*), and in *Smoky Valley* (1954), the best of his five Westerns, his tough-minded but reflective heroes, while at home with guns and prepared to play very rough if necessary, are still emphatically men who want a non-violent life for themselves.

Paul Nyquist (gunsmith), Jim Gregory (atomic physicist), and young Civil War veteran Major John Parrish (businessman/ rancher) not only have occupations that they enjoy, they have also experienced what is rarely discussed in thrillers, the long debilitating process of recovery after having been shot themselves.

XXVI

By his own account, when he embarked on the first Helm book, *Death of a Citizen* (1960), Hamilton didn't have a series in mind.

Helm was presumably to have been a man with an even more violent wartime past than Parrish's who had made the transition from underground wartime assassin (of Germans) to contentedly married husband and father (uncommon again in thrillers at that time), and who would resume his satisfying occupation of photographer/writer after having been temporarily tricked out of retirement.

The series, Hamilton tells us, was the idea of his editor at Gold Medal Books.

But the essentials of Helm were there from the start.

And in working out the framework of the series, Hamilton had obviously said to hell with it, to hell with trying to appease "nice" readers by reminding them *politely* that the Cold War American world might not be altogether a nice, clean, safe one in which martial professionals were only grubby anachronisms.

XXVII

In his Fifties Westerns Hamilton had made his own cumulative political analysis of American society—of its essentials with respect to order, power, violence, justice, love, honour.

And now he came out with his intelligent, well-brought-up, and college-educated hero who was unapologetically a counter-espionage, anti-terrorist killer for a top-secret government organization.

As Hamilton himself explains somewhere, what made Helm so bothersome to a number of readers, particular women, was that he was *likeable.* Or to use that old-fashioned term, presentable.

He wasn't a figuratively trench-coated, CIA type like Edward S. Aaron's Cajun-born Sam Durrell, with no discernible existence apart from the more or less dramatic situations that he passes through in the series that began in 1956, or the various other attempts to do American versions of the pre-Sean Connery James Bond.

He valued the social decencies, was interested in a variety of in non-lethal matters (including women's fashions), and if you'd sat next to him at a moderately intellectual dinner party, he could have been in fact the professional photographer-writer that his cover required him to continue to be from time to time.

He wasn't even the toughest-minded of Hamilton's heroes, the atomic physicist Jim Gregory in *Assignment: Murder* being *that*.

XXVIII

But vastly superior though they are to the Bond books, and gripping though the best of them are (I read them all as they came out, just as I read all MacDonald's Travis McGees), the Helm books are still morally simpler than Hamilton's earlier ones.

And enjoyable though it is to live along with Helm in his dealings with baddies, other government personnel, a variety of civilians (especially women), and the unglamorized physical world of pick-up trucks, bars, sports boats, foreign hotels, and so on, his insistent moralism about everyone with reservations about *necessary* violence—not to mention the ruthless efficiency of his own use of it—can be a bit problematic at times.

Particularly when it comes to relationships between the sexes.

XXIX

By and large, it is the "male" values that are the norm in the Helm books. The women for whom Helm feels respect, again by and large, are ones who, even if not professionals themselves, can share in, or at least not disapprove of, his own value system.

And Helm remains unmarried (after the separation at the end of *Death of a Citizen*) and permanently unattached, even if without the remarkably high death-rate among the women with whom Travis

McGee finds, temporarily, the heart-to-heart sexual relationship that he *truly* craves.

XXX

Hamilton himself continued to explore the viability of Helm's ethics, and played interesting variations on them (if he hadn't, he'd have become bored stiff). But in the early Sixties, Helm was a new and problematic element in the thriller mindscape.

To which, in 1962, Donald E. Westlake, writing as Richard Stark, had also added Helm's criminal shadow, the affectless and wholly professional Parker, who would also enjoy a long series life.

XXXI

Intelligent thriller writers, like other fiction writers, read works by their contemporaries to see what they are up to.

I am morally certain that the blue-collar-born Williams would have felt challenged by the emerging Helm books.

In a sense, the aristocratic-born Hamilton (he would have been a baron had his family remained in Sweden) had been working his way back towards the kind of hard-nosed view of things that Williams had been working his way *away* from, in an upward curve on which at one point, in a piquant kind of mirror effect, a new Williams novel, whose title I forget, felt like one of MacDonald's warmer pre-McGee novels, while a new MacDonald novel felt like one of the bleak earlier Williams ones.

I think that Williams, who had worked his own fictional way out of bleakness and blankness into a more or less chivalric and honour-governed view of things, must have felt the need to reassure himself that his own (male) values were neither inorganically dominative nor sentimentally naive.

8. Gender

XXXII

Well, we do indeed have reminders in *Dead Calm* of more or less familiar "male" and "female" dichotomies and antitheses.

When Hughie Warriner, after climbing aboard *Saracen* and quieting down, explains to Rae and Ingram what had gone wrong during the voyage of the *Orpheus*, and why only he is left to tall the tale, Rae is all motherly concern and pity.

And when Ingram starts to feel some uneasiness about possible inconsistencies in that account, and expresses them tentatively to Rae after Hughie has gone below to sleep, we get a familiar pattern of dialogue:

> "Well, sure, honey," he protested. "I realize what he's been through. But we ought to make *some* attempt to salvage what we can—"
>
> "He doesn't want to go back on there. I'd think you could understand that."
>
> "He doesn't have to. I told him I'd go."
>
> "But why? He said there wasn't anything worth trying to save, didn't he?"
>
> "I know. But obviously water wouldn't ruin everything. Clothes for instance. Also, he contradicts himself."
>
> "What do you mean?"
>
> "The radio, remember? He said it's been ruined by the water. But he'd just got through telling us he called us on it."
>
> She sighed. "Why do men always have to be so literal? Do you think he's some kind of machine?"

XXXIII

And there are familiar gender divergences, as well as overlaps, between Russell Bellew and Lillian Warriner.

Bellew—World War II paratrooper, big, strong-bodied, stubble-bearded writer about hunting and fishing for outdoor magazines—is

pretty much the neo-Hemingway *macho* male, quite certain now that *Orpheus* will sink, however hard they pump, and that nothing can save them, but still fuelled by his hatred of Hughie, and continuing to lock horns with Ingram and Mrs. Warriner.

Lillian Warriner, likewise certain that they are doomed, and likewise refusing (because of breeding) to give way to self-pity or to Bellew, is locked into the past in a different way.

She is gripped by her sense of her own responsibility as a woman for the disaster that overtook them,

— her failure as a *woman*,

— her failure to be a sufficiently strengthening presence for Hughie (thirteen years her junior),

— her moral failure when on one fatal occasion, exasperated by Hughie's inability to stand up to Bellew, she made an open pass at the latter, thereby driving Hughie into the mothering arms of forty-year-old Estelle Bellew.

XXXIV

But as things go on, Rae's and Ingram's values *aren't* in fact dichotomized.

The ways in which they cope with their respective impossible situations overlap substantially and do not, as it turns out, involve abrupt changes in their value systems.

On the contrary, it is the continuities and human decencies in their ways of thinking that in the end save them.

And this is not because of any sentimentalized good luck, the kind that favours (as we would like to think) the virtuous, but because those decencies are *effective*; are grounded in the nature of things.

The novel isn't just about survival, it is about *moral* survival, without any of the adjuncts of religious beliefs, hopes, fears, sanctions.

9. Couple

XXXV

John Ingram is forty-four, "a big man …with a flat, windburned face and cool gray eyes" (rather like Williams himself, perhaps, to judge from a photo on the back of *Gulf Coast Girl*), his dark hair, "atrociously cut some five days ago by his wife, greying deeply at the temples."

Rae, tawny-haired, long-legged, is in her middle thirties and was married twice before. (They had become acquainted in the much inferior *Aground*, but *Dead Calm* is as free-standing as Joyce Cary's *The Horse's Mouth* is in relation to the two previous novels in its trilogy.)

They have been married to each other for only four months, and they are happily on their honeymoon, nineteen days out from Panama on their way to Tahiti and "the islands to the south."

This happiness is presented convincingly in the opening two or three pages, before they first glimpse the speck of Hughie rowing furiously towards them from the becalmed *Orpheus*.

And though they do indeed react differently to the young man's story of a pleasure cruise in which all but he were struck down with botulism—Rae all warm maternal sympathy, Ingram with nagging doubts creeping into his mind because of inconsistencies in the story—they don't make a gender fight of it.

And Rae's only (mild) worries when John decides to row over and take a look, are the normal practical ones attendant on someone's going aboard a boat, obviously with water in it, that's been adrift for ten days.

XXXVI

Nor are they conventional Innocents with respect to the sea, as had been the quartet aboard the *Orpheus*—the Warriners, the Bellews—who had likewise set out for the glamorous islands on the 20-year-old yacht that rich Lillian Warriner had allowed Hughie, her new young artist husband in love with the Gauguinesque idea of Papeete, to buy for this purpose.

Not one of them, Mrs. Warriner drily observes to Ingram, "was competent to take a yacht across the Pacific, and incompetence multiplied by any number up to infinity is still incompetence."

XXXVII

John Ingram, in contrast, is an experienced and professional-minded sailor, scrupulously attentive to the vessel, the *Saracen*, on which his and Rae's lives will depend (no dry-rot *there*).

And Rae is a mature woman, able to play her part in managing the boat, but aware of his superior knowledge and expertise.

They *respect* one another—she his professional judgment, he her moral good sense. There is no equating of "authority" with bullying and dominance.

If they are innocent, in plot terms, it is in the sense that they have done nothing *wrong*.

They are not *ignorantly* innocent. They are not smugly self-centered, or presumptuous, or careless. There is no *hubris* to be punished, no class-complacency to be disrupted. On the contrary, they are behaving *well*.

When they take aboard this panic-stricken young man, they are honouring the codes of human decency, not to mention the code of the sea.

When Ingram, once the young man is down below and asleep, decides to go over and take a look at the *Orpheus,* he is honouring a professional feeling, based on his own knowledge of boats and sailing, that something doesn't sound quite right in Hughie's seemingly four-square and detailed account of how only he had come to survive.

And when disaster strikes, as it does almost immediately, there is no question of a false view of reality—of how the world *really* is—becoming replaced by a true and much grimmer one.

XXXVIII

The *possibility* of such a transformation is brilliantly communicated elsewhere in the novel. As Lillian Warriner explains to Ingram,

> “When you look out there you see nothing but the surface. So do I; so does everybody. We realize, vaguely, that two miles down there’s bottom, but we never think of it, even if we’re swimming in it—probably even if we’re in trouble in it. It makes no difference whether you drown in seven feet of water or seven miles; you still drown within a few feet of the surface. But you’re *in* the water; I think [Hughie] imagines himself rather precariously suspended on the surface of it, as if it were a film of some kind, ten thousand feet above the bottom. In other words, I get the impression he sees it all the way down.”

And behind this vertiginous consciousness of the abyss lies a terrifying experience of abandonment, a total-seeming deprivation of all communal sustenance, in a world that abruptly lacked all fairness; an “absurd” world.

Through a set of innocent coincidences, Hughie and Bellew’s wife Estelle, innocently taking a swim together, had been left behind while *Orpheus* sailed away with no-one at the helm.

And Hughie, a powerful swimmer, wasn’t picked up for six hours—by now alone, and with the conviction that the abandonment had been deliberate.

XXXIX

But Ingram and Rae do not panic. Nor (for Williams is obviously providing a spectrum) are they afflicted by the more limited feeling of absurdity that has overtaken the Hemingwayesque Bellew.

Though Bellew continues to go through the motions and play the game out to the end—he labours at the pump, he bails with the buckets at the ends of ropes that Ingram has provided—it is with the conviction that it is impossible to keep the water out, that there is no way in which *Saracen* is going to be coming back for them, and that the only real question is how well the three of them will comport themselves when *Orpheus* sinks from under them, leaving them bobbing in a minute dinghy.

For the Ingrams, in contrast, the world does not now become as empty and meaningless and deadly as the sea that stretches to the encircling horizon.

Each of them is intensely conscious that the other is—or *may*—still be out there. And the overwhelmingly important thing for each of them now is to continue to do everything possible to get back together again.

So we get no philosophizing, or pseudo-philosophizing, about why you should or shouldn't act and what it all "ultimately" means.

There is none of the speculating and *willing* of Camus' classic novel of entrapment *The Plague*, in which a variety of characters with different philosophies adjust themselves to life in the sealed-off plague-ridden city of Oran.

Or of Conrad's *Victory* as poor Heyst tries to reason himself into defending himself and Lena.

> "Here I am on a Shadow inhabited by Shades. How helpless a man is against the Shades! How is one to intimidate, persuade, resist, assert oneself against them? I have lost all belief in realities …
>
> "Neither force nor conviction," [he] muttered wearily to himself. "How am I to meet this charmingly simple problem?"

XL

Like Conrad's own anti-Heyst, stolid, middle-aged Captain McWhirr in "Typhoon," Ingram concentrates at the outset on the next step, and the next, and the next.

He does what is dictated to him at each point by the physical problems in front of him (the water in the hold, the importance of keeping a bearing on *Saracen*, the need to get *Orpheus* under way on her track).

And he shuts out from his mind pointless speculations about the raging vortex of Hughie's crazed mind and the swirling animosity between Bellew and Mrs. Warriner. ("What kind of madhouse was this? With the boat sinking under their feet, you had to tear them from each other's throats and drive them to make them try to save themselves.")

XLI

But though he methodically takes bearings, estimates speeds, watches the wind, and figures out how much water their pumping and bailing is

removing from *Orpheus*, Ingram's is still not a simple, let alone a simply "male", consciousness.

He isn't another Captain McWhirr, saved from despair in the face of the typhoon's immensity by his total blessed lack of imagination.

Nor (for Williams is obviously working in terms of contrasting patterns and possibilities), is his concentration like that of Hughie Warriner at *Saracen's* tiller, bent hysterically on getting ever further away from the inchoate machinations of Them (as he imagines Bellew and Estelle) aboard *Orpheus*, and fleeing to nowhere.

XLII

As he watches *Saracen* move inexorably away with the tiny figure of Rae lying crumpled on the deck, Ingram is almost unbearably conscious that "This might be the last time he would ever see her, this dwindling spot of color fading away toward the outer limit of binoculars… "

And a little later, after *Saracen* has been lost to sight,

> the thought of Rae poured suddenly through the defenses of his mind again, leaving him shaken and limp. No matter how you barricaded yourself against the fear, it lurked always in ambush just beyond conscious thought, ready to catch you off guard for an instant and overwhelm you… Lay off it, he told himself savagely; you'll run amok. Do what you can do and quit thinking about what you can't.

However, this does not mean abandoning thinking altogether, or ceasing to search for knowledge and practical understanding. But "knowing," in this novel, is not a simple matter.

10. Problems

XLIII

As in "Typhoon," the rhetoric of *Dead Calm* emphasizes the radical differences between the characters' perspectives and how impossible to them (and to any of us in the actual world) is the God's eye view

that we as readers are permitted as Williams cuts back and forth between the two boats.

Rae's faith in John Ingram's competence, as described to us, may be total, but the next minute Williams cuts to where John, his mind flickering back over his years at sea, "at the moment … didn't believe he'd ever been in a position quite as hopeless as this."

And the knowledge of Hughie that Ingram and Estelle construct between them during their conversations, solid as it may now seem to us, is totally inaccessible to Rae.

And Rae herself, glimpsing the edges of an oedipal explanation of what may have gone wrong with Hughie (an explanation that to judge from what Lillian tells Ingram sounds pretty plausible), reminds herself that "she could be oversimplifying just a little the labyrinthine complexities of modern psychiatry."

She is not a psychiatrist, she is *her*, on this boat, now, an ordinary person faced existentially with these particular behaviours, words, tones of voice, etc. And the clock is inexorably ticking.

XLIV

But if knowledge—functioning, usable knowledge—is hard to obtain at times, it is not intrinsically unobtainable.

When looked at steadily enough, whether in connection with the sea and navigation or with more "human" doings, things carry their own coercive logic, their charges of meaning and futurity.

Time and space here are not simply voids and abstractions.

A few seconds (will Hughie turn his head?) or a couple of feet (can Ingram, after rowing furiously towards it, grasp the rail as *Saracen* slides past him?), or a small motion of hands and arms or error of the eyes (is one heading on a bearing that is off by a degree or two?) can make the difference between a lifetime of happiness together and a total loss.

But error and loss are not inevitable.

XLV

Both Ingram and Rae have the power of concentrated, purposeful attentiveness.

And each *trusts* the other.

Each knows that the other will do the very best that it is possible to do in their respective situations, and act, in the proper sense of the term, disinterestedly.

Without egotism. Without vanity.

When Ingram establishes temporarily his authority over the sardonic Bellew, with his air of "hard-boiled and half-contemptuous amusement with which he seemed to regard everything that happened," it is not a matter of machismo.

It is a matter of *time*, of overriding urgency, of the imperative of getting the water level down and *Orpheus* under way.

He is engaged in an intense reaching forward, like that displayed when he has the other two haul him up to the top of the wildly swaying mast from which he may be able to get another glimpse through the boat's binoculars of the now lost-to-sight Saracen, and take a bearing on it.

> Then his pulse leaped. There she was, a minute sliver of white poised just over the rim of the world.

Anything that breaks his momentum and concentration could be fatal.

And when, having put on a mask and dived below and seen the ruinous state of the *Saracen's* hull, he realizes that there is no conceivable way in which they are going to be able to keep moving at more than a snail's pace, he doesn't start the slide towards a doom-laden resignation and passivity:

> "And there's nothing we can do?" Mrs. Warriner asked.
>
> "Nothing except keep pumping."
>
> She sat down at the break of the raised deck and lit a cigarette. She blew out the match and tossed it overboard. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ingrain. It's too bad we had to infect you."

> Still occupied with the practical problem of survival, and its vanishing possibility of solution, he was caught off guard by this lapse into the figurative. “Infect?”
>
> “With our own particular dry rot. Our contagion of doom. We should have been flying a quarantine flag.”

Ingram himself is *not* lapsing into the figurative, that insidious adjunct of imprecision.

11. Rae

XLVI

But it is Rae, on whom all their lives now depend, who is at the emotional and moral heart of the book.

And Williams is at his best in presenting the movements of her mind and body—her consciousness—as she tries to figure out the rules of a situation in which, as it initially impinges on her, “All the landmarks and reference points of rational existence had been so suddenly jolted out of position, she couldn’t orient herself” and “there was nowhere to go; behind her was only the sea.”

It is rather like Hughie’s situation alone in the water earlier with Estelle Bellew.

And as Rae herself recognizes, it has the potential for destroying her mind’s ability to function effectively.

Coming down the companion ladder after her initial conversation with Hughie, she is conscious of the craziness of their civilized good manners, and wonders if she too is losing her grip on reality, just as later on she feels that “She must be mad herself; Paradise couldn’t have become this nightmare in the few short hours since sunrise.”

And as her situation becomes increasingly impossible—but because of its psychological density, rather than from the vacancy that faced Hughie when passively alone in the water with Estelle—she reflects that

> Nobody could endure this for seven hours. Her nerves would crack. Sometime between now and sunset her whole nervous system would go up in a puff of smoke like a short-circuited

> pinball machine; bells would ring, lights would flash, and she'd wind up lying on the bunk staring blankly at nothing while she picked at the fuzz on the blankets.

XLVII

But with a fineness at once psychological and moral, she works her way through a maze in which, time and again, the obvious reading turns out to be untrue or inadequate.

And her situation, as she hesitates between choices, is made all the more dramatic for us by the cross-cutting between the two boats.

Lillian Warrriner and Ingram on the *Orpheus* function as a species of chorus, both in what they say to one another and in their reflections about what has gone on and what may happen.

By and large, they touch on most of the key aspects of Rae's situation, and they know some things with a good deal of accuracy, Ingram about navigational problems, Estelle about Hughie.

But it is still only abstract knowledge in contrast to the phenomenological complexities of Rae's situation as she herself experiences it.

And the reader, having been in a sense forestalled by Ingram and Lillian with respect to possibilities and moral parameters, is obliged to concentrate on what Rae *does* in that situation, rather than sliding away into an easy knowingness about what she "ought" to do or think or feel.

12. Patterns

XLVIII

Our bonding with Rae's plight and copings is further intensified by a pattern that has already been established with Ingram, a pattern at once psychological and rhetorical.

Ingram *almost* reaches *Saracen*, but misses the railing by a couple of feet and it is *gone*. By dint of sustained effort he manages to get *Orpheus* sailing in its wake—and then the wind dies and it *stops*. He puts on a mask and checks the boat's hull and it is a *ruin*.

It is a standard thriller pattern but none the less effective for that—the dramatic close of a chapter or stretch of narrative in which the hero or heroine, after hoping and striving, faces disaster: "The door of the cellar was locked and the water was rising!," etc.

(Eric Ambler worked an elegant variation on it in *The Light of Day* (1962, filmed as *Topkapi*), in which, time and again, the shyster hero-narrator, caught with his figurative hand in the till, comes up with a plausible lie that is only *barely* adequate to keep him going until the next time disaster threatens.)

In a sense, as thriller readers, we may "know" that Rae and John Ingram will overcome their difficulties, just as we know that Odysseus will find a way to escape from the seemingly final trap of Polyphemus' cave in *The Odyssey*—the huge boulder rolled across the mouth of it, so that if he and his men kill the giant they will *never* get out; and the blinded Polyphemus rigorously guarding the exit as his flock leave.

But as Ezra Pound remarked, "Great literature is news that *stays* news."

XLIX

In works that *stay* news, there are no guarantees of safety.

Disaster can occur all too easily at this point, or this, or this if a less ingenious person (you or I, for example) were unable to find a way to solve the problem.

And disaster *does* partly occur in Polyphemus' cave. Two men are eaten by the giant on the first night after he finds them there, and two the next morning, and two again the next evening, and Polyphemus is implacably bent on continuing the series until he comes finally to Odysseus himself.

Dismaying closures are a feature of "serious" modern fiction, too, and not just of the Maupassant variety ("But my poor Madelaine, the diamonds were fake!").

In Camus' "The Guest," for example, the distant watched Arab takes the *wrong* turn in the road, defeating the French schoolmaster's best and most morally pondered efforts to save him.

Or again: In Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Catherine Barclay dies in childbirth just when the young couple seem to have overcome great obstacles and won through to freedom and happiness.

Conditioned as we are by irony and the imagination of disaster, we tend to feel that this is how things "really" are.

L

The seeming disasters in *Dead Calm* for Ingram and even more for Rae carry that kind of weight, so that, faced with them, it is easy to feel that this really *could* be the end;

—that "life" (the sea, Hughie's madness, and so forth) is simply too much for these small frail human centres of consciousness called "Ingram" and "Rae";

—that, as the narrator puts it in *A Farewell to Arms*, "Life kills the very good and the very brave and the very sensitive."

We ourselves as we read—well, I myself, anyway—can imagine no possible way in which Rae's problem could be overcome.

Nor, if there happens to be a possible technical solution, is there any certainty that Rae herself will hit upon it.

So there is something precious and heartening, Rae and Ingram not being Peter O'Donnell's Modesty Blaise and Willy Garvin, about the ways in which seemingly absolute closures in *Dead Calm* turn out not to be absolute. The escapes are *earned* escapes.

They are also ones that we ourselves, put into similar situations, might *not* be able to earn, and not because we weren't strong enough or agile enough but because our minds, and our modes of being, weren't *good* enough.

13. Cognition

LI

So how does Rae go about solving her problems, and ours? Is her approach feminine? masculine? what?

Well, the essential cognitive problem, to begin with, is the question of *what* Hughie is.

It is rather like the puzzle posed in Algis Budrys' science-fiction novel *Rogue Moon (1960)* by an evanescent structure, roughly three hundred feet across and sixty high, and at least a million years old, that has been discovered on the moon, and about which a scientist explains:

> "We don't even know what to call that place. The eye won't follow it, and photographs convey only the most fragile impression. There is reason to suspect it exists in more than three spatial dimensions. Nobody knows what it is, why it's located there, what it's true purpose might be, or what created it. We don't know whether it's animal, vegetable, or mineral. We don't know whether it's somehow natural, or artificial."

The rules governing passage through it are almost, but not totally, impossible to figure out. If you get them wrong, it kills you, in highly unpleasant ways.

When, early on, Rae "tried to make some sense of this thing that had happened to them, [she] ran immediately into the opaque and impenetrable wall of the fact that Warriner was the only clue to any of it, and Warriner was mad. Where did you go from a starting point like that?"

LII

At first, before she realizes how mad he is, he is someone who is innocently, if mysteriously, in error (her first reaction when she groggily awakens after being struck down) and who simply doesn't realize what's going on.

> "Please! We've got to go back! Don't you understand? Turn around. Turn. Like this." She made a lateral motion with her free hand, as though trying to explain the mechanics of wheel-turning to an idiot or to someone who spoke another language. She realized immediately this was wrong, but was too frantic to know how to correct it.

But no, when he speaks he seems nice, civilized, articulate. So presumably he can be appealed to in terms of moral urgency.

And then, no again: he simply slides away from her "unreasonable" agitation with a display of schizophrenic illogic.

> "*Unreasonable?* Can't you understand? My husband's back there. We can't go off and leave him. He'll drown."
>
> Warriner dismissed the whole subject of Ingram with an abstracted wave of the hand. "He won't drown."
>
> "But the boat's sinking—"
>
> "It probably won't. Anyway, he wanted to go aboard there, didn't he? It's his own fault." He turned and looked at her, as though puzzled by her refusal to grasp so obvious a fact.

LIII

Well, then, he is lost in an unreal world of his own and can be bypassed by immobilizing the engine, which in its turn will presumably immobilize *him*.

No again. When she removes the distributor cap (unfortunately there's a spare) the intensity and speed of his reactions are terrifying. He is highly *efficient*.

Very well, so he is paranoid, opaque, unreachably alien: "It was as though they were threatened with destruction by the blind and impersonal trajectories of some hitherto placid machine that had run amok through a short circuit in its wiring."

Again no. Once his explosive rage drains away, he is as charming, friendly, and articulate as ever. Nor is his rage (near though he comes to killing her) directed essentially against *her*.

LIV

So, then, surely, *surely*, if she can only find the right button to press, the right tone to adopt, he is a human individual—vulnerable, lost, suffering, yearning for forgiveness—who can be reached.

> That was it, she thought: if she could establish an identity he could recognize, first merely as a woman who was friendly and sympathetic, and then as one he could help in some way, she might

> penetrate the insanity of breakdown and get through, at least temporarily, to the old behavior patterns.

So perhaps if she were to tell him, as she does at some length, how she and John had come together and how much he means to her…?

No, again. No. No.

It is clear—and the more we learn from the conversations between Ingram and Lillian Bellew about what lies behind Hughie's break the clearer it becomes—that Hughie *cannot* be reached on the one crucial point, and that if Rae persists in trying to reason with him he will almost certainly kill her.

LV

By now we ourselves know from Lillian Warriner's account and Ingram's reflections on it a good deal about what lies behind Hughie's ontological fragility.

We know about his bullying yahoo Southern father, disgusted with a son more interested in drawing animals than killing them, his over-protective mother, his subsequent over-dependence on other older women, including Lillian herself.

We know about the Sartrean *Huis-Clos* sequence of events, bringing out the worst in four initially compatible people during *Orpheus'* disastrous weeks at sea, a voyage during which things increasingly fell apart because of Hughie's incompetence as a navigator and his inability to take responsibility and exercise authority as captain of *Orpheus*.

We "understand" Hughie. Or think we do.

But Rae is not a psychiatrist, *Saracen* is not a mental hospital, and there are no male nurses to protect her from this frighteningly powerful man if she missteps.

And she seeks in vain to have him settle down in her mind into *some* kind of familiar and coherent pattern—a machine that has run amok? a dangerous animal? a desperately assumed mask behind with lies a normal, if childlike, warm human self?

LVI

She herself is aware of her analogy-making, too. When she comes up into the cockpit at one point, she reflects that getting too close to him, getting too invasively into his territory, would be

> like misjudging the length of chain by which some dangerous wild animal was secured. She waited, thinking of this and conscious of the incongruity or even the utter madness of the simile. Dangerous? This nice, well-mannered, unbelievably handsome boy who might have stepped straight out of a mother's dream. That was the horror of it, she thought. Conscious evil or malicious intent you could at least communicate with, but Warriner was capable of destroying her with the pointlessness and the perfect innocence of a falling safe, and with its same imperviousness to argument.

LVII

Other concepts wobble as well, concepts that most of us, and certainly most thriller readers, are likely to carry around with us.

Rae herself is conscious of the hollowness of some of them, particularly with regard to violence.

As John has predicted, she recognizes the absurdity of pointing a gun at Hughie "the way they did on television" and expecting him to obey her command to turn the boat round.

> This, she knew in her heart, was idiocy comparable to that other cliché of the private eyes and western marshals, the immaculate and neatly packaged death by gunshot wound that never hurt either the shooter or the shot …

And when she initially contemplates "simply" hitting him on the head, she recognizes also that

> She knew nothing whatever about knocking people unconscious … in spite of the easy and apparently painless way it appeared to be accomplished all the time on television, and unless she was able to overcome her natural revulsion to such an act and did it brutally enough and in the right place he would only wake up and choke her to death.

LVIII

Moreover, if her body is there in space—the macro-space of the sea and sky, the micro-spaces of *Saracen*—her mind, too, has its spatiality.

And just as the physical spaces are in part indeterminate and shifting in their nature, so that a "safe" distance can suddenly, with the crossing of an invisible frontier, become a dangerous one, or a sanctuary turn into a trap, so too there are degrees of concreteness in the mind's movements.

You reach ahead with the aid of a concept or term or half-formed image, but it may be only a very loose reaching, not a grasping.

When, early on, she concludes, perfectly sensibly, that she must stop the engine, "it occurred to her she had no idea at all what she was actually going to do. Disabling the engine had a fine sound to it—but just *how* did she disable it, and what was she going to do afterwards?"

LIX

But the point is that error and ignorance here, in Rae's negotiating with her environment, aren't *total*.

They're not like the disjunction between Hughie's detailed *false* account to the Ingrams (which Rae had believed) of what had happened on board *Orpheus* and whatever it was, as viewed from Rae's subsequent and better informed perspective, that may actually have happened.

They're more like the procedures in Stephen Crane's fictions where characters find themselves having to adjust their preconceptions in the light of what confronts them in "concrete" situations—military, nautical, slum-urban, and so forth.

"At bottom," as I have remarked elsewhere, "all of Crane's best writing involves the drama of categorizing and re-categorizing."

We know that Williams had read Conrad attentively. It would be very odd if he had never read Crane.

LX

By a patient attentiveness, Rae manages to transpose her limited knowledge of automobile engines into terms of the unfamiliar configuration that confront her when she examines the boat's engine.

It is not a matter of things either having or *not* having meaning in some absolute sense as she regards the at first formless continuum of the engine.

Nor is it a question of "giving" them meaning, in a subjective and arbitrary imposition.

It is, rather, a matter of semi-concrete (visual), semi-abstract (conceptual) attempted fittings-together whereby you arrive at the kinds of meanings—the functions—that others have already provided, so that a particular piece of metal suddenly "becomes," correctly, a distributor cap.

> She studied it, searching for a vulnerable spot to attack. Though she had once been a sports-car enthusiast and had for a short period in her life owned an agency for one of the European cars, she knew little more about gasoline engines than does the average woman. She was aware, however, that they could be stopped by shutting off either the gasoline supply or the spark that exploded it.
>
> There was a valve in the small copper line coming from the fuel tank to the connection on the engine, but closing that would solve nothing. She could take a hammer from the toolbox and smash the line itself, but that would let the fuel drain into the bilges and convert the boat into a potential bomb. Then how about pulling loose a bunch of wires? That was better, but still not perfect. Warriner could replace them in less than an hour.
>
> Then her eye fell on the distributor. There was the answer. Smash that, and the power plant was permanently out of commission.

I have taken the liberty of splitting one paragraph into three, in the interests of screen readability.

LXI

And when, after the attempted immobilization has failed, she is barricaded inside the sanctuary of the forward cabin and new and

much more alarming gaps in her conceptualizing reveal themselves, it is not a disaster.

This narrowed world in which she has assumed herself, in a tentative way, to be more or less at home, does not simply vanish and become replaced by *nothing*, dreadful though some of the shocks are.

> Somehow she had to get control of the boat so she could take it back—Her thoughts broke off, and she sat up abruptly, feeling a chill along her spine.
>
> Take it back? Back *where*?
>
> She'd forgotten she had no idea at all which direction they'd been traveling since they left the other yacht. And with it lost somewhere over the horizon now, where all directions looked the same, trying to get back to it could be just as hopeless at ten miles as at a thousand.

As she immediately recognizes, she has to keep track of their course somehow; and there is a spare compass stowed away down below.

It, too, isn't a magic wand, any more than a gun is.

She has to figure out where to place it so as to maximize the chances of its giving an accurate reading. And the readings that it gives fluctuate, so that she has to strike an average. And even then, "There was no certainty, she knew, that this reading of 226 degrees was anywhere near the actual course, the one [Hughie] was steering in the cockpit; they might even differ by as much as 20 or 30 degrees."

But as she also recognizes, *if* she can get control of the boat she can, by a process of methodical trial and error, transpose this reading into terms of the compass on the binnacle.

LXII

A few moments later, though:

> She sat down, weak-kneed, on one of the other sailbags and regarded end-to-end those two conditions she'd danced across separately and so lightly a moment before.
>
> *If she ever got control of the boat… Provided it wasn't too far….*

Too far back to where John might still be… If … *if* she ever got control of the boat…

Control of the boat? But how?

> Trying to reason with [Hughie], she had already discovered, was futile. Trying to overpower him was so manifestly absurd there was no point wasting time even thinking about it.

Which brings her, and us, back to the matter of violence.

14. Force

LXIII

Just as we haven't had any philosophical reductiveness in the novel with respect to the "abyss"—the thing that is "really" there if we are sufficiently unblinded and fearless to peer into it—so there isn't any about violence.

It isn't a simple matter of nature versus nurture, with nature given primacy.

Lillian Warriner may have been right in her prediction that "inevitably there'll be a point when she has to stop thinking, and it'll become a simple matter of instinct versus conditioning. Instinct is a lot older." We shall never know for sure.

But that is not how the novel is operating, and nothing in it is a simple matter.

LXIV

There is no *a priori* set of Rae Ingram's mind against the use of force.

She is not the kind of woman like Grace Kelly in *High Noon,* or some of the prisses who so irritate Matt Helm, for whom the use of force, *any force,* is simply wrong wrong wrong, and who seek, as it were, by an act of will, to maintain the world as a place in which force is never *really* necessary.

Though she has never fired one herself, she is not someone for whom guns, any guns, are simply nasty. Her father and brothers were hunters, and it didn't bother her.

But she is aware that if force is to be used successfully (and failure will mean her own death and the death of John), it has to be used with a total commitment of her being at the decisive moment.

And when she settles on a marlin-spike ("It was over a foot long, of heavy bright steel, gently tapering from one thick end to a point at the other—the classic weapon, she knew from sea stories she'd read, of the bucko mates of nineteenth-century square-riggers driving their crews around the Horn") and solves, after several tries, the problem of where to conceal it on her person, and goes up on deck to where, perfectly good humoured now, Hughie sits at the wheel and praises the bone-structure of her face (he is, he tells her, a painter), the moral complexity of it all surges in upon her.

> For a moment she saw the whole scene with a sort of wondering horror—a civilized woman of the twentieth century, sitting here with the marlin-spike of the Cape Stiff bully-boys seated against her flesh between her nylon panties and her bra, listening while this handsome boy who was murdering her husband as surely as if he'd used a gun discussed with such charm and evident admiration the structure of her face....

The marlin-spike simply isn't *on*, given the odds against her succeeding with it.

15. Shotgun

LXV

Which makes way for the increasing entry into her consciousness (the memory of it had flickered there earlier, only to be repressed immediately) of Ingram's shotgun, so important in the novel.

A shotgun *can* be used successfully by someone like herself. No skill or strength, at such close quarters, is needed to aim it and pull the trigger.

But what Williams does with the shotgun and its potentialities has no equivalent in any other thriller that I have read, including—especially

—those of Donald Hamilton, who had moved with *Death of a Citizen* to Gold Medal Books, where Williams too had had a berth in the Fifties.

LXVI

The shotgun had not been a common weapon in thrillers.

Near the end of Richard Starnes' very readable *The Other Body in Grant's Tom*b (1951) the villain is cut down by a blast from a twelve-gauge riot gun, "the most murderous close-in weapon ever devised by man." And I seem to recall a lethal shotgun in one of E.V. Cunningham's (a.k.a. Howard Fast's) rather depressing series with women's names. But that's about all.

But Hamilton, who hunted himself and wrote non-fiction about guns and hunting, *liked* shotguns, and was impatient with others' reservations about them.

In the third Matt Helm novel, *The Removers (*1961) Helm is at the Nevada ranch of his ex-wife Beth and her new husband, and desperately needs to get a couple of hours' sleep.

So he asks her to stand watch over him in the living-room with the "little 16-gauge" double-barrelled English shotgun that he takes down from her absent husband's gun-rack.

If the baddies come, he tells her,

> "Aim it in some direction where it won't do too much damage if it goes off. If you hear anything—anything whatever—push off the safety with your thumb and put your finger on the trigger, like this. Either trigger, but it's customary to start with the rear. If you have the slightest real intimation of trouble, just pull the trigger."
>
> "But—"
>
> "Beth," I said, "please! I know it's a little rough on the household furnishings, but we hope you won't have to do it. But if you should, just follow instructions, do you understand? … Just blow a hole in the wall."

The baddies do come in, and Beth ("gentle wife and mother") of course doesn't fire, and Helm and we feel that she's rather failed him in his hour of need.

It shouldn't be *that* difficult to point and shoot, unless one's afraid of spoiling the furniture.

But why not? And what about Rae now?

LXVII

In Hamilton's own favourite novel *Line of Fire* (1955) the gunsmith hero, Paul Nyquist, reflects that "There's something very satisfying about the kick and bellow" of his sawn-off pump-action shotgun as he invades the defended nighttime grounds of city crime-boss Carl Gunderman's house.

And in the very filmic Western *The Man from Santa Clara* (1960; aka, *Two-Shoot Gun)* the photographer-hero Alexander Burdick carries his twelve-gauge double-barrelled Purdey everywhere in the dangerous community, using it lethally against an individual only once, but totally prepared to use it if necessary, and successfully conveying that message to others.

For Williams, and for Rae, things are more complicated.

LXVIII

In contrast to the distributor cap, which has to be brought into being by her, and the spare compass, which she eagerly looked for, the shotgun has in a sense *forced* itself into Rae's consciousness.

As the novel keeps reminding us, "choosing" may not be a tidy process, and memory isn't always at your command. When John Ingram is up the mast at sunset searching yet again for a glimpse of a distant mast or sail, "It was impossible to escape entirely the beauty of it or to seal the mind against all of memory's infiltration…."

At first the shotgun is a mere flickering and immediately suppressed memory while Rae is still thinking in terms of the marlin-spike: there is a shotgun *somewhere* in the boat.

Then, with the marlin-spike abandoned and her fullest attempt at getting through to Hughie a total failure—a *dangerous* failure—it comes back again as three fleece-wrapped parts stowed away in a drawer under the bunk on which she and John used to make love.

“She remembered it too easily this time. Her mind slipped away from it with the same revulsion, but she could still see it.”

And finally, just as she is about to give up her fumbling with the three pieces in the relieved conviction that a piece must be missing, something snaps into place and “She stared at it in horror. It was a complete shotgun. It was all there, and it was assembled.” The “three separate, improbable pieces” had been “suddenly united and frozen into this unmistakable shape of deadliness.”

The deadliness is not merely notional either. Her father and two older brothers had hunted quail, and she knew what a shotgun could do to the body of a bird when fired from too close.

LXIX

The question of whether Rae *will* shoot, however, isn’t a simple one, and is inseparable from the question of whether she *should* shoot.

For Williams has swerved away from another familiar thriller and horror-movie pattern.

Faced with the total menace of the absolutely alien and other—whether a hockey-masked machete-wielder, or a monster from outer space, or the obscenely smiling ex-army psychopath Max Cady in John D. MacDonald’s *Cape Fear* (1958, originally *The Executioners*)—there can surely be only one possible decision, one possible *ethical* decision at least.

When MacDonald’s Sam and Carol Bowden, once they understand that no other recourse is open to them, plan, in Sam’s words, to “lay a trap and kill him and dispose of the body” before Cady destroys them all, you feel that what they are doing is *right*.

And since Hughie Warriner is dangerously insane—insane, very strong, and absolutely unreachable—there would seem to be no very strong reason to be concerned about his fate either, as set against that of the Ingrams.

At one point, apropos of what may have happened while Hughie was alone in the water with Estelle, Ingram himself reflects that it would be natural—and self-forgivable—for someone to beat off, even if it resulted in the latter's death, a swimmer who had panicked, was trying to "climb up out of the water" upon you, and was about to drown *both* of you.

The "other", at that moment, has virtually ceased to be human; has become animal, like a panicked cat whom it's impossible to handle.

LXX

But as we learn through Lillian Warriner's exposition to Ingram, and Rae's firsthand perceptions, things aren't that simple.

Hughie is *not* a monster, and not just because, as Rae puts it to herself early on while struggling to see him as dangerous, he is a "nice, well-mannered, unbelievably handsome boy who might have stepped straight out of a mother's dream"—a description that, as we all know could apply just as well to a Patricia Highsmith sociopath.

As we learn from Lillian, he had had that lousy childhood—a mother's boy with a brute of a father—and until disaster overwhelmed him that day in the water he was a normal, agreeable husband to her, if a bit weak, and with some talent as an artist.

And if the TV image of the gun as magic wand is naive, so too, is the idea of a final tidy solution of a problem by means of force.

What we have here, the novel reminds us, is more than just a matter of objects—of a gun, a target, a trigger—, and existence is not divided up in a conventionally fictive manner into units with final closures.

There is no question of seeing a "problem" (Hughie) and a "solution" (the shotgun) and then doing some kind of tidy moral calculation.

16. Crisis

LXXI

Rae does indeed, up to a point, try to reason herself forward and cope with the awareness of the consequence for herself if she uses the gun.

The image of the carnage will remain with her for ever, and there will be "all those nights she'd wake up screaming, and…until the day she died her mind would never emerge completely from the shadow of the unanswered question: could there have been some other way?"

Nevertheless, she tells herself,

> In the end it boiled down to a simple act of purchase, didn't it? If she had no illusions about the price or about the fact she would have to pay it, the terms were clear and understood. For John's life she gave up her peace of mind for the rest of her own. Why not? People gave up their lives themselves for others, didn't they? This was the opposite of heroic, and the act itself was abhorrent, but the same love was involved, the same willingness to pay.

But as she herself acknowledges,

> There was no sense to any of these arguments. You couldn't rationalize killing a man with a shotgun, and you didn't arrive at this deed by any process of thought, of weighing the advantages and disadvantages. If you did it at all, it was after you'd quit thinking, in desperation, when nothing else was left.

LXXII

And what we see collapsing in her are the processes of logical reasoning. Which is to say, we see in part their inadequacy to her situation.

As she moves, or is pushed, towards the final terrible act, it is without any recourse to, or construction of, a higher or more fundamental structure of values that can be opposed to "normal" values: the values of war as opposed to the values of peace.

Her mind is increasingly *dis*ordered, as it skitters across all the options again, and finds temporary relief and escape as she notes down "very carefully and precisely" the compass bearing that the boat is on. ("It looked neat and businesslike. And there was the illusion she was doing something.")

Increasingly things *happen* to her, rather than being *made* to happen.

And gaps start opening up in her consciousness.

"Without any remembrance at all of how she got there," she finds herself standing on the companion ladder shrieking imploringly to Hughie to turn back before something dreadful happens.

Then, again without knowing how she got there, she's back in the forward cabin with her fingers running over her face and hair. "Something was quivering, either her face or the hand, but she wasn't sure which, any more than she was sure whether she'd actually gone out there and screamed at him …

Time, as she sees when she looks again at her watch, with a sense of disbelief, "was hurtling past her, and she was beginning to lose whole intervals of it."

17. Climax

LXXIII

The four-and-a-half pages in my paperback edition in which she finally commits herself, as she thinks, to using the gun are the most *inward* writing that I know of in any thriller:

> Then, with the suddenness of a thrown switch, the wildness and despair were gone, and she was strangely calm. It was as if her mind had come into focus at last, with everything else dropping away until there remained only the two simple, elemental facts she'd been groping for all the time, the only two that mattered at all. John was going to die unless she saved him. And she had the means to do so.

But it *is* a strange calm.

> There was a faint rushing or ringing sound inside her head, as if she had been taking quinine. It was like being enclosed in some huge bubble that protected her from all extraneous sound or thought or interference. It was cold inside the bubble, and there didn't seem to be enough air, because her breathing was rapid and very shallow, but she was invulnerable to everything beyond. She went over and picked up the shotgun.

And when she figures out how to load it, and drops two shells "into the ends of the tubular air columns of the barrels,"

> This was strange too, with some feeling that she'd done it before and knew exactly what she had to do. It was as if, while her conscious mind was recoiling from it in revulsion, some far level of the unconscious had already accepted the gun with complete fatalism and calmly planned its use.

LXXIV

But that "natural" instinct for self-preservation that Lillian Warriner spoke of is another of those concepts that is looking less four-square now.

There is nothing berserk about Rae's state of mind, no comforting "seeing red"—comforting because when that happens it's as if someone else altogether has taken over, a pre-"civilised" self, an "animal" self, perhaps (in theory) a truly "natural" one.

> The roaring in her head was louder now, so she could scarcely hear the engine. She was cold all over and wasn't sure she was breathing at all; there seemed to be some tremendous weight pressing on her chest. She walked with a stiff-legged artificial gait, like a mechanical toy …

In effect, far from the "animal" taking over, this is the terminal stage of a process in which she has tried her uttermost to find some other route, only to be driven back to the present one, with vivid unsought intrusions of memory and futurity intensifying the process—John's beloved face, in all its details, there before her as *Orpheus* goes down.

And it is her hunger for a non-terminal solution, combined with that human warmth that Ingram recalls in her during his conversations with Lillian Warriner, that in fact saves her.

LXXV

When her finger, feeling like "some great unwieldy sausage," refuses to pull the trigger, Rae returns to the cabin, drained, with the knowledge that at this moment at least (though she has no idea how she will behave at the point of no return), she cannot, even to save John, cold-bloodedly kill "a boy who didn't know what he is doing."

But this isn’t simply a recoil or a negation—a surrender, another instance of “feminine” weakness.

While she was hunting through the drawers for shotgun shells,

> It was only for a minor part of a second, a fleeting but inexplicable hiatus of movement that was noticeable at all only because ever since she had accepted this thing and committed herself she’d been going forward with the inevitability of some machine running downhill on rails.
>
> Poised there in the dark center of this almost imperceptible hesitation, with the feeling that somebody was pounding on the wall of the bubble, trying to get in or to attract her attention, she’d looked down into the drawer, wondering what had caused it.

And when she comes back down and wearily unloads the shotgun, the message gets through and she is able to act with a suddenly released flow of self-confidence.

Her ability to respond with an unforced maternal and forgiving calm, and to find in a *successful* act of communication, exactly the right tone of voice, had saved her earlier from the potentially most lethal of Hughie’s terrified rages.

Now it enables her to decisively outwit and immobilise him, very much to our relief. (I won’t say how. You may be reading the novel yourself.)

LXXVI

In actuality, or so I have been told, what she does wouldn’t have worked.

But though the design flaw, coming from so knowledgeable a writer, is a puzzling one, it is less serious than the Three-Stooges-like chaos that would have ensued in Polyphemus’ cave when Odysseus and his men tried to assemble those frenziedly bleating sheep and lash them together (with what?) in threes.

If, with the point of no return upon her at last, Rae had finally, desperately pulled the trigger, as I think she would have done, the rest of the novel’s basic action could still have gone forward.

And she would, truly, only have turned to violence as the last resort.

18. Unfairness

LXXVII

In a conventional thriller, that would pretty much be that.

Rae would turn *Saracen* 180 degrees around, as her surrogate does in the movie, and head back along the same bearing to *Orpheus*, accompanied by appropriate head-music. And there would be a blissful reprieve of the three people aboard the foundering yacht, saved by an authentic heroine.

But *Dead Calm* is not a conventional thriller, and Williams has grasped something fundamental about the way in which conventional thriller attitudes and conventional "existential" ones overlap.

I am referring to the question of justice and fairness in a godless world.

LXXVIII

With or without a god, thriller readers still want to see *some* governing principles or patterns in the way things are.

Virtue—the right kind of person doing the right things at the right time in the right way—is rewarded in *some* fashion (the innocent man on the run is exonerated, the bank is successfully robbed by the properly professional robbers).

Or viciousness, to use an old-fashioned shorthand term, carries with it its own punishments, as in depressing novels like James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, or the even more depressing novels that Williams himself developed out of them, about unpleasant characters on the make who are not as smart as they think they are.

("I wonder how long that veneer of toughness would have lasted," Mrs. Cannon remarks to John Harlan in Williams' *The Big Bite*, "if you'd ever had the intelligence to see, just once, how many ways there are in this world you can be utterly destroyed by random little sequences of events that look as harmless as marshmallows.")

Or again, another pattern: virtuousness is inevitably and inexorably *defeated*. As Lieutenant Henry famously puts it *A Farewell to Arms*,

> If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterwards many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially.

LXXIX

Reading or viewing, we want to be able to settle down into a *secure* pattern of rewards and punishment.

We want to be able to share a character's pleasurable feeling of accomplishment.

Or to keep ourselves at a distance emotionally because what he or she is trying to do is essentially pointless, since it is doomed to failure.

We veer between the belief that if you comport yourself with full concentration and commitment it will pay off, and the counter-belief that there is no point to subjecting yourself to those internal pressures because they *won't* pay off.

Which has its own advantages, since it diminishes that nagging suspicion that if you fail it is because you haven't tried hard enough or aren't the right kind of person.

In effect, we look more or less for validations of our own commitments when we *are* committed, and of our ironical and/or pessimistic withdrawals when we aren't.

And a belief in the idea of fate, or destiny, or chance, or luck can be oddly hard to shake free of.

Some coincidences, as Thomas Hardy knew, can be a little *too* appropriate to seem merely the result of chance.

19. Dynamics

LXXX

But the dynamics in *Dead Calm* are human dynamics, not mechanical ones (machines, electric circuits, failing safes), or organic ones (dry-rot), or quasi-supernatural ones (the sea as card-sharp), as in Lillian Warriner's remark to Ingram, "No doubt you remember the old ploy of crooked gamblers, letting the sheep, the intended victim, win the first few hands in order to increase the stakes. It was as if the Pacific Ocean, or fate, did it deliberately."

When she explains how Hughie and Estelle had come to be left behind in the water, "Ingram nodded. He could see the tragedy already beginning to take form, like the choreography of some death scene in a ballet, where every movement had to fit."

But it is not a *coerced* fatality that he discerns, nor is there some mysterious "innate" human wickedness that needs to be evoked.

The dynamics of the deteriorating relationships between the Warriners and the Bellews as Lillian Warriner outlines them are perfectly clear—Bellew increasingly annoyed by Hughie's incompetence, Hughie increasingly incompetent in consequence, Lillian's exasperation with Hughie leading to her pass at Bellew, Hughie turning for sympathy to the childless forty-year-old "maternal" Estelle …

LXXXI

And though it was simply by chance that *Saracen* came upon *Orpheus* in the first place, the ways in which, after their separation, Ingram and Rae make or form their own destinies have nothing arbitrary or weightless about them.

Hughie's account of the deaths by botulism aboard the *Orpheus* is demonstrably false, and his theory about the "abandonment" of himself and Estelle is untrue literally, though not simply made up out of nothing.

But the accounts that John Ingram and Lillian Warriner give each other of past events are plainly *not* false in that way, any more than their hypothesizings about what may be going on aboard *Saracen* are merely arbitrary.

In fact, as we see with the back-and-forth cross-cutting, they are reasonably close to what in fact is going on.

There is no implication in the novel that human endeavours and constructions, and the means that we use to make sense of and perhaps influence what is happening to us, are *meaningless*.

20. Discourse

LXXXII

True, the requisite person-to-person communication with Hughie has been shown to be impossible.

True, too, encased in her bubble, Rae passes beyond language and ratiocination in a situation in which there *is* no one right course. And yet action is inescapable, since doing nothing (so long as there is any hope left) is still doing *something*.

But there is no undercutting of language, communication, and reason as such.

Which is to say, of the human community, as existing in this space where there is nothing, except for sea, sun, and wind, that is *not* a human construction.

LXXXIII

If Ingram and Lillian have a dislike for "mere" talk, it is talk that is a mode of distraction or evasion, talk that *distorts* things.

When Lillian remarks that "Bellew, of course, is a pig; and I'm an arrogant and insufferable bitch," Ingram

> paused in his pumping. "Do you have to do that?"
>
> She wondered herself. She'd always held a dim view of the therapeutic value of catharsis or confession and regarded all breast-beating and *mea culpa* as being more vulgar exhibitionism than anything else. If you'd bought it, you lived with it as well as you could and with as little fuss as possible.

But this is nevertheless a novel about people *trying* to communicate with each other, people telling each other narratives, or asking each

other questions, or challenging each other's assertions, or being obliquely ironical, or using the radio, or desperately waving their arms, or using other body language.

Even Hughie talks freely and seriously with Rae about art, the female figure, and the like, in the expressed conviction that the two of them do indeed "understand" one another.

And part of his madness is precisely that language, as he uses it, doe *not* fit things:

> "Do you always have to ruin everything by becoming hysterical? He won't drown."
>
> "But that boat is sinking!"
>
> "Why do you keep saying that?"
>
> "You said it was. You told us yourself."
>
> "I did?" It was obvious he didn't believe it. He glanced into the binnacle, dismissing the whole thing as of no importance. "I don't know why I would have said a thing like that."

LXXXIV

When Lillian Warriner persuades John Ingram to talk about what kind of person Rae is, it isn't just sentimental chat.

She is concerned with estimating Rae's chances of handling Hughie, and for the same reason tells Ingram about Hughie's temperament and background and about the events leading up to his break.

Rae Ingram too has been trying to "see" things, grasp them, understand their dynamics.

And if under the strain of irreconcilable imperatives her mind tacks and veers, her exclusionary bubble is not the result of a despairing collapse but of a willed and precarious maintenance.

The external world is still out there, threatening to implode the bubble, and speaking to her, even though she may not always hear what it says.

(She is lucky, we are told, not to have used a shotgun before, so that the characteristic sound of the shells dropping into those columns of

air, and the click of the closing breach, do not carry their full charge of associative meaning for her.)

21. Concentration

LXXXV

The *possibility* of failure, total failure in her endeavours, has been all too real, of course, as she faces, after Hughie's subjugation, "all the problems clamoring for attention, calculations of time and distance and the unknown factor of direction and the need to do everything at once."

She is not comfortably reading the thriller in which she herself figures. She has no assurance of a happy outcome.

During the subduing of Hughie,

> *Saracen* had come to rest and was rolling forlornly on the groundswell, completely becalmed and helpless on a sea as unruffled as glass and achingly empty in all directions to the far rim of the visible world, where it met the converging bowl of the sky. With John there, it was privacy, but now it was a loneliness that screamed.

And as she plots a course back the way that they have come, and figures out how much time is left to her, she reflects that

> *Orpheus* had to be in sight by then, because there would be no second chance. If she weren't there, she'd already sunk, or the course had been wrong, and with no compass the latter was as irreversible as the first. Within a half-hour she'd be helplessly lost herself, with no idea where she was going or where she'd been.

But she doesn't panic, nor does she torment herself with the thought that since she no longer has instruments of precision to aid her, and is not herself a skilled navigator, what she attempts will be impossible.

There is no feeling that she is somehow now the "wrong" kind of person.

LXXXVI

She's been aware all along that navigation even with the aid of the boat's binnacle will not be risk-free.

When, earlier, she was unable to get a glimpse of the binnacle and had taken her own bearings down below with the spare compass, "There was no certainty, she knew, that this reading of 226 degrees was anywhere near the actual course, the one he was steering in the cockpit; they might even differ by as much as 20 or 30 degrees."

But she also assumed that when the time came, *if* it did come, she would be able to correlate the two.

And here we are back to the moral dimension of reasoning about the physical world, and acting upon that reasoning with a principled "existential" commitment.

22. Intensification

LXXXVII

When the movie-makers came up with their all-too-predictable, *Carrie*-esque, post-finale assault by the monster, they were in a sense transposing, albeit in comic-strip terms, what was there in the book.

For just when it looks as if Rae has won without losing her human decency, Williams gives the screw a further turn.

In another of those utterly unfair moves that can make you feel that fate is implacably against you, that you have been judged and found wanting, and that like Hardy's poor Tess of the Durbervilles, you are doomed, the staggering Hughie smashes the *second* compass too before he passes out.

> In the abrupt and almost terrifyingly lonely silence as *Saracen* slowed and came to rest she could only cling to the handrail of the ladder in defeat, and for a moment she wished she had killed him when she had the chance.

So now Rae must find her way back to *Orpheus* by means of a rough-and-ready bit of home computation involving shadow lines.

And the image of her keeping the boat running steadily for four and a half hours during which "her eyes encountered nothing but the empty miles of water and the far rim of that circle in which they seemed to be forever centered" could easily become a paradigm of absurdity.

The slightest error now can mean that when she believes that she is going towards the closure of an established and longed-for place, the place where she *really* belongs, she is in fact heading towards empty and non-humanizable space, without bearings of any kind, and the horrors of an ultimate solitude, with "no idea where she was or where she'd been," and nowhere further to go, and a tied-up homicidal madman on her hands.

At every moment, in such a situation, there is the temptation to feel that perhaps you should be changing course *slightly* in one direction or another, like a gambler at the roulette table hesitating between putting her final stake on 23 or 24.

The physical gap between them is tiny, but one of them may contain impoverishment and disgrace, the other a blessed, a miraculous plenitude.

23. Resolution

LXXXVIII

Rae is not superstitious. She does not panic, she makes and keeps to the best decision available to her, and her reaction to the loss of the second compass is not mere wishful thinking.

> After what she'd been through this far, nothing was going to stop her. She had no idea how she was going to find her way back across all those miles of open sea with nothing to guide her, but that would have to wait till she could get to it.

And her hope isn't dependent on the fictive plenitude of a yearned-for image of future happiness—a *deserved* reunion with John.

Though the minds of each of them have at moments been invaded by almost unbearable memories of the other—unbearable because emphasizing the possible totality of their loss—they have been doing their best to exclude that kind of imagining, let alone an imagining of what it would be like to be together again.

Rae's hope rests, rather, on her growing consciousness of her step-by-step-ability to cope in a focused way as each new problem comes along, and of the physical world as "readable."

"Apparently after four hours of improvising and feeling your way along the rim of disaster, you began to develop a belief there was always another handhold just beyond."

But even so, the logical, the natural, the odds-on fatalistic end appears to have arrived at 7:05 p.m. when, as the sun sets and "just for an instant the defenses of her mind gave way and she remembered sunsets she had watched with John here in the cockpit," she scans the horizon with her binoculars "and there was no sign of *Orpheus* anywhere."

LXXXIX

She and John *aren't* destroyed, of course, any more than Odysseus is destroyed in the cave of Polyphemus.

But with its frightening distances, its tenuous glimpsings, its fragile communicatings, and the indispensability of various pieces of equipment, the process has been charged with the possibility of failure at every point.

And it is only the focused intensity, the single-mindedness of their joint commitments and alertness, unweakened by corrosive self-doubtings or a sense of malign fatality, that makes their salvation possible.

XC

For there have been, all along, *two* hoping consciousnesses in this drama, not just a solitary figure facing a hostile universe and the increasingly likelihood of defeat and death.

If, by an act of provisional faith, Rae assumes, in the absence of any other knowledge, that *Orpheus* can still be there, and that if it is, her glasses will pick it up, Ingram too has continued to assume that she can still get back.

So that he in turn keeps scanning the horizon with that seeking intensity, that projection of the self to the farthest reaches of vision,

that is only possible if you believe that something can be there to be found, a belief encouraged in him by the evident fact that Hughie is *not* a monster.

And eventually he sees, far, far away, the streak of *Saracen's* mast, with a sudden intense awareness of *Rae* there in her fullness—but ignorant of where he himself is—below that tiny sign.

XCI

I won't go into the details of the explosive act of will—the *hurling* of the self towards communication—by which he gains her attention in a final, dangerous, all-or-nothing throw of the dice. I will only say that their coming together is a profound demonstration and reaffirming of value and valuing.

As Ingram draws near to *Saracen*, Rae

> slid down into the cockpit seat with one hand still feebly clutching the lifeline above her, unable even to raise her head, and her diaphragm began to kick so she couldn't exhale. Every time she would try to breathe out, it would kick and she would inhale again.

And as Ingram, before she has been able to explain anything, grasps what an extraordinary feat of navigation she has accomplished, there is an immense flooding in of value, a sense of the even greater rarity and preciousness of their relationship than had obtained before their separation.

She has done it for *him*, she has done it for *them*, and her own trust in their relationship has made it possible.

> Then, just before she disappeared entirely into the mist [of unconsciousness], she heard her own voice say something at last.
>
> "Did you have any lunch?" she asked.
>
> "No," he said. He swallowed and rubbed a hand across his eyes. "I guess I forgot."

Holding the compass from *Orpheus* very carefully, he "went below and stowed it in a drawer. It was beyond price now, and nothing was going to happen to it until he could get it secured in or on the binnacle."

24. Coda

XCII

Dead Calm does not end there, however. This is as much a novel about remembering and recollecting, and about responsibility, as it is about hoping and willing.

It is not just the success story of John and Rae Ingram.

It is also the story of the Warriners and the Bellews, and *that* story is a story of error, and failure, and a hunger for "justice," meaning punishment, including self-punishment—a subject for a much darker novel.

If Rae and Ingram are relatively free spirits, their attentions bent constantly upon the future but grounded on a secure sense of the past, *their* past, there are other ways of being human-all-too-human.

XCIII

The dynamics of the others' story haven't suddenly stopped.

Bellew and Lillian Warriner are still locked into their relationships with each other and with Hughie.

Bellew still hates the pampered darling whose incompetence brought ruin on them all and who (in Bellew's all-too-plausible reading of what had gone on in the solitude of the water) had killed his wife.

Lillian still refuses to blame Hughie and despises herself for her own responsibility for the disaster—for Hughie's madness and Estelle's death, and for "the spreading shock wave of disaster" that engulfed "two other people whose only crime had been the fact that they were in the same part of the ocean."

Honourably clear-eyed in terms of the stoical code that she had tried to live by,

> The guilt was still hers, and she accepted it, though it seemed a terrible price to pay for the pursuit of an impossible dream, a few minutes of arrant and unforgivable bitchiness, and an accident. There were beckoning avenues of escape: the accident couldn't have been her fault because she'd been asleep at the time, and

> she'd been goaded into the bitchiness, but these were sleazy evasions and technicalities for which she had nothing but contempt.

At bottom, for her, "the real responsibility from which there would never be any escape" had been "the pursuit of the impossible dream, while she knew it was impossible."

XCIV

So though Ingram himself now craves to be able to withdraw from something that simply isn't his and Rae's affair, he is compelled to intervene, not only because the dynamics of those relationships have the power to destroy them all, but because of his own sense of human responsibility and of the very real worth of Lillian Warriner.

Though he hates speechifying, he is compelled into physical action, and into offering his own reading of what had gone on during that other pleasure cruise, based on what Lillian has told him and what he himself has inferred.

In all this he is only partly successful, and the possibility is now there that, as could have been the case for Rae had she pulled the trigger, he too, in his turn, will become a prisoner of the past.

After the final disaster in the book, the final explosive outcome of the relationships between the Bellews and the Warriners,

> He knew that for years it would keep coming back, leaping out at him in odd moments and without warning to haunt him with that unanswerable question: *Would something different, some other way, have worked*?

But he answers his own question: "No. Nothing could have changed it. He'd done everything he could, and in the only way it could have been done." And in this he is not being smug or self-deceived.

XCV

Dead Calm is a book about errors—multiple errors, at times disastrous or near-disastrous ones—and the feelings of guilt that they can create.

Even Rae, at the beginning, was almost fatally wrong in her belief in Hughie's story.

But it is also a book in which true perceptions and reasonably accurate readings of the past are possible, just as accurate navigation is possible, and with them true judgments.

If Hughie is destroyed by his inability to see things as they are—"I don't think it's a feeling of guilt that made him crack up but just the refusal to accept the blame," Ingram tells Lillian—and if Lillian comes close to being destroyed by her more complicated romanticism, both John and Rae are saved by their undeluded and holistic intelligence.

And because of John Ingram, Lillian Warriner, too, while remaining a tragic figure, is to some extent released from the grip of the past.

XCVI

This is also, I am sure, the book in which Williams resolved to his own satisfaction the kinds of problems that I sketched at the outset, with its demonstration of the experiential shallowness of the fashionable "existential" model, and the dangers—dangers, not just theoretical errors—in a *tout comprendre* romanticism.

Hughie Warriner, and the destruction that he caused, had been created as much by the overly generous and forgiving nurturing of the women in his life, as by the bullying of men.

And where survival is concerned, the truest, or at least the most profitable model (though Williams himself doesn't invoke the analogy) would appear to be, not the old-style positivist image of nature as tooth-and-claw bloodiness in an echoing empty space, but the newer ethological one of animal communities grounded in their environment and governed in their interactions by principles of order that it can be lethal to ignore.

XCVII

The author of this humane and intelligent philosophical novel—epistemological, phenomenological, ethical—took his own life, I do not know from what demons.

Was *Dead Calm*, particularly in the figure of Rae Ingram, the ultimate defining of things that had given meaning to his writing career, and that were increasingly slipping beyond his grasp, like *Saracen* sliding away beyond the horizon, leaving him struggling and alone there in the water, with no prospect of anyone's coming back for him?

In any event, let us salute him.

Ajijic, Mexico, 1990
Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2001

Notes

Geoffrey O'Brien warmly praises Williams' writerly qualities in the two-and-a-bit pages that he devotes to him in his wide-ranging *Hardboiled America: Lurid Paperbacks and the Masters of Noir* (1981; expanded edition, Da Capo Press, 1997). He prefers Williams' bleaker works, with their challenge to the Fifties version of the American Dream, and there is a substantial factual error in his eight lines on *Dead Calm.* But his book valuably brings out the strength of the vein of depressive and too often alcoholic nihilism in a number of American thriller writers that Williams himself struggled against. There was more love there in the genre than O'Brien allows for, however, particularly in the Gold Medal books, and the nihilism requires more explanation than he attempts.

For categorizing and recategorizing in Crane, see my "Crane, Norris and London," *American Literature*, vol. IX, *New Pelican Guide to English Literature*.

My source for *Line of Fire* being Donald Hamilton's favourite novel is his reply to a fan letter from myself in 1994.

We now, I see in 2013, have the generously detailed Wiki entry on Williams, plus lots of other online material, including readers' enthusiastic responses to *Dead Calm.*

But if the term *noir* implies some kind of interior darkness in the protagonists that results in defeat, *Scorpion Reef* [*Gulf-Coast Girl*], *Stain of Suspicion* [*Talk of the Town*], and *Gulf Coast Girl* aren't noir. Nor were the immortal Gold Medal books, started in 1950 after the troubled post-war years, all noir. Despite the viciousness of the bad

guys, books like John D. MacDonald's *The Brass Cupcake*, *Murder for the Bride, Dead Low Tide,* and *A Bullet for Cinderella* weren't *noir.* Wade Miller wasn't all noir. The prolific and popular Richard S. Prather wasn't noir at all.

In the Fifties I was buying paperbacks fresh off the drugstore and news-stand racks, with an immigrant's eyes, and my spirits *lift*ed the moment I saw new GMs. The chivalric, which I had grown up on in England, has been a strong presence on both sides of the Atlantic. See my *America and th Patterns of Chivalry* (Cambridge UP, 1982).

A simple rule-of-thumb might be, "If it ends well, it ain't noir."

I see that "A Philosophical Thriller," gratifyingly present in the Wiki article among External Links as "intriguing," is considered "highly speculative." The term seems a bit odd to me, since I think of it as normally applied to things that are unknown, such as realworld matters of fact ("She may have been moved to write the story by the reported death of Hemingway in Africa") or the arguings that go on about the ghosts in "The Turn of the Screw." (They're *there*.) Apart from my references to Hamilton, I would have thought that I was simply describing, like any critic of fiction, what goes on in the action. But the action is intellectually richer than that of most thrillers.

I guessed that Williams, who did the script for René Clement's *Les Félins* (1964), would have had a brush, if only in conversation, with French Existentialism. But that would have taken me outside my area of competence and, worse, played into the hands of academics only too willing to turn away from the psychological complexities of the goings on on a page to the hypothesized "mind" of the author.

Is anything known about Williams' reading, apart from Conrad?

Writer at Work

> And after all, what else is the German *Bildungsroman* [development novel] than the sublimation and spiritualization of the novel of adventure?
>
> Thomas Mann, "The Making of *The Magic Mountain"*

> It is not my place to say where, in the scale of literary quality, my own presentations stand, or fall.
>
> Donald Hamilton, in *Twentieth-Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, 3rd. ed.

> "Well, I hate to hit a guy on the head when I'm shooting at his tires. That's pretty wild."
>
> "Wild, hell!" said Crane.
>
> He knew O'Malley was lying. This was one of the times he could put his finger on what O'Malley was. What O'Malley was he kept hidden most of the time. So did Doc Williams. And Eddie Burns. They were all alike. You learned about them only in an inverse manner. They boasted about how frightened they were of certain things, and you knew they had been brave."
>
> Jonathan Latimer, *The Dead Don't Care.*

> I loathe this misconception of writing down to the public just because you're supposed to be working in a popular vein.
>
> Donald Hamilton (to Roy Newquist, *Conversations,* vol. IV).

1. Introduction

[2013] I put this long article online while Donald Hamilton was still alive, and haven't done any updating. It would have been too complicated, and my finding my way through what was still largely uncharted territory is part of what the article is about.

Its pace is leisurely. I don't provide a sequence of topic sentences and then staple information to them. So what I do can't simply be speed-read in order to get the point.

But that too is partly what the article's about. These works, after the first What-will-happen-next? read-throughs, have plenty of thinking in them to repay extended attention.

There is no jargon in my descriptions, and I don't have any axes to grind.

I

Donald Hamilton, at eighty-six the dean of American thriller writers, has had an unusually long and enviable career, and his books have been part of my own consciousness, on and off, for forty years.

He was one of the major—the *greatest* —generation of American thriller writers, who were born during or just after the so-called Great War, reached adulthood during the character-forming Thirties, served in the armed forces in World War II, and began their writing careers after being demobilized. He has outlived fellow professionals like John D. MacDonald, Kenneth Millar (a.k.a. Ross Macdonald), John McPartland, and Charles Williams, and went on writing until very recently. Only Mickey Spillane, so far as I know, is still hanging in there.

Hamilton has forty-two books to his credit, twenty-eight of them in the Matt Helm series, five of them Westerns, two of them non-fiction, one of them a selection of Western fiction edited by himself. Seven movies have been made from his books, and in 1975 a TV series briefly featured Helm, played, with wildly incongruity, by Tony Franciosa, as a private eye.

The Helm books, with the iconic photo of Hamilton on the back cover in those reflecting aviator sunglasses, have apparently sold close to twenty million copies, and were obviously enjoyable to write.

He has been President of the Mystery Writers of America, no doubt with other honours from his fellow professionals, and come a long way since 1946 when he quit his occupation as chemist (in which capacity he had served in the Naval Reserve) and set out as a writer and freelance photographer at the age of thirty, with a wife and children to support.

There is a website on him called "The Donald Hamilton Worship Page." I am writing as a fan myself, though this side of idolatry.

II

Obviously it wasn't roses, roses all the way.

You can be sure that he didn't get rich quick with his two hardcover novels, *Date with Darkness* (1947) and *The Steel Mirror* (1948), or the two novellas bound together in 1950 as *Murder Twice Told*, after magazine publication.

The action in the two novels isn't edge-of-the-seat unputdownable, nor are their heroes and heroines all that easy to empathize with. They are not *comfortable* works, even though *The Steel Mirror* had made it into the *Saturday Evening Post* as a serial. Hamilton himself remarks that *Date with Darkness* "didn't do much."

And evidently he wasn't a natural when it came to short stories. By his own account he had pounded out lots of them for pulps like *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective* (starting back in the Thirties? ; the chronology isn't clear), all of them coming back to him. The first of the only two stories that were accepted in those years, both by *Collier's,* both in 1946, both of them love stories, apparently required seven editorially prompted rewrites.

He was a long way in those days from the runaway success and manic certitude of Spillane's Mike Hammer books, or the fertility of John D. MacDonald, who sold a couple of hundred stories to the pulps before coming out with the excellent *The Brass Cupcake* in 1950.

In the 1986 article "Shut Up and Write," Hamilton recalls that there were some "tough patches" and "pretty bare" cupboards during those years and that "it's a bleak country—the land of the learning writer."

The two novellas, *The Black Cross* (1947) and *Deadfall* (1949) moved faster and along more familiar lines (*Deadfall*, too, appeared in *Colliers*), but no further books were published by Rinehart, and thereafter his works, apart from the non-fictional *Cruises with Kathleen* (1980), which was about sailing, appeared only as paperbacks, first with Dell, then in Fawcett Gold Medal Books.

III

Presumably this was a pondered career choice. Writers like MacDonald, Williams, and Millar (Macdonald) would appear between both soft covers and the more prestigious hard ones.

But there may also have been a touch of defiance there, a nailing of his colours to the mast. And there may have been costs.

IV

Reading between the lines, the Fifties, when he was doing some of his best work, remained an uncertain time for him financially. “While we were scraping by,” he observes (“Shut Up and Write”), “we certainly weren’t getting rich or famous.”

Four of the books were Westerns, starting with *Smoky Valley* (1954), his first book in four years, and Westerns, he remarked later, were not big sellers unless your name was Louis L’Amour. If my own experience is anything to go by, there was very little cross-over between readers of thrillers and readers of Westerns. Apart from Hamilton’s five, all of them good, I doubt if I have read half a dozen others.

Evidently it was a blow when *Collier’s* folded in 1957. His first short story in *Collier’s* back in 1946 had brought him a cheque for $750, which would be worth at least five times as much today. So the three novels serialized in it, if paid for at the same rate, would have made a substantial difference to the family fortunes. As it was, apparently, Kathleen Hamilton had to help out by teaching school.

V

Moreover, I have the impression that the superb *Line of Fire*, announced on the cover by Dell as “First Edition. Not a reprint,” and the very interesting *Assignment: Murder* (ditto) didn’t make the kind of splash at the time that they deserved to, especially the former, one of the finest and most elegant of American thriller.

I myself was reading a lot of thrillers in the Fifties. (Minneapolis was a city rich in used paperbacks, and a faux-Tudor reading room in the University library had a section for mysteries), but I didn’t become

aware of *Line of Fire* — Hamilton's own favourite, according to the one letter I have from him—until after the first Helm book appeared in 1960.

And there are no quotations from reviews of either book on the Gold Medal reissue of *Assignment Murder* as *Assassins Have Starry Eyes* (an appalling title, but apparently foisted upon it by Gold Medal to avoid confusion with their Sam Durrell "Assignment" series by Edward S. Aarons).

Anthony Boucher, reviewing thrillers and mysteries for the New York *Times*, was a fan of his. But paperbacks in those days weren't bought by libraries.

And those were the years when slightly snobbish affections of the heart were being established that would put various thriller writers on the intellectual map and keep them there. Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald, in hardcover as well as soft, were *real*, which is to say literate, which is to say *intellectual* writers. *Line of Fire* and *Assignment;Murder*, on the other hand, were simply paperbacks in drugstore racks.

In comparison with Chandler and Macdonald and Hammett, surprisingly little has been written about Hamilton.

VI

Nor did Hamilton have the intellectual-prestige breaks of Chandler, or Hammett, or various other writers, such as Cornell Woolrich and the dreadful Dorothy B. Hughes, when it came to the filming of his books.

The adaptation of *Smoky Valley*, his best Western, as *The Violent Men* (1955) was surprisingly faithful to the novel, starred Glenn Ford, Barbara Stanwyck, and Edward G. Robinson, and was directed by Rudolph Maté, the great cinematographer for Carl Dreyer's *Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) and director of *noirs* like *D.O.A,* (1950). But it *was* a Western, and not a noir, and I don't imagine it was Cinématheque talk in Paris, where serious American reputations were increasingly made.

And William Wyler's *The Big Country* (1958), a wide-screen "quality" Western with Gregory Peck as a sea-captain who has moved to

cowboy country, so totally lacked the crispness and authenticity that made the good parts of the very filmic novel memorable that it was a virtual How-Not-To demonstration of missed opportunities.

Five Steps to Danger (1957), the movie adaptation of *The Steel Mirror*, has sunk virtually without a trace despite starring Sterling Hayden and Ruth Roman. The reviewer for the New York *Times* called it a "lax" and implausible melodrama, and Hamilton and his wife, as he recalls, almost missed seeing it, since it never got into the big theatres.

In addition, Hamilton's fans, to judge from the websites, are still writhing in disgust over the campy dumbing-down of four of the best Helms in the Sixties, with Dean Martin particularly incongruous in the lead role. There was no way I myself was going to see them, I knew. Martin, in his urban-cool manifestation, was an ironical antithesis of the Helm of the books, and the movies probably put a lot of intelligent readers off from trying the books at all.

The lovely and highly cinematic *Line of Fire* has inexplicably never been filmed. Nor, back in the Forties, were the two novellas, which would have made fine noirs.

Hamilton, like Jonathan Latimer, was always very conscious of the movies, I would say. He was a photographer himself.

VII

Nevertheless!

Two big-name Westerns in three years. What a boost to morale and income! No wonder he would speak warmly later of *The Big Country*, despite his own contributions to the screenplay having been lost, as he recalls, in the multi-writer shuffle. (Apparently he had trouble writing additional dialogue for it.)

And as a thorough pro he obviously knew that what you couldn't change you lived with, and that if you were in the business of providing entertainment, it was a lot better to be getting income from the Dean Martin movies than *not* to be getting it.

True, it would have been nice to have had a movie equivalent of the Mitchum/Peck, *Cape Fear* (1961).

But then, Hamilton himself hadn't written an equivalent of the spine-tingling *Cape Fear* novel (originally *The Executioners,* 1957), and in fact only one of John D.MacDonald's vastly popular thirty-volume Travis McGee series (begun in 1964, four years after the first Helm) was filmed for theatrical release—*Darker Than Amber* (1970), with Rod Taylor less than entirely adequate to MacDonald's battered, rangy, sexually therapeutic knight-errant.

VIII

And after Hamilton's agent had seen the possibility of making the first Helm novel (*Death of a Citizen*, 1960) the start of a series, rather than have Matt (originally George!) return to his normal peaceful life after his enforced departure from it, and Fawcett Gold Medal had given him a long-term contract (one book a year), and Helm, by Hamilton's own account, had taken on a life of his own so that the early books virtually wrote themselves, Hamilton was presumably fixed for life, so far as any writer ever is ("Over 16 million Matt Helm novels in print!" the back cover of *The Revengers* announced in 1982) and able to relax and enjoy a variety of activities when he wasn't at the keyboard.

Which, to judge from his books and the worship page, included hunting, sailing, camping, photography, driving pick-up trucks and the occasional sports car, and raising with his wife Kathleen (they were married for almost fifty years) a family of two sons and two daughters.

Three of the children evidently enjoyed growing up with guns and hunting (Elise with particular gusto, by the sound of it), and Gordon, who also shared his enthusiasm for sailing, has been his partner over in Europe in a boat-refinishing business enterprise.

He has done a lot of traveling, in search of locations for the Helm books—Mexico, Scotland, the Caribbean, Norway, Canada, Hawaii among them. And found out a lot about the history of the American West.

And been based for most of his writing life in the New Mexico evoked with such evident pleasure in several of his novels.

IX

A long, productive, and honourable career; a good family life; an enviable repertoire of outdoor skills; the respect of fellow writers of both thrillers and Westerns; the respect, too, of fellow aficionados of sailing, guns, and hunting, including the readers of his articles about them; a sufficiency, I imagine, of friends and friendly acquaintances, despite the probably judicious absence of dedications from the novels—well, you could go a lot farther and fare a lot worse, couldn't you?

2. Development

X

When things have gone well for a writer, it seems worth enquiring why. All the more so when you think of the melancholy arc of the careers of thriller writers like Hammett and Chandler. And Charles Williams. And Ted Lewis.

Let me see what I have to sayh. This will take some time, but I shall do my best to be clear.

XI

Hamilton's thrillers (I will omit the Westerns, as too big a subject) group themselves conveniently into decades.

1940s

Date with Darkness (1947)—Philip Branch (Naval Reserve jg), Jeannette Lalevy-Duvall

The Black Cross (1947)—Hugh Phillips (sociology instructot), Christine Wells, Janice Phillips.

The Steel Mirror (1948)—John Emmett (indusrial chemist), Ann Nicholson

Deadfall (1949)—Paul Weston (research chemist), Marilyn George, Janie Collis

(*Deadfall* and *The Black Cross* were published together as *Murder Twice Told* in 1950)

1950s

Night Walker (1954)—Dave Young (Naval reserve officer), Elizabeth Wilson

Line of Fire (1955)—Paul Nyquist (gunsmith), Barbara (Babs) Wallace

Assignment: Murder, a.k.a. *Assassins Have Starry Eyes* (1956)—Jim Gregory (physicist), Natalie Gregory, Nina Rasmussen

1960s et seq.

Death of a Citizen (1960)—Matt Helm, Tina (no non-alias last name), Elizabeth (Beth) Helm

(And so on, through the rest of the Helm series, up to *The Damagers* in 1993.)

In the rest of these pages, I shall concentrate on the works of the Nineteen Forties, with a glance or two at others along the way.

I believe that it was how Hamilton thought his way through a number of issues in them that enabled him to advance with the confidence that he did in the wider-angle novels of the Fifties, especially *Line of Fire*, *Assignment: Murder*, and the Westerns, and to keep the Helm saga going so long.

The Forties works are works of discovery, works about finding things out about more than merely criminal goings-on—finding them out about other people, especially women, about yourself, about being a writer, about being "a man" in a self-respecting way—the rules, in a sense, of engagement. Development itself can be an adventure, a faring forward into the unknown, or the very imperfectly known, like Hamilton leaving the security of industrial chemistry.

They are also deeply moral (moral, not moralistic) love stories. "The Love Stories of Donald Hamilton"? It has a curious ring to it, doesn't it? But then, lots of thrillers are basically love stories, and Hamilton himself went on writing novels (thrillers, Westerns) that are about love.

3. Choices

XII

To risk some preliminary generalizations.

Obviously the Hamilton of these works had decided to stay pretty close to his own experiences and areas of competence; in other words, not to *fake.*

Apparently he had always written, on and off—scaring his kid sisters with ghost stories, doing a boyhood thriller with a sacred crocodile and an erupting sacred volcano in it, and spending so much time on writing as an undergraduate that he had to take an extra year before getting his B.Sc. at the University of Chicago in 1938. (Did any of it appear in student 'mzines, I wonder?)

But he stayed on as a graduate student, paid his way as a lab assistant in a junior college, and got a job with an oil company, working on rust prevention. And his war service as a Naval Reserve ensign and subsequently lieutenant, j.g., had been stateside, "fixing up bad smells at a naval experiment station" at Annapolis, as he puts it, plus doing (or so I recall reading) some small-boat instructing on Chesapeake Bay.

So the heroes of the Forties works are all young professional men, three of them without overseas war service, two of them chemists, one of them a Naval lieutenant, j.g., one (but his work doesn't enter into the story) a sociology instructor in an unnamed university (Johns Hopkins?).

XIII

Physical skills? Oh, nothing much. Two of them are small-boat people, one of them knows which end of a rifle you pointed at the Japanese, one of them is a reasonably efficient long-distance driver. Nothing dramatic, no unarmed combat, no hand-gun expertise, no college sports, not even any hunting or fishing.

Not that Hamilton was indifferent to the charms of hyper-skills and hyper-effective heroes. Leslie Charteris' Saint books, as he reports, had been among his own enjoyments, along with the works of John Buchan, Geoffrey Household, Dashiell Hammett, and others.

And in the unpublished novel about German spies that he wrote while in the Navy, and the short stories that he had pounded out on his Remington portable since college and fired off to the pulps, he was presumably having his go at conventional heroes and heroics.

And there's nothing intrinsically wrong with that. It's beside the point, with respect to whether something in a book feels *real* or not, whether or not the author has had similar experiences. The Saint books aren't made better or worse when we learn that Charteris himself, according to Chris Steinbrunner and Otto Penzler's *Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection*, had led an adventurous life as a cop, gold prospector, pearl fisher, seaman, and so forth, was a good horseman, and could throw knives (ah, enviable gift) "more or less accurately."

On the other hand, though, it obviously helped Buchan and Household and Hammett to have had *some* of the experience of the physical world that they write about. And I suspect that when Hamilton was trying in vain to break into *Black Mask* and the like, he simply didn't sufficiently know what he was talking about. And that it showed.

So, no faking.

XIV

Domestic locales. Midtown Manhattan, midtown Chicago, Chesapeake Bay, highways west from Chicago to Cheyenne and down to Santa Fe, with stops along the way.

First-person or single-point-of-view narration. A wise choice, that, making it easier to present things as they're experienced, not authorially tidied up. The weak parts of the Westerns later would be when Hamilton shifts temporarily away from the central consciousnesses of the heroes.

Violences? Very few involving the heroes. No killings by the heroes. A few body-contact episodes. A car accident.

No chases in the two novels. No horses. No savage dogs. No knives. No brass knuckles.

No pool halls, no card games.

No nightclubs, no strip joints.

No dancing.

No Italians or Latinos, no Jews, only one Black that I can recall (the hotel maid in *Date With Darkness*, well two if you count a Pullman porter), no colourful newsies, or wisecracking newspaper reporters, or talkative cabbies, or philosophical bartenders, or salty fishermen.

Can these be *thrillers*? American thrillers?

XV

Well, there are thriller plots and thriller characters, certainly.

A young Frenchwoman gets a young naval lieutenant (j.g.) to help her outwit four members of the Resistance who are over here in pursuit of her collaborationist husband (*Date with Darkness*).

A young chemist driving West to a new job helps a young American woman who had been in the Resistance and was tortured by the Gestapo meet a German physicist currently working in a top secret American establishment, so as to have him clear up her uncertainty as to whether or not she broke under torture and betrayed her comrades, in which quest she is being interfered with by…well, that's enough about *that.*(*The Steel Mirror*).

A young American woman who has been identified as a traitor re-surfaces in the life of another young chemist and involves him with another spy ring (*Deadfall*).

A young sociology instructor's wife, formerly a nightclub singer, has been (he believes) murdered before his eyes after a highway accident, leading to his involvement with criminals with whom she had been associated (*The Black Cross*).

Yes, there are indeed thriller elements, and each of the heroes, Philip Branch, John Emmett, Paul Weston, and Hugh Phillips (what WASP names!) is in serious danger of being killed at some point, and the love-interest women who drag them into trouble are all problematic in some way, and there is a good deal of lying and obfuscation by them and other parties.

XVI

So, then, these are works in which more or less conventionally thrillerish and romantic situations are experienced more or less realistically by more or less ordinary young men?

Well, yes and no.

Part of the difficulty of writing about these works now, after there has been so much sophistication and pseudo-sophistication about thriller conventions, and so many variations played on them, and so much reading of subtexts, and so much everything, is that to speak in those terms seems to imply a dichotomy that isn't there in the works.

There is no sending up of a genre in them, no ironical juxtaposing of an ostensible fictive glamour and a seamy-side realism, I mean no ongoing programmatic juxtaposing.

4. Post-War

XVII

When John Emmett in *The Steel Mirror* tries to cope with the fact that Ann Nicholson had been in the Resistance, we are indeed reminded of fictions:

> He … tried to imagine her, in sweater and skirt, perhaps, or disguised as a boy,…slipping down darkened alleys with, at the end, always a large German sentry silhouetted against the light of the street; or crouching in the bushes in the rain while the lightning flashes showed the patrols searching for her; or standing by the window of a shabby room, her profile clear against the sunlight outside as she drew back the curtains minutely to look down at the street where a man in a trench coat, obviously a heavy, stood ostentatiously reading a newspaper. Because it always turned out Hollywood when you tried to imagine it. You knew it had not been like that, but you had no idea of how it really had been. When they said "underground" and "Gestapo" it came out Warner Brothers, passed by the state board of censors.

But that is where we, and Emmett, and Hamilton *are*, in the immediate post-war Forties.

Unlike the heroes of Hammett's novels and Chandler's, we have gone to the movies. We have seen (no doubt) movies like Fritz Lang's *Hangmen Also Die* (1942) and *13 Rue Madeleine* (1946). We are aware of heroic Humphrey Bogart (the Bogart of movies like *Casablanca* and *Across the Pacific* and *To Have and Have Not,* not the sneering pre-war hoodlum of *Dead End* and *The Roaring Twenties*). Bogart is mentioned several times in these works.

XVIII

But if the just-ended war had been fictionalized, it hadn't all been fiction.

The Gestapo had been all too real, Resistance fighters had behaved heroically, spying had gone on, atrocities had been perpetrated, flesh-and-blood men and women had died, sometimes horribly. There had been a whole ongoing clatter of information about what the war had been like, and what postwar Europe was like—magazine articles, memoirs, newsreels, radio broadcasts, and so on and so forth.

There were "facts" as well as "fictions."

The problem, of course, was deciding which fictions were falsifications; which were functional because embodying truths, even if not literally; and which were "true." Particularly, given the premium that had been put on courage, with respect to how individuals had comported themselves under the Nazis

XIX

Hamilton at age thirty when the war ended was obviously well aware of all this.

He may also have been conscious (not having seen action himself) of the paradox of movie actors like aw-shucks Jimmy Stewart and terribly decent David Niven having been genuine war heroes, and the quintessentially heroic John Wayne having been, alas, virtually a draft dodger. (Bogart, forty-one or so at the time of Pearl Harbor, had enlisted in the *First* World War.)

It was not a simple period. Particularly not if you were concerned, like Stephen Crane about the Civil War, and George Orwell and

Christopher Isherwood after World War I, with the question of how you yourself might have behaved in the conflict that you missed, and had had warriors among your forebears.

XX

There had already been thrillers about more or less ordinary men plunged into extraordinary situations, especially ones involving espionage—men, I mean, whose occupations didn't require them to go *looking* for trouble, in contrast to journalists, insurance investigators, and the like.

In 1944 alone:

—Richard Powell's contentedly deskbound Army Lieutenant Andy Blake had been dragged into spy-hunting in wartime Washington by his hyper-active gun-loving wife Arabella (Arab) in *All Over But the Shooting*,

—Kenneth Millar's Robert Branch (sic) had become involved with murderous Nazi spies (one of them a transvestite) at the Midwestern university where he was an English instructor, doing some heavy running around and at one point fighting a duel with fencing sabres (*The Dark Tunnel*, a.k.a. *I Die Slowly*).

—David Dodge's tax-accountant Whit Whitney, with his just-married bride Kitty, had German spy-ring trouble in Reno, Nevada, in a novel that begins "There were four men in a dark little room. One of them had been shot several times in the chest and was about to die," and has plenty of gun-play in it (*Bullets for the Bridegroom*).

—and Ray Milland had major spy trouble in Fritz Lang's *The Ministry of Fear*, the film of Graham Greene's novel of that name which had appeared the previous year and in which reclusive, guilt-haunted Arthur Rowe coped with German agents in bomb-damaged England.

I won't even try recalling other movies, let alone Damsel in Distress thrillers about *women* (Dorothy B. Hughes' for example) for whom the world has suddenly turned strange and menacing and you do *not*, of course, ever do the sensible thing and turn to the authorities for help. Or get it if you do.

XXI

I think that the ground rules that Hamilton set for himself—partly with respect to his own inexperience as an action writer, but partly also for moral reasons— when he sent *his* ordinary men in trouble were that

(a) he would make the action as little melodramatic as he reasonably could;

(b) he would try as far as possible to convey how things *felt* to the heroes as they were occurring—felt as they might also have felt to you or me had we been there in their place;

(c) spies, private investigators, black-marketeers, and other illegals existed in reality, and he would use them, but he would try to make them, too, as natural as they might well be;

(d) he would not simply take over unexamined the conventions of thrillers with respect to courage and love ; and

(e) he was absolutely *not* going to let himself go into a trance of self-congratulatory identification with heroic "action".

XXII

His well-bred college graduates wouldn't be having adrenalin surges like Andy Blake towards the end of *All Over But the Shooting*, taking out the fat, evil, judo-cunning master Nazi spy and saving a convoy from the U-boats:

> I slammed hooks into his jaw without putting him down. It was like hitting a huge ball of putty. No clean sharp impact. No jolt tingling back to my elbows. Padded flesh squashed under my knuckles. I got reckless and threw a right at him from the bleachers. He was waiting for it. He pivoted, caught my arm over his shoulder, like a fielder taking a fly…Slow fire burned upward from my wrist.
>
> I hooked a foot around his ankle to steady myself, ripped hooks into his left kidney with my free hand. His bent back was a sweet target. Like socking a drum. I pounded him three times. He grunted, jerked upright. Something tore agonizingly at my locked

> arm. I dug into his kidney once more and then he whirled around and let me fly off at the wall.

XXIII

Oh, and

(f) there would be a strong romantic interest in the conventional sense of the term, which had been absent from most of the works that I have named.

Being an "ordinary" young man does not necessarily mean that only ordinary things will happen to you and that you are doomed to endure Wallace Stevens' "malady of the quotidian."

Relationships with women, especially young women, may be by no means ordinary for *you*. Any more than chucking up a safe career in chemistry at the age of thirty and setting out as a freelance writer-photographer, like Hamilton himself, was an everyday thing to do.

5. Darkness

XXIV

Date with Darkness, the most complex and at 246 paperback pages the longest of the books, is peculiarly difficult for someone with as bad a memory as mine to write about.

The prose is always shapely, and this is not at all an experimental novel stylistically, but things proceed in so subtly incremental a fashion that when you try to explain how *real* things feel in it in the earlier parts, I mean how well Hamilton establishes the rules of his own game, you run the risk of oversimplification.

Later on, when Philip Branch is down at Queen's Harbor, on Chesapeake Bay, waiting, along with the French group, for the enigmatic Jeannette Duval to turn up, there are passages of clear, calm, unfussy locale-evoking description that it is a pleasure to quote. For example:

> From the screened porch that ran the front of the bungalow one could look down through the trees into a small cove where a rambling long narrow wooden pier on pilings jutted far out into the

> water. From the end of the pier a line led to the stern of a motorboat moored to a white-painted conical buoy; the boat lying quite still between the two lines on the sheltered water of the cove, covered from cabin to stern by a dingy gray tarpaulin. The wind that drove through the trees about the bungalow reached down to make small dark darting cat's-paws on the water.

We follow, without being told, the movements of Branch's eye, noting the relevant nautical physical details—the pier you would walk along, the mooring of the boat, the stillness in the sheltered bay, the hints of wind in the trees and in those small dark darting cat's-paws on the water.

I am reminded of Ford Madox Ford's once well-known analysis of the opening of one of Lawrence's earliest short stories that he had read in manuscript around 1910, the "just-sufficient" details, without any of the tedious local colour of scene-painters. Had Hamilton read it, perhaps? We know that he read Hemingway, as who didn't? But this isn't Hemingway pastiche.

I suspect that there are writers who would *kill* (figuratively) to be able to write prose as good.

XXV

But earlier, when there are no set-piece descriptions of restaurants, or bars, or hotel rooms ("Presently they found a small bar done in black and chrome and sat down at a table by a pillar of black tile, facing each other," and that's *it*), what makes you know what it would be like if you were there yourself in those generic sites?

Well, I suppose partly because most American sites like that *were* generic if you were concerned with something else, a relationship maybe, and not novelistically registering details, particularly in those austerity years.

And you will have seen locales in movies.

And right from the outset we're in the consciousness of a young man who's concerned about a young woman and registering details about *her*.

Here is the opening of the book. Quoting at some length here will permit me to be more economical later.

> He took down her suitcase and her fur coat. She said she did not have a hat. She let him put the coat over her narrow shoulders like a cape, and sat down beside the suitcase on the seat to wait out the uncomfortable last minutes while he braced himself, in the aisle, against the people crowding past. Daylight was snatched from the windows as, slowing, they entered the station.
>
> He followed her along the platform with the two suitcases and they climbed the stairs into the rotunda where, stepping out of the flood of people into an eddy behind a pillar, she stretched out her hand for her bag.
>
> "Can't I—?" he asked.
>
> "No, I'm taking a taxi. This is fine," she said. "Thanks an awful lot." Even in the low-heeled pumps she reached to a level with his eyes. He could just see over her and no more.
>
> "Well," he said, "thanks for the company."
>
> "I'll call you if I can," she said. "The Cooper. I'm sorry to be so indefinite."
>
> "That's all right," he said.
>
> "Well," she said, "so long."
>
> He watched her, tucking the purse under her arm, carry the small black suitcase away from him. Her name, she had said, was Janet Haskell. He did not for a moment believe she would call him. He felt very lonely and thrust his unlighted pipe into his mouth for company.

XXVI

Well, this is "cinema," isn't it, but without being at all pictorial and with only one (effective) literary-expressive touch with the precision of "Daylight was snatched from the windows …" These are things that you do on a train or plane or bus, with clothes and bags, feeling the momentum of the slowing train, waiting sensibly for the crowd to leave, finding a spot in the station to talk for a moment.

But they are *particular* things. He civilly drapes her *fur* coat around her *narrow* shoulders, and carries her suitcase as well as his own like a gentleman. She stretches out her hand for hers, she is tall, her pumps are low-heeled, it's a *small* black suitcase, so presumably she's not doing major traveling.

The talk on the train appears to have been casual and compatible ("Thanks for the company"), there are only a few light words of dialogue, there's no obvious "tone" to the writing, but at the end, "He felt very lonely and thrust his unlighted pipe into his mouth for company."

The loneliness of the young male, hoping that something *will* happen, that a girl *will* call him, having found him interesting, but sure that she won't.

XXVII

No drama. No writerly hooking of your reader's sympathetic attention with maximum "establishing" information, as in:

> It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid October, with 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.

Thus Chandler, of course, opening *The Big Sleep* eight years previously.

No thesis-statement won't-we-have-fun cuteness, either, as in:

> Wartime Washington was quite restful until my wife Arab arrived. Of course, there had been a certain upsetting quality about it, like living inside a concrete mixer, but until Arab came there had been positively no chance for me to win a decoration for valor—posthumously. (Powell, *All Over but the Shooting*)

Nor the literary-intellectual-at-work density of:

> Detroit is usually hot and sticky in the summer, and in the winter the snow in the streets is like a dirty, worn-out blanket. Like most other big cities it is best in the fall, when there is still some summer mellowness in the air and the bleak winds have not yet started blowing down the long, wide streets. The heart of the city was clean and sunlit on the September afternoon that Alec Judd and I drove over from Arbana. The skyscrapers stood together against the powder-blue sky with a certain grotesque dignity, like a herd of frozen dinosaurs waiting for a thaw. (Kenneth Millar, *The Dark Tunnel*, a.k.a. *I Die Slowly,* 1944)

XXVIII

Of course, if I had wanted to buy a couple of paperbacks in the Fifties for a long-distance ride on a Greyhound bus or coach-class in a train, I know which ones I'd have picked, and *Date with Darkness* wouldn't have been one of them.

But then, I hadn't wanted to keep reading *A Farewell to Arms* in 1947 after getting through the opening paragraph of *that*.

> In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels. Troops went by the house and down the road and the dust they raised powdered the leaves of the trees. The trunks of the trees too were dusty and the leaves fell early that year and we saw the troops marching along the road and the dust rising and leaves, stirred by the breeze, falling and the soldiers marching and afterward the road bare and white except for the leaves.

Pebbles, leaves, trees, dust—what on earth was this *about*? This was a *war* novel?

XXIX

So Hamilton, who was not a symbolist writer in that way, was able to keep unfussily adding details about this young man (this hero?) incrementally—without our feeling that we already know from the outset who and what he is and how we are expected to be viewing him.

Within a dozen pages, after Jeannette has phoned him at his hotel, the focus is on him focussing on her, and on his sense of himself in relation to her, the unknown or little known on one side, and on the other the familiar—the Navy from which he is on leave prior to demobilization; his mother back home in Chicago expecting his return.

XXX

I will quote again, to illustrate the process of filling in, a process that keeps his body *there* for us, in part because of the language of the body, the *inhabited* body. When Jeannette Duvall's call comes to his hotel room, Philip is lying on the bed:

> He sat quite still for a moment. Then he said, "Well, hello," and swung his feet to the floor and pulled his dressing gown about him. He found his glasses on the bedside table and put them on, bringing the room into focus. He could feel his heart beating rather more heavily than usual.

And then, after an appointment's made without our being given more dialogue,

> Dressing, he watched the narrow dark face in the mirror contort itself as he wrestled the starched regulation collar about the rather long and knobby neck. The gold-rimmed glasses supplied him by the naval dispensary when he had broken the old horn-rimmed pair reflected back to him the light from the ceiling fixture. Dressed, he brushed himself off with a small whisk broom. In the Navy you were always brushing at yourself. It became automatic.
>
> He looked at himself in the ribbonless undecorated uniform and thought, *Well, it's too late now. Anyway, I lived through it. What did you do in the Great War, daddy? Well, I was an officer in the Navy. Yes, but what did you do?*

XXXI

This isn't a Jack Lemmon part, though. The slightly fumbling and diffident but not *weak* Jimmy Stewart, perhaps—the Stewart of the Thirties, not the war-hardened simmering Air Force veteran (man, not characters) of *Call Northside 777* or *Winchester '73*.

It could have been Stewart physically, in the remaining part of the opening chapter, who hesitantly, but with growing firmness, down in the hotel dining room, conscious that he might be making a fool of himself, "feeling the blood singing in his ears," asks to see the I.D. card of the young naval lieutenant who, with his tired young wife, has been not so subtly playing on his sympathy with a view to getting him to give up his room to them, but who has made significant errors about his supposed Navy experience.

But it isn't Jimmy Stewart either, not really, who at the outset of the encounter

> felt a slow, trapped resentment as he looked from one to the other of them. He watched the girl taste her drink and thought, *I wonder at what rummage sale she picked up that skirt?* The bulkiness of the skirt, the ill-fitting looseness of the shirt, and the low-heeled flatness of her laced brown oxfords gave her a dumpy look that annoyed him because she was quite a nice-looking girl.

I don't really know *whom* you would have wanted to cast? A younger Henry Fonda? A young William Holden, perhaps? Not any of the other emergent *noir* familiars, surely, like Mitchum (too strong-bodied), or Alan Ladd (too the reverse), or Robert Mongomery (too pretty, though himself a brave man), or even, I think, Glenn Ford.

Well, maybe Ford. Yes, why not Ford?

Or even, come to think of it, the younger Hamilton himself of those years, whose face, to judge from the long, narrow, rather apprehensive-looking one in the photo on the back of the Helm books until 1964, was a long way from the bearded Hemingwayesque tough in the silvered aviator sunglasses, head thrown back and foreshortened, who replaced him in a good marketing move.

XXXII

In any event, it is to this young man that the thrillerish elements more or less *come* in the first third or so of the book: We have:

> (a) Jeannette, with whom he goes to bed that night ("When he came out [next morning] the tall buildings had the beautiful clarity that always came to things afterwards"), and whose bag he takes

down to Chesapeake Bay in the expectation that she will turn up to reclaim it;

(b) the French Resistance quartet—chinless middle-aged Mr. Hahn, middle-aged former pianist Madam Faubel, and the younger pair, Paul Laflin, now out of his masquerade uniform, and Constance Bellamann, still in her graceless clothes—all of them here in the States to seize Jeannette's collaborationist husband Louis when he turns up;

(c) the private detective A.J. Dickerson, trying to "persuade" Philip to stop helping Jeannette, with the assistance of infrared photos of their lovemaking that he's taken over the transom (a heavily built man with "a square fleshy face with the pores of the skin greatly emphasized," in "a very well-pressed suit of grey with a fine colored stripe, an immaculate white shirt, and a conservative silk tie");

(d) the large, prosperous, slightly dangerous-feeling New York racketeer, Dickerson's employer, Mr. Sellers, who offers Philip a handsome bribe after he says "Nuts " to the blackmail threat.

Information, and misinformation, comes to Philip bit by bit—about Jeannette; about the Resistance group, especially Madame Faubel and Constance, both of them tortured by the Gestapo; about himself, about his own values and capacities and attitudes.

This is particularly important, this question of courage, particularly political courage, and I shall dwell on it for a bit.

6. Atrocities

XXXIII

When I first read *Date with Darkness* in the late Fifties or early Sixties, I remember being disconcerted by Branch's reactions to what he was told about the treatment of Constance by the Nazis:

> Mr. Hahn said slowly, "Rochemont was hell, Lieutenant. Hell on earth."
>
> "A camp?" Branch asked irritably, refusing to be impressed. There was always that special tone of voice that people used in referring to those places, and he was a little tired of hearing about them.

> After all, the Nazis had not invented evil. It was not as if Roman emperors and Spanish priests had not thoroughly explored the methods of inflicting pain on the human body centuries before. He listened unsympathetically while Mr. Hahn described Rochemont in the pedantic tone laden with unspoken moral superiority that he might have used in discussing sexual perversion in a psychology class in a coeducational university.

I myself, during those wonderful movie-going years in the early Forties, had seen the kinds of movies that John Emmett had seen; had read in those days about Dachau; had commissioned in 1945, as a schoolboy editor, a description by an Old Boy, a young army doctor, of the newly liberated Belsen; had been overwhelmed by that quintessential Resistance-and-torture movie, Roberto Rossellini's *Open City* (1945*);* had taught English (very badly) in the marvelous Israel of 1951–53; had read Egon Kogon's extraordinary *Theory and Practice of Hell* about Buchenwald by a former inmae; and so on and so forth.

It did not seem quite right to be *irritated* by talk about life in hell.

XXXIV

And things didn't get better a page or two further on:

> At the back of his mind was the feeling he always had when hearing about it, that he could not really feel indignant about it, because the thousands who had experienced this personal malevolence were relatively insignificant against the millions who had known the blind inquisition of the battlefield. It was a legalism to draw an arbitrary line and say, this is a crime, and this is war. It was all war. You could blame them for starting it, but to itemize the horrors, now that they were defeated and it was over, seemed petty.

Conscious as I was of the extreme unlikelihood of my having behaved heroically myself during the Occupation, let alone under torture or the threat of it, it seemed imperative to keep holding on to the image of a Germany of absolute evil, and of Resistance heroes as models of Jean-Gabinesque valour, along the lines (though I didn't come upon them until recently) of Izis' portrait photos of actual Maquisards, *Ceux de Grammont*, all looking remarkably like those heroic workers and

revolutionary soldiers in the Russian silent movies of Eisenstein and Pudovkin.

XXXV

That was a long time ago, however, before Marcel Ophuls' revelation in his four-hour documentary *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1971) of how much more complicated the actual history of wartime France had been; before, well, before a number of other revisitings, none of them leaving the Germans and their French-Gestapo assistants looking any better than before, but not making the ordinary French all that wonderful either, and reminding us of what a political train-wreck the France of the Thirties had been.

And it seems to me now that Hamilton was engaged in a brave and prescient questioning, I am almost tempted to say a deconstructing, of ideological simplicities, the simplicities of the Good Side/ Bad Side paradigm, as you find it in Kenneth Millar, with his horrified-but-fascinated sense of the other side as pure evil (evil being a subject that continued to obsess him and that permitted a savage intensity in the punishment of evil), or the simpler pieties of Richard Powell as Andy Blake deals with the grotesquely fat master spy and his thuggish American-Nazi assistants.

I am speaking of the invocation of that kind of dichotomy as a way of enforcing compliance.

The Nazis had been pure evil, Jeannette's husband had been a collaborator, the four pursuers are now here (clandestinely) as agents of the Central Committee (Communist committee?), to bring him back to France for judgment and execution, and *therefore* it is incumbent on Branch to cooperate with them and shut out Jeannette from his sympathies.

We have all, it seems to me, become a bit more sophisticated about such claims for total allegiance.

And when you think of the agonies of body and mind endured by ground troops during the ferocious Pacific campaign, or the Battle of the Bulge, or the siege of Stalingrad, the phrase "blind *inquisition* of the battlefield" doesn't seem all that far-fetched.

XXXVI

Hamilton isn't being a moral relativist, however, let alone taking the everything's-a-fiction-and-therefore-insubstantial line beloved by a lot of American academics for a while, before they moved on to everything's-political-and-about-POWER-and-when-are-we- going-to-get-that-salary-increase-that-we-Workers-deserve?.

The cruelties referred to here and in *The Steel Mirror* were all-too-real.

Madame Faubel had been tortured herself (telling them that she knew but wouldn't tell, and braving it out); Constance Bellamann had been tortured, and *didn't* know, and made up conflicting stories, and was turned into walking-wounded, and goes into nauseated shock when Branch, in his ignorance, kisses her down by the water's edge at Queen's Harbor. And he pities her.

What is in question is whether you should surrender yourself and your own moral judgments, at the command of others, when confronted with, in a sense, fictive narratives (like the Hollywood ones) about things of which you have had no first-hand experience.

The here and now, the here and now that Branch *is* experiencing, is the here-and-now of that slightly too tall, too thin, untrustworthy yet oddly likeable girl Jeannette trying to save a husband that Branch also has no personal knowledge of.

And dowdy diffident Constance Bellamann. And chinless Mr. Hahn, and big Paul Laflin, and middle-aged Madame Faubel, a pianist before the war, who, in pursuit of their own moral (and in American terms illegal) ends, applies a heated poker to the soles of his feet.

XXXVII

Before that had happened:

> Branch said, "Listen, tell me just this: did she, I mean Jeannette, have anything to do with what happened to"—he gestured in the direction of the smaller girl's room—"her?"
>
> Madame Faubel hesitated. "No," she said finally. "She did not."
>
> "Did her husband?"
>
> She shook her head. "No, not directly, but—"

> "I don't," Branch said, "like people who pull a long and irrelevant sob story on me before asking me to do something for them. I'm very sorry about the girl—"
>
> "There are hundreds of others like her," Madame Faubel said angrily. "Thousands of others."
>
> "And the way to cure them is to drag them around the country and expose them to passes by every wolf in naval uniform who comes along?" He laughed sharply and went on before she could retort, "Anyway, I don't see the connection, if neither of them had anything to do with it."
>
> The woman's narrow face was quite expressionless. "We are not free agents, Mr. Branch," she said. "We take our orders from the Central Committee… We are not agents of revenge but of justice… Would it seem better to you if we were avenging mere personal injuries?"
>
> "By God it would," Branch admitted. "Anyway, it would seem nice and normal and natural." He laughed uncomfortably. "Tell me —"
>
> "Yes?"
>
> "If you could, would you shave her head like in the pictures?"

XXXVIII

I would say that Hamilton's primary concern is with how you yourself are behaving, and how virtuous you are yourself, and how you might behave under various circumstances, as victor or vanquished. The self in question here being a particular experiencing consciousness that happens to be called Philip Branch, but which may subsequently be called Paul Weston, or John Emmett, or Hugh Phillips.

And the resistance here by Philip Branch to the felt pressure of the French orthodoxy will extend later to the resistance of other Hamilton heroes to the claims of the American state, or at least of sub-systems in it, such as the F.B.I.

XXXIX

But still (the question inevitably intruded), what about the Jews? Wasn't Branch being a tad premature in feeling that it was time to turn away from the horrors and get back to ordinary living?

Well, I think I see something now that I was overlooking when I first read *Date with Darkness* at the end of the Fifties. Novels are not normally published in the year in which they are written, and *Date with Darkness*, completed (according to a Rinehart blurb) in the fall of 1945, is evidently *set* in that year.

The image of the concentration camps at that time, the generic image, the widely accessible image, the image of wartime books and reports, was still essentially that of the camps as incarceration and *punishment* camps, cruelty camps, at times unspeakable cruelty camps, camps in which, in Orwell's words, you might have "elderly Jews drowned in cesspools," camps in which (as in the Belsen of my high-school magazine report) prisoners might die in dreadful quantities from starvation, overwork, disease—but *not*, in the gas-chamber sense, extermination camps.

They were terrible places into which *anyone* might be put, anyone offering resistance to the Nazis, whether inside Germany itself or in the occupied countries of Europe, anyone considered to be an enemy of the Nazi state.

Including Jews. Including Jews generically, as part of that monstrous persecution that in the Thirties was driving German and Austrian Jews into exile. Like the two German-Jewish boys in my own pre-war day-school, where another boy had somehow or other acquired a rubber truncheon that he passed around one day at lunch.

XL

The camps could happen to you, they could happen to me. Which was why they were such effective instruments of terror.

Eric Ambler, who had provided a couple of memorable episodes of Fascist torturings in *Dark Journey* and *Background to Danger*, has a fascinating passage somewhere in which someone who had been in a concentration camp in the Thirties (and released) explains that part of

their effectiveness was their infantilization of you, their reduction of you to someone who could be beaten at any point; like a naughty child.

And even during the war, to judge from Victor Klemperer's remarkable diaries (*I Will Bear Witness*, 1999), *anyone*, anyone in Germany itself, could be put into them at any time for almost anything.

Hell isn't hell because you die there, but because you have to *live* there.

XLI

It was easy enough, it is easy enough now, to be anti-Nazi in Britain or America, with all the appropriate horror and indignation.

But it required almost superhuman moral courage, which some Germans, particularly the young Germans of the White Rose resistance movement in fact possessed, to do anything at the time which, if it came to the notice of the Gestapo, could rip you suddenly away from all that you were and thrust you into the horrors of a camp from which you would probably never emerge, except (with official regrets) as the ashes of someone who had died from "heart attack."

The full-scale atrociousness of the extermination machine in Poland— the Final Solution— had not yet, to the best of my own recollection, become generally known when Hamilton was writing *Date with Darkness*. Not all information travels with electronic speed. Auschwitz-Bierkenau, Sobibor, Treblinka were not yet on our mental maps. Branch speaks of thousands, not millions.

Viktor Klemperer himself during the war, a Jew living in Germany with the shaky protection of being a World War I veteran with a gentile wife, did not, seemingly, know of the gas chambers. And the editors of the massive and almost unendurably poignant *The Holocaust Chronicle* (2000) report of the 1946 Nuremberg war crimes trials that "Making no mention of the Holocaust or the Shoah—such terms were not yet widespread—[the] indictments did not identify specifically what had happened to the Jews or to other civilian populations targeted by the Nazis and their collaborators."

XLII

In any event, it is not the death camps that the French group in *Date with Darkness* were talking about and that Madame Faubel and Constance Bellamann had been in. The fictitious Rochemont was a *French* Camp. Historically, by the sound of it, though the word is "camp," it could even have been a prison, one of the dreadful prisons in which the torturing of Resistance members like Jean Moulin went on, often at the hands of the *French* Gestapo.

When Branch and Constance Ballamann emerge from a movie that they've gone to, Constance says, apropos of the newsreel,

> "With all the other people who are starving, to give *them* food!"…
>
> "Don't be so bloodthirsty," he said, laughing uncomfortably. "After all, the war's over. You can't let people starve."
>
> "*They* did."
>
> "They also beat up Jews and tortured people. Do we have to do that, too?"

XLIII

Nor is Branch allowed to get away unchallenged in his attitude. As Madame Faubel points out to him, *he* had not been in a camp, *he* had not been tortured, he did *not* know what it was like. (She also tartly reminds the pedantic Mr. Hahn that he too hadn't been in a camp.) And as to their cruelly dragging poor Constance around and not allowing her to get back to a normal life, she had been so badly traumatized by her experiences that their current bonding was the nearest thing to normality that was possible for her at the moment.

She was with people, especially Madame Faubel, who understood, as others could not, what she had been through, and what it could reduce you to, and who were not sitting in judgment on her or demanding things of her of which she was incapable.

In *The Steel Mirror* Ann Nicholson, at stage center, is a woman who had been tortured by the Gestapo with a dentist's drill.

XLIV

I would say, now, that all this was pretty sophisticated.

I would also guess that Hamilton would have read around 1954, as I did, Gustav Herling's remarkable *A World Apart* (trans. 1951) about his experiences in the *Russian* camps, a decade and a half before French intellectuals were shocked, yes *shocked*, by the revelation, if that is what it was, that if the wartime images of all-black Germans may have been a bit simplistic, so too may the images of heroic Communists glowing with socialist virtue.

As were the images of the heroic *punishment* of collaborators, including those women with shaven heads, one of them in a memorable photo by Robert Capa. I mean, how virtuous had all the applauders of the head-shavings in fact been themselves? How would you and I have behaved during the Occupation?

It was hard enough finding tenured North American academics willing to stand up in the Seventies and Eighties. and be counted against thought-policing,

XLV

Moreover, when Hamilton himself presents torturers in the novel the torturers are the same persons with whom we are now familiar—Madame Faubel, chinless Mr. Hahn, Paul Laflin— who, if they don't at all answer physically to the generic image of heroic Resistance figures, are also not the conventional sadists of our instinctive imaginings.

They are not *evil*. They want certain information, for what they consider moral reasons, and Branch has it, they believe, and since he won't tell them otherwise, Madame Faubel applies a hot poker to the soles of his feet.

And while this angers him, as well it might, there is no sense of any mystery, any puzzlement about how people could possibly do this to one another. Any more than there was for the anonymous hero of Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male* (1939) with respect to his torturing by the house guards at Hitler's Bavarian eyrie in order to find out the

facts about what appears to be a plot to assassinate the Fuehrer. The novel begins with the words, “I cannot blame them.”

It is perfectly obvious why the French group are doing it, and while it is clear that the unpleasant Paul Laflin, whom Branch has previously knocked down and kicked in a fight, enjoys seeing Branch suffer, there is no enjoyment on Madame Faubel’s part.

Nor is Branch thereafter out for revenge. Torture is what people *do*, particularly people in search of information. Hamilton would go on thinking about it in *The Steel Mirror*, in *Death of a Citizen* (where Matt Helm tortures his wartime comrade Tina in order to save his kidnapped baby daughter Betsy from certain death, just as Household’s Roger Mayne tortures a man in *A Time to Kill* in order to get back his boy and girl), and in two or three other Helms, including one in which Helm himself is tortured with a soldering iron.

7. Middle Tones

XLVI

So it's an interesting pattern in this novel, and one that would continue in Hamilton’s works—no *evil* villains, evil by virtue of belonging to some kind of alien and mysterious and innately wicked system; evil by temperament.

America’s own internal wartime corruption, the corruption of black marketeers and crooked defence contractors, is present in *Date with Darkness* via the two men who have been involved with Jeannette Duval and her husband. And it is clear that Mr. Sellers, the very big man “with the smooth, pale, smiling face of a successful minister” who talks with Branch in his long gray Packard sedan in Manhattan is potentially dangerous, so that Branch is taking a risk when he flushes down the toilet the ten one-hundred dollar bills that Sellers has given him.

But Sellers himself is someone with whom Branch can negotiate, and he positively enjoys coping later on with the blackmarketeer Frank Haskell down from Evanston, “a short man with a smooth, well-fed stoutness and the pink clear skin of a child,” with a sensation of coming back home, coming back to the other crooked contractors and

their subtly offered bribes whom he had had to deal with in his wartime capacity.

The continuing absence of *evil* villains is partly why Hamilton's novels, including the Helm ones, were less compulsively thrilling, than John D. MacDonald's. MacDonald's galaxy of sociopaths. Smiling Max Cady in *The Executioners* (those dreadful false teeth!), Junior Allen in *The Deep Blue Goodbye*, Boone Waxwell in *Bright Orange for the Shroud* (a real Robert Mitchum part, that), Howie Brindle in *The Turquoise Lament*, others, others, are genuinely scary.

A good villain (John McPartland had them too) generates action and drives the plot forward, because he's out there doing things, some of them horrible, and at some point he may get to *you*. MacDonald obviously *knew* his Southern sociopaths, maybe partly from the army, partly because (to judge from the prominence of money in his novels), he understood from the inside the sensual thrill of *greed,* and could keep dipping into those wells.

Peter O'Donnell's Modesty Blaise books, on the other hand, progressively ran down as O'Donnell became less and less able to come up with memorable plot-driving villains.

XLVII

And there are no *good* systems here either, in these early novels of Hamilton's, I mean the kind you can plug into and immediately they will be helpful in the right sort of way.

Lieutenant Branch, unlike Richard Powell's Lieutenant Andy Blake (U.S. Army), has no contacts that he can turn to, no-one in naval security, no former office mate, no sympathetic commanding officer. He doesn't know who he might have reported the initial deception by Paul Laflin and Constance to, and his C.O., Commander Tollifer, referred to briefly, is simply someone who would feel a slightly weary confirmation of his suspicions about reserve officers had the dirty photos turned up on his desk.

No good mental systems either ("I'm one of the *good* guys"), whether patriotism or "justice," meaning the punishment of the wicked.

XLVIII

There isn't even the conventional thrillerish energizing of love, the imagined future of creative happiness with another person, such as is under threat in Charles Williams' *Scorpion Reef* and *Dead Calm*. Philip Branch knows by page seventeen that it isn't his long narrow face, or knobby neck, or gold-rimmed glasses, or lint-free blues (dress uniform), or unscintillating personality that has drawn Jeannette back to him. Nor has he himself made any emotional commitment to *her*.

When Jeannette tells him in the small Manhattan bar with its black-and-white decor that she's from Evanston,

> he felt a small disappointment. He did not want her to be from Evanston. If she was from Evanston he would have to look her up when he got back to Chicago; or decide not to look her up. He would rather have their acquaintanceship terminate itself automatically when the time came.
>
> "Well, he said heartily, "well, that's practically next door to home, isn't it?"
>
> She looked up and smiled and he was uncomfortably afraid that she knew what he had been thinking. The waitress returned with their drinks. Janet Haskell picked up her old-fashioned and tasted it thoughtfully, watching him across the small table. It seemed to him the shape of her mouth was suddenly a little strained through the very even, unobtrusive lipstick.
>
> "Could you lend me two hundred dollars?" she asked abruptly, not ceasing to watch him.

My own first full-time academic job in the early Fifties paid me $3600 a year. I would guess that $200 in 1946 would carry the emotional charge of, "'Could you lend me two thousand dollars?' she asked abruptly, biting into her Big Mac".

> He was proud of himself that his voice did not falter. "Say that again. It seemed to me you said two hundred dollars."
>
> She did not say anything, only putting down her drink and regarding him, her face calm and preoccupied.
>
> "Do you need some money?" he asked stupidly.
>
> "Yes," she said. "Two hundred dollars."

XLIX

She continues to use him, to manipulate him, to rely on his taking her abandoned bag down to Queen's Harbor, to assume that he will help her smuggle her collaborationist husband Louis into the country, that he will save both their lives.

She despises him for not being sufficiently brave and inventive when they are the prisoners of Faubel, Laflin, and Hahn.

She takes an ill-concealed malicious pleasure in watching him suffer at their hands, after he has expressed his irritation at finding her (who had screamed to him for help over the phone) not particularly roughed up, and witnessed her being knocked around a bit by Paul.

She is simply not a very likeable or admirable thriller heroine at all.

L

Yet there is no quasi- or pseudo-nihilism here in the novel, no debilitating relativism (who's to say who's *really* right or wrong?), no inhibiting self-scrutiny of the kind that Conrad and E.M.Forster had regarded with such mistrust, no ironical passivity. Branch in fact *acts*, acts in a long-term purposeful way, acts decisively, acts effectively, and saves both himself and Jeannette without recourse to physical violence.

LI

So what, then, *is* the "self" of this in a sense solitary individual, unsupported by power systems, not bonded in a partnership of conventional sympathy and understanding, not fuelled by moral indignation and a passion for justice, not even driven forward by romantic imaginings of himself as a quasi-Bogart?

What values are at work here?

8. Chivalry

LII

Well, with a book of my own called *America and the Patterns of Chivalry*, I guess I can't dodge saying that they are to some extent chivalric ones. But that is not at all the same as saying that they are simple.

When Philip Branch, after Jeannette has been made to scream for his benefit over the phone, goes out to the Resistance group's hideaway down by the water, "Americans must be a very chivalrous race," [Mr Hahn] said dryly, considering Branch for a moment. "I didn't think you'd be fool enough to come."

One of Hamilton's fundamental preoccupations, here and in his other fictions, is the problem of what it means to behave honourably in modern American society without becoming hampered—or hamstrung—by inappropriate rules.

He was interrogating a cliché set of values—a gentleman is clean, modest, brave, truthful, polite, respectful to women, fights fair, and so forth—and redefining them in a way that brought them in line with some of the actual martial ideals of the past.

Which is to say, he was getting beyond the simplified East Coast prep-school version of them, the kind that leads John McPartland's sardonic fixer Bill Oxford in his powerful *The Face of Evil* (1954) to remark of a reform politician, "I could have told him that being a gentleman is sometimes foolish and expensive," the kind touched on when Holden Caulfield's old history teacher asks him what his headmaster had talked about during their farewell chat:

> "Oh …well, about Life being a game and all. And how you should play it according to the rules"…
>
> "Life *is* a game, boy. Life *is* a game that one plays according to the rules."
>
> "Yes, sir. I know it is. I know it."
>
> Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hot-shots are, then it's a game, all right—I'll admit that. But if you get on the *other* side, where there aren't any hot-shots, then what's a game about it? Nothing. No game.

After their escape from the enraged Sheriff Patman in *The Steel Mirror*, John Emmett tells Ann Nicholson irritably, “Don’t be formal… You know me. I’m the guy who wipes the goo off your shoes after you’ve coughed up your breakfast. Just call me Galahad for short.”

LIII

There had been quite a tradition in American literature of the gentleman-loser, the gentleman as the man of finer perceptions or nobler values who is incapacitated by them from effective action—Hawthorne’s Miles Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance*, John P. Marquand’s Henry Pulham in *H.M. Pulham, Esq,* Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby*, Faulkner’s Hightower in *Light in August*, the gentlemanly ranchers in that first wide-screen Western novel, Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*, going down to defeat by the railroad robber barons, and, oh, others, others, the list could keep extending.

Of course there had also been the gentleman-swashbuckler, the gentleman-jock (Tom Buchanan, breaking Myrtle Wilson’s nose in *The Great Gatsby* with “a short deft movement of his hand”), the gentleman-gambler (Hammett’s Ned Beaumont in *The Glass Key*), the gentleman-detective (Philo Vance), and other variants.

I am talking about the *gentlemanly* gentleman, the kind of stereotype that poor Hemingway, growing up in the squeaky-clean Chicago suburb of Oak Park with a mother who wanted him to be her little knight, expended so much energy in breaking free of, with the assistance of the “wicked” liquor that finally destroyed him.

LIV

But Hamilton was the real thing.

He didn’t have to pretend to be, or yearn to be, “really” an aristocrat. He *was* one, at least by birth. He had been born a count in a Sweden where (to judge from a passage in, as I recall, *The Revengers*) one could still take pride in a Viking heritage. And the title was weighty enough for relatives of his back home to be indignant, as he recalls, about his not using the title in the States.

But he was an aristocrat with a difference.

LV

Evidently (doesn't Hamilton or Helm say something to that effect somewhere?), when they came to the States, Hamilton's father, himself a professional—a pediatrician taking up a position in the Harvard Medical School— had impressed upon them all that they were *Americans*, not aristocrats *manqués*, that they were not in any game of status-seeking, and that the only kind of quality that counted was the quality of your performance in this or that task.

Obviously, too, they went on receiving an education in the stoical decencies. If you hurt yourself while out in the woods with the grown-ups (another Helm book?), you didn't whine about it. You didn't make excuses for yourself. You were not *aggrieved*.

LVI

So Hamilton's heroes in these early books are always unfussily aware of what decent conduct is like, and don't feel oppressed by its rules. Nor are they faking.

They know what it is like to behave politely, to *be* polite, not merely talk politely like Hammett's Op dealing in a professionally even key—formal, orderly—with a respectable client whom he has been sent to interview, or Marlowe, whose natural mode is rudeness, showing momentarily (look, Ma, no wisecracks!) that he knows the verbal equivalent of the right clothes to be calling on the rich in.

Branch, reclining on his hotel bed, sits up, adjusts his dressing gown, and puts on his glasses to have a phone conversation with Jeannette. He wears pajamas. After being tortured, he puts on socks over his ointment-smeared burned feet to prevent her nightie from getting greasy. He carries bags and helps on with coats. He is prepared to give up his hotel room to the seemingly tired young couple. He is ultra-courteous to Madam Faubel at one point.

And these aren't role-playings. He isn't the protestingly socialized young American barbarian. He can be *naturally* considerate.

As can, later on, in *The Steel Mirror*, John Emmett, who is scrupulous at the outset about not seeming in any way to be imposing upon Ann Nicholson when she offers him a lift in her convertible, and who at one

point hesitates to wake her after the long night's drive. "It was always embarrassing to wake up a stranger from a sound sleep; it was not quite fair to look at anybody you did not know well before they had got themselves assembled for the day."

9. Reading signs

LVII

Branch and Emmett are indeed conscious of codes of speech, dress, body language, and what they indicate about the standards—standards, not status—of others. But it is more as pointers, than as instant revelations of deep character, and it is part of their general alertness to signs and codes. These are novels in which small details can pack large charges of meanings.

The braid on Paul Laflin's masquerade uniform, one of three possible naval kinds, hints at how long he may have been in the service. Ann Nicholson isn't dressed for long-distance driving, so may have got out onto the highway in a hurry. When Constance Bellamann reappears in the hotel dining room the morning after her literally nauseatig experience with Branch the night before, she

> came into the dining-room and he watched her hesitate inside the doorway, wearing again the short high-necked brown print dress, so that at a distance she looked about fifteen years old. She saw him and came toward him between the busy tables, and he rose as she stopped beside him.
>
> "Hello," she said, smiling up at him.
>
> "Hello," he said, and heard himself ask her if she would care to join him; and he seated her and returned to his chair. She spread a napkin in her lap and looked about the room, smiling a little, the haphazard lipstick very bright in her pale face. Her short brown hair was, on either side, held back from her face with the kind of narrow silver clips the girls had been wearing the last year of the war.

She isn't *styling* herself (does she have only the one dress?), her lipstick is put on carelessly, her clips are a bit out-of-date.

LVIII

In dramatic contrast, when Helene Bethke, the unforgettable Miss Bethke, psychiatric nurse, comes into *The Steel Mirror* for the first time, in the diner, in her vividly flowered black silk dress,

> Her hair was the color of polished brass, glossy and almost metallic, without looking at all artificial. It had once during the day been built into a smooth roll over her forehead, but this was loosening now, and she looked rather as if she had pulled a hat off her head without bothering to remove the pins. Waiting for her coffee, she pushed idly at the trailing strands, unconcerned about their untidiness. She picked up the mug as it came to her, drained it as if it were a shot-glass of whisky, sat it down hastily, and passed her hand across her chin.

She herself is a space-invader and pats Emmett's wrist at the end of their conversation, lightly, condescendingly.

LIX

Women's appearances deteriorate when they're tired. Lipstick starts to flake. Seated on the hotel bed, Ann Nicholson pushes one shoe slowly off, then the other. "Then she sat rubbing her foot in her lap, unaware or too hot and tired to care that her skirt had worked up to reveal the limp folds of a white slip and the tops of her stockings."

Men too can get tired and irritable and be in need of a shave.

But if someone lets herself go without those excuses, like Elizabeth (Lizzie) Wilson in *Night Walker* (1954), it may be more serious, though Lieutenant David Young doesn't share the *social* snobbery of her relatives by marriage:

> He found himself suddenly noticing certain disillusioning details of her appearance that he had missed earlier, or discounted, because you always gave a beautiful woman the breaks, wanting her to be perfect. It shocked him a little to realize, now, that Elizabeth Wilson missed perfection by a significant margin, even when you made allowances for her emotional state and the early hour of the morning.

> It was not just a matter of hair and make-up. The gold satin housecoat had made a fine impression on a man just awakening from drugged slumber; but at close range you could not help noticing that the regal garment had been worn at least once too often since its last trip to the cleaners.
>
> There was even a small, but noticeable gap in the seam behind the left shoulder, once clumsily mended but opening again; and the bright cloth of the sash was dull and threadbare where it knotted at the waist.

But no, this *isn't* simply male snobbishness. "He stopped the inventory, suddenly ashamed, aware again of the odd sense of kinship that he had felt upon seeing the fear-sickness in her eyes."

LX

Environments, too, can be "read".

In a lovely Hopperesque passage at the Illinois gas station where Ann Nicholson has gone to freshen up,

> Emmett accepted the gas-tank key and stood for a moment, after closing the trunk, looking at the white clapboard station with the little wings of lattice-work that modestly concealed the [toilet] doors on either side; everything very white and clean, the pumps, oil cans, and water cans looking very new in the fading red light; only the hydraulic lift at the side showing enough grease to prove that they actually did business in this place. The white gravel expanse was bordered by a low white picket fence. Behind the station, on the hill, was a farmhouse not nearly as neat and tidy as the station, and there were other farms as far as you could see in all directions. The concrete highway ran arbitrarily through them as if laid down, not necessarily with a ruler but at least with a French curve, after everything else had been there for years except the filling station which belonged to the highway rather than to the Illinois countryside.

It is a Hopper counterman in the all-night diner who "came over and wiped a space in front of Emmett, not as if it needed wiping but as if the gesture were a formality, like shaking hands," and a Hopper sergeant and lieutenant who later on squatted in the shade of their

olive-green Chevrolet sedan at the gate of the atomic research centre to which Hammett and Ann Nicholson had been traveling: “They looked as if they had been talking some time earlier, but had run out of conversation and were merely waiting to finish their cigarettes before rising.”

LXI

There is something here of the immigrant’s continuing love for his new, his adopted, his *chosen* country.

Hopper too, and Walker Evans, those most American of American artists, didn’t really look at, didn’t *see* America, and the beauty of the “ordinary,” until they had come back to it from Europe and could perceive its *differentness*.

For that matter, Hemingway and Fitzgerald did their own best writing about America in Europe, Hemingway in France and Switzerland, Fitzgerald (*Gatsby)* in an expensively rented villa near Saint-Raphael on the Med, revisiting in his head the un-French textures of American body English, speech patterns, iconography.

10. Language

LXII

Where language too is concerned, there’s a sense in these early Hamilton works of the ordinary as being, to just the slightest degree, exotic; of the American language being something that you make and use, not simply a medium that you swim in.

The passionate knowledgeability about guns in the mid-Fifties *Line of Fire* and *Assignment: Murder*, we learn from Hamilton’s non-fictional *On Guns and Hunting*, was the passion of someone who had actually only come to shotguns and high-powered rifles a year or two previously. Hamilton was a *discoverer* of guns and hunting, as he was of the cowboy West (using that term generically) that he carefully researched for his novels.

Obviously as an immigrant he had also discovered the English language, learned and loved its patterns and potentials; its *precision*, when rightly used.

At the outset, as an eight-year-old in what must have been a good school in the Cambridge area, he had possessed, by his own account, little English, and piquantly failed to understand the fluttering of the hencoop when he turned up on the first day with the sheath-knife that every normal Swedish boy, like Sikh ones still, carried in those years.

LXIII

Hamilton's own expository prose is scrupulously correct (much more so than Hemingway's); meticulous in its syntax, meticulously punctuated. The semi-colon (to adopt phrase from Graham Greene) holds no terrors fot him.

And one of the pleasures later on in the Helm series is the linguistic precision of Mac, his bureau chief, and Mac's irritation when others speak imprecisely. When Helm, in the Seventies, asks about an enemy agent, "Do we know who he really is, sir?" Mac dryly replies, "We should. I do. And you would if you'd done the required amount of work in the recognition room." (Had Dr. Hamilton perhaps said things like that?)

The plot of *The Intriguers* (1972) hinges, at a key point, on the misuse over the phone of the word "presently" by someone impersonating Mac. I myself had noticed it when it occurred, and wondered if Hamilton was slipping a little.

But clearly, an intelligent concern with "correctness" is a matter of the *functional* rules and structures of a particular linguistic system. As it was for the ante-bellum father of the narrator in the Southern poet and critic Allen Tate's one novel, *The Fathers* (1938), of whom the narrator recalls in a classic passage that:

> He used the double negative in conversation, as well as *ain't*, and he spoke the language with great ease at four levels: first, the level just described, conversation among family and friends; second, the speech of the "plain people" abounding in many archaisms; third, the speech of the negroes, which was merely late seventeenth or early eighteenth century English ossified; and, fourth, the Johnsonian diction appropriate to formal occasions, a style that he could wield in perfect sentences four hundred words long. He would not have understood our conception of "correct" English. Speech was like manners, an expression of sensibility and taste.

And also, like manners, a matter of occasion and of respecting the persons to whom you were speaking.

LXIV

So Emmett downshifts from his more formal mode with Ann Nicholson to a road-self of small transactions with other males, the common-language self who says things like, “You and me both” and tells a gas-station attendant to “Put the damn thing on the hoist. Grease. Never mind the oil. And get that crap off the windshield, will you? There are more damn bugs in this country!”.

And later on, when he is being driven to the lodge of the pre-war family friend Mrs Pruitt’s lodge out west after being picked up by a local at the bus depot, “‘Still digging up the creek, I see,’ he said in a conscious attempt to establish himself as an old-timer, as the station wagon bounced over the wooden bridge.”

There are more significant shifts in name games: the use of the comfortably generic “Mac” (as in, “Hey, Mac, you forgot your change”); the ascribing or claiming of less-than-wholly-adult status with terms like “Sonny,” “Pop,” and, as used by a parent to a younger daughter in that curious American idiom, “Sister”; the generic slight discourtesy of “fella”; the personalized rudeness of addressing a woman by her last name—rudeness or worse, as Ann reminds Emmett at one point:

> “Please,” she whispered. “*Please* don’t call me Nicholson. It sounds as if—” She choked down a laugh that had come dangerously close to hysteria. “Besides, it isn’t even *right*! I’m Mrs. Emmett. Mrs. John Emmett. Remember?”

When he is with Helene Bethke on another occasion, “‘For God’s sake call me Helene,’ she snapped. ‘Miss Bethke this, Miss Bethke that. As if I were a housekeeper or something.’”

LXV

There are more complicated shiftings, too, more complex language games. Straightforward information-giving dialogue in Hamilton is uninteresting, as in his *Guns and Hunting* and *Cruises with ‘Kathleen’*, or in too many of the later Helm books. Uninteresting, that is if you’re

not interested in what's being talked about. Nothing is going *on* in them between the speakers.

No, the more characteristic Hamilton dialogue is that in which things *are* going on—in some degree agonistic, adversarial dialogue. And by that I don't mean the compulsive wisecracking that Chandler employs in an effort to give the essentially groundless Marlowe a distinctive character.

I mean dialogue in which people are trying to learn things from and about each other. Trying to find where they stand in relation to them. Trying to get them to reveal more about themselves. Challenging some too easy assumption, some undeserved claim to moral superiority.

LXVI

Other good thrillers contain such encounters, of course,

Geoffrey Household's *Rogue Male* (1939) is concerned with the states of mind and physical doings of his anonymous upper-class hero on the run through the late-Thirties German and English countrysides, but it comes to a moral focus in the exchanges between the anonymous upper-class hero trapped in his West Country burrow and his nemesis the urbane Nazi agent Quive-Smith.

Adam Hall's Quiller novels are full, at times to the point of mannerism, with Quiller's adrenalin-charged consciousness as he waits impatiently for missions, drives at ferociously high speeds, tails people relentlessly under exhausting conditions, escapes, at times by the skin of his teeth, from captors and pursuers.

But along with the episodes of high speed action, we have the conversations in which something important is *happening*; in which a wrong turn of phrase or wrong facial expression in an exchange with an NKVD officer, or a professional terrorist, or a fellow agent gone bad may be literally a matter of life or death, and in which each party is bringing total concentration to bear on the task of disarming suspicion, or finding out what the other is up to, or aiming the other in a certain direction.

And works like Len Deighton's *The Ipcress File,* and Martin Woodhouse's *Tree Frog*, and Ted Lewis's *Jack's Return Home,* and

Simon Harvester's Dorian Silk novels, and the novels of Ross Thomas and Dashiell Hammett, especially Hammett's, are full of memorably adversarial conversations.

LXVII

But Hamilton's dialogue seems to me the most subtle, not only in its formal shapeliness, but in the shiftings between codes that go on, the shifts in self-presentation, shiftings in which *both* parties are vulnerable, so that it isn't simply a ping-pong game.

There is a lot of good dialogue in Hamilton, and I would like to do a lot of quoting. Instead, I'll offer a single long example at this point, from *Date with Darkness*, with one or two shorter ones to come later. You can see in it what Hamilton had learned from Hammett, particularly from a couple of the exchanges between Sam Spade and the exasperating Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon*. But the tone is very different, and what Hamilton does here seems to me richer and deeper than what you find in Hammett's novel.

Spade is dealing with Brigid *de haut en bas*, and gives no sign of being disturbed by her pathological lying and masking. Philip Branch and Jeannette Duval are meeting as equals, and (though I shall not try to characterize them) there are at least four major shifts in the dialogue with respect to how they stand in relation to each other: four barrier-breachings that I have numbered.

With its shiftings with respect to role-playing and "sincerity," it seems to me a masterly piece of writing.

LXVIII

It is the dialogue of individuals who are behaving theatrically and manipulatively, but in a theatrical situation (Branch has just been visited by the private detective who took photos of their love-making the previous night in order to get him to leave town), and without full control over their moves.

Essentially Philip and Jeannette would like things to come out at the same point—his staying to help her—but for what are partly "impure" reasons: he because their relationship is spicing up an otherwise lonely

leave, she because she would like him to give her the money he has promised her.

But it isn't all impure, for they would prefer if possible to preserve the romantic elements. And each of them is intelligent enough, and recognizes that the other is intelligent enough, for them to know that continuing the sexual relationship depends upon each of them being able to preserve a sufficiency of self-esteem.

So there is an obvious uncertainty and experimentation throughout as to how much frankness is possible—given the conflict between manipulative needs and "personal" feelings—in a situation charged with role-playing (nobly self-sacrificing woman; accusatory male realist; calmly commonsensical female realist) and the kind of hurt vanity that issues in a less armoured bitchiness and directness on both sides.

And it is pleasant seeing them able to survive the transactions.

LXIX

> (1) She touched her tongue to her lips. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "How nasty. You'd better go, hadn't you?"… She touched his arm, looking up at him. "Don't—" she paused. "Don't stay—on my account." Her voice was a little uncertain, her eyes very wide and helpless, watching him.
>
> He slapped the side of her face smartly.
>
> (2) He stood quite still, hardly breathing, watching her after a moment step back and reach slowly behind to retrieve the jacket the impact of the blow had jarred loose from her shoulder.
>
> He heard his voice mimic the tragic breathlessness of hers. "Don't stay—on my account." He laughed.
>
> "Philip," she whispered.
>
> "Cut it out," he said. "Cut it out. Quit it."
>
> "Please," she whispered. "Philip. It was so nice and now it's spoiled, but don't make it worse."
>
> He waited, a little frightened at having started this.

(3) “Oh, all right,” she said, turning away. “Oh, all right,” and he let himself breathe again. She sat down on the side of the bed facing the window. “Cigarette?”

“Sure,” he said, giving her one.

“Sit down,” she said, patting the space beside her. He lit her cigarette and sat down. “Oh, for heaven’s sake relax,” she said irritably, looking at him. “*Please* relax. Don’t act like a—”.

“You should talk about acting.”

“Well, stop trying to look so—so tough. You’re not really very hard-boiled, you know, even if you did slap me.” She glanced at him again. “Aren’t you going to say you’re sorry?”

“No.”

“I told you to go, didn’t I?”

“Like that,” he said. “With tears in your eyes. Nuts.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?”

“The mystery woman,” he said. “God, come out from behind that mask.”

(4) She smiled a little. “You didn’t seem to mind it, Philip. In fact, there were times when you seemed rather to enjoy it. Tell me—”

“Yes?”

“How many times have you—?”

He looked at her quickly. “I don’t know,” he said stiffly. “Should I keep count?”

She smiled again, clearly knowing that he was lying. “Does your mother know about it?” she asked sharply.

“No.”

“I’m sorry, Philip,” she said smoothly. “You’re really very sweet. But you shouldn’t accuse people of acting after putting on an imitation of a class-A roué. The way you took me in your arms. And carried me to the bed. It was really very masterful.”

(5) He sat looking at the geometric pattern of windows on the far side of the airshaft. Presently he reached for his pipe.

“Well,” he said, drawing a long breath, “well, we’ve pretty well taken that apart.”

She said in a small voice, “Yes. We have rather, haven’t we?”

“It’s kind of too bad,” he said. Looking at her, he saw that she was crying. “Don’t do that,” he protested.

“I can’t help it. I’m not acting,” she gasped, blinking her eyelids and biting at her lips as, the tears running down her face, she stared blankly at the confined emptiness of the airshaft. “It’s so nasty,” she whispered.

11. Gentlemanliness

LXX

So, being in some sense a gentleman isn’t a matter of always being “gentlemanly,” as the term is used later on, jokingly, by city boss Carl Gunderman to Paul Nyquist in *Line of Fire. (*“So what did you do, boy, make like a gentleman?”) apropos of the pouty-lipped little sexpot Jeanie whom he had inflicted on Paul in the lakeside motel as part of Paul’s alibi.

Nor is it a class thing. It isn’t a matter of defining yourself, by speech and other markers, *against* your environment, your American environment. There are no fond memories here of dear old Dartmouth (as in Powell’s *All Over But the Shooting*), or dear old Yale, as in *Gatsby*.

Naval Lieutenant Dave Young in *Night Walker* (1954) is juncomfortable himself in the snobbish environment of “good” families that he finds himself in, down in Maryland, after having been murderously assaulted while hitchhiking and coming to in hospital, his face masked in bandages, with another man’s identity imposed upon him.

Hugh Phillips, in *The Black Cross,* doesn’t remind himself about campus life in the university where he teaches sociology, as Robert Branch in Kenneth Millsr's *The Dark Tunnel* would surely have done.

The only reference that Matt Helm ever makes to his college years that I can recall is to the occasion when he virtually cut off the hand of a would-be hazer, member of a student mob trying to break into his freshman room after he has given them due warning not to.

LXXI

But then Helm, you would say, is no gentleman? Or Emmett when he knees Sheriff Patman in the groin to protect Ann Nicholson?

> He watched the man come forward and made certain plans, on a purely theoretical basis. He had not fought with, or struck, another human being since he was sixteen years old. The man outweighed him by well over fifty pounds and was at least four inches taller. He felt his stomach as a tight knot of nausea just below his ribs.
>
> "Look," he said weakly. "Look, Sheriff, Miss Nicholson's been sick. She lost her head. She didn't mean—"
>
> Then the man was reaching for his shoulder to sweep him aside, and he moved forward inside the long arm and felt the other hand strike him a passing blow on the chest; and he was inside that, too, his arms wrapped around the other's body. He brought his knee up with all the strength that was in him. With the jolt he felt the larger man's body contract as if the whole body were a muscle in spasm. He stepped back, startled at what he had accomplished, and saw the sheriff bend over and grab at himself, groaning, and sit down on the sidewalk, doubled over.

LXXII

Well, perhaps that can be considered what Emmett himself called it later, in his head, an impulse of stupid chivalry, as he drives away westward as fast as he can, frighteningly conscious of the beating awaiting him, and the ruination of his career, if Patman catches up with them.

> *If he catches me, he'll take me apart*, Emmett thought. *If he catches me, he'll kill me with his bare hands.* There was not a doubt in his mind as to what would happen if the freckled sheriff caught him. Somehow he knew with utter certainty how a man like that thought and felt with respect to certain fundamentals, of which being kneed in the groin was definitely one.

But how about when Branch kicks the fallen Paul Laflin in the head? Or when research chemist Paul Weston, fighting for his life out in the dark rain-drenched city park in *Deadfall*, stamps on the spymaster Louis' face?

> He felt no more compunction than if it had been a snake in the path. A hand caught his trousers leg; a pale oval the size of a face turned up to him; and he drove the hard leather heel of his other foot directly at the light target, striking with a terrible unexpected accuracy, and feeling bone and cartilage smash beneath the blow.

Or the unforgettable episode in which Emmett is up in the hotel room to which Helene Bethke has dragged him, and his chemist's nose detects an incongruous odor in the rum-and-coke that she has handed him?

> He was a little embarrassed. He could feel his blood singing in his ears, and he was aware of a sense of outrage, but he could not see precisely what he was going to do about it. Her eyes followed his face as he rose; her face turning up to him was expressionless, the hazel eyes blank, as if a shade had dropped. He knew that he was in the presence of something primitive and unfamiliar. People who cared much for human life did not use chloral; it was an unreliable agent. Helene Bethke looked cool and self-possessed and a little contemptuous. Her composure angered him unendurably; when she moved, he flung the drugged drink in her face.
>
> There was ice in it. He saw her through a singing haze, thrown off balance by the shock of the cascade of ice and cold liquid; when she started again toward the purse on the table, he was ahead of her. She did not stop. He put his shoulder and hip into her with deliberate violence, taking the impact of her compact body with a savage pleasure that derived from sources he was aware weren't very nice. She was hurled across the cocktail table to strike against the sofa and roll off onto the floor in a flurry of green sandals and bare muscular legs and stained white dress. He took a small gun from the green purse, looked at it for a moment, and recalled how to pull the slide back to check the loads. There was a shell in the chamber.

Gentlemanly? Chivalrous? Well, no. And yes.

12. Peace and War

LXXIII

In *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), the twenty-four-year-old Stephen Crane had thought his way through some central issues concerning the war, the Civil War, at that time *the* war, that he himself had not seen action in.

How would *he* have behaved during that supreme testing out in battle? Particularly since he, like his young hero Henry Fleming, had grown up with a divided consciousness in which, on the one hand, heroic action could be glorious, but on the other (his mother's side), violence was *evil* and vigorous self-affirmation was to be mistrusted as prideful.

And the demonstration of the book, as it develops, is that when you are *in* a war situation, it is that kind of split that is the destructive element — it causes Henry's own panicked flight—and that the healing of that split, during Henry's self-lacerating wanderings behind the line, makes possible the real and unselfconscious courage that he displays after his return to his regiment, and the service that he now renders to his comrades.

You have to be a liberal-left American academic prig to *despise* Henry for his heroism, as has occurred in various critical discussions of the book.

LXXIV

The question of the values of peace and the values of war, the "rules" of war, had come up strongly during and after that greatest of American wars, the War between the States, in which the nature of war itself was changing, partly because of the advantages that the increase in fire-power now gave to defenders over attackers.

Had Grant been a butcher? Had Sherman, during his march to the sea, or Phil Sheridan devastating the Shenandoah Valley, not fought *fair*? Was the North in general not fighting war as it *ought* to be fought, namely as, like the duel, a test of moral courage in which, once honour had been satisfied with respect to whose conviction was the stronger, an honourable peace could be concluded?

Well, the war had amply demonstrated that being a Southern gentleman like Virginia's Lee or a Northern one like Maine's Joshua Chamberlain was not in the least incompatible with the most complete and focused military energy, over and above the essential requirement of physical courage.

But it was Sherman, whose daring war-shortening march had involved amazingly few violences to civilians, who had been the least wasteful of the lives of his men, and that *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche,* Robert E. Lee, who caused the insensate butchery of Gettysburg.

And dreadful though the casualties had been during the Wilderness campaign and elsewhere, if it hadn't been for Grant's implacable persistence against a determined foe under conditions that at times were new in warfare and whose rules had to be figured out as you went along, the North would *not* have won the war, and slavery as such would not have been abolished, at least not for a good many years.

LXXV

So Sherman, who said of his troops in 1864 that "they will march to certain death if I order it, because they know and feel that night and day I labor that not a life shall be lost in vain," was in the right when he insisted that he and Grant and the other great Northern generals *had* fought an honourable war, given the nature now of war.

And, problematic as is the idea of total war, he seems to me to have been, also right when he insisted that when the South seceded, it stepped outside the customary protections of peace and could not now reasonably complain if war was made unpleasant for civilians too, so wholeheartedly, for the most part, behind the fighting men.

And that once it returned within the border of peace it would, as Lincoln too said and meant— Lincoln who welcomed the playing of "Dixie" at the victory ball in Washington— be treated civilly once more.

13. Violences

LXXVI

I have no idea what reading Hamilton himself had done, or what he had thought about the campaigns of World War II, including the horrors of the yard-by-yard, island-by-island advance, with dreadful casualty rates, against the entrenched Japanese defenders in the Pacific.

But his position has always been clear, namely that if someone uses violence against you, they have no right to complain if you use it against them; and that you have a perfect right to defend yourself violently if there is no workable alternative.

And this applies just as much to violences or attempted violences by women as by men. There are no magic shields, no benefits of clergy that put women in an automatically *good* category, any more than there are for former members of the French Resistance.

Nor is this, as we see it in these early novels, a morally crude position. This isn't Mickey Spillane, whose first novel, *I, the Jury*, came out in 1947, in the same year as *Date with Darkness*, and notoriously concluded with Mike Hammer putting a.45 slug into the naked belly of beautiful, blonde Park Avenue psychiatrist Charlotte Manning ("young and delicious and exciting") who admittedly was all set to off *him* with a gun of her own.

> "How c-could you?" she gasped.
>
> I only had a moment before talking to a corpse, but I got it in.
>
> "It was easy."

LXXVII

One of the novelties of these books of Hamilton's is that some of the violences inflicted by the heroes are ones that we too can feel, I mean at the receiving end.

At times, as we well know, thriller violences have some of the unbloody neatness of physical comedy.

A number of the killings in *Red Harvest*, that book of many deaths, are like that. “He agreeably trotted off…, and was shot down at his third step.” Or again: “I steadied my gun-arm on the floor. Nick’s body showed over the front sight. I squeezed the gun [sic]. Nick stopped shooting. He crossed his guns on his chest and went down in a pile on the sidewalk.”

So too, very often, are Richard Stark’s killings which at times have the effect of extra-heavy punctuation marks:

> Shevely read his intentions and suddenly thrust his hands out protectively in front of himself, shouting, “I’m only the messenger!”
>
> “Now you’re the message,” Parker told him, and shot him. [End of chapter]

LXXVIII

But when Sheriff Patman’s body contracts “as if the whole body were a muscle in spasm,” or Paul Laflin, after being kicked behind the ear by Branch, flops down in a rocking-chair and, “oblivious of everyone else, was rocking himself minutely back and forth, bent forward to hold his head in his hands,” or Louis (no last name) in *Deadfall* is found lying on the sofa in little near-sighted Janie Colis’s apartment, “oblivious to everything but the agony of his smashed face,” these are pains that could be experienced by us as well.

They are not cause for satisfaction, let alone for an exultant feeling that it’s payback time, as it is when Sam Drake deals with the heavy-set Nazi spymaster Anderson near the end of Kenneth Millar’s *Trouble Follows Me* (a.k.a.*Night Train*).

> When he got up I hit him again with my left. The lower half of his face was bright with blood. Now a flap came loose over his eye and hung down showing the white bone. I hit him again with my left and he went down moaning. I pulled him to his feet and hit him again with my left. He kicked at me but lost his balance and fell on his back. I helped him to his feet and hit him again. My fist caught him in the center of the throat and broke his larynx. I heard it snap. When he fell down I let him lie. I was very happy.

LXXIX

The body, the feeling, experiencing body, is very real in these early books of Hamilton's.

People get hot and tired and irritable from lack of sleep, the air gets colder or hotter, things feel different as the altitude changes.

In *The Steel Mirror*, when Emmett and Ann are on the way to the justice of the peace,

> She reached up to pry gently at the fingers that gripped her arm. The satin of her sleeve was quite wet where he had been holding her. He hesitated, and released her. She walked along beside him, silent, plucking the thin material free of her skin. It began to dry almost instantly in the hot, dry air.

Earlier, Helene Bethke, in her white dress and bright green hat and gloves and high-heeled sandals, had dragged him almost at a run through a Denver hotel lobby with a grip so tight that he would have had to use force to break loose from it.

The bodies are *clothed* bodies, too, like yours and mine.

Hamilton has a sharp and knowledgeable eye for clothing.

Clothes are partly how individuals express themselves, along with their hair-styles and other possessions. In *Line of Fire* Paul Nyquist catches himself wondering whether the young crusading news reporter Jack Williams has chosen the two-tone green of his car to match his red hair; "You get a very odd slant on people, sometimes," he reflects, "from the cars they pick to drive."

There are a lot of references to women's clothes in the Helm books, obviously deriving in part from Helm's (and his creator's) stints in fashion photography.

Clothing also matters as a boundary-definer, a separating off of selves; an armouring, or at least protecting, of the self, though weakening in that regard when you get tired and careless. After the episode with Sheriff Patman, Ann Nicholson throws up and Emmett has to wipe the "goo" (his term) from her pump.

LXXX

So it is all the more transgressive, all the more a violating of decorum, a stepping into a different space, a space of violence, when Emmett, after catching the scent of chloral, throws his doctored rum-and-coke in Helene Bethke's face.

And when she impatiently tears at the dress and steps out of it, defiantly exposing herself as the kind of girl who doesn't wear any underwear at all, it is just about the most erotic moment that I can recall in any thriller.

> She had pulled herself up to kneel beside the sofa, her forehead pressed against her folded arms. Her shoulders shook with the force of her breathing as she kneeled there, her disheveled bright hair matted and sticky, her dress splashed and awry and ripped at the waist. Her dishevelment embarrassed him and made him want to turn his head while she pulled herself together.
>
> She rose with a last shuddering intake of breath; standing, she regarded the gun for a moment, then his face. Then she looked down at her ruined dress and, gingerly, as if not liking to touch it, her fingers marking the silk where it was still clean, tugged at the knot of the sash. Her face contracted with impatience, something tore, and she stripped the dress off over her head. She had nothing at all on beneath it. She stood there without anything on but the green sandals, using the dress to dry her hands and face and hair. Then she threw it at him.

14. "Violence"

LXXXI

So we have a funny kind of paradox in these novels. When Paul Weston and Marilyn George in *Deadfall*, after their narrow escape from death in the rain-wet Chicago park, go to Janie Colis's apartment where her spymaster Louis (no last name) is lying on her sofa in agony, Janie

> went on her knees beside him and looked at Weston. "You lousy coward," she gasped. "To kick a man in the face like that! I wish I had killed you. I would have, if she hadn't interfered!"

This after having just put a bullet into Marilyn George.

And in a funny way we can understand her attitude, just as we can in *Assignment: Murder*, when Nina Rasmussen demands, apropos of her brother Tony,

> "Granted that you were justified in defending yourself, Dr. Gregory, did you have to be so—so brutal? After all, you're a fairly big man and he's only a boy!"

The previous night, the tough, wiry, twenty-year old "boy" had done his level best to kill Jim Gregory outside his house with a switchblade knife. And it had been an accomplice of his who shot Gregory during the fake hunting accident that cost him weeks of hospitalization.

But now it is somehow the still convalescent Gregory, barely saving his life by means of desperate punching, butting, kneeing, and with an eight-inch gash in his back, who is the "violent" person, just as it is Paul Weston in *Deadfall* who is the violent, the *cowardly* violent person for having, in a chaotic desperate scramble out in the dark wet park, saved himself and Marilyn George from being cold-bloodedly murdered.

And it is Emmett who is being, shall we say, unchivalrous in body-checking a nicely clothed *woman* like that—a woman who has tried to knock him out—or worse— with chloral hydrate, and who in her dash for her purse is presumably not going in search of a kleenex.

LXXXII

The two male victims here, as it happens, are Communist agents—as is Helene Bethke—, and the implicit emotional logic is clear and by now familiar, I mean the logic whereby it is the self-defenders who become in some "objective" political sense the aggressors.

It is the same kind of logic by means of which the monstrous death-tolls and torturings in Stalin's prisons and up in the wastes of Siberia, like the millions of deaths by starvation during the artificially induced famine in the Ukraine in the 1930s, are somehow not "cruel" or wicked in the same way as those in the camps and prisons of the Nazis.

For what the Communists were trying to do, Stalin included, was *good*, don't you know? They weren't evil sadistic persons, they weren't "aggressive," they weren't *selfish*, even if they may have made some mistakes and gone at times a bit too far. They were idealists.

So somehow it was the duty of the innocent (but who is to say which of us is *really* innocent?), well, the "innocent" victims (but isn't "victims" a loaded term?), well, let's just say the eggs that happened to get broken during the making of the historically inevitably omelet, to recognize, uncomplainingly, that they were being sacrificed in a good cause.

There was nothing *personal* about it. The would-be killers of Ann Nicholson and John Emmett didn't *dislike* them, any more than Faubel and Laflin and Hahn in *Date With Darkness* had anything personal against Branch and Jeannette, who they were also going to kill.

Besides, Communists were *nice*, compared with those dreadful low-life Nazis swaggering around in their jackboots. Communists were *clean*. And not, absolutely not (this was a good while before Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*) sadistic.

LXXXIII

The self-defensive violences of Hamilton's victims or would-be victims here are messy and look strange, since they aren't professionals of violence.

Philip's fight with Paul Laflin is an affair of clumsy wrestling and butting, not the conventional straight-left, right-hook, Queensberry rules stuff of innumerable man-to-man encounters.

In *The Black Cross*, when Hugh Phillips, still shaky during his post-accident recuperation, realizes that he and his tall, nice, former girlfriend Christine Wells have been trapped by the night-club owner Karl Lewis in his rented cottage on the bay and will be killed,

> he swung his arms backward with a helpless desperation that was not courage but simply a refusal to stay alive and take the responsibility for what was going to happen to [Chris] at the hands of Janice's murderer.

> He felt the barrel of the revolver against his wrist and the blast from the cylinder scorched him and he was not dead. He was pushing and kicking, shoving death back into the cottage, and closing the door on it; and he had not been able to get his hands on the gun but neither had the tall man been able to turn the unwieldy weapon against him.

LXXXIV

Violences can spin out of control, too, once the figurative door has been opened.

If fully civilized relationships involve a respect for the personal spaces of other (properly clothed) civilized individuals, and if breaching those barriers is an affair of spectrums, degrees, symbolic weightings, including slaps, kicks, punches, rape (Jeannette Duvall is raped by Paul Laflin and Mr. Hahn), torture, poisoning, and shooting, at some point you may indeed get a full "animal" ferocity even in a normally peaceable man:

Down at the water's edge in *The Black Cross*, when Hugh Phillips desperately swings Chris's wet skirt at Karl Lewis, covering his face, and they go down among the reeds together and Lewis's Colt.38 automatic goes off while choked with mud, and explodes,

> The body beneath [Hugh] twisted and squirmed and, sobbing for breath, he reached for the throat and hung on. A hand came up to beat at his face, and he gagged and hid his face against the other's chest, because the hand was ragged and incomplete, shattered by the explosion of the pistol. The broken hand tried to claw away the slippery folds that muffled the face, and the fingers crushing the throat.

The blood singing in his ears, he would have choked him to death had not black-haired and hitherto rather irritating Mr. Holt from the sheriff's office intervened.

LXXXV

However, in the—dare I venture?—dialectical explorings that Hamilton was engaged in, this kind of loss of control isn't moralized into a good in itself.

In *Deadfall*, when Paul Weston, Hamilton's most violent hero, slams a metal rod down on the wrist of the FBI man searching his locker, a lab technician's scream brings home to him that

> he was stepping forward with every intention of bringing the rod down across the bowed head of the larger man with every bit of strength he possessed [he] checked himself with an effort that left him sick and blinded. *I almost killed him*, he thought. *I almost killed him.*

I have the feeling that in that story, Hamilton was deliberately swinging a number of degrees away from the pattern of *Date with Darkness*, the way Shakespeare swung away from a man acting too slowly (Hamlet) to a man acting too fast (Othello). Weston, who has fought in the Pacific (though almost nothing is made of this) and knows the comfort of a gun, is also savagely, woundingly aggressive towards Marilyn George—and, as it transpires, entirely wrong about her.

Hamilton was, perhaps, having a look at what can happen when a *good* guy steps a bit too readily, if understandably (his career in "sensitive" research is being wrecked by Marilyn) out of the box.

LXXXVI

But after black-haired Mr. Holt (no first name) takes over at the end of *The Black Cross*, it emerges that the cops had known for some time about the bad guys, and that it had been quite unnecessary for Hugh Phillips to put Chris and himself in danger at all.

Back in bed, in the home now of Chris's parents, Hugh does not feel self-congratulatory. He hasn't proved something. If anything, he understands Chris's earlier distrust of him (not at all the instant good-girl supportiveness) when she feels that he may in fact have murdered his dead wife Janice.

> He tried to think what was in her mind and his own, but he could not feel anything but a vague tired bitterness. He did not blame her for anything. The war was still close enough that you remembered that almost anybody, given an opportunity and an excuse, would kill; it did not anger him that she had thought him a murderer.

And in fact there had been domestic violence on one occasion between himself and Janice that Chris had known about:

> He had asked Janice politely to turn the radio down a little, and she had turned it up instead, so he came out of the study and jerked the plug from the wall and she slapped him and he slapped her back and she threw an ash tray at him. It went through the big front window. He grabbed her and she struck at him with her nails. She was screaming at him. He had never been so angry in his life. They had been building up to it for weeks…
>
> "She did have a habit of swinging at me occasionally," he admitted. "It didn't mean anything. After awhile I just started swinging back."

But there might, might there not? have been something a bit simplistic about his reflection, at the time of that earlier conversation, that "Chris thought that if you hit a person you must hate them. Chris had probably never even kicked a wastepaper basket across the room in a temper; she would have thought it showed a dreadful lack of self-restraint."

LXXXVII

And Hamilton's heroes feel uneasy about other violences.

John Emmett feels very uneasy indeed when, up on the mountain road in Colorado after leaving Mrs. Pruitt's lodge, he uses a jack handle to break the collar-bone of the ordinary-seeming man who has been tailing himself and Ann Nicholson.

Had he in fact, in a paranoid panic, assaulted a perfectly innocent man who was getting ready to help Ann with what looked like a punctured tire?

> The shock of the blow going home left Emmett as surprised as the man he had struck. Part of his mind had been calmly certain that he would never get away with it, that he would find himself standing there flatfooted, holding the bar or iron, while the man pointed a gun at him, and told him to drop it and stop acting like a jackass. Instead, the man in the Stetson hat gave a little grunt and grabbed for his shoulder, then staggered as the pain got to him, swayed against the car, and sat down in the road.

It is only later, when he has "stupidly" asked Helene Bethke what the man had been planning to do, that, "'Well, darling,' Helene Bethke said, smiling, 'if he saw the opportunity, he was going to kill you.'" Just as Helene herself had tried to kill Ann Nicholson with sleeping pills.

15. Coping

LXXXVIII

But that, in a way, that kind of uncertainty, both about what is visibly in front of you and about the question of what lies behind it, how you should "read" it—and then how you should *act* —is what these books are about. They are about coping, about figuring out, about, in a sense, *thought*.

Date with Darkness is a thriller about a young man doing everything that he can to save a young woman and himself *without* significant violence. Branch's violence score (if tallied by one of those earnest souls who count the "violences" on TV) would be four, I think:

> Two slaps (Jeannette, Constance), one of them heavy enough to knock someone down.
>
> One brief fight with another man, including kicking.
>
> One spray-drenched middle-aged gun-holding woman (Madam Faubel) thrown into a corner of a boat's cockpit.

Not a lot of violence *there*.

LXXXIX

Date with Darkness is in fact a heartening demonstration of effective intelligence, effective long-term planning. involving a successful reading of other's intentions, detailed knowledge of an environment, personal skills, psychological misdirection, and stoical courage.

It is also a narrative in which, as it progresses, Hamilton moves away from situations that remind us, to some extent, of earlier thrillers—masquerading couple (spies?), sinister-genial big criminal in fancy car, enigmatic foreign woman, blackmailing private detective— into ones that are more uniquely his own, down on the Chesapeake Bay that he

himself had obviously become acquainted with before and during the war.

As Branch sits in the train taking him south alone from New York,

> he sat smoking and watched the landscape roll by in the sunlight outside the dirty window of the car. You could see it was fall out there, and the wind was strong enough to send swirls of dust across the dirt road that for a little paralleled the tracks. The single houses stood naked among bare fields and did not look like places where people lived.

It is a lovely Hopperesque evocation of a native America without foreign entanglements.

And later on, Hamilton gives us some of the best kinaesthetic writing in any American thriller (better than anything in John D. MacDonald, better than anything in James Lee Burke) as the power-boat makes its nighttime way down the increasingly choppy bay, with Branch at the wheel initially feeling the complex physical pressures of waves and wind, and Paul Laflin taking over and being unable (like you or me) to cope with them, and Branch taking over again.

I will quote only one paragraph:

> As they ran out of the shelter of the creek, the boat came heavily to life, rolling regularly, like a pendulum, with a fixed period of its own that was independent of the impact of the short, steep, crested chop of the river. The wind took on weight and sharpness; and Branch was aware of Paul Laflin turning up the collar of his coat to reinforce the turtle-necked sweater; the man standing spreadlegged beyond the cabin door, prevented by some pride from taking his hands from his pockets to steady himself, so that he weaved from side to side, in a curious static dance movement, with the rolling of the boat.

Oh well, one more. This is such *damn* good writing, and Hamilton isn't in the least pretending to be Hemingway stylistically:

> As they approached the center of the river he let the boat swing gradually away to the left, downstream, and the rolling stopped as they raced away before the wind, to be replaced by a slow pitching motion as each wave raised the stern, forcing the boat ahead, then

> passed forward. With the wind astern, steering became a monotonous cranking of the wheel from left to right and back again as the waves passed. In the darkness the speed seemed tremendous, but the leisurely movement of the lights on shore, that only slowly came abeam and fell astern, belied the surging pounding confusion of sound in the boat. It was a little like creeping down a broad highway in low gear.

16. Commitment

XC

But "reality" here in these books isn't something that's *given*, any more than language is. You don't simply see what a situation is, assess it, and then (rationally) take the necessary steps.

In the three works that followed *Date with Darkness*, particularly *The Steel* Mirror and *The Black Cross*, Hamilton. went on to complicate the nature of commitment and action.

XCI

By the time Philip Branch is out there with Jeannette in the boat things are (almost) all clear. The problem for him is definite, the solution feasible (incapacitate Hahn, Laflin, and Faubel with sea-sickness, lock them in the cabin). And he knows what Jeannette is like; there are no more surprises to come *there*. And he hasn't broken any laws or disgraced his uniform.

The continuing uncertainties have been the reader's, largely because of a technical feature. Hamilton has simply not told us what Branch's plan is.

Partly, I think, this is so that we can share the uncertainty of the trio (and Jeannette) about what he is up to and whether he is being dumb, or cowardly, or what.

But partly too, I think, Hamilton wants to stay always close in his narrative to what Branch is thinking and feeling *now*, the actual sequences of his mind-flow when facing what is immediately physically in front of him (something derived, probably, from Hemingway and Hammett).

Describing authorially how his plan forms itself, and the weighing and balancings, hopes and fears, that it entails, would be impossible to do concretely.

XCII

Furthermore, Branch's own thought processes aren't neat and tidy.

Challenged by Madame Faubel about his motivations,

> To explain your behavior to other people it was necessary to use simple words like love or hate. But it was not as simple as that, you merely went on doing what was easiest or most pleasant until something said, Stop, this is far enough in this direction; try again, bud, this isn't quite right.
>
> Not until you were pushed into a corner did you bother to think out a course of action that satisfied all the strange little taboos and prohibitions that were half-buried in your subconscious, and the sense of what was right and just that you never examined too closely because, while it never seemed quite to correspond with what other people thought right and just, it was yours and you were stuck with it, when they finally got you penned in a corner. When the chips were down. When you had to decide what to do instead of letting the decision make itself. Then you found that this man that you had never examined very closely was you, and he did not hate or love anybody in particular, but he had this sense of what was equitable, and a feeling for what ought to be done and what ought not to be allowed; and you weren't particularly impressed with his intelligence or the logic of his line of reasoning but he was you and you were stuck with him. He had grown this way while you were not looking, and now you were stuck with him.

XCIII

In *The Black Cross* and *The Steel Mirror*, both the exterior and the interior difficulties are more amorphous.

The Black Cross, which reads a bit like a movie treatment (I don't say that disparagingly; I would have liked to see the movie) is another of those *noir* stories of the man who has witnessed something that he can't (it appears) get the authorities to believe, and which after a bit

even he himself isn't sure about; and who (he realizes) is viewed as someone who may in fact have committed a murder.

And in his post-accident traumatized and headachy state, Hugh Philips isn't, for awhile, totally sure himself of his own innocence.

And he finds that the woman to whom he had been married for a year wasn't what he had assumed, and that the "facts" about her that he had taken for granted were all (seemingly) wrong.

It is ably done, and I shall be returning to it shortly in connection with the love interest in these works. But *The Steel Mirror* is more complicated, and more interesting, and contains some of Hamilton's finest writing.

17. Mirrors

XCIV

Not everything in *The Steel Mirror* is at the same level of excellence. The last section, after John and Ann reach Los Alamos is thinner than what has gone before, and Ann's father isn't as fully developed as he might be.

But in the predominantly best parts of the book, the writing has a reality that lasts, a realism that you don't *fully* get in *Date with Darkness*, where there can be a shade of doubt as to whether all the dialogue given to the French group is *exactly* how even the most bilingual of conspirators would have spoken in English. Paul Laflin and Constance are almost *too* perfectly American during the opening encounter in the bar.

Besides, when speaking to each other out in the country, and not wanting Branch to know what they were up to, they would have spoken French. No?

I would guess that that basic design flaw in *Date with Darkness*, even more perhaps than the emergent information about Auschwitz-Birkenaus and other extermination camps, was responsible for Hamilton's reprinting the book.

Eight years later, in *Assignment: Murder*, a furious Nina Rasmussen is going to shoot Jim Gregory in his hospital bed, with a cop outside the

door, until Natalie bops her on the head with a vase of flowers. It is a fine scene. Unfortunately, it is nonsensical in the light of what we learn about Nina subsequently. But Hamilton does a nifty variation on this pattern in the 1985 Helm book *The Detonators.*

XCV

John Emmett, despite those flurries of dramatic action that I've mentioned, is a much more self-doubting hero than Branch. He hasn't been in the services at all, and feels guilty and uncomfortable about that, particularly since he's conscious of the Bogart stereotype that he *isn't*—conscious, too, of the heroic images, courtesy of Warner Brothers, of Resistance fighters in occupied France.

And he is out there on the highway in the slightly strange America of motels, and gas-stations, and lunch-counters that in those days you inhabited during long-distance driving, particularly if you were between jobs.

And he is there with this elusive and well-heeled girl, in her expensive fawn-coloured Mercury convertible, someone who's on the run and goes into a total tooth-and-nail panic attack with the small-town Illinois sheriff, who simply wants to hold her for questioning, as he's been instructed to do by the Chicago police. And who's a lousy driver. And irritable. And selfish, downplaying his heroism with the sheriff and expecting him to wipe off that goo.

For a moment, while she's fighting with Sheriff Patman, "he hated the girl more than he had hated anything in his whole life—for getting him into this, for not being fifty years old and ugly, and for making an obscene display of herself on a public street in broad daylight."

And she's not glamorous like the rich girls of road movies, such as Claudette Colbert in *A Night to Remember*, And people come and tell him disquieting things about her—her psychiatrist, her psychiatrist's nurse, Miss Bethke.

And he isn't always on top of things.

XCVI

This is one of those commendable and uncommon thrillers in which heroes get really and truly *tired*.

John Buchan's Richard Hannay, on the run through the Highlands in *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, goes down with a bout of his recurring South African malaria and becomes weak as a kitten.

Eric Ambler's civil-engineer Nicholas Marlowe, on the run in Fascist Italy in *Cause for Alarm*, reaches that point of utter exhaustion in which it becomes impossible to take another step though your life depends upon it.

Simon Harvester's Dorian Silk, the most convincing of all spies, suffers from the early-morning numbness and blankness of someone who is essentially a night person. (Napoleon nicely remarked of one of his generals that he had "that rarest form of military courage, the courage of early morning.")

No doubt there are other examples.

And a hero can find his *interpreting* of events shifting too, as they do from time to time for Hannay, especially in *Mr. Standfast*, when he loses his conviction of the worth of what he is doing and fears that he may simply be making an ass of himself.

As Branch would have done (or so he felt) had he flung himself to the Manhattan sidewalk when Mr. Sellers' big Packard sedan drew up alongside him.

XCVII

Things feel different in daylight from how they do at night.

Altitude can affect you. After getting off the bus at night in Colorado and being met by an old-timer, "Emmett followed him with camera and fishing-rod case, feeling awkward and a little lost. He could feel the mountains all around him in the darkness, and his lungs were aware of the altitude."

Other people can fade.

For a moment, seated across the hotel dining-room table from the pseudo-naval couple, Branch has “a momentary feeling of being completely out of touch with them, as if there had been a pane of glass between them and him.” And after Jeannette has, as he thinks, left him for good, he “could recall the sound of her voice and the shape of her mouth and the texture of her hair, but like a girl met in a dream, she had only physical characteristics.”

At one point, for Emmett, “the solid hours of rest seemed to draw a curtain over the events of the past days; shaving, he found that he could hardly recall Ann Nicholson’s face.”

People’s images can also be changed by others. When Helene Bethke refers to her as a “feeb,” “The crude term for imbecile seemed to put Ann Nicholson immeasurably far away from him; she was no longer a pretty girl he had known, but only a warped brain capable of a certain perverse, vicious cunning.”

And your mental circuits can be overloaded.

Near the end of his long intense conversation with Ann in the hotel room in Cheyenne, in which she gives him a seemingly candid explanation of her erratic behaviour, Emmett finds that he

> had been in the little room too long. He could no longer feel anything for her; she had made too many demands on his emotions already, and it was too hot. When she buried her face in her hands, he found himself wondering whether or not she was peeking through her fingers to see how the gesture affected him.

The demand for intense responses and commitment here is too strong, since there is too frail a base of first-hand knowledge and experience to sustain them.

XCVIII

Near the end of *The Black Cross*, Hugh Phillips reflects that “Everybody was six other people,” a formulation that he likes enough to repeat it a little later, and which Hamilton himself obviously liked. David Young in *Night Walker* reflects that the cocky red-headed Navy brat Bonito (“Bunny”) Dekker is “too young to know that everyone is

six other people," and that "a man shows a different face to every person he meets."

And the game rules for transactions between multifaceted individuals may be uncertain.

When Ann Nicholson's condescendingly asks what he knows about amnesia, Emmett replies irritably "That it's generally faked," and goes on to develop the point in detail. But he does so with some uneasiness:

> He was afraid to look at the girl. He had let his resentment carry him into depths he knew nothing about. If her mind was really ill, his skepticism could easily bring on some reaction he would be quite incapable of coping with, not being a psychiatrist.

Changing the rules of the game means embarking on a new stretch whose outcome is uncertain and in which you can't foresee the details of your own behaviour.

But this doesn't mean that you have to be wholly at sea.

18. Intelligence

XCIX

A couple of times in these works Hamilton reminds us of the possibility of madness. At one point Ann Nicholson says,

> "It's like a nightmare… You're with people you know, and maybe you like them and maybe you don't, but they're still civilized human beings, and you wouldn't dream of being afraid of them; then you look at them and suddenly their faces have changed and their teeth have changed and they start to close in on you like vicious animals."

And it's not just a woman who can feel so disturbed.

When Hugh Phillips in *The Black Cross* climbs up the steps to where Shirley Carlson waits for him,

> He looked at the girl again, and her face did not look the same; it had a blunt, blurred, animal-like quality, and there was something sinuous and boneless in the way she moved, coming toward him. He told himself that it was part of going crazy to imagine everyone

> against you, but he drew back instinctively. In his mind, as his foot slipped, he saw the precipitous stairs behind him…

John Franklin Bardin had got a good deal of mileage out of that kind of thing in *The Deadly Percheron* (1946), with its pervasive big-city nightmarishness and the uncertainty about what is really real, and what is madness, and how, if at all, you can tell them apart (very *serious*, very modern, very noir).

And paranoia, or the possibility of it, was part of the stock-in-trade of "quality" mystery writers like Cornell Woolrich and Dorothy B. Hughes, and of Alfred Hitchcock in movies like *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), *Suspicion* (1941, and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943).

But Emmett dryly undercuts Ann's dread at that point.

And Hugh Phillips, who is aware of these odd fadings in his own consciousness, has also been doing his best to behave rationally after he discovers, on returning home from the hospital, that things aren't as they seem.

These states of dread aren't ones that you want to *indulge* in. What you're trying to do, or should be, is try and arrive at more or less solid facts and act upon them.

C

Behaving rationally here, though, isn't a neat and tidy business, like that of the detectives in the "classic-puzzlers" of Agatha Christie, Rex Stout, and others, beloved of American detective-fiction *aficionados* like Jacques Barzun. It's more a set of predispositions, a loose constellation of strategies for coping.

If Hamilton hasn't endowed his heroes with a wartime expertise in violence, he also, scrupulously, doesn't belabour the fact that two of them are scientists. Which could have been a useful gimmick to enhance their status for Rinehart's hardcover *New York Times*-reading mystery buyers.

Halfway through *The Steel Mirror,* however,

> Emmett found that things people told him seemed to have stopped carrying conviction some time ago. He had stopped trying to sort

> out the truths from the falsehoods; he no longer believed anything, he merely filed it for reference. He was merely collecting information and waiting for a hunch. As a chemist you learned that, contrary to the popular idea of scientific procedure, one good hunch was often worth a ream of data.

And I suspect there are other ways, in which having been professionally a chemist might involve some competence with respect to truth-seeking.

Just as being a college teacher of the odd medley of readings and writings that we call literature can develop in you a certain sophistication about the nature of "facts," and about the smooth certitude with which at times we are told what was said and felt and thought on some occasion by some political personage.

Shortly thereafter, by dint of listening carefully to what Helene Bethke is saying, and recalling with reasonable certainty what he himself had seen in the contents of Ann's handbag, Emmett does indeed come upon an inconsistency that solidly establishes that Helene is lying about Ann's apparent suicide attempt

CI

But a hunch, too, isn't necessarily a simple matter, and when you are dealing with people, particularly people of a kind you're unfamiliar with, there may be nothing definite or conclusive about one at all.

As late as chapter 21, with only five more chapters to go, Emmett, out alone under the desert stars with Ann in New Mexico, after imposing marriage on her to gain a legal stake in her defense, is *still* not sure whether or not she is a murderer. He has deliberately left the pistol taken from that man out on the mountain road where she can get hold of it, and he "could not remember ever having been so scared in his life."

So what you've been doing is playing hunches, watching what Ann is like, watching how people behave when they tell you things, like Dr. Kaufman and Nurse Bethke telling you early on in the diner about their escaped patient now asleep (or so Emmett assumes) out in her car.

> The man had removed, and was polishing, his glasses. He looked curiously unruffled beside the gaudy dishevelment of the girl; a small compact man with a neat square face, smoothly shaven except for a short moustache. His hair, when he removed his hat, proved to be dark and thick and glossy. He was wearing a black suit with a fine white stripe, a white shirt, and a silk tie printed with a fine pattern of white and blue. He was somewhere around forty years of age. The girl, Emmett decided, was about fifteen years younger.

By the end of the conversation, you've believed them and have agreed to accompany the patient down to New Mexico. But "they had taken the girl named Ann Nicholson apart in front of his eyes. She was no longer a girl and a human being, she was a case for the medical journals," and Emmett doesn't particularly like them, and "felt a sense of loss. He had begun to like the girl named Ann Nicholson."

CII

So at a deeper level your mind stays alert for possible inconsistencies in what you're told by *anyone*, including "experts," including Ann herself.

And knowledge, of a sort, continues to come. A little further on,

> He glanced at her and was suddenly aware that he did not really know what kind of girl she was. He had only known her for twenty-four hours, although it seemed much longer. He glanced at her and realized that, in thinking about her, he had actually been thinking about an imaginary person—not even the quiet, well-dressed if slightly hot and rumpled girl he had met in the garage the previous evening, but the girl he had never seen, who had gone to the cocktail party where something had happened to send her rushing off across country without exchanging her party clothing for something more suitable for traveling. He had been thinking of her as the girl he thought her to have been the day before, not as the girl he was actually seeing, sitting rather carelessly on the bed, shoeless, her expensive skirt and blouse showing clearly that she had not had them off for twenty-four hot breathless hours.
>
> He had not been thinking of her as the girl who would pick up a strange man by the roadside, who would flee from a sheriff in utter

> panic and fight him like an alley cat when he caught her; whose voice could hold a sharp, vixenish note when referring to another girl whom, a few hours earlier, she had claimed to like very much.

There are about six other selves there, I'd say.

19. Inductions

CIII

But knowledge, firm knowledge, trustworthy knowledge, the kind you can base action on, has to be *sought*. And there has to be a predisposition that makes its seeking possible and permits you to have some trust in yourself as an investigator, and not to be imprisoned in *idées fixes* about what people "really" are.

CIV

One of the constants in Hamilton, in his heroes anyway, is the unfussy awareness that people may not be homogeneous.

And when I say unfussy, I mean that the heroes don't think in terms of a binary system in which either people are basically good (yourself included) or else, when you look more carefully, you realize that they're actually *lousy*.

—as does young Goodman Brown, in Hawthorne's famous story of that name, whose relationship with his fellow townsmen in Puritan New England is darkened beyond recovery by his night out in the woods witnessing (dreaming?) their participation in a Witches' Sabbath.

—or Ross Macdonald's increasingly depressive Lew Archer, for whom, by the end, virtually everyone (himself included?) is a phony role-player once you've correctly read that tenseness around their eyes, or nervous licking of the too loose or too tight lips, or whatever the betraying signs are.

Hamilton has no problem with the fact that most of us usually want to be viewed in a favourable light, whether by others or by ourselves (it is a mode of persuasion and of self-energizing), and that sometimes we may be caught out.

While Emmett is being driven out to Mrs. Pruitt's lodge and tries to sound like an old-timer ("Still digging up that creek, I see"),

> Pete Mack spat through the window beside him. "Young fellow just started up again. Veteran. Expected to make a fortune by Christmas." After a moment he added, "Last Christmas."
>
> Emmett glanced back at the great futile mounds of bluish clay illuminated by the lights of the shovel in the ravaged stream-bed bordered by cottonwoods. It seemed to him they were so obviously symbolical as to be merely silly. Then it occurred to him that he had no very strong position from which to criticize the other man; his own reasons for coming up here were not exactly brilliant.

But this is not the same as happening upon a symbolic flaw in himself that shows that he is fundamentally phony.

And next morning, when he picks on Mrs. Pruitt, whom he genuinely likes from way back when his family stayed there for vacations, and who sounds a bit like Jane Darnell in a variation on her *Grapes of Wrath* part and has been genuinely nice and helpful this time, it isn't any kind of deep write-off, and the exchange doesn't just go one way:

> Mrs. Pruitt said, "I'm betting that girl's all right."
>
> He was a little tired of Mrs. Pruitt's carefully rough-hewn picturesqueness, and he reflected that it was very easy to be magnanimous and kindly about a girl you weren't ever going to see again. "You are?" he asked. "What the hell do you think I'm doing?"
>
> She laughed at his irritability. "So long," she said. "And watch your step, Sonny."
>
> "So long. And thanks a lot." he said. "Mom."

Being "six other people" need not imply falsity or falsification. Like levels or modes of discourse, it can simply be part of the everyday process of interacting with a variety of other people.

CV

And if you are one of these young men of Hamilton's who aren't going to implode, you also resist being intimidated, by "authorities"—the police, FBI agents, medical "experts"—and by the moral claims of

authority figures, including parents. I say “resist,” since there isn’t the jaunty stance of untroubled irreverence here that makes Ross Thomas’s heroes appealing.

Authority figures want to marginalize you. They want you to leave things in their expert hands. And when other things are equal you may go along with them, being conscious of how much you yourself *don’t* know. (Emmett is in fact all set to withdraw from the Nicholson “case” at one point, before the first piece of really solid empirical evidence comes his way.)

But the experts may *not* be right. In *The Black Cross* there are too many things that don’t square for Hugh Phillips with the official version of Janice’s death, so he persists along his own track. As does Emmett.

CVI

And you may at times have to be rude, or impolite, breaching barriers that most of us normally respect because breaching them may involve refusing to take someone on their own terms, not necessarily at the level that invites “Are you calling me a liar?” but with the unavoidable implication that you may not be fully believing them, particularly when they speak *ex cathedra*.

And you may need to *push*, to annoy, to search for fault lines, to elicit inconsistencies.

And you may have to become a masquerader yourself, like Branch with Hahn and Lafflin and Faubel out at the summer cottage, and afterwards in their boat, committing yourself to a private agenda, hidden if necessary from *everyone* else, as Branch hides even from Jeannette what he is up to.

And doing so with the awareness that what you’re up to may not *necessarily* be right, may not be based on a correct reading of a situation, may not achieve the result sought, may not be what someone better than yourself might be doing in the same situations.

But it’s the best that *you* can do.

CVII

At bottom, perhaps, there's something here in Hamilton like Spinoza's central concept of the *conatus*, that disposition of everything to persist in its own being.

It's essentially what we see in *Wuthering Heights*, that great proto-modern novel, in which young Nelly Dean has to make her way among the conflicting, at times destructive, at times grievously in error, selves of those around them in that closed system up on the moors, away from police, from magistrates, from priests or ministers, and try to minimize disasters, even while recognizing that "Well, we *must* be for ourselves in the long run; the mild and generous are only more justly selfish than the domineering."

The deep inner conviction that you're *not* going to self-destruct, not going to undermine yourself, not going to end up in a state of moral or emotional paralysis, particularly when you're young, is one of the important threads in that tapestry that we loosely call modernism, whether in Nietzsche, or Yeats, or Stephen Crane, or the Conrad of *The Secret Sharer* and *The Shadow* Line, or D.H. Lawrence *passim*, or the Joyce of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or dear lovely Jean Rhys.

And as I have said, it is a major element in thrillers generally. Thrillers themselves, which came of first-person-narrative age with Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* (1903) and reached their flowering with John Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), are a peculiarly modern form.

CVIII

When Paul Nyquist at the end of *Line of Fire* contemplates suicide and sticks the barrel of the little.22 target pistol (less messy than the.45 automatic) in his mouth, "It seemed like an awkward shot to make; and I took it out and placed the muzzle against my temple. I felt remarkably silly, and knew that I couldn't pull the trigger if I stood there a million years."

Nyquist has indeed been taking substantial risks in his dealings with his friend city boss Carl Gunderman and Gunderman's hoods, his

“jerks,” especially his right-hand man Brooks, enough to make Gunderman comment that he just doesn’t *care*.

But when he drives out to Gunderman’s house for the final showdown, he can’t bring himself, despite the urgency, to drive as recklessly as the jerks.

> You’d think a man who had nothing to live for wouldn’t mind a little thing like passing blind on the curves. It occurred to me that I had been singing that dirge for quite a while now, but I never quite seemed to get around to blowing my brains out. There was something significant in that, I was sure, and I’d have to give it some thought, later.

A man with nothing to live for indeed. Well, not very much.

Like Jake Barnes, in *The Sun Also Rises*, which Nyquist himself invokes to his just-married bride, he would appear to have been permanently shut out by his hunting accident from the possibility of a forward-reaching, future-changing, marriage relationship, that intimate, complicated intertwining of Plato’s parable.

Which brings me back to the subject of sex, the primary relationships in these novels being with women.

20. Couples

CIX

Despite that tediously repeated cliché about Woman as Angel, Woman as Whore, this is simply not how things are in a lot of thrillers.

Much more often, it’s women as companions, potentially companions for life, that we’re seeing in thrillers, as distinct from the depressive crime novels of writers like James M. Cain, Cornell Woolrich, and, apart from *The Getaway*, Jim Thompson.

The thriller, the speeded-up novel of action, is much more often than not a novel with a happy ending. Difficulties have been faced, difficulties have been overcome, and the hero has either achieved a longed for security—the emotional security of a lasting relationship with a woman—or is able to relax back into a relationship that has

been threatened, like that of the newly-wedded John and Rae Ingram in Charles Williams' *Dead Calm*.

And predominantly the achieved women are highly desirable, corresponding, I suppose, to your belief, particularly if not yet married, that you deserve, or hope to obtain, the *best*.

The alternative feeling that you're such an awful person that you'll be lucky to find anyone at all also gets its gratification from time to time. Wade Miller's battered, aging soldier-of-fortune Biggo Venn is happy to be able to settle down at the end of *Devil May Care* (1950) with the nice but unremarkable fallen sparrow Jinny, who cares for *him*, and whom he can care for.

But this pattern is much less common.

CX

Thrillers have some lovely women in them, as wives or more or less long-term companions.

Richard Hannay's calm grey-eyed Mary Lamington in *Mr. Standfast* is the perfect energizing agent for that slightly unsure of himself knight-errant. When he first sees her during the house party at Fosse Manor, "There was more than good looks in her young face. Her broad, low brow and her laughing eyes were amazingly intelligent. She had an uncanny power of making her eyes go suddenly grave and deep, like a glittering river narrowing into a pool." What a catch!

And how nice it is for Andy McClintock at the end of John D. MacDonald's pre-McGee *Dead Low Tide* (1953), when

> The door opened and my long-legged, brown-eyed blonde came in. My life came walking back through the door. My warm life stood there, just inside the door, and her eyes found mine first and they were filled with gladness.

He had been given to understand that she was dead.

I don't need to multiply examples.

CXI

There may be a bit of a problem with respect to marriage, though.

There isn't in the pre-McGees, of course. You know that the strong, honourable small-town Florida cops and so forth are going to marry their handsome wholesome young Florida women and settle down to raising a brood of tow-headed kids with whom they'll go to the unspoiled Florida beaches and do all the other things that wholesome families did in the Fifties, like the Bowdens in MacDonald's *Cape Fear*, and which servicemen had very understandably yearned for during the tedium and horrors of World War II.

But once McGee comes along in 1964, the more individuated and admirable and all-round desirable the women are with whom he becomes involved (as distinct from the beach bunnies), the more marriage becomes a trap for him and for us, since obviously we don't want to see him settle down and have someone rearranging the drawers and closet space aboard *The Busted Flush* (assuming she wants to live on a houseboat at all) and getting him to drive her to the supermarket in his picturesquely converted Rolls Royce, *Miss Aggie*.

Hence the remarkably high death rate among them.

CXII

Intelligent married couples in thrillers, unless they're under threat, have pretty well only been acceptable, if they're detecting, I mean if she's sharing his work, like the Nick Charleses in *The Thin Man*, or Andy and the insufferably jaunty Arabella (Arab) Blake in three or four of Richard Powell's books, or John and Suzy Marshall in James M. Fox's workmanlike sub-Chandleresque series.

Ross Thomas's Mac, in the McCorkle and Padillo series, may be happily married to the polyglot, widely cultured, and all-round gorgeous German political journalist, Frau *Doktor* Fredl. But all we really know from before her early kidnapping in *Cast a Yellow Shadow* (the best book in the series) is that they used to enjoy long leisurely companionable Sundays together, with the N.Y. *Times* and all.

The also blissful marriage of young Lucifer Dye with "the most unselfish person I have ever known" in Thomas's magnificent *The*

Fools in Town are on Our Side (1970) ends soon enough, with her murder by East German agents.

James Lee Burke was obviously making a brave try at showing that in the Eighties and Nineties a relatively complex hero could *too* be married when he introduced Bootsie (dreadful name!) and their adopted Latin American daughter Alafair into his Dave Robichaux series.

But I imagine I'm not the only reader to have found them increasingly irritating once they had ceased to be imperiled plot elements, and there is less of them in the later books, and you can simply skip the pages in which they are conveniently confined.

We don't go to thrillers to read about married life.

Thrillers are about dynamic processes, speeded-up processes, outcome-oriented processes, not the ongoing trudge, however amiable, of everyday.

CXIII

By far the best treatment of these problems is in the Dorian Silk spy novels of Simon Harvester, I mean the clearest recognition of the problems.

Dorian knows, reluctantly, that he simply can't risk involving permanently in his dangerous profession any of the remarkable women he encounters, such as the magnificent and well-educated Afghan Shamz Nayim in *Silk Road*, and that marriage with the convincingly nice and very wealthy Fatima Fahmy of *Cairo Road* and *Zion Road*, which they talk about frankly, just wouldn't work—that he couldn't retire from his *honourable* government service and settle down, with the help of her money, to resume his career as a failed playwright.

But the enjoyment of normal heterosexual relationships at more than a merely physical level is strong and convincing in these novels (Silk and his creator obviously *like* women), and the question of Dorian's work isn't just a cop-out, a pretext hiding a fear of commitment.

In those admirable books we are into exotic territories, both literally and figuratively, as Harvester himself, a working journalist, appears to have been.

With Hamilton's heroes, and their jobs, and the women with whom they become involved, we are into much more familiar ones.

CXIV

At one point in *The Steel Mirror*, John Emmett reflects on

> the unpublicized side of adventure: you got tired, you got sleepy, and you could not keep from worrying how what you were doing now would affect what you would like to be doing a year from now. Or ten years from now.

Hamilton's heroes are young men with jobs, ordinary (but, for them, interesting) jobs and professional lives. And with colleagues here and there. And parents here and there. And friends and families here and there, with whom they have normal social relationships, as Hugh Phillips does with Christine Wells's family in *The Black Cross.*

I say "here and there" because not all these things are true of each of them, but all four characters inhabit this kind of social space.

And the women too may have, or appear to have, parents, parents who in one instance answer to the conventional image of the take-charge American male, uneasy when it comes to human relationships, particularly with daughters. Ann Nicholson's war-profiteer, ex-WWI Marine father, with his "lined, brown, rectangular face, a little too big for his body, and stiff short graying dark hair," is obtusely uncomprehending about Ann herself, and has no trouble pigeonholing Emmett as a young blackmailer exploiting a rich girl in trouble.

The Hamilton of these novels, indeed of most of his novels, among them *The Wrecking Crew* and *Smoky Valley*, doesn't much care for conventionally "masculine" males of that sort, especially large ones, unless they are emotionally vulnerable like Carl Gunderman or the land-hungry rancher Lew Wilkison in *Smoky Valley.*

Nuclear physicist James Gregory in *Assignment; Murder* tolerates Natalie's self-assertive businessman father, but, as he says, "I don't know anything about men like William Walsh, and I make no effort to learn."

John Emmet's spirits don't experience any lift when "government" enters the action out in Denver and

> He saw a big man with the look of a college athlete—sunburned, with cropped dark hair and the type of regular, handsome, rather heavy features that, during the fall, could be seen bursting out of the rotogravure sections of papers all over the country, framed by a football helmet and occasionally adorned by a nose-guard...

We are not, to use a word that Hamilton himself obviously disliked, in conventional *macho* country here, I mean country of the mind.

CXV

And marriage, for these young men, is not going to be, or be sought as, a dramatic transformation, a disclosure of entirely new capacities in themselves, a liberating of their true potentials, and the rest of it. Nor are the romantic heroines in these books ones with whom you and I would particularly care to become entangled, at least I don't imagine so. They are *difficult*, and not just because they are involved in more or less complicated plottings and counter-plottings.

They are difficult personally in the way that women often are for young men. They have clearly individuated personalities of their own, and concerns of their own, and are not, at the outset, particularly interested in the young men for themselves.

You don't look at them and think, Oh, I would love to be there and be involved with them, and of course they'd really appreciate *me,* and turn their laughing and amazingly intelligent eyes upon me, and love me for myself alone.

CXVI

These are relationships that need to be *worked* at.

The men in the post-war novels, especially Philip Branch and John Emmett, do not receive that conventional pay-off of heroes who have behaved, or are behaving, heroically on behalf of women.

Jeannette Duval is quite offhand about Branch's blistered feet ("It's a nuisance, darling, but it will be all right in a week or two"), and Ann Nicholson's reaction after they have put some highway distance between themselves and Sheriff Patman is to ask Branch to clean off the vomit that splashed on her shoe when she threw up. After trying to

downplay the danger he faces if caught, she remarks that he appears to be *scared*.

The women—Ann Nicholson, Jeannette Duvall, Marilyn George—have been living *more* heroically than the men, taking more risks, facing more dangers.

CXVII

Nor is there any firm instant bonding of camaraderie, any more than there was in Hitchcock's version of *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1935) where Robert Donat was on the run, linked literally by handcuffs to the spoiled rich blonde Madeleine Carroll. Hamilton's men have to figure out on their own what to do with respect to the problems they face. The women themselves (who are obviously lying at times or in other ways unreliable) are *part* of the problems.

There is a fair amount of mutual antagonism and annoyance in these books, too.

Temperamental incompatabilities drive the orderly Hugh Phillips and his wife the vivacious ex-nightclub-singer Janice beyond the bounds of marital decorum.

Jeannette Duval's face wears a look of "bright eager malice" when Branch, having come to rescue her, is beaten up by Paul Laflin.

John and Ann, breakfasting in the Nebraska diner after Emmett has been driving all night, find themselves suddenly "regarding each other across the table, their glances locked in a curious sexual conflict. Some impulse of cruelty born of sleeplessness made Emmett hold his steady until the girl's eyes broke away."

Gaps of one kind or another keep opening between the couples.

CXVIII

At the same time, the urge to communicate, to understand what's going on, is there, at least on the men's part.

As in Lawrence's fiction, especially *Women in Love,* the past is not allowed to take moral precedence over the present.

Wartime atrocities, the revealed "truths" of psychoanalysis (as embodied in Ann Nicholson's Dr. Kaufman), the complex manoeuvrings of FBI agents in the name of national security, are all in a sense remote.

The here and now is *this* person with whom you're talking, and how they are saying what they are saying; how credibly or otherwise they seem to be speaking; what large or small details of speech or gesture or clothing hint at a less than a perfect transparency or reveal (not always to their discredit) more than they may have intended.

And if you really care about arriving at an objective "fact" or at a sense of where the other persons stand and what they are up to, you *push*.

21. Romanticizing

CXIX

This pushing isn't simply an affair of one separate and distinct self engaged in resisting or deflating the pretensions of another, or trying, with that "weary objectivity" that Emmett feels at one point, to extract information. (The presence of torture in these works reminds us of what one end of the spectrum of "extraction" looks like.)

In a number of the passages of extended dialogue, such as the long one that I quoted earlier between Jeannette Duvall and Philip Branch in the hotel room, we see the characters meeting as equals, without their merely sexual selves, especially not male sexual selves, controlling the conversations.

CXX

Seeing and relating to women as equals, or on a level of equality, is not a simple matter, though.

Part of Emmett's trouble with Ann, of course, is the moral pressure he feels—she a war heroine, he something close to a draft dodger—to regard her as a *superior.* And there are other barriers that have to be breached before you can see the heroines as individuals whom you neither condescend to nor flatter; individuals whom you can speak to *plainly*.

CXXI

There is no conventional erotic idealization in these works. Sexual intercourse in them isn't something magical, mysterious, sacred and/or taboo.

The earth doesn't move. We don't have anything resembling the Travis McGee Ineffable Orgasm Machine, with all its murmurings, strokings, groanings, cryings, soarings, breakings, collapsings. Or to Ross Thomas's clutchings and tonguings and (implied) fifty-seven-different-positions manoeuvrings between his expert cocksmen and their female counterparts.

Nor is nakedness aestheticized or theatricalized.

Nakedness or partial nakedness indeed occurs in these pages, as they do elsewhere in Hamilton. But they do so realistically. It is simply a fact that when people want to make love, they usually remove some or all of their clothes. In *Assignment Murder*, Jim Gregory, as he picks up some of Natalie's garments after their captive reunion in the underground survival shelter, remarks that:

> I could not help reflecting that a great many of the crises of married life can never be portrayed accurately on the stage or in the movies, because the costumes of the principals generally wind up something less than adequate.

CXXII

No, there is no conventional eroticism here. The only eroticized woman is Helene Bethke, of whose spectacular nudity, in her green high-heeled sandals, Emmett is uncomfortably reminded later on when he notices a Varga-type pin-up on a garage wall.

But Helene, with her sturdy muscular body and her brisk movements, is in fact the most self-confident of the women, tossing down a mug of diner coffee as if it were a shot of whisky, dragging Emmett through the Denver hotel lobby by his wrist, and talking to him more or less man to man.

And the enigmatic Jeanntte Duvall, with her "long pointed chin," is rather too tall and thin. And Resistance-heroine Ann Nicholson and the

athletic and utterly wholesome Christine Wells in *The Black* Cross are not erotic at all.

Nor, for that matter, are Philip Branch and John Emmett what you would call highly sexed.

CXXIII

But if the women aren't made conventionally glamorous for *us*, this doesn't prevent the males from romanticizing women.

Hugh Phillips may be grieving sincerely after he has returned to his home with all its reminders of the gone-for-ever Janice: "He had never been so lonely in his life and there was nobody he wanted to see except one person, and she would not come."

But in fact he *isn't* heartbroken, as Christine Wells, whom he had dumped for Janice the year before, tartly suggests in her challenge to his "heartbreak routine." As he acknowledges to himself a little later,

> He missed [Janice], of course, as you would miss anybody you had got used to living with; but he had wanted to be rid of her and now, although he would have preferred to have it happen some other way, he was relieved that she was gone. It gave him a nasty sense of disloyalty to admit it at last, but he knew that it was the truth.

And though near the end, when Chris seems to have withdrawn from him again, he wishes momentarily that Janice were back, since "when she was good she was very, very good. And at any rate he had known her, and could talk to her," he acknowledges to himself that "even this was not true and he had no idea what the real Janice had been like… He had lived a year with a woman who had not existed."

CXXIV

There is a darker side to romantic idealizing, too.

The differences between the glamorous Janice whom Hugh had married "in search of a nameless excitement," and the flesh-and-blood woman of emphatic likes and dislikes and a certain bold carelessness who messed up his orderly routines, had led to the fights, physical as well as verbal, between them.

And Paul Weston in *Deadfall,* his own career now seemingly in ruins, is exasperated beyond endurance by the seeming complacency of the returned Marilyn George in the luxury of her lakeside apartment.

He recalls ironically to himself "a way he had had of thinking of her—hunted, fleeing, walking the streets in run-over shoes and snagged stockings, like him looking for a job where nobody would question her past." And his deep underlying bitterness towards her soon surfaces.

He knocks her down when she holds a gun on him ("Next time you try that, … you two-bit Mata Hari, I'll ram the damn thing down your throat butt first!"); sneers at her as a lush; mauls her "to hurt and humble her."

And she *calls* him on it, and not just because "he still had his hat on and was therefore no gentleman." In a fascinating passage, she rounds on him with:

> "Do you think I like having you around with that hangdog look, blaming me for everything that's happened to you since the day you were born, Paul…? Do you think I like being needled and insulted and sneered at, yes, even struck … just so you can keep on telling yourself you're not still in love with me?… Have I used my —my sex on you to make you do anything but get the hell out of something you don't know anything about and haven't the experience to handle? Or, if you're going to be stubborn and get your fool head shot off, to treat me with ordinary human decency until it happens? I haven't, have I?"
>
> "No," he said stiffly.
>
> "All right," she said. "And another thing. I don't like to be looked at and handled as if I were some kind of a tart."

In effect Paul has put her inside the frame labeled "romantic love," assumed that the normal codes of social behavior don't apply within it, become outraged when she fails to conform to the rules of "love," and gone on behaving as if those were still the operative ones.

22. Breaking Out

CXXV

However, you don't have to *stay* self-trapped like that.

At times you may be touched by a glimpse of someone's vulnerability when they aren't making a spectacle of themselves; may perceive a common humanity beneath the structured social self.

Sitting in Marilyn George's apartment beside "a girl he had every reason to hate," Paul Weston catches himself feeling "disturbed by her thinness, worried by the small signs that kept cropping up to show that her nervous system had been taking a terrible beating."

When Shirley Carlson in *The Black Cross* bursts into tears because of the strain of the performance she's been putting on to snare him for the crooked nightclub-owner Karl Lewis, Hugh Phillips "wished she did not look so very much like a small disheveled child crying because a larger child had beat her up."

And Emmett and Branch ("For a moment he had broken through the guarded reserve that [Jeannette] carried like an armor, and beneath it she was quite young and rather frightened.") are similarly affected by glimpses of child-like vulnerability.

CXXVI

But such feelings by themselves would lead nowhere. Or if succumbed to (as Paul Morel knows in *Sons and Lovers* in his tormented relationship with sweet Miriam Leivers) they would land you in a morass of pity, guilt, and eventual resentment—resentment at feeling guilty because you couldn't love enough, if at all.

What matters much more is the quality that is so uncommon in thrillers, and which is present to so high a degree in Hamilton's work, namely a concern with equity.

With fairness.

23. Fairness

CXXVII

It is easy enough—seductively easy—to be concerned with "justice," meaning the punishment of the *un*just. It's something else to be able to see that you and others are bound together by common principles, and

that you can't reasonably complain about others' behaviour if you refuse to condemn the same faults in yourself.

Simon Harvester's heroes have this capacity quite often, as do, at times, Martin Woodhouse's, and Dick Francis', and Adam Hall's Quiller, and Gavin Lyall's Harry Maxim. But it isn't common, especially not in American thrillers.

There's nothing wishy-washy about it. Nor is it the same as that chronic sense of your own imperfections and your lack of a right to strong moral convictions that pervades the later Lew Archer novels, probably because of what Macdonald (Millar) had learned about himself, not necessarily to his credit, during his real-life difficulties with his daughter.

In Hamilton, it's not a simple binary system of "my" values (good) and "their" values (bad).

Paul Weston acknowledges, "stiffly," the truth of what Marilyn has said.

Hugh Phillips recognizes the unfairness of his own typically male assumption that, after treating Christine unforgivably earlier (love justifying all) by upping and marrying Marilyn without any warning, he can now simply go back to her for old-friendly comfort.

And when Ann Nicholson makes some of her challenges to Emmett, he doesn't simply assent and let the matter drop. He goes further and opens up more, exposing himself and making himself more vulnerable.

Here they are, for instance, at the close of his sardonic analysis of faked amnesia:

> She kicked the car out of gear and braked to a halt at the side of the road. A truck swerved past, its horn blaring. She glanced at it, startled, as it went on to the west, and turned to face Emmett.
>
> "Does it occur to you that you're being rather cruel, Mr. Emmett?"
>
> He took his pipe from his mouth and looked at it with distaste. He did not say anything.
>
> "Why do you dislike me?" she asked.
>
> He looked up. "I don't," he said quickly. "I think you're probably a fine girl, Miss Nicholson. But God damn it—!" He rubbed his

> eyes. He had a headache now. “Oh forget it,” he said. “Please forget the whole thing.”
>
> “What were you going to say?”
>
> He turned to her. “Listen,” he said angrily, “I’ve spent the whole damn war and a couple of years more being respectful and sympathetic to guys who looked down on me because—”
>
> “I see.”
>
> “—So then I think I’m getting away from it,” he said savagely, “and I pick up a girl on the Lincoln Highway and damn if she doesn’t turn out to be a lousy heroine.”
>
> He knew his face was quite red, and he could not make himself look at her. He cranked down the window beside him, knocked the hot ashes out of his pipe into his hand, and pitched them out before they could burn him. He heard the girl begin to laugh, looked up, and found himself grinning wryly.
>
> “I think you’d better climb in back and get some sleep,” Ann Nicholson said.

CXXVIII

What is going on in such exchanges and elsewhere is a progressive, though not always steady, emergence of the others as they really are at this point, replacing the constructions that the men have in their heads.

When Paul Weston in *Deadfall* sees Marilyn’s face for the first time without any make-up on, “somehow it made her more of a person to him, and less of a romantic idea, than she had ever been.”

And after he has knocked her down, and finds her crying on the bed,

> He sat down beside her, for some reason that was not quite clear to him. There were times when you had to make it up as you went along; he had hit her and now he was sitting down to comfort her. It did not make sense, but then, nothing else did either.

And he apologizes.

Later on, after he learns how she had set him up to be arrested with the confidential scientific papers on him, and pulls the “lousy little tramp” to him roughly “somehow the kiss did not turn out like that at all; and

after a while he released her abruptly, bewildered and a little frightened by what had happened to his angry intentions."

And when Ann Nicholson abruptly remarks to John Emmett that Helene Bethke is "a vulgar oversexed bitch, and I think they sleep together. Not that it's any of my business,"

> The quick viciousness of her voice brought [Emmett's] mind abruptly to attention. He was a little shocked. There were girls who could talk about certain things and use certain words and you would think nothing of it; and then there were girls, like her who could not.

But he doesn't simply stop at that point. He goes on into the realization that I quoted earlier, that he had really been thinking about an imaginary person when he viewed her in that way, and not about the complex nest of selves that had been emerging during their time together.

CXXIX

There is a strong presence of everyday socio-sexual relations in these works, too.

Taking Constance Bellamann out for the evening, Philip Branch

> had the uncomfortable feeling that he was talking to himself, and he remembered once, under pressure from his mother, taking the daughter of some family friends to a dance: I don't see why you don't take Ellen, she's such a sweet girl and the McIntyres are our best friends. She had been a sweet girl, all right, in the stiff pink taffeta all sweet girls wore, and she had smiled at him in just that shy helpless way when he had tried to talk to her.

He recalls, too, when Jeannette asks him about it in bed, his own "first time":

> "It was a mess," he said. "After a dance. Freshman year. She didn't know a damned thing about it either. It took me two hours to get her calmed down and pinned together afterwards, enough that she could sneak back into the dorm; but it was a month before she gave up the idea that she was going to have a baby. Cured me until senior year."

For Emmett and Hugh Phillips, too, girls come attached to parents, and they don't want the parents to feel that they have been misbehaving towards their daughters—a feeling that even Matt Helm suffers from on one memorable occasion (in *The Removers*, 1961).

CXXX

And there are gaps between the sexes, and not just dramatic ones.

When Jeannette, at Branch's urging (with her safety in mind) has, as he thinks, left him for good, "suddenly it seemed to him that he knew very little about her, after all; he did not know the thing that, in the normal course of events, you always learned first about a girl: whether she was punctual or would keep you waiting."

And earlier, when he is returning to his New York hotel after he and Jeannette have made love and "the tall buildings had the beautiful clarity that always came to things afterwards," he reminds himself that "You never really knew what a girl thought about it."

The uncertainty is still there subsequently when Jeannette, in bed, whispers:

> "You're very gentle."
>
> "Am I?" He had not thought of himself as gentle and he was not sure that he liked it; nor was he sure that she really liked it. "What am I supposed to do, black your eyes?"
>
> "No, you shouldn't change," she said.

Hamilton also catches the irritation of the young male with the seemingly unruffleable young female, epitomized by healthy wholesome Christine Wells.

CXXXI

But if women are not men and can be problematical for men, there is none of the thrillerish fear here of being trapped and tamed by them. There is no sense of sex as a wounding or as a tacit declaration of undying love, with marriage lying further down the road as the only "honourable" thing to do.

Branch and Jeannette are very comfortable with each other sexually even though when she asks him if he loves her,

> He smiled and shook his head minutely, looking at her. "I don't think so."
>
> "It's nice to be frank, isn't it?" she said with just a touch of tartness in her voice.

Nor do we have any intimations in these works that the *real* business of women is sexual, that they are essentially waiting to find completion in marriage, and that if they pull back from that completion, or are denied it by the man, there will be a wrenching or break in their real natures.

CXXXII

No, the principal women in Hamilton's Forties works are committed to the pursuit of certain ends, in relation to which if it enters at all, sex is only incidental.

If they are problematic for the heroes it is because they are pursuing their own ends, not the heroes'. They are not programatically hostile to men, nor are they hard, nor are they, like Richard Powell's insufferable Arabella Blake, compulsively looking for opportunities to "prove" themselves.

They are not "unwomanly" at all. They simply have their own sharp focuses. They are operating largely outside the law, and coping with real dangers that occupy a good deal of their psychic energy, and are not at all in the emotional surrender business.

They are also as honest as their circumstances permit. And in their various ways they are brave.

CXXXIII

Not all of them have the "pure" courage of Marilyn George in *Deadfall*, infiltrating a dangerous organization and enduring the contempt of her former colleagues, or Madame Faubel stubbornly holding out against the Geatapo torturers.

But Ann Nicholson, regardless of what her own war record may really have been, and uncertain and afraid though she may be at times (with good reason), stubbornly persists in getting down to the research establishment in New Mexico in the hope of clearing up her problems, just as Jeannette Duval, weak and duplicitous though *she* may be at times, persists in the dangerous task of getting her husband into the country with Branch's help.

And young Shirley Carlson in *The Black Cross* preserves her aplomb and lies through her teeth in one improvisation after another when the armed and obviously disturbed Hugh Phillips comes calling on her at night and interrogates her.

And timid Constance Bellamann, revulsed from physical contact though she is, lures Branch out to where the others are hiding, grips him desperately when they move in on him, and is prepared to kill Jeannette by herself when she knows that the others have failed.

These strengths would be apparent subsequently in Jim Gregory's opinionated young peacenik wife Natalie and the Communist agent Nina Rasmussen in *Assignment: Murder*, and in Matt Helm's former wartime associate Tina in *Death of a Citizen*, and the idealistic young Swedish aristocrat Elin von Hoffman in *The Wrecking Crew*, and the aristocratic American Robin Rosten in three more Helm books, and the Russian agent Vadya in three books, and, oh, the list could be tripled.

CXXXIV

Moreover, the difficulty of a relationship may at times be inseparable from its long-term success.

When Philip Branch and Jeannette Duvall are separating for the last time and she accuses him of loving her but being afraid of what people would think about someone with a background like hers, "He glanced at her irritably. 'It's too damned complicated,' he said. 'And it isn't worth it. I could love you twice as much as I do and it still wouldn't be worth it.'"

But while you can't really see Jeannette back home in Illinois as Mrs. Engineer Branch, let alone as cookie-baking Mom, in a sense the relationship has also been too *simple*.

CXXXV

Virtually from the start Branch has been able to relax with Jeannette to an uncommon extent.

Going to bed together has happened quickly and been mutually enjoyable. They can talk comfortably with one another in bed. They can have fun together afterwards. When she says he sees through her:

> "No," he said. "Not all the way. It's sort of like peeling an onion. There's one layer after another."
>
> She said "Heavens, couldn't you make it a little more romantic, like an artichoke, perhaps?"
>
> They laughed foolishly, unable to stop, and the waitress came with more coffee and took away their empty plates.

More importantly, they can engage in the kind of self-exposing risk-taking dialogue in the long passage that I quoted earlier and emerge untraumatized, since right from the start they have had almost no romantic illusions about one another.

Jeannette knows that he has a possessive-protective mother, he's had a safe war behind a desk, and is returning to his job in his father's firm. Branch knows, after that request of hers for two hundred bucks, that she is on the make.

CXXXVI

But in consequence, certain creative tensions are lacking.

And in *Night Walker* Hamilton takes David Young even further into the comforts of such a relationship with the slightly desperate, somewhat slatternly Elizabeth Wilson, only to pull him back from them at a crucial point in the action.

> She looked, in that moment, pretty and desirable beyond belief; she represented affection of sorts, and an escape from respectability. She was, he knew, the one person in the world before whom he would ever be able to appear as himself. She knew him for what he was, as he knew her; and she would never demand anything of him that he could not perform. All other women he would meet would

> expect him to live up to certain arbitrary standards of courage and loyalty; and the trouble was he would be fool enough to try.

Young pulls away from her (and from the espionage doings in which she has been entangled) and by the end is inclining towards the cocksure, boat-crazy, passionately moralistic, red-haired Navy brat Bunny Dekker, the kind of person who says things like “You scramble a mean egg, sailor.”

CXXXVII

“Certain standards of courage and loyalty”:

In a sense, the erotics in these works, and those of the Fifties, are an erotics of loyalty, an erotics of concern— the concern that brings Christine Wells to Hugh Phillips’ aid even though he may be a murderer—the concern that causes Marilyn George to stop the bullet intended for Paul Weston, after doing her best to save him from the consequences of his re-involvement with her.

After Jeannette Duvall has jumped off the train to Baltimore as it starts gathering speed in the New York station, Branch finds it

> disconcerting to realize that [she] had estimated accurately the mixture of curiosity and adventurousness, of stubbornness and perhaps loyalty, and certainly of expectation, that would make him take the traveling-bag she had left behind to the place she had told him to go and wait for her as long as there was any reasonable chance of her coming. He did not love her, there were too many questions yet to be answered, but he could not by his own action cut himself off from any chance of ever seeing her again. There was a certain fascination about a girl who had the courage and recklessness to throw herself off a moving train and the foresight to bring along a spare pair of hose when she did it.

CXXXVIII

Nor do you always have to be remarkable in a Hamilton novel—a Resistance heroine, a government agent, a spy—to be admired. Or to stay married.

Just as the kind of humour that remains funny longest, like Laurel and Hardy's in contrast to Harold Lloyd's or Keaton's (does anyone *laugh* at Keaton still?) emerges realistically from character, so sexual realism can sometimes be a by-product of drama.

Assisgnment: Murder is Hamilton's fullest marriage novel, credible and touching in its presentation of two wildly mismatched individuals who are nevertheless able to make a go of it because of mutual liking and respect, charmingly captured in the dialogue. (It is also feels very credible in its presentation of scientists.).

But *Line of Fire* is the most enjoyable of his novels, and understandably his own favourite,

And in it what appears at first to be the least active, least goal-oriented, most ordinary of his heroines, the young widow and office secretary Barbara (Babs) Wallace, who is horrified when Paul Nyquist shoots the jerk who is about to shoot *her*, and believes that right is right and wrong is wrong and the line between them perfectly clear, turns out, while still being genuinely nice, not to be the classic Nice Girl.

She doesn't get fussed when she is introduced to the details of Paul's gunsmith business, is not afraid to shoot a pistol at an *al fresco* target when shown how, isn't horrified by her glimpses of criminals, brings her spike heel firmly down on big Carl Gunderman's foot when his wedding-celebration kiss in his nightclub has gone on too long, and behaves bravely and with a quick understanding of what is involved during the later mess in which she and Paul come close to losing their lives.

She *cares* about Paul.

She is still on his side even when her media-influenced conscience compels her to go to the police, as she has made clear that she will, when an "innocent" man is arrested for the shooting that she has seen, or thinks she saw, Paul carry out.

And she is prepared, in a decent, civilized, undogmatic way, to challenge him about his less-than-wholly-heroic reaction to the traumatizing contempt of his first wife with respect to his sexual impotence.

Let's hope the marriage works out. I wonder if Hamilton will let us know sometime.

CXXXIX

It certainly deserves to.

The dialogue is pitch-perfect in Paul's apartment after their largely silent drive following the brief marriage ceremony— the marriage that this still enigmatic man, I mean enigmatic for her, has pretty well forced on her to protect her against the city boss with whom he may (she's still not sure) be criminally involved.

It is delightful seeing her starting to establish herself there, engaging in the necessary small transactions of two people sharing the same space; each of them almost entirely ignorant of what the other's really like, in a situation whose rules are as yet almost wholly unclear.

Very much, in fact, like what you or I could have experienced in those days after less dramatic marryings.

As she tells Paul further on, "lots of other married people have the same….I mean, Hank and I had a simply *awful* time, and it was weeks before….It doesn't necessarily mean anything."

Here they are, just after arriving back at his small hot apartment over the store.

> I put the phone down, and looked up. The girl was standing in the kitchen doorway, although I had not been aware of her coming out of the bedroom. I could tell nothing from her expression. She had removed her hat, the sleeves of her jacket were pushed above her elbows, and she was holding a spatula.
>
> "I put on some coffee," she said. "Do you like your eggs up or over?" We hadn't stopped for breakfast.
>
> "Up," I said.
>
> "How many?"
>
> "Two," I said. "But you don't have to do it. There's a place right around the corner."
>
> "It's all right," she said. "But you'd better come in and show me how to work the toaster. It looks to me as if it's wired for sound."

> Ten minutes later, when we were sitting down at the kitchen table to eat, she said, "You're not being quite fair, are you?"
>
> "Fair?"
>
> "You haven't given me a single opportunity to apologize."
>
> "There's nothing to apologize for."
>
> "Don't be noble," she said. "I acted like a prissy little fool yesterday. I seem to have a positive genius for jumping at the wrong conclusions."
>
> I said, "It was a perfectly natural jump to make."
>
> She said, "Oh, stop being polite or I'll throw this egg at you."
>
> I looked at her, startled. Then I grinned. She flushed and laughed. After that we talked about different things.

CXL

All five of the couples who look as if they have a chance of making their marriages work—Paul Weston and Marilyn George, Hugh Phillips and Christine Wells, John Emmett and Ann Nicholson, Paul Nyquist and Babs Wallace, Jim and Natalie Gregory—have been far apart at times.

And with respect to three of them, at least, it is obvious that there will always be gaps between them.

Nyquist's impotence may (though I hope not) be irreversible. The Easterner Natalie is still going to dislike dusty New Mexico and disapprove of Greg's weapons-related scientific work. And Hugh Phillips will always be the man who chucked Chris over for sexy Janice, and whom Chris, despite having grown up with him, believed for awhile to be a murderer.

CXLI

But the gaps are still different from the fundamental one that Branch defines to Jeannette after he's explained that things are too complicated:

> Her laughter was a little shrill. "That's what I said about—about Louis, isn't it?"

> He nodded. “Yes. He wasn’t worth it, to you. Not when it started to hurt. And I wasn’t worth it when you thought I might let you swim ashore.”

It’s the same basic gap that opens up in the contempt of spoiled Patricia Terrill in *The Big Country* for her young ex-sea-captain fiancé Jim McKay when she believes him to be insufficiently manly in Western terms—a contempt for his fundamental self. And it can’t be retracted after she learns, angrily, of the courage that he in fact displayed privately, for himself alone, in taming an unridable horse, in an episode recalling the one with Hammett’s Op during his Western stay in ”Nightmare Town.”

Ann Nicholson-Emmett quite rightly tells Emmett, “Until you make up your mind about me, you haven’t any right to kiss me as you did this morning, or touch me as you did just now. As if you liked me. That’s dirty.”

CXLII

There are experiences that cannot be shared, behaviours that it can become too destructive to explain, conversations that you will never have. Two people cannot become one mind, any more than they can become one flesh.

But they can still have the kind of ongoing being-there in marriage that comes with the undeluded, rules-of-the-game mutual respect and acceptance that Hamilton has been defining, one way and another, in these complex early works.

Ann Nicholson, now Ann Emmett, will still have to go on living inside her head with the consequences of what went on in the Gestapo’s cell with the portable dentist’s chair and the steel mirror on the wall. But John’s non-judgmental acceptance of that fact, of her “failure,” obviously applies to more than just her.

It could apply to himself.

To you.

To me.

> You could not help what you saw in the steel mirror, and the mirror would not break. There were those who could be proud of what they had seen in it—and there were the others, who simply had to live with it.

CXLIII

The movement from a falsifying idealization to a true, unsentimental, unegotistical respect is brought out especially movingly in *Deadfall*, in Paul's reaction after Marilyn George has been shot by Janie Collis during their tussle in Janie's apartment:

> Then he was kneeling at Marilyn's side. She was still breathing very carefully, as if it hurt her. She made no sign that she knew he was there and he did not speak to her. She had a silent battle of her own to fight and he knew that she would not thank him for distracting her from the grim business of staying alive.

And when a coming together *does* occur, it can be deeply moving and a token of things to come, like the passage in Lawrence's *Women in Love* in which Rupert Birkin and Ursula Brangwyn, out driving at night, truly come together after a flaming row.

> [Emmett] shaved from a cup of water, crouching a little to use his reflection in the side window of the convertible as a guide. It was still just barely morning. There was a heavy dawn mist that looked as if it might very well become rain later on; you could not feel the sun behind it. The plains were flat and gray, the buttes colorless in the weak, directionless light. He knew when she came around the car and when she stopped behind him. He found himself thinking that if she were to come quite silently into a perfectly dark room where he was waiting, he would know when she was near him. Then he thought that this was really getting pretty corny.
>
> "I thought you were going to change your suit," he said…

You have no doubt at all by the end of the novel that the two of them are married for life.

CXLIV

But things aren't brought to clear, end-of-the-tunnel, peace-is-here-to-stay resolutions at the ends of these Forties works.

Near the end of *The Steel Mirror*, after the seemingly satisfactory resolution of Ann's problems at the research center,

> Emmett listened with a flat sense of anticlimax. Everything had been much easier than he had anticipated. His fears of the day before seemed in retrospect melodramatic and rather silly; no one had tried to trap them or hurt them. It was hard to remember that a man had been murdered in Chicago. The nightmare quality of the situation had been dissolved, as if by daylight, and it was hard to keep from wondering if the whole thing had not existed only in the tortured imagination of a girl obsessed with the question of an older guilt, now answered.

But that other world has not been an illusion. Its menaces have been real, and it continues to exist elsewhere, with its at times conflicting claims on your loyalties, and the possibility that counter-violence may be necessary in it.

Though Emmett in a sense debriefs himself at the end of the novel—"He thought, *You were getting to be pretty hot stuff, kneeing people, throwing drinks at them, and slugging them with jack handles. It's just as well somebody's reminded you that you aren't Humphrey Bogart, or there would be no living with you*"—the guilty, freely admitting their guilt, remain unpunished and at large.

It is not a *safe* world, and there is no magical safety to be found in love and marriage.

CXLV

But just because it *isn't* a safe world, the events leading up to the coming together of the several couples provide their own kind of reassurance.

All the couples have been involved in compressed and speeded-up mutual testings-out under conditions of stress.

All have done some things with complete commitment together.

All, despite strains, slippages, antagonisms, misunderstandings, have behaved essentially honourably towards each other.

And all have shown themselves willing when faced with danger and the need for violence, to go the limit with and on behalf of each other.

In Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *Wind, Sand and Stars* (1939), which I have not revisited for fifty years, there's a statement to the effect that a good marriage relationship is one in which, rather than gazing inward at one another, you're both looking outward together.

It is surely that kind of thing that Hamilton is implicitly talking about.

It seems to me, though he might find the word pretentious when applied to a mere writer of entertainments, in contrast to, you know, *real* novelists, real deep literary thinkers like Norman Mailer, and John Updike, and Saul Bellow, to be what is customarily called wisdom.

24. Conclusion

CXLVI

During the past decade, I myself stopped going to Hamilton for my relaxation reading, and two unsuccessful attempts at the present article remained unfinished, I assumed permanently.

But then, I was no longer reading various other thriller writers either, among them John D. MacDonald, and Charles Williams, and Wade Miller, and Raymond Chandler, and John McPartland, and lots of others that at one time gave me a lot of pleasure.

The books that went on working for me as bedtime reading were ones like Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, and the earlier books of Ross Thomas, and Harvester's Dorian Silk novels, and Household's *Rogue Male*, and Deighton's *The Ipcress File*, and Ambler's *The Light of* Day, and Ted Lewis's *Jack's Return Home* and *Jack Carter's Law*, and John Welcome's *Stop at Nothing*, and Hammett's *Red Harvest*, and Latimer's *The Lady in the Morgue* and *The Dead Don't Care* and *Solomon's Vineyard.*

All of them had narrative voices with which I felt at home. All gave the world, and consciousness, something of the unproblematic

substantiality that I wanted. None of them, not even *Jack's Return Home*, allowed tragedy a toe-hold.

I was no longer an academic. I did not require certain kinds of seriousness. Besides, I was engaged in a very different kind of work, with a seriousness of its own, but a more dispersed, a slower, a less conventionally structured seriousness.

And I no longer felt, or wanted to feel, the kind of focused energy of Matt Helm, who I felt, as from time to time I've felt about his creator, might very well not approve of *me*.

But previously, and especially in the re-politicized Sixties and Seventies, Hamilton's books had been a vital part of my consciousness *as* an academic, with their unintimidated interrogating of fashionable pieties, their invigorating moral challenges, their alertness to self-righteousness and hypocrisy, their ongoing self-renewals and re-examinations of previously taken positions, and in general the feeling they gave you of a writer who went on taking risks, a writer always at work.

And, as with the Travis McGee novels, it was good to have someone, year after year, reacting to and commenting on more or less current events and concerns, not necessarily always in ways that you agreed with, but always intelligently, so that it could help a bit in one's own thinking, or at least in maintaining your own stance in the world.

CXLVII

Also, of course, there was the sheer lovely craftsmanship of Hamilton's writing when he was "on," as in various passages that I have quoted in this article, or the beautifully paced and shapely penultimate chapter of *Line of Fire*, in the seven pages of which he does more in the way of packed but controlled and shapely dramatic action, action in which character is never lost sight of, than almost any other writer, not just thriller writers, could have accomplished.

Or those moments, large and small, in which something, small or large, is brought to powerful life, such as young Moira Fredericks' Afghan hound Sheik that she and Helm are watching out in the Nevada desert in *The Removers*:

> The dog was out there, all right. I just hadn't looked far enough out. I found him with the naked eye, first. He didn't seem to be moving very fast, just kind of ambling along. Then I put the glasses on him, and drew my breath sharply. You hear loose talk about how beautiful deer are, running, but actually it's kind of a bunchy progress, if you know what I mean: great big muscles going off in great big explosions of power. This animal was running faster than any deer ever dreamed of, and he didn't seem to be expending any energy at all…
>
> I had the rabbit in sight now. The big jack was going flat out, running for his life, every muscle straining. and behind him came the lean gray dog, running silently, its long fur rippling with the wind of its own motion, its head well forward, its long hound ears streaming back. There was no strain here, no effort; there was just pale death flowing over the ground. …It was over in an instant, just a snap and a toss of the head. I started breathing again and turned away.

Or there's that "great, low, black, wet, monstrous shape" of the nuclear submarine surfacing for a moment in the Canadian dusk at the end of *The Ravagers* and slipping back down out of sight again.

Or the three superb pages on the ambush at the pass in *Smoky Valley*, and ex-Union Army major John Parrish's culminatory main-street showdown with Cole Hansen in the same novel, at the end in which "Suddenly he became aware of silence. He came out of the closed marksman's world into which he had retreated …"

Or Paul Nyquist out at the farm where Babs Wallace has just been seized by Gunderman's jerks:

> They were leaving now. Two of them had the girl and were leading her to the car. I might as well have saved myself the trouble of teaching her to shoot. The third man had the sister and kids backed up against the kitchen door like a family portrait. I could just barely make it all out at the distance, as I ran diagonally across the field toward a spot from which I could cover the dirt road leading out of the place. The furrows were straight, and deep for running. The young corn was just coming up. Habit had me trying to avoid the plants as I ran, which made it something like a game of hopscotch. I stopped that foolishness.

Or, well, I seem to keep coming back to *The Steel Mirror*, perhaps because there is so much *else* out there in the other books to draw on,

> He was aware of the counterman in the corner having difficulty with his crossword puzzle, and he heard, outside, the rising whine of a car leaving the town at well over the legal speed limit and accelerating to still higher speeds as it swept past. The diner was alive with the constant flicker of lights on the highway.

An America of the heart! *My* America.

CXLVIII

The aspects of Hamilton's work that I have been defining reinforced for me what I also derived from the great American literary critic Yvor Winters, and from one of my favourite American poets J.V. Cunningham, for both of whom, as for Hamilton, there was no sharp division between the everyday (but not banal) physical world of common experience and the higher reaches of heroic aspiration and articulate moral judgment.

Both of those writers were movingly conscious, as was Lawrence, of some of the unique challenges, and beauties, and dangers of the North American continent, and of how so much in its post-Columbus civilization was an affair of things consciously chosen and *made*, sometimes almost overnight, instead of the often slow and incremental growth of shared habits and attitudes, over the centuries, on the other side of the Atlantic.

Both were aware, too, of the possibility of the kind of psychological implosion that writers like Hawthorne and Melville had been afflicted by, and that we saw so terribly in action in 1961 when poor burned-out, impotent, despairing Ernest Hemingway rested his forehead on the twin muzzles of his Boss shotgun and pulled both triggers, that Sunday morning in Ketchum, Idaho.

The history of twentieth-century American writing is, in part, a history of burn-outs and wreckage. Or declines into pretentious gabbiness.

But as Winters and Cunningham and other writers affirmed and demonstrated, those fates were not inevitable.

In his unegotistical ongoing career, Donald Hamilton seems to me a heartening exemplar of the literary life, someone who was conscious of the lurking darkness and emptiness but did *not* allow his heroes, or himself, to implode. And who did not have to maintain himself in his occupation (“Occupation: writer,” to borrow Robert Graves’ phrase) by a tense and finally insupportable effort of will.

If the young Hamilton may have aspired to some of the virtues of Hemingway—a popular *and* a serious writer at the same time—perhaps the Hemingway of those dreadful final years, had he been given the option, might have preferred to have been a Donald Hamilton and be able to reserve his guns for their natural targets.

Ajijic, Mexico, 1990
Halifax, Nova Scotia, 2002

A Bit of Theory

Overviews are for the birds.

A saying.

I

It can be irritating to note the omission of obvious-seeming names from a discussion and not know whether the omissions were due to ignorance.

In *Thrillers; Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (1978), Jerry Palmer defines what he sees as that genre without mentioning John D. MacDonald, Ross Thomas, Eric Ambler, Peter O'Donnell, Richard Stark, Michael Gilbert, Ted Lewis, Stanley Ellin, Graham Greene, Charles Williams, Richard Stark, or Donald Hamilton.

It's still an intelligent and interesting book, socio-historical-political, and he collapses the conventional distinction between thrillers and mysteries. But his definition of a thriller excludes too many of my own favourites.

The trouble is, the term "thriller" floats.

A detective story is about detection, a spy story is about spying. But a thriller isn't *about* thrills, any more than a hardboiled novel is about eggs. It is a work that thrills, or at least tries to. That *grips* you.

A detective novel, a spy novel, a crime novel, can all be thrillers—sometimes hardboiled thrillers. For me, at any rate. And obviously for others.

II

So you can say, perfectly reasonably, "I'm going to talk about a group of works with such-and-such features, to which I've given the name thrillers." And what you say about them may indeed be interesting.

But you can't, or at least you shouldn't, add, "And this is what thrillers really *are.* This is what the genre *is*."

And you also shouldn't go on from there to talk about what people who enjoy such works *must* be feeling as they read them.

As Ralph Harper does in *The World of the Thriller* (1969).

It seems quite a bright book when I flip its pages. But, "The Reader; His Inner World" ? "The Reader; His Secret World"?—who is Ralph Harper, intelligent though he may be, that he presumes to know anything about my own inner world. Or, God forbid, my secret ones?

Would you talk about the inner world of Jane Austen's readers?

And the world of *the* thriller?

The World of the Regional Short Story? *The World of the Urban Poem*? *The World of the Labour Novel*?

Would you really be in a hurry to read such books?

Isn't there some condescension here towards "thrillers"? And what, anyway, is a "world"? Let alone *the* world.

III

Of course we do use the term "world" figuratively, particularly about a single author, or even a single substantial work—figuratively and usually evaluatively. Maybe we'd like to be there ourselves as one of those fortunate characters, doing those things in those pleasant places. Or we feel a bit oppressed, we're not at home, too much of what we ourselves know seems left out.

If this or that book were all that remained of our civilization, what inferences would a future researcher make from it about what our lives were like? And/or about how the author viewed—what? The world?

Something like that?

But once we, or you, get beyond a single work or author and start talking about several authors and their books, what's going on? What kind of conflation, what averaging is taking place?

No, Harper does *not* know how I myself feel. Sorry! Unless, I suppose, he's dipped into my website.

Nor do I myself know what it would mean to talk about the world of the *non*-thriller.

The "real" world? The way things *really* are? In contrast to a fanciful one?

The term "realwrld" is useful as a pointer to physical consequences. Hit your thumb with a hammer and it huts

But what world am I in when I watch the daily news on CNN? Or, post-9/11, contemplate buying a transatlantic plane ticket?

The term "world," like the term "organic unity," is a slippery metaphor.

IV

And mostly unnecessary.

"In Sapper's world, foreigners are either knaves or fools"? Hmm, maybe, maybe not.

But how about, "In Sapper's view of the world"? At least that gets us into the perceiver.

Well, then, why not simply "For Sapper"? Or better still, "In the Bulldog Drummond novels," which gets us to a point where we can really start testing the truth of the claim.? And which makes it easier to shift to a comparison like, "For Buchan, on the other hand," or, "In the Hannay novels."

If every writer has his or her "world," they become like Leibnizian monads rolling around on an infinite pool-table.

V

When you say "thriller," you're not talking about something like a sonnet, with subsets of rules to observe if what you submit to a poetry competition is to be considered a sonnet.

(Loose though the rules are, nineteen lines of blank verse are *not* going to make it into the competition.)

You're pointing to a configuration, a configuration of your own perceiving. As I have done here.

Which is not to say that it's wholly private. Configurings and lists overlap. The *Thirty-Nine Steps* is usually there in discussions of thrillers, and *Jane Eyre*, *The Red Badge of Courage*, and *The War of the Worlds* aren't. (But how about *The Island of Doctor Moreau*?)

Wittgenstein's analogy of a family is particularly appropriate here.

There's a large family reunion—grandparents, second-cousins, the whole *schmeer*—and an outsider can see that some of them, perhaps a lot, are obviously members of the same family. But this isn't because of features that they all share.

No, Mary and Bill have the same eyes and nose, and Bill and Nelly have the same nose and mouth, and Nelly and Lester…well, you know how it goes. And there are fadings, so that it's hard to tell from their looks whether some of those present are family members or not. Second-cousins-once-removed, perhaps?

Actually most genres are like this, but we've forgotten it. What *is* a novel? A poem? For that matter, what is prose?

Shades of the examination chamber. "Define."

VI

To judge from the books on my shelves, the titles that I've remembered unprompted, and the ones that I've recognized in secondary works, I have read or skimmed at least one crime/suspense/espionage/etcetera work, and in some instances as many as twenty or thirty, by well over three hundred writers.

I'm speaking here of books that I read for pleasure, starting with "Sapper's" *The Black Gang* in 1937 at age nine.

How many of these authors would be on most lists of thrillers, I wonder? Not all of them would be on mine, I'm sure.

How many others would I enjoy if they were to come to my attention?

Lots, probably.

VII

A word or two about enjoyment, though.

In his brilliant and sometimes very funny *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (1989), Thomas J. Roberts discusses what he calls “junk fiction” as if thrillers, Harlequin romances, science fiction, and so on, constitute some kind of aesthetic category, rather than a social one.

He is fascinating when he settles down to explaining the pleasures to be derived from particular works that are indeed junky or trashy, badly written, simplistic, foolishly sentimental, and so forth, and *yet* the aficionado loves them, and it is a pure love, and not simply coarse or dumb—in fact, an art experience.

Richard Usborne’s at times hilarious and probably very influential *Clubland Heroes* is admirable in that regard. The novels of “Sapper” (the term for a British army engineer) are preposterous, and politically reprehensible, and Usborne brings this out, and *yet* he writes affectionately about Hugh (“Bulldog”) Drummond and his under-employed, ex-service, men-about-town cronies.

On the other hand, he is justifiably irritated by John Buchan’s paragon heroes—Hannay, Leithen,. Lamancha, Arbuthnot. Buchan, like Kipling, obviously sees himself as a *definer* of decent values.

By his own account, Donald Hamilton used to enjoy Leslie Charteris’s Saint novels at a time when he himself was trying to become a writer.

I myself loved the Saint books when I was twelve or thirteen, along with Sapper’s and Dornford Yates’. They were totally unputdownable—then. And I was getting art experiences from them that I wasn’t getting from most of my school texts.

VIII

But when I myself was, and sometimes still am, reading ones that I particularly like, I’m not saying to myself, “This is junk but/and I love it.” I’m not in there among John Waters’ trailer-park trash, or on 42nd Street in its great days in the Seventies and early Eighties when Bill Landis was on the prowl for his remarkable 'zine *Sleazoid Express*.

I'm simply *reading*, the way I'd be reading works by Jean Rhys, or B.Traven, or Stephen Crane, or Penelope Fitzgerald that I have enjoyed. Which is to say, advancing pleasurably from one sentence to the next, one paragraph to the next, one chapter to the next, and *caring* about the evoked experiences.

IX

In other words, I am reading good writing, good works of literature. Not great ones. But there aren't all that many of those anyway, are there? once you get away from the delusion that there is a correlation between distinction and size.

And you'll miss out on a lot if you feel that the term "minor" implies some kind of deficiency, a lack, a failure to be what works *ought* to be, namely—ta-DAH!— "major."

Limericks last, novels vanish. Unfair—but lots of limericks (our *haiku*) are perfect.

Someone recently said, "When will people realize that it's just as hard work being a minor writer as a major one?" Or words to that effect.

To adapt Jeremy Bentham's famous remark about animals and pain, we should be enquiring of a work, not, is it major, or is it minor, but is it *good*?

A lot of bad writing comes from authors, mostly American, who aren't content simply to be good.

X

A word, too, about "genres."

Of course we need the term. We need a set of pigeonholes for comic strips, sitcoms, movie documentaries, limericks, ghost stories, elegies, nature poems, detective stories, and so on and so forth.

But Scylla and Charybdis lurk, as always.

XI

On the one hand, ignorance.

It can be too lightly assumed that anything in some genre will be beyond the pale. You've glanced at one or two works, and they're dreadful, or so you think, and you're not going to waste time finding out about the others.

Some of the casual early dissings of *Seinfeld* and *The Simpsons* by self-appointed guardians of culture were like that. "But how many episodes have you *seen*?" one wanted to shout at them.

And sometimes it may be true, I mean about being beyond some pale.

But the Surrealists, especially André Breton, with their collapsing of mechanical distinctions between "high" and "low," showed how valuable art experience can be had in unlikely places.

Such as in so-called "exploitation" movies—another floating term.

The history of "culture" is partly the history of works being eventually allowed inside the pale—*King Kong, The Texas Chain Saw Massacre,* the drawings of Robert Crumb. Often because of their dark humour (but please, *not* camp).

Hammett made it. Ted Lewis will. Heaven knows, he deserves it.

And yet, if you were to say that *King Kong*, the old great black-and-white *King Kong*, should be way up above *Lawrence of Arabia* in any 100 Best list, you would probably be thought odd.

So maybe one should be sparing with predictions.

XII

On the other hand, too *much* knowledge, of a sort, can be a problem.

You've read or looked at enough examples to believe that you've cracked the code and understand what the *real* dynamics of works like that are.

Which is to say, why every work in the group has to be the way it is because that's, well, that's simply the *nature* of the genre.

Bruce Merry, in *Anatomy of Spy Fiction* (1977), *knows* that spy novels are mostly pretty romantic and silly, as well as being politically

noxious. Always excepting, of course, that famous *realism* of writers like Somerset Maugham and John Le Carré.

(Though why academics should feel that they can take Maugham and Le Carré on trust, I don't know. But then, some non-academics probably thought *Lucky Jim* was giving them the skinny on academic life.)

But things can also go the other way.

Whatever the features that are there in the work, they are there because they *had* to be there, they are part of the *conventions* of the genre. Or so we are assured.

They were *meant* to be there. They were what the writer *intended*.

So you have to switch off your critical faculties and not complain about gross inconsistencies, moral confusion, technical incompetence, heavy-handed symbolism, and so forth.

If that's what you perceive there.

XIII

Years ago, C.S.Lewis defended *Paradise Lost* like that against reality-check criticisms of its moral and narrative rhetorics.

You had to realize that the poem belonged to its own special genre, the *literary* epic. Meaning that it was sort of like *The Aeneid*, in which Virgil had been trying to get one up on Homer by combining features from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in a twofer that would put him in solid with Boss Augustus.

I forget what the genre-creating precedent for the *Aeneid* had been. If there was one.

He also (Lewis) wrote as if this was how sin really *had* come into the world. He was *mad* at Eve and Satan. Talk about a willing suspension of disbelief!

But then, *Paradise Lost* is itself a sort of thriller, I guess. How will Satan do his prison-break ? How will he get into the guarded estate? How will the tenants react?

XIV

But everything *doesn't* have to be the way it is (in fact nothing does), and quality doesn't travel by osmosis.

The promising opening of a work no more guarantees that the rest of it will be good than the promising start of a snooker break mandates what will follow.

Nor, contrariwise, does fumbling at one stage in a game mean that the fumbling will continue.

Literary works have more in common with snooker and pool than they do with trees and plants (though the term "organic unity" can be a useful metaphor for a certain kind of start-to-finish rightness and flow).

Thrillers are literary works.

XV

So how *do* we interface with this "genre"?

I have just dipped again into John G. Cawelti's *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance* and realized something more clearly.

Cawelti writes intelligently and sensitively as he constructs his typologies, and he's read widely enough to pick up some of the lesser names, such as Richard S. Prather and Brett Halliday. But I knew why I didn't want to set to and really *read* the book.

Surely by now there must be a literary concept like the Heisenberg Principle, whereby you change something in the act of observing it? The something here being your enjoyment of a work, rather than your enjoyment of observing yourself enjoying the work?

The more subtle the typologies, and the more you've studied them, the more you're going to be asking yourself what what you're reading is an example *of*. Which slot does it belong in? What formulae are being used in it?

One of the most important movie books for me was Ado Kyrou's *Le Surréalisme au cinéma* (1953). But all he did was talk about lots and

lots of movies in a roughly chronological sequence *and make me want to see them*.

If he had talked about them in terms of "types" of Surrealism, and kept refining on the types, he'd have killed the subject dead for me, and probably everyone else, apart from a few academics.

Isn't that the definition of being "academic," namely converting experiences into objects of study, so that the studying overrides and falsifies the experiencies, making them shallower and blurring differences?

Regretting that he couldn't attend the first academic conference on Sade, Jean Paulhan cautioned the organizers, "*Respectez le scandale,*" respect Sade's scandalousness.

I hope I haven't been academic in the chapters here.

XVI

A work should work if it's the only one of its kind that you've read. Otherwise you're trapped in a Borgesian regress wherein to understand work A you must first read work B and to understand work B you must first read…

But genre pleasures are real, of course.

Development, variations, adaptation, differentiae, individuation—the true genre pleasures, for both readers and writers.

The thrill of the good key-setting first paragraph. Like stills outside a movie theatre in the (truly) good old days of movie-going.

Promises. Expectations. Including the covers.

The paperbacks on my shelves are old friends, some of them going back forty years.

I am grateful to Geoffrey O'Brien's *Hardboiled America; Lurid Paperbacks and the Masters of Noir* (1981, rev. ed. 1997) and Max Allan Collins' *The History of Mystery* (2001) for their recoveries of cover art.

XVII

A caution, though, about “formulae” (Cawelti again).

It can be tempting to feel that you've cracked a code, that you understand a formula, you being a possible writer as well as reader.

How do I break into the pulps? (Donald Hamilton never managed it when he was starting out.) How do I do a Harlequin Romance? How do I write an airport bestseller and be able to quit this horrible job of mine?

Please tell me the formula. PLEASE! ("Take one tough private eye, one enigmatic brunette, one friendly/hostile police captain…")

“Formula”? Another slippery metaphor, with its implication of success.

If you know the recipe for Miracle Whip, what you make will *be* Miracle Whip. But good works of fiction aren’t simply combinations of “elements” or “patterns,” not even when dignified with talk about structures or *deep* structures.

XVIII

You can’t, or at least you *shouldn’t*, take the simple as paradigmatic of the complex, and treat the complex as though it were a variant on the simple (or simpler), as if Beethoven’s symphonies and Bach’s fugues were variants on folk music.

Or as if *Pride and Prejudice* were one of the Harlequins that are its lineal descendants.

For that matter, the “simple” itself may not be all that simple either. “The Story of Hansel and Gretel,” as told by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, is its own fascinating point-by-point narrative about those two particular brave and resourceful children, not just a bundle of type situations as classified by Viktor Propp, or a culinary blend.

So that to try *experiencing* the complex by approximating it to the simple may be to falsify the simple as well.

F.R. Leavis, bless him, was deconstructing structuralist-type reductiveness and dichotomizing long before Derrida and De Man, the latter of whom obviously knew his work.

XIX

The gratifications of repetition and variation are real, of course.

The child being told a bedtime story for the umpteenth time wants it to be told without additions and omissions.

The story *as it stands* (or has come to be) is satisfying. There are others that he/she never wants to hear again.

A list of all the things we enjoy in Travis McGee or Modesty Blaise or Quiller novels would be a long one. Again, it's "families" time. Not all those things have to be in every novel, but some of them do. I forget whether Quiller tangles with his home-base superiors in every novel, but those tangling are so enjoyably there for me now in memory that I suspect he does.

Some procedures, some forms, go on generating satisfaction.

We enjoy, we *demand* that shift into courtroom work half way through each week's rerun of *Law and Order*. We *know* that Columbo is going to have just one more question to ask before he actually exits through that door—a *relevant* question.

Forms like the Petrarchan sonnet, the limerick, the Chandleresque private-eye novel make it possible for some things to be done *well*, and to go on being done well, not requiring ground- (or rule-) breaking talent.

Good imagist poems (another "family") are still being written a century after the Imagist manifestoes of Ezra Pound and others.

But the operative word is "possible." There's no guarantee that things *will* be done well.

XX

How irritating it is to watch the *merely* formulaic Western or drive-in thriller on TV, and feel the presence of the camera crew just out of

sight, and catch yourself thinking about genres because there's nothing else to think about.

And oh, the dreariness of some of those once oh-so-beloved black-and-white TV shows that get excerpted from time to time.

And the melancholy of the new (doomed) formulaic sitcom pilot, like a stand-up comic who's dying on his feet.

Television is a graveyard of failed formulae.

But when something's working, you're experiencing the work, not noticing (ah ha! got it!) the formula.

The "same" elements may recur, but as potentials. The same chessmen are there at the start of a game, the same balls on the pool table.

But when you're watching an episode of *The Simpsons* which you haven't seen before, you will *not* be able to predict how it goes.

And once you've seen it, yes, of course, it's a *real* Simpson episode.

XXI

Writers have often said that their characters take over.

Donald Hamilton has told us that he'd be *bored* if he knew in advance what would happen in a new Helm book.

But yes, given such-and-such a situation, that *is* how such-and-such characters will behave.

And when the situation is *right…*

I bet that's how Hamilton's lovely *Line of Fire* simply *came*, by his own account, in six paunless weeks.

XXII

At bottom, it's a matter of creating satisfying *characters*, isn't it?—Helm, Quiller, Hannay, McGee, Modesty and Willy, McCorkle and Padillo—and then putting them in the right situations.

It’s uncomfortable watching the *failed* characters that early silent comics devised--Larry Semon, Billy Bevan, Stan Laurel while he was still imitating Chaplin to the point of plagiarism.

Like bad old TV programmes, they are *merely* fictive, a bundle of conventions.

Whereas with Laurel and Hardy and in the marvellous delicate mimicry of the best Carol Burnett shows we have real-world dynamics.

A "character" is itself a form, a conjunction of potentials—things that someone *like* that does, might do, would never dream of doing.

How satisfying it is, too, when you get the right actor and right characterization for a fictional character—David Souchet's Poirot, Peter Cushing's Frankenstein.

And narrators too are characters, willy-nilly, whether first-person, single p.o.v., or omniscient.

When things are right, it’s a living voice that’s there at the outset of the work.

"Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediment"; “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”; “I was forty and I felt it.”

And certain forms permit a satisfying defining, exploring, resolving.

XXIII

Part of the pleasure of embarking on a new thriller if the opening’s been promising, is that you really don’t know in any detail what’s coming next, even when you’ve read other works in the series, if it’s a series.

You’re on a journey of expectations, at times disappointments, at times pleasurable surprises, all the more interesting because of how what you’re reading departs from and improves upon what you’ve read already, whether by that author or others.

How will the bank be robbed *this* time?

You're reading another spy novel, another detective novel, another robbing-the-bank novel, another innocent-man-on-the-run novel, another Modesty Blaise book.

You are in suspense, something has to be done more or less urgently, there's danger along the way, there's some kind of illegality, the train is running, you can't jump off.

You're reading a thriller.

XXIV

It may not be all fun and games, of course. What you're reading can disturb you, some event be truly shocking. With challenges to moral thought.

George Orwell famously contrasted the value systems of E.W. Hornung's late-Victorian stories about gentleman-thief A.J. Raffles and James Hadley Chase's kidnap-and-rape gangster novel *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, which he nevertheless considered "a brilliant piece of writing, with hardly a wasted word or a jarring note anywhere."

I myself had a go at the question of values in *Violence in the Arts* (1973), including violences in thrillers.

Thrillers as a group are charged with values—with multiple and conflicting value-systems.

Erik Routley is far too kind to Dorothy Sayers in his *The Puritan Pleasures of the Detective Story* (1979). And to various other authors of so-called classic puzzlers. And there are some big absences in his account, such as Arthur Upfield's Bony books.

But this out-front personal book by an eminent, at least that's the word on the dust-jacket, eminent musicologist and theologian is exemplary in its uncondescending and, in the proper sense of the word, discriminating exploration of a genre that he loves.

Thriller *aficionados* have been too much on the defensive.

XXV

Continuities are comforting, and thrillers can provide them.

There are probably more series about recurring characters in thrillers than in any other, can't avoid the term, genre, a lot of them first-person or single-point-of-view narratives.

Thrillers, like other works, involve problem-solving, and part of what makes them readable for relaxation—well, most of them— is that the problems *are* solvable.

A romance ends with marriage. In thriller series, there's always a new problem to be confronted by the protagonists next time—robbing another bank, preventing another terrorist attack, finding out who *really* killed Cock Robin.

But the problems, if they're going to matter, have to be, in part, realworld ones. Blows hurt, cars skid out of control, there are penalties, sometimes terminal, for error.

There is no "world" of thrillers. There is *the* world, ours, made temporarily more interesting and more manageable in a variety of ways.

Lagniappe and Leftovers

1. RealCrime
2. Reading
3. Enrichment
4. Skills
5. Fluffs, Fumbles, and Fakings
6. “Style”
7. Educational
8. Hamilton again.

1. RealCrime

We needed somewhere to have supper, and an Italian restaurant in North Chicago had been praised in a guide, with the casual information that it was popular with the Mob. We went there, the food was good in its Italian fashion, and a table or two away (the place was almost empty) was what was obviously a Mob family eating out—squat, power-charged, dyspeptic-looking father at the head of the table, unnoticeable wife, spoiled-looking daughter, dumb-looking son-in-law, and smoothie *consigliere*. They had good service, including the attentions of the restaurant’s accordionist. There was little audible conversation. This was in 1961, eleven years before *The Godfather*.

No, I don’t believe he was actually a dyspeptic manufacturer of bathroom fixtures.

That was the nearest I’ve come to the criminal classes—well, apart from an artist-thief called David who in a caff off the Charing Cross Road in 1949 circled around the possibility of my becoming involved in some kind of dodgy customs operation.

2. Reading

After looking at the novels on my shelves, and remembering others, and having my memory jogged by printed references, I’ve arrived at the following list of crime and espionage novelists whom I’ve read something by, starting back in the 1930s. I don’t remember what’s in lots of the works, and the gaps for the last quarter century are considerable, . But I was in search of pleasure, not doing research.

What I wanted was novels in which one or two well-defined central consciousnesses are involved in some way with illegality and are themselves at risk. From this point of view it's immaterial whether the characters are private detectives, spies, cops, professional criminals, unjustly accused jockeys, etc.

What counts is what happens next—and next—and next, and having numerous suspense points, large or small, at which one's anxiety increases. Being able to step through a portal into that kind of experience and lose yourself there for a couple of hours is a blessing. I wish I had it more often these days, but there seem to be fewer of my kinds of books around. TV series like "24" have been heavy competition, as have over-the-top Realworld doings. And I guess I lost my innocence and became lit-critty watchful while exploring the Mushroom Jungle (Steve Holland's term) of British pulp publishing ca. 1946-1954.

I've added some Jungle names to the list, all of them pseudonyms. For lots more, see jottings.ca>Found Pages>Sidebars>Jungle Books, or jottings.ca>Thrillers>Found Pages˘>Sidebars>Jungle Books.

The symbol "ss" indicates short stories. I've included pseudonyms.

• Aarons, Edward S. • Adams, Cleve F. • Allain, Marcel • Allingham, Margery • Ambler, Eric • Armstrong, Anthony • Armstrong, Charlotte • Avallone, Michael • Azimov, Isaac • Bagley, Desmond • Baker, W. Howard • Ballard, W.T. • Ballinger, Bill S. • Bardin, John • Barlow, James • Barry, Joe • Baynes, Jack • Beeding, Francis • Berckman, Evelyn • Blackburn, John • Bleeck, Oliver • Blodgett, Matthew • Blood, Matthew • Boothby, Guy • Braine, John • Brandon, William (ss) • Brewer, Gil • Brookmyre, Cristopher • Brown, Carter • Brown, Fredric • Bruen, Mark • Brunner, John • Buchan, John • Buckley, William F. • Burke, James Lee • Burnett, W.R. • Byrd, Max.

• Caillou, Alan • Cain, James M. • Cain, Paul • Cannon, Jack • Carr, John Dickson • Carter, Nick • Cassiday, Bruce • Chaber, M.E. • Chandler, Raymond • Charlton, John • Charteris, Leslie • Chase, James Hadley • Chesterton, G.K. • Cheyney, Peter • Child, Lee • Crichton, Michael • Clancy, Tom • Cleeve, Brian • Clements, Calvin • Collins, Michael • Condon, Richard • Constiner, Merle (ss) • Cory, Desmond • Coxe, George Harmon • Craig, David • Craig, Jonathan • Crais, Robert

• Crawford, Robert • Creasey, John • Crisp, N.F. • Cross, James • Crumley, James • Cumington, O.J. • Cunningham, E.V.

• Dale, John • Daly, John Carroll • Davidson, Lionel • Davis, Norbert (ss) • Dean, Spencer • De Felitta, Frank • Deighton, Len • Dent, Lester • Diehl, William • Dickson, Carter • Diment, Adam • Dodge, David • Donaldson, D.J. • Doyle, Arthur Conan • Driscoll, Peter • Dürrenmatt, Friedrich • Ehrlich, Jack • Eisler, Barry • Ellin, Stanley • Elroy, James • Estleman, Loren D. • Eustis, Helen • Evans, John • Fairman, Paul W. • Fearing, Kenneth • Finney, Jack Fischer, Bruno • Fish, Robert L. • Fleming, Ian • Follett, Ken • Forbes, Bryan • Forester, C.S. • Forsyth, Frederick • Fox, James M. • Francis, Dick • Freeling, Nicolas • Furst, Alan • Gardner, Earle Stanley • Gardner, John • Garner, William • Garve, Andrew • Gault, William Campbell • Gifford, Thomas, • Gilbert, Michael • Glinto, Darcy • Goldman, William • Goodis, David • Gores, Joe • Graeme, Bruce • Gray, A.W. • Greene, Graham • Gruber, Frank

• Haggard, William • Hall, Adam • Hall, Andrew • Halliday, Brett • Hamilton, Donald • Hammett, Dashiell • Hardy, Lindsay • Harling, Robert • Harvester, Simon • Heard, H.F. • Heath, W.L. • Heatter, Basil • Hiaason, Carl • Hichens, Dolores • Higgins, Jack • Highsmith, Patricia • Himes, Chester • Himmel, Richard • Hone, Joseph • Horler, Sydney • Hornung, E.W. • Household, Geoffrey • Huggins, Roy • Hughes, Dorothy B. • Hunt, Howard • Hunter, Stephen • Huston, Charlie • Innes, Michael • Irish, William • Janson, Hank • Japrisot, Sébastien • Jenkins, Geoffrey • Kakonis, Tom • Kane, Henry • Karta, Nat • Keene, Day • Knight, Adam • Kyle, Robert • Lacy, Ed • Latimer, Jonathan • Lauden, Desmond. • Laumer, Keith • Le Carré, John • Leasor, James • Leather, Stephen • Lehane, Dennis • Leonard, Elmore • Leonard, Frank • Lewis, Colin • Lewis, Ted • Ludlum, Robert • Lyall, Gavin • Lybeck, Ed (ss) • Lyons, Arthur

• MacDonald, John D. • Macdonald, Philip • Macdonald, Ross • Mackenzie, Donald • Maclean, Alastair • MacRoss, Ross • Mair, George B. • Manchester, William • Manor, Jason • Mara, Bernard • Markham, Robert • Marlowe, Dan J. • Marlowe, Stephen • Marsden, Richard • Marshall, William • Martin, Aylwin Lee • Mayo, James • McBain, Ed • McCarry, Charles • McClure, James • McDowell, Emmett • McGivern, William P. • McKimmey, James • McPartland, John • Millar, Kenneth • Millar, Margaret • Miller, Rex • Miller, Wade

• Mills, John • Mitchell, James • Morrell, David • Morelli, Spike • Morse, L.W. • Mosley, Walter • Myles, Symon

• Nebel, Frederick (ss) • Neely, Richard • Noel, Sterling • Nolan, William F. • O'Donnell, Peter • Ozaki, Milton K. • Parker, Robert B. • Pendleton, Don • Porter, Henry • Powell, Richard • Prather, Richard S. • Presnell, Frank G. • Puzo, Mario • Quarry, Nick • Queen, Ellery • Quinn, Simon • Rabe, Peter • Rae, Hugh C. • Raymond, Derek • Rice, Craig • Rigsby, Howard • Rohde, William • Rohmer, Sax • Rome, Anthony • Runyon, Charles • Rutherford, Douglas • Sanders, Lawrence • Sandford, John • Sangster, Jimmy • "Sapper" • Sarto, Ben • Schoenfeld, Howard • Scott, Chris • Sela, Owen • Shay, Reuben Jennings (ss) • Sheers, James C. • Sheppard, Stephen • Simenon, Georges • Simmons, Dan • Simon, Roger L. • Singer, Bart • Sjöwall, Maj and Per Wahloo • Skinner, Robert F. • Smith, Don • Smith, Martin Cruz • Smith, Neville • Souvestre, Pierre • Spillane, Mickey • Stark, Richard • Starnes, Richard • Sterling, Stewart

• Teran, Boston • Thomas, Ross • Thompson, Jim • Timlin, Mark • Tinsley, Theodore (ss) • Toler, Buck • Torrey, Roger (ss) • Trinian, John • Upfield, Arthur W. • Vachss, Andrew V. • Valin, Jonathan • Vance, Louis Joseph • Vian, Boris • Wallace, Edgar • Walsh, Thomas • Warwick, Lester • Watkins, Leslie • Waugh, Hillary • Westlake, Donald E. • White, Lionel • Whitfield, Raoul (ss) • Willeford, Charles • Williams, Alan • Williams, Charles • Williamson, Tony • Wise, Arthur • Woodhouse, Martin • Woolrich, Cornell • Worley, William • Yardley, James • Yates, Dornford • Yuill, P.B.

3. Enrichment

I

In *A Portrait of the Artist,* Stephen Dedalus grows up between two poles.

On the one side are images of human potency and potentiality—military heroes like Napoleon, soldier-saints like Loyola, hero-artists like Byron, hero-philosophers like Aristotle and Aquinas, heroic politicians like Parnell.

On the other side is the "real" world, a world of family bickering, schoolmasterly pettiness and cruelty, uneasy vulgar *machismo*, clerical

unimaginativeness, the narrowness of the already conforming young; and the Dublin of failed ambitions, frustrated rebellions, and diminished expectations that Joyce had anatomized in *Dubliners*.

All Stephen's energies are thrown into denying the authority of that so-called reality and affirming the validity of self-affirmation.

And a good deal of Joyce's own energies go into disrupting the ostensible stylistic realism of *Stephen Hero* and *Dubliners* and creating instead a variety of styles, none of which claims to be *the* representation of reality, so that reality can remain open.

II

Good thrillers likewise challenge the downpull of "realism"—the assumption that pride will inevitably have its fall, that human relationships will always turn out badly, and that if you look too deeply into things you will become paralyzed or cynical.

They challenge the idea of a reality governed by irresistible forces—psychological, social, etc.—and the alternative idea of a reality in which everything is infinitely malleable according to the individual's desires.

4. Skills

In *The Axe and the Oath; Ordinary Life in the Middle Ages* (2007/2012), Robert Fossier says:

> The warrior had to become expert in riding a horse, using heavy and dangerous weapons, and knowing how to dodge a blow and watch out for trouble. He had little need for schooling or knowledge. Courage, an ability to size up a situation at a glance, and endurance were enough.

"An ability to size up a situation at a glance"—that applies to so much, doesn't it?

Quick decision-making, from *The Thirty-Nine Steps* on, is part of the DNA of the best thrillers.

5. Fluffs, Fumbles, and Faking

I

In Donald Hamilton's *Date with Darkness* (1947), the bilingual quartet who've been sent from France to "execute" Jeannette Duval's collaborationist husband never ever speak French, even when alone with Philip Branch, who doesn't know French. There were ways of avoiding that absurdity. But in movies back then, foreigners always spoke English, usually with strong accents.

The novel was never reprinted, though.

II

In Jonathan Latimer's *Solomon's Vineyard* (1940), private-op Karl Craven's partner is shot behind the right ear around 4.30 a.m. in a substantial small-town rooming-house when he's taking a leak.

How?

Simple.

The officially dead and embalmed necrophiliac former head of the pseudo-religious colony up on the hill had been waiting down in the street until the upstairs bathroom light went on and then shot him through the open window. Evidently no passer-by had been bothered by coming upon a very tall, thin, cadaverous bearded guy with lank black hair dressed in a long nightshirt and holding a silenced rifle. "'Coon hunting, eh?"

But how did… I mean, wouldn't …?

Don't be so pedantic. This is a *thriller.*

III

The killing of Joseph Harbin outside Harry Lime's apartment building in *The Third Man*, in order to fool the authorities into believing that it was Harry who died under the wheels of that truck, is best viewed through the wrong end of a telescope, if one doesn't want to be picky.

As is the ingenious murder of the wife in *Vertigo*, with its dependence on (a) Stewart's car not getting held up in traffic, (b) Stewart being on the exact position on the tower stairs to see her corpse hurtling silently past the window, (c) Stewart, back down on terra firma, not being cop enough to go look at the body, and (d) the wicked husband, if Stewart didn't arrive on the dot in this brilliant murder scenario, having to go on talking to keep the wife up there ("Hey, hon, come and see the pelicans. How many do you think there are?") or else, having killed her prematurely, go into the dead-parrot routine if other visitors climbed the stairs unexpectedly. "Oh no, she's just tired, hard day with the kids you know, just having a little nap."

IV

What comes into play here, as in lots of locked-room classic puzzlers, is of course the retrospective effect. We "know" that something could happen, because it did. And the fact that it did validates the procedures described in the eventual explanation.

In *Headed for a Hearse* (1935), Latimer has fun himself about locked-room mysteries when Bill Crane predictably fails as he tries to solve one with the aid of pins and a long piece of string. He tells the others:

> "Every flossie detective story has a trick like that in it. You can just see the murderer trying to slide the key back on the table and having the cord slip off the pin. Maybe somebody asks him what he's doing and he says, 'I just knocked off a dame in there and I want to make it appear as though somebody else with a key locked the door from the outside."
>
> Finkelstein said, "Maybe he had a trained monkey that carried the key back for him. A monkey could get through the grocery opening."
>
> Mr. Williams nodded. "Or a seal could be sent up through the drain in the bathtub."
>
> Miss Hogan put a hand on her right hip. "Say, what asylum did you guys escape from, anyway?"

Was Latimer having fun with the gullibility of readers when he did his own fakings? There are several in his novels.

If mystery writers were obliged to come up with murder plots that look do-able at the outset and don't require stop-watch timing, the agility of circus acrobats, good-luck-beyond-lucky, and benign smiles by watching deities, there would be a lot of gaps on the shelves.

But aficionados, a.k.a addicts, are forgiving.

There's an anecdote about how the writer of a popular weekly serial back in the early 1900's quit in order to make a point about his contract, and left his handcuffed hero stuck in a three-foot tunnel under the East River with a steel grille ahead of him, killer rats swarming over his legs, and the water rising. No scab was going to take over *that* narrative. After the publishers folded their hand, he began the next installment with,

> With one thrust of his mighty arms, the Avenger was free.
> Emerging from the tunnel, his eagle eyes spotted…

Sighs of contentment from the readership.

I heard this years ago from Thomas J. Roberts, author of the brilliant *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (1990).

V

Faking and fumbling were not confined to mere entertainments, of course.

In one of Kipling's Mysterious East stories, a full=grown pet orangutan, who becomes intensely jealous when his master marries, tears the new wife into little pieces (I don't think he eats her), after which the husband kills him with his bare hands. An orangutan. Full-grown. With his bare hands. He was *mad* at him, you see. He wasn't a professional wrestler, either.

In another story, a young administrator in India, using what would probably have been a fixed-focus box camera, takes through the eye of a dead man a photograph of an image preserved on the retina. Kipling, as we know, was the laureate of Technology as well as of Empire.

And Wells, who had had some scientific training, wasn't as cognizant as he might have been that while his electrical whatsit might have made a body invisible, it wouldn't affect foreign items in it.

Probably, though, he saw the difficulty but figured that most readers wouldn't, and took a chance. A book titled *The Invisible (Except for the Contents of His Stomach and Intestines, Oh, and the Fillings in His Teeth and Any Dirt Under His Fingernails) Man* would have lacked something.

And as for Doctor Moreau's reconstructive surgery out on that tropical isle of his… But since we see the results, we know that he must have figured out how to cope with skin grafts, and infections, and so forth, I mean after all the other anatomical tweakings.

6. "Style"

I

When returning veterans like Kenneth Millar, John D. MacDonald, Mickey Spillane, Charles Williams, Donald Hamilton, and John McPartland were embarking on their own careers around 1946, the premier "serious" American writer of mysteries—I mean mysteries that were "more than just mysteries"— was almost certainly Dorothy B. Hughes.

Her *Ride the Pink Horse*, which also appeared in 1946, contained sentences like, "Sailor was good. He could shoot before the Sen[ator] did, could watch the Sen's gun explode toward the stars, too far away to know or care; watch the Sen crumple on the dark stubble of the earth."

It contained "psychological" passages like,

> The Sen looked at him, trying to read what he meant, sure that it wasn't what the Sen alone knew; wondering if Sailor had sold out to McIntyre, sure that he wouldn't dare; *boring into Sailor's impassive face* and getting no answer. He *rattled Sailor's words in his brain* and couldn't get an answer without asking for it. "Now what?" he demanded.
>
> Sailor said, "I didn't kill your wife."
>
> It was the moment he'd been moving up to and the moment was worth the feints and thrusts of delay. The Sen stood frozen where he was. He looked really old, shriveled and old. He was in that

moment one with the aged violinist at Tio Vivo. *There was only a mechanical shell left*.

II

Hughes, you see, was a Real Writer. She had had a slim volume published in the Yale Younger Poets series. She had reviewed mysteries.

Here are a few sentences from her first thriller, *The So Blue Marble* (1940), which was about nasty things happening to ordinary people like you and me.

"She was near to tears again but she *buffeted* them." "Missy *nibbled* her fork." "Bette's smile *was twinkles*." "The inspector *had eyes that could look sideways*." "Griselda's nails *teethed into* her hand."

I could keep going.

Sometime, if it hasn't been done already, someone should write about the popular conception of poets and the poetic as displayed in thrillers, Hammett's among them.

And there's a moral point of sorts here.

III

If you write the kind of prose I've just quoted, the body, the inhabited, muscled, active, *live* body simply isn't there for you as you write. *People* aren't really there, not in their flesh-and-blood individuality.

So that it is easy to present (in *The So Blue Marble*) a narrative in which everywoman Griselda Cameron Saterlee, successful young Hollywood dress designer temporarily back in Manhattan and staying in the upper Fifties, has no problem co-existing socially (when she doesn't feel that her own precious self is in danger) with two debonair young socialite twins with lethal canes who have murdered *in her apartment* the inoffensive janitor of her building (with whose wife she converses), plus a night-watchman in her brother-in-law's Fifth Avenue bank, plus a woman movie star.

And who stubbornly refrains from telling the cops about it, even though one of them went, where else? to Princeton.

And the cop doesn't *press* her. And the evil twins, abetted by her evil kid sister, don't simply twist her pretty arm until she tells them where the amazingly mysterious and important little blue marble of the title is hidden.

Hardly surprisingly, the Chicago mobster ("Sailor") down in Santa Fe for two or three days on a mission of vengeance in *Ride the Pink Horse*, has zero believability. The movie of it that Robert Montgomery directed and starred in in 1947 was a pretty good noir though.

All this isn't simply a different-but-equal tradition. It's a *lousy* one, and related, I'm sure, to bad writing in poetry during those years.

IV

In equal-opportunity fairness I should add that in *The Black Curtain* (1941), the much-filmed Cornell Woolrich favoured the serious mystery-reading public with sentences like: "His wrist *made a quick hitch*, and he gulped the bracer of whisky," "Terror, still *unassuaged by safety*, still *meeting with some grim inflexible purpose*," "The agate eyes *buried themselves deeper behind their lids with baleful calculation*," and "It was violence *in its most ravening form*. It was *the night gone hydrophobic* at their threshold."

There is a quotation from the *New York Times Book Review* on the front of my copy of *The So Blue Marble* (bought, I hasten to add, for the purposes of this article): "If you wake up in the night screaming with terror, don't say we didn't warn you."

If that was Anthony Boucher, he also called it "an unforgettable experience in contemporary sensation fiction." Which I guess may have been true.

7. Educational

In my favorite Gold Medal paperbacks, you were in a Fifties world of hot sweet summer nights, roadhouse brawls, long-distance truckers, gunbelt cops, sociable B-girls, tow-headed kids who called you "Sir," long-barrelled magnums in glove compartments, deer on car hoods, bored rich wives meditating widowhood, long white Florida beaches, cold brews, an ingrained distrust of outsiders.

Returned veterans like John D. MacDonald and Charles Williams understood the conflicting desires to get rich quick and see corruption cleaned up, as did the hard-living John McPartland (Warren Oates? Lee Marvin?), whose 1959 Mafia novel *The Kingdom of Johnny Cool* was an early-warning signal of things to come. As the co-editor of a grad-student 'zine, I sent a copy to Ross Macdonald, PhD, to ask if he'd review it for us. He replied to the effect that it just seemed to him Spillane-crude. Which struck me as imperceptive, McPartland being much the better writer of the two. That was ten years before *The Godfather*.

But the books not only displayed the lure of the fast buck, the slick deal, the amateur drug-smuggling operation that absolutely couldn't miss, the deadly spider-woman, and so forth. They also testified to a yearning for freedom from bossy authorities (there'd been enough of those during the war), and a decent—i.e., crime-and-corruption-free—environment to bring up kids in, with a freedom from "issues."

Blacks didn't come my own way until the 1959 paperbacking, as an Avon Original, of Chester Himes' glorious *The Real Cool Killers*, with Provence's Jean Giono on the back cover calling *A Rage in Harlem* "the most extraordinary novel that I have read in a long time … I give all the Hemingway, Dos Passos, Steinbeck for this Chester Himes."

If you'd spent time in the mindscape that I've described, you weren't surprised by police clubbing decent folk in the Sixties, and the resentments and yearnings that came to a head in Reaganism, and the third rail of redneck honor, and shocked revelations in *Time* magazine about small-town corruption, and the ruthless greed of the rich, and two-for-the-price-of-one U.S. Senators.

Moviemakers learned from these entertaining books, particularly after colour, with its flesh-tones, and manicured grass, and sky-blue waters took over from noir. Green, especially, doesn't show up well in black-and-white.

8. Hamilton again

Contact

Back in 1994, I wrote Donald Hamilton a fan letter after reading *The Damagers*. I can't find his reply, but I recall his saying that his own

favourite novel was *Line of Fire* (1955), and that it had come in a wonderful burst of only six weeks. I had said in my letter that I'd probably read it a dozen times.

That was my only contact with him.

Luck

Hamilton says that he himself was lucky in his career, and luck is certainly real. Some people have *very* bad luck. But you need to be able to recognize good luck when it comes your way.

It was luck (well maybe also a residual scholarly conscience) that caused me to e-mail Robert F. Skinner to learn where I could find the article by Hamilton that he had quoted from in his admirable piece about him in Lesley Anderson's *Twentieth-Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, 3rd ed.

And it was luck again—well, generosity on Bob's part— that sent me, via e-mail, to the extraordinarily nice Raymond Peters, whom Hamilton had apparently called his "unofficial archivist."

And wonderful, wonderful generosity on Ray's part that made him send immediately to a total stranger some invaluable information about publication dates, plus photocopies of much-needed research items, including Hamilton's handful of magazine stories, plus a bibliography about him.

Model?

Some time during the past decade I read an article about a brilliant young American-born physicist who was working in Los Alamos in the Fifties, and he sounded to me a good deal like Jim Gregory in *Assignmen; Murder* (1956), too much so, I felt, for it to be just a coincidence. After all, Los Alamos and Hamilton's Santa Fe were practically within spitting distance of each other.

I wouldn't have wanted to spend time with Gregory.

But I think it was because of what Hamilton did in *Assignment: Murder* that he was able to embark with confidence on the Helm

series, and keep posing over the years, in one concrete situation after another, the never-ending problem of ends and means.

Helm

I

When he devised Matt Helm, Hamilton must surely have had in mind the predicaments of CIA agent Sam Durrell in Edward S. Aarons' Gold Medal "Assignment" series, which debuted in 1955, three years after the first James Bond book.

"As an American," sneers a bad guy in *Assignment—Angelina* (1958), "you have confused ideas of loyalty, the sanctity of human life, and all those medieval concepts of chivalry that prohibit you from risking the girl to get your own way."

On the one hand, Durrell is expected to foil plots that threaten the whole existence of America, the "free world," the lives of scores, hundreds, thousands of others.

On the other, he is so inhibited morally that at one point when he was in hot pursuit of the *very* bad guys and is stopped by a young uniformed cop, he "didn't want to fight the cop or hurt him" and only "finally began to fight him off in earnest" when another cop comes up. "But it was too late by then."

A more sophisticated version of this attitude occurs at the end of Adam Hall's penultimate novel, *Quiller Salamander* (1994), where the only way, the *only* way, that a ground-to-ground rebel missile attack on the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, can be prevented is if Quiller, who alone has the needed sniper skill, takes out a Khmer Rouge general. And Quiller *refuses* to do so on the grounds that he's a spy, not a cold-blooded assassin. Hall contrives a way for him to do it with warmer blood and preserve his self-image, but you can imagine Helm's incredulity about the episode. This is a *professional?*

But it is no longer axiomatic, as it used to be in countdown movies, that it would be political suicide for an American government to order the shooting down of a hijacked airliner headed towards a major center with lethal intent.

II

And *debate* goes on in the Helm books, particularly where the women are concerned.

Helm isn't like Quiller who simply can't exist without the adrenalin surge of a mission, and who, once launched, hurtles towards his goal like the MiG-28D that he memorably pilots in *The Sinkiang Executive* (1978). Helm proceeds at a more leisurely pace, and making him a counter-terrorist, counter-assassination *killer*, rather than a spy, makes possible a larger role for contrary voices, particularly women's voices.

In a spy novel, a "decent" woman isn't normally going to object when she and the hero are on the run and he's trying to save them both, or when he seeks to foil some dastardly plot. And when the enemy agents are caught in North America (if they haven't been killed in self-defense), they will be turned over to the forces of law and order.

I am not talking about a couple of individuals quarrelling. There can be plenty of that. I am talking about their seriously debating issues.

When killing someone is itself an agent's mission, and if, as a matter of organizational policy, no sentimental scruples can be allowed to prevent it, it invites those indignant questions from "decent" people that we hear so often in the Helm books:

How can your horrible organization be allowed to DO such things? And how can YOU (who love dogs, and can be surprisingly tender and considerate to people, and always treat women as individuals, and have genuinely loving relationships with some of them) belong to it? And how can you do what you're doing in this particular instance?

Hamilton himself, he tells us, had heard those kinds of complaints, at times perhaps to the point of exasperation. In some of the later works you sometimes feel that he is deliberately trailing his coat.

III

But a correction is needed here.

The real point is not that Helm, as Hamilton says, (a) is a pretty nice guy and (b) kills people. Nobody, I'm sure, would be bothered by the thought that young Lieutenant Helm—a pretty nice guy, who after the

war settles into a nice peaceful life as writer and photographer with the very nice Beth—had spent part of the war heroically taking out key German officers, most of them no doubt Nazis, and at least one of them personally vile, in Occupied Europe.

The problem is that Helm's peacetime targets are not obviously *nasty*. They are not, for the most part, conventionally villainous—sadistic, swaggering, gloating, greedy, megalomaniacal mini-Hitlers. If Helm were wacking Ian Fleming's villains, he'd be cheered all the way. He'd be cleansing the world of wickedness.

But in fact the same thing can be said of most of the enemy assassins (meaning Communist assassins) that Helm copes with as is said of him.

They kill people, or try to (*The Shadowers*, 1964, involves the projected more or less simultaneous assassination of a number of key American nuclear physicists), but individually, when we see them, they're mostly pretty normal, reasonably nice, at times (like dear Vadya) literally lovable.

And I think that underlying the objections to what Helm does is partly (a) a persisting but not necessarily speakable feeling that what Communists did, particularly in the Third World, couldn't really be *bad*, since it was always being done in pursuit of good aims, and (b) that people should be judged according to what they *are*—I mean, whether they're basically nice or not—and not according to what they merely do.

Which at bottom may be related to the feeling that when essentially nice people like you and me screw up, it shouldn't really be held against us and there shouldn't be any significant penalties. I mean, it's not the real *us* that did that.

IV

The debates in the Helm books are almost Shavian at times.

And those debates (some of them inside his own head) are not as rigged as they might appear in a casual skim-and-dip.

V

I am not going to come to the defense of Helm as Mr. Nice Guy.

He is indeed, as Hamilton himself says, a *relatively* nice guy. But his comments can be pretty bothersome at times, and in fact he can be obnoxious at times, and he certainly didn't need to hack off practically the whole hand of that frat-boy when the yahoo mob tried to break into his college room (*The Intimidators*, 1974).

The early *Murderers' Row* (1962) is substantially about his own recognition that his violence can get out of control. Which makes him try to resign from the organization.

But the ferocious kill-or-be-killed absolutism of some of his statements is often a mode of energizing himself at a particular point in the action, and it turns out subsequently, as he will acknowledge, that he was being over-simple. Often too a seemingly callous act or assertion on his part has a conventionally benign motive behind it.

Nor do the individuals with counter-positions always lose out.

VI

We do indeed get a good deal of what Hamilton, in one of the articles, calls "sentimental hypocrisy" on the part of the nice young things who shriek with sometimes too predictable regularity, "You *killed* him!", even though his doing so has saved their lives.

From time to time, too, we are reminded of how an insufficiently grounded pacifism can rotate through a hundred and eighty degrees when something particularly dear to the pacifist, usually the anti-nuclear pacifist, especially the anti-American-nuclear pacifist, is at stake.

But not all the individuals who refuse to go along with Helm's values are shown up as hypocrites or wimps, or even as inevitably less efficient.

The twelfth book in the series, *The Interlopers* (1969), is particularly rich in successful challenges to both his moral and his professional authority, and it is pleasant when at the end the young Lester Davis, who he has suggested might consider joining Mac's organization,

replies, "If this world is to be saved, Mr. Helm, it's going to be saved by people who still retain a few illusions, not by people like you. I'll stay a Rover Boy and a boy scout, if you don't mind."

VII

The Helm books are an interplay of general principles and particular instances, at times to the detriment of their thrillerishness.

They are concerned with stereotypes and actualities, role-playing and authenticity, legality and *realpolitik*, the values of "peace" and "war," the nature of true professionalism, the dangers of self-regarding amateurishness, the relationship of the individual to the organization, and of the organization to society at large, and individual decision-making inside multiple sets of rules. And these matters aren't all tidily arranged.

When Hamilton tells us that when he starts a novel he doesn't know how it is going to end, this surely applies to the moral aspects as well as to the action ones.

VIII

It would be wonderful if one didn't have to think about all these unpleasant questions about violence in what still passes for the real world but feels an increasingly fictional one. (List a dozen of the more dramatic public events of the past quarter-century and you will *know* that you are inside an airport novel.)

But the problems won't just fade away at the end of the flight or when the credits start rolling, and Hamilton has done a lot of thinking about them, and it goes on in the Helm books.

Nor are the issues simply ones of violence.

If the private eye is particularly appealing to the creative writer as someone who pursues his own odd path, often without knowing where it is leading to, and is only intermittently in touch with "official" values, the figure of someone like Helm who belongs to an organization and, up to a point, has to follow orders, but who does not feel a self-denying brotherly love for his fellows in it, and has missions of his own with which they can offer only marginal help, if any, can

have its appeal as a paradigm for the life of the high-intensity academic.

And, as so often, principles of energy as well as of order are involved.

IX

In *The Mona Intercept* (1980) Hamilton's long, ambitious, multiperspectival, and regenerative vacation from the Helm saga, young Harold Ullman is thinking about his wife Nancy—a wife whom he loves, but who shortly thereafter knocks aside his shotgun in horror when he is about to shoot three masked figures whom he has caught trashing their house, resulting in his own hospitalization and her multiple rape:

> The idea that you had to test yourself occasionally, just as you tested your cameras or the rigging of your boat, to find out if you were still all there, still ready, still competent to cope with it if it came—whatever it might be—seemed to be totally incomprehensible to her. She had only one word for it, that idiot term macho, the great cop-out word of the century. If it was tough or dangerous, or uncomfortable, or required skill, strength, or endurance, you dismissed it with a sneer as macho and saved yourself from having to do it. Like all her intellectual friends, Nancy stubbornly refused to believe that it had nothing whatever to do with masculinity. It was an ancient survival mechanism totally divorced from sex.

And here is Helm in *Death of a Citizen*, double-clutching his half-ton truck into compound-low on a steep slope off the highway:

> I hit it right for a change, the lever went home without a murmur, and we ground on up the mountainside in the dark with that fine roar of powerful machinery doing the job it was designed for. It always gives me a kick to throw her into that housemoving gear and feel her knuckle down and go to work, using everything that's under the hood, while the big mud-and-snow tires dig in for traction …
>
> Maybe that was my trouble, I reflected. I just hadn't been using everything that was under the hood for a hell of a long time. [Ellipsis marks in text.]

Such bracings of the self can be essential in intellectual undertakings too.

In Thomas Carlyle's words, "Smooth Falsehood is not Order; it is the general sumtotal of Disorder. Order is Truth.—each thing standing on the basis that belongs to it. Order and Falsehood cannot subsist together" (*On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, 1841).

Truth is not won easily.

1990–2014

Coda

I

I have written a lot about violence, one way and another.

The widely praised *Violence in the Arts* (1974) was an attempt to find my bearings among the explosive Franco-American celebrations of actual and fictive violence in the Sixties. Charles Marowitz, reviewing it in the *Spectator*, discerned in it "an extremely agile and incessantly active mind which illuminates almost every subject it touches." Which was nice. Among other things, I showed what a lot of activities, whether factual or fictive, are covered by the term "violence," and why some are odious and others entertaining.

My magnum opus, *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (1982), was a follow-up to it which, like the initial team of military advisers in Vietnam, grew and grew and *grew*. I was basically concerned, as I discovered, with the chivalric as one of the three major, and not mutually exclusive, value systems of Western Civ, along with religion and socialism, and with its role in containing, humanizing, and preventing violences, especially the brutality of winner-take-all Robber Baron capitalism in the decades after the Civil War. The Wobblies and the *Masses* group are prominent in it.

A senior reviewer (too late, alas, to influence sales) called it "a brilliant and utterly absorbing work," and said that "There are not many learned books which have the unputdownable quality of a thriller; this is is one of them." However, its rhetoric of discovery obviously puzzled other reviewers, who missed the familiar tidiness of an opening thesis statement (was I "for" or "against" chivalry?) developed by chains of topic sentences that you could follow along without having actually to unfasten and *read* the various bundles of evidence dangling below each of them.

But I was reaching down to the deep-rooted emotions at work in value-charged conflicts, most of them still with us, which took me into a lot of different kinds of texts. And the paragraphs are often mini-essays in which things are different at the end from how they were at the beginning.

I cannot, I find, improve on the publishers' blurb for the essays in *The Name of Action* (1984).

Like the other two books it "explores conflicting attitudes towards self-affirmation and social order," deals with works concerned with "ideas of energy, power, and personal plenitude," and contains "some of his finest analyses both of the workings of pastoral and heroic ideals and of the dangers of irony and nihilism in a violent world." The essays "range in subject from Shakespeare to Atget's photographs of Paris, by way of American fiction, sadomasochism, literary theory, and patterns of rural culture."

In sum, I've been concerned with war AND peace.

The Name of Action was reissued, after a couple of years, in the Cambridge Paperback Library, a series that "represents some of the best current scholarship in the English language."

II

In the wartime 1940s, you grew up in England with a binary view of the political world. On one side were the revealed horrors of the camps and the torture chambers, with their demonstrations of the wickedness that people are capable of when given a chance. On the other was the energizing vision of a brave new postwar world of democratic power-sharing at home and fraternal cooperation internationally. As editor of the school magazine, I commissioned an account by an Old Boy (alumnus) of what he had seen in the medical corps at the liberation of Belsen. I also joined the idealistic Richard Acland's quasi-syndicalist Common Wealth party (favorably mentioned by Orwell).

The vision quickly became a fading dream. This was not a postwar world in which violence and force were going to go away, and in which a Gandhian pacifism, in Orwell's analysis, or simple human decency, would take care of things. Nor could you escape, any more than during wartime, thinking about how you yourself would behave when put to the test, under whatever tyranny.

In my first term at university, after two pleasant years of clerking in the RAF, I was lucky enough to start off with Shakespeare, rather than Chaucer, under the modest and permissive *Scrutiny*-oriented J.C Maxwell. So I wrote my way through the three highly political Parts of

Henry VI (Pound had called the whole cycle the real English epic) and beyond, without worrying about received opinions, and got a deeper education in the ways of violence, power, and conflicting ideologies. Maxwell borrowed my essay on *The Tempest* to send to a friend of his, probably Derek Traversi, who he said was working on the play.

III

The message that has kept coming up for me is that what brings stability and a satisfying peace, particularly as analyzed in the chivalry book and observable in the primate communities studied by ethologists (there's a fine book called *Chimpanzee Politics*) is not a shocked turning away from violence in search of a clean stasis managed benignly from above. It's an agonistic and non-dominative balancing of empowerments, small-scale or large, with an awareness on both sides of the penalties for misjudgments, and the loss of benefits, that reduces the likelihood of violence and helps to contain it when it occurs. Unstructured powerlessness, or the feeling of it, and of being dissed, can create the rage out of which violence erupts.

The actual jungle, with its observable intraspecies carings, and accomodatings, and adjustments, *isn't* red in tooth and claw. It's Randism that's the unnatural aberration, as was Sadeism earlier.

Which is obviously the analysis of a lot of civilized, and now better appreciated, professional soldiers for whom truth-oriented integrity, a fading dream in politics and high finance, is not just a rhetorical option but a practical necessity.

The political theatre of Gamdhi's own non-violence, with its legions of demonstrators, and his shrewd understanding of what buttons to push in the British conscience, was itself a major political force, of course, as was the sophistication of the heroic Mandela about when and when not to resort to violence.

IV

There's nothing novel about all this in itself. What counts from a literary perspective are the details, and the range of behaviours and dilemmas that are covered by terms like "violence" and "force." Those I have tried to shed some light on.

This involves, as Orwell taught us, a concern with the interplay between value-charged or value-depleting abstractions—the indignant instant filling of a given term with the pre-set meanings of propaganda, or the ho-hum denial of significance to flesh-and-blood pain—and eyes alert for the practical consequences of ideological choices.

Which entails passing beyond binary oversimplifications and taking into account how often something happens, and to how many and what kinds of people, and for how long, and how injuriously. Idiocies result when a Brownshirt beating a Jew to death with a rubber truncheon and a four-year-old pre-schooler kissing a classmate are both guilty of "aggression."

The sociologist Beatricc Webb said that one must never forget the percentages when looking at the numbers, or the numbers when looking at the percentages. Equally one could say that you mustn't forget the general when looking at the particulars, or the particulars when thinking about the general. Fictions can illuminate the processes by which one passes back and forth between them.

V

In *Heart of Darkness* and *Dead Calm* we see flying sticks and odd-shaped bits of metal suddenly "becoming" arrows ("by Jove! We were being shot at!") and a deadly shotgun.

In Shakespeare', terms like "jealousy," "ambition," and "being in love" return to their experiential complexities. The plays are studies in How. *How* can such disasters, such moral deteriorations in admirable-seeming individuals, come about? How (passing beyond the seductive defining of perfect Love in "Let me not to the marriage of true minds/ Admit impediment…") may two strong-minded individuals arrive at what promises to be a satisfying marriage—a term awaiting its own explorations later on by novelists like Tolstoy and Lawrence.

I have been a good deal concerned with How in my own writings. In my analysis of the post-Civil War decades in *America and the Patterns of Chivalry,* I show how the brutalist dichotomy of Winners and Losers became transformed, in colleges and elsewhere, into the agonistic patterns of a community in which chivalric values, so visible during the CivilWar, were still powerful enough for magnates and politicos to be shamed by the accusation of having behaved dishonorably.

The results of the erosion of that power are all too visible now.

VI

The two most important "serious" authors where my favorite kinds of thrillers are concerned are Conrad and Stephen Crane, the latter with his ongoing interest in the drama of categorizing and re-categorizing, from whom Conrad learned so much. Behind them both, of course, was Dickens, especially the Dickens of *Great Expectations* (1860-61).

If the confident first-person voices of a lot of thrillers derive from Buchan's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* (1915), which itself derived stylistically from Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883), what they recount are sequences in which the unfamiliar and untrustworthy keeps recurring, with renewed demands for interpretation, decision-making, and, within a short time, action.

The combination of the Conrad-Cranean and the Stevenson-Buchanish is a mode of empowerment. Things are strange, people lie, the evidence of your eyes and ears isn't necessarily to be trusted, the powerful try to bluff and bully and control you. But you can solve or bypass particular problems with the exercise of intelligence, and make your way towards a goal.

This is not the ongoing plod, and endurance, and limited successes, and ultimate defeats of a lot of fictional Realism. Nor is it the Dickensian vortex, in which, like Pip, one is in an environment vaster than oneself, among mysteries that one gets seriously wrong.

To empathize, if only for a while, with such voices is heartening.

You too can cope, they say.

2004

Appendix

Darcy Glinto and the Mushroom Jungle

I

In 1943, in the annex to the market-town grammar-school that housed some fifty of us boarders, I found in a vacated common-room locker a scruffy paperback with no covers and the last page seemingly missing. I couldn't believe my luck. It was what three of the older boys had been snickering about, and apparently it was legally banned—my second prohibited book, the first being *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, witheld from me before the War by a big cousin.

Portals. Underworlds.

As I learned later, what the gods had released to me was an "exploitational" reworking of elements in James Hadley Chase's *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1939), which latter had sold in the hundred thousands and would be savaged by George Orwell in 1944 in "Raffles and Miss Blandish." ("Now for a header into the cesspool"—though he conceded that it was "a brilliant piece of writing.") What with a rubber-hose beating, "delicate almost transparent knickers," a creepy build-up to a rape (undescribed), an even more violent third-degreeing than the one that disgusted Orwell in *No Orchids*, and a harakiri-style murder in bed, my find was heady stuff for a fourteen-year-old in a boys-only school.

I returned the book to the locker, but it was in my mind to stay, and it wasn't diminished by the much more professional *No Orchids* when I finally read that.

II

In a 1960 episode in *Hancock's Half Hour*, there's an explosive laugh of recognition when the audience learn the title of the book whose missing page has been bothering the East Cheamers—Darcy Sarto's *Lady, Don't Fall Backwards*.

Which is to say, Darcy Glinto's *Lady—Don't Turn Over* (1940) plus a nod to Ben Sarto of the Miss Otis series, but evidently just an ordinary whodunit.

In the early 1980s, when a copy of *Lady—Don't* showed up in a dealer's catalogue, I bought it for thirty quid. It would probably have commanded five hundred now. Parts of it still carried a powerful charge. Others seemed under-written and amateurish, compared with *No Orchids.*

But there hadn't in fact been a page missing.

In the 1990s I obtained Glinto's *Road Floozie* (1941) and *Deep-South Slave* (1951) online from a respectable Scottish novelist who was selling off most of his library, including a cache of "low" paperback bequeathed to him by a sergeant-major who'd served under him in North Africa.

The two books,were so different from each other and from *Lady—Don't*, and not exploitational, that I wondered if they were by the same hand and what the other Glintos were like—*No Mortgage on a Coffin*, *One More Nice White Body*, and so forth.

With the help of Allen J. Hubin's prodigious but unannotated *Crime Fiction 1749–1980; a Comprehensive Bibliography,* from which I learned that Glinto was only one of several pseudonyms used by Harold Ernest Kelly (1899–1969), I haunted eBay and AbeBooks (the thrill of the chase!) and over several years read almot all his books, acquired some biographical facts, and constructed various hypotheses about him.

My most intriguing discovery was that in the early Thirties Kelly and a fellow journalist had created *City Mid-Week*, which was like the broad-spectrum weekly of a provincial city, except that the city here was the City of London, England's financial centre.

Kelly himself wrote the cultural reviews and probably some of the anonymous commentaries on current affairs, along with a series of bellelettrist celebrations of City worthies, reprinted in 1951 as *London Cameos*. The first part of the introduction, most likely created back then, contains sentences like this about the the Tower of London: "Whitened and blackened by Time until it stands outlined against river and sky like a three-dimensional woodcut, aloof above all human feeling in its massive strength and timeless endurance, it imposes a half-reverence upon our minds."

All of which was a far cry from the faux-America of *Lady—Don't Turn Over* and "'A bit late for keeping your legs private,' he said, and jerked her skirt back. His other hand held a gun."

But Kelly has remained frustratingly elusive. Even now I don't know whether he was in the Great War, or visited North America—*Deep-South Slave* is convincingly Southern—or how he spent most of the Twenties and Thirties, or whether he was married. It's almost as if, being twice a loser in the Old Bailey he developed a habit of secrecy, like B. Traven.

There must be individuals still around who knew brother Hector, ten years his junior, who ran the Robin Hood Press (1946–55) in which the Glintos and Harold's excellent Westerns appeared. But I've had little luck with this. I did, however, receive some very welcome family photographs and information, thanks to Morgan Wallace. And Bryan Maycock too came up with solid genealogical facts. A correspondent who recalled knowing Harold in the Canary Islands during his last years said that he was a cultured man who spoke good French.

III

In 1934, A.J.A. Symons did a well-received biography called *The Quest for Corvo* about a minor Catholic writer called Frederick Rolfe, best known for his 1904 fantasy novel *Hadrian the Seventh*, about Vatican politics. Symons, in what was subtitled "An Experiment in Biography," took his readers along with him as he pieced together the life and works of the author. He had, he explained, been drawn into the research by the discrepancy between that novel and a batch of pimping letters by the impoverished Rolfe about the pederastic delights of Venice.

Without planning it, I'd found myself on a quest for Kelly. But Symons' book wasn't in my mind while I was working on what became *Found Pages* on my website. I simply didn't know enough to pull things together in a narrative with organizing generalizations and conclusions.

Instead, I created a year-by-year bio-bibliography, supplemented it with substantial sidebars, and when new information and ideas came my way, added them, without rewriting. By the end there were fourteen sidebars plus sixty-eight expository notes about Kelly and his

times. But I have no proprietary interest in the subject, and no plans for further work on it, though I'd be delighted to add, with attributions, any further biographical information that anyone can dig up. Being in Britain and able to continue along the Hector trail could be a big advantage.

This was my only venture into traditional scholarship, with its concern for solid facts (yes, there are such things) and the scrutinizing of evidence. But I did a lot of inferring and speculating. Was Kelly the tough-looking man in that 1948 race-track drawing by his artist friend and illustrator Imre Hofbauer? I guessed so. But I didn't *know*. I've seen no photos of Kelly. It's clear, though, that in the Thirties he was friends with the great traditional wrestler and holistic body-builder George Hackenschmidt, now retired, with whom he no doubt sat at ringsides. His descriptions of hand-to-hand fights are unusually detailed.

IV

Googling for "Found Pages: the Remarkable Harold" will get one to the "Contents" page of Found Pages. "Introductory" will take one from there into the biographical maze.

An annotation at the bottom of the Contents page indicates that if this were a print book averaging 400 words to the page, it would run to about 450 pages.

There is something called an "exploded" drawing (see Google) in which you can see an artifact, a bicycle say, with all the parts in it separated while still preserving the general configuration. It strikes me that Found Pages, which is wholly a Web book and not just a print book that has gone slumming, is a bit like that.

The "subject," Harold Kelly, takes one into lots of unfamiliar areas, about which there is usually more of interest remaining to be discovered. There is no pretence that we now "know" Kelly, but neither is there any flim-flammery about innate unknowability. The book is about finding out, with numerous options as to how what has been found out already can be assembled.

I am pretty sure that I took an initial tip from Edward Nehls' magnificent *D.H. Lawrence: a Composite Biography* (1957), in the

three volumes of which he presents more or less chronologically what individuals who knew Lawrence recalled about how he was at this or that time, along with letters by Lawrence from those times, and almost no intrusions by Nehls himself, resulting in an unparalleled evocation of the complexities of what, normally, is far too lightly referred to as an author's mind. Lawrence *lives* for us in the differing selves of his transactions with others, sometimes within a single week or day, not that what they say is necessarily wholly true, though they usually seem trustworthy.

The Web allowed me to use a variety of techniques and not pretend to knowledge that I didn't and still don't possess, and not having to worry about length was a major advantage.

Have there been comparable treatments of other writers, I wonder?

V

Just before I retired, I was served at a supermarket deli counter by a bright grad student who was in my Literary Theory seminar. She looked and behaved just like a girl behind a deli counter. Later she told me, without invoking Sartre on that waiter of his, that she had to *be* that girl, otherwise the other girls would notice the falsity and resent you.

I didn't want to be into falsity myself about Kelly and what was *known* about him. And I wrote descriptions of his works in which I was trying for the same accuracy with which I'd described normal thrillers in "Jottings," and not just sketching plots and tossing cliches at them.

In a kind of closing of a circle and payment of a debt, I brought him back from the brink of extinction (Darcy *who*?), and the prices of his books went up and up, sometimes ridiculously, and I see my opinions paraphrased when I look around on the Web. Others, too, seem to have found him an interesting figure, unique as he was in 20th century British fiction.

But I didn't want to pretend to an authority that I didn't possess.

VI

Working on Kelly also took me in among the multitude of other pulp paperbacks put out in what Steve Holland, immensely knowledgeable about British publishing history, dubbed the Mushroom Jungle in his 1993 book of that name. This was the zone occupied circa 1946–54 by a host of small new publishers who'd been able to get their hands on rationed paper, and whose wares, with their lingerie-rich covers by Reginald Heade and others, were mostly carried by newsagents. I never noticed any myself, apart from a few being offered one day out of a suitcase in Piccadilly Circus. With a sense of daring, I bought one by Ben Sarto. It was mild.

Al Bocca, Spike Morelli, Nat Karta Duke Linton, Ace Capelli, Hank Janson (pronounced Yanson), and on and on—it was a medley of pseudonyms, some of them used by several different authors. And many of the titles weren't showing on eBay or accessible through inter-library loan. I went on from Hubin and compiled some authorship lists. And I tried not to be fakey when describing such books as I was able to acquire. I particularly refrained from cultural moralizing.

As practiced at its best by Orwell, it included extended treatments, plenty of examples, and distinctions about quality. But more commonly, where the Jungle was concerned, it was a matter of deploying terms like "banal," "hackneyed," "coarse," "derivative," "sadistic," "sexist," etc, with no quotations and an uncertainty as to how many of the works the commentator had actually read or dipped into, let alone what the works, in their details, were like.

I was partly reading with Orwell in mind, though, and more particularly the quasi-Orwellian anti-American polemic of Richard Hoggart in *The Uses of Literacy* (1957). The whole genre figured in the Ain't it awful? part of that book as an open "American" sewer polluting the innocent postwar minds of mill-hands, and miners, and others, some of them only recently shooting non-fictional Germans, who would otherwise have been occupying their spare time with—what? Singing jolly traditional British songs in good old neon-free pubs over pints of honest watery English beer? Learning about Realworld decencies from the pages of J.B. Priestly, Daphne du Maurier, and James Hilton?

VII

I wanted to see for myself if the genre was as foul (and interesting) as Hoggart's presentation made it appear, especially in the memorably sadistic long "quotation" that a researcher found later on had been composed by Hoggart himself at his publishers' request, in order to avoid libel actions, and which was much worse than anything to be found in Glinto (*Lady* is obviously alluded to in it) or anywhere else in the Jungle that I'd come across.

So I was waiting for "moments" of S & V as I read along, in part as someone whose wide-ranging interest in the subject, starting back to the Thirties, had been on display in the well-received *Violence in the Arts* (1973).

But I was also hoping for *any* moments, as I would when reading normal thrillers—moments of *l'insolite*, strangeness, sudden linguistic freshness, flashes of humour, unexpected decencies or nastiness in believable characters, dramatic violences, other pleasures. At times they came. And these deplorable books were, as I found, very largely narratives which one read in the normal thriller fashion for the suspense, the dangers evaded, the interactions of characters.

When I jotted down a description of each book after it landed in my front porch, without reference to other books bearing that particular authorial name, I was principally trying to compensate for the feebleness of my own verbal memory. But I also had in mind those few academics whose heads weren't stuffed with prejudices masquerading as principles, or corseted in "objectivity," and who might be curious themselves as to what it was all about.

And I *quoted*. Every critic or reviewer of thrillers should quote *something* from the works that they're discussing. It's there that quality lives.

By the end I had provided descriptions of well over a hundred books. Getting the plot lines clear wasn't always easy.

Found Pages can be reached on my website, jottings.ca, via the column of buttons on the left.

To get to “Jungle Books” once you’re in, you have to sneak up an alley, as at were, via Sidebars at the top and then the bars at the top of the next page. I guess I like a touch of the clandestine myself.

Googling also works at times.

NB: The only unexpurgated texts of *Lady* and *Floozie* are the Wells, Gardner first editions of 1940 and 1941.

VIII

Recently, in response to a request by Benoit Tadié for something about British “thriller” takes on America for an issue of the online *Transatlantica* that he was guest-editing I ended up with the equivalent of some seventy print pages titled “Portals and Pulps; Orwell, Hoggart, ‘America,’ and the Uses of Gangster Fiction.” A google will whisk you there.

In it, I (a) give an account of crime-fictional treatments of American criminals and crime-stoppers in the first three decades of the 20th century and place *No Orchid* in a 1930s political context in which it figures (contra Orwell) as an *anti*fascist work; (b) recall some of the experiences of things American in the Thirties and wartime Forties by my own young middle-class self; and (c) revisit the Jungle and define several benign cultural services that it performed for returning veterans, even in some of the more violent and at first glance misogynistic works.

With some reflections about portals and Underworlds.

IX

As a boy in the Thirties, my reading, while partly of the comics that Orwell hated—*Hotspur*, *Rover*, *Wizard*, *Adventure*—also extended back into the boyhood reading of my father, as evinced in the glorious bound volume of *Chums* from 1912 at home, and the volumes of the *Strand Magazine* at my grandparents’ in their Wiltshire village, with a gloriously illustrated serialization of *The Lost World.*

One way and another, the most exciting period in popular British fiction was between 1880 and 1914—the works of Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, H.G.Wells, Rudyard Kipling, Conan Doyle,

and John Buchan especially— in which men ventured or were drawn into strange and scary places, whether on tropical islands or in the wicked depths of the English countrside. *Heart of Darkness* was the great paradigm here, of course.

There are still dark places, particularly on the Web, some of them ones to stay well clear of. Some things do defile. But I was glad to discover during my safari that this was not in fact a zone in which reason, as in Conrad's outposts of "civilization" on the Congo, had deteriorated into clichés masking cruelty and greed, or had never, as among the drumming imagined cannibals along the serpentine river, been ascended into.

Normal desires and intentions were at work in the junglies, at least such as I was able to access, including the pleasure of invention and craftsmanship, a sense of writerly community, and a preference in the plotting for difficulties overcome.

The books were very different from American shudder-pulps in the later Thirties like *Horror Stories* and *Terror Tales*, in which, to judge from anthologies, the cruelties were the point and the rest just in-fill. There was also none of the postwar *vrai*-American noir cynicism and crusading indignation.

The Britain to which ex-servicemen returned was not a whited sepulchre of plenitude concealing corruption. There had been singularly little wartime profiteering, and this was now a near-bankrupt country of shortages and inconveniences, under an egalitarian Labour government. The postwar black market was partly a pressure valve. Where else could Mum go if Dad liked a bit of bacon from time to time with his powdered eggs and all the coupons had been clipped from his ration book?

X

But I still detect an uncertainty in myself when it comes to adding Jungle names to my list of "normal" thrillers.

In the Jungle, particularly when explored for critical purposes, things are *strange*, and there are major unknowns. Thanks to Al Hubin's amazing bibliographical labours, the actual authorship of lots of

individual pseudonymous works seems pretty well established. But there's still the problem of accessibility.

Given the low survival rate, and lacking access to the handful of British and Irish libraries with substantial Jungle holdings, let alone the holdings of collectors who bought while the prices were what was on the covers, it's impossible with a lot of the names to build up a reliable sense of individual "authors," not biographically but as a matter of recurring interests and treatments. You're like a paleontologist trying to conjure up a dinosaur from a thighbone, a few claws, and a couple of vertebrae.

Ben Sarto, the nominal author of almost ninety titles of which I could only access four, was five different writers. And fascinating as is Steve Holland's *The Trials of Hank Janson* (2004), only a relative handful of works by poor, sad, self-defeating, unlucky Stephen Frances are described in it.

But Frances' hardcover *La Guerra; a Spanish Saga* (Delacorte 1970) is an impressive, "straight," 630-page historical novel, with nothing in common stylistically with the Jansons. And the horrifying *In the Hands of the Inquisition,* by "Maria Deluz," feels as though it's a translation of something by a fin-de-siècle French man-of-letters. What else, it seems permissable to wonder, may be hiding among his hundreds of other books with their twenty-five different pseudonyms?

There's also the question of norms and departures from them.

XI

I had read normal thrillers for pleasure, and was familiar with lots of recurring elements, and had no trouble deciding how well something was working. You knew after a while what you were getting into with Quiller, Modesty, Dorian Silk, Matt Helm, Travis McGee. And even when there were different protagonists, like in Charles Williams, Ross Thomas, John McPartland, and pre-McGee JDM, locales didn't change abruptly when you passed from one work to another, any more than when crossing state lines.

Part of the appeal of the junglies was that lots of them weren't formulaic in the Police Procedural, Damsel in Distress, Robbing the Bank, Private Eye sense. But this had its downside.

I mostly couldn't be sure whether the originality of a work was simply the result of others not having come my way. And there was a problem at times about the locales. Those in some of the private-eye junglies were straightforward pastiche. But mostly you had to do your own filling in, at times without even the benefit of street names. Which made it harder(to project yourself imaginatively into a car chase, or small-town bank robbery, or city shoot-out. There wasn't enough texture and traction.

XII

Very few of the junglies that I've read have gripped me from start to finish like ones from those years by real American writers like MacDonald, McPartland, Kenneth Millar, Wade Miller, Jim Thompson, and Charles Williams.

Poor production values (paper, printing, staples) probably has something to do with it. There's only so much risqué glamour that a cover, even by Reginald Heade, can create. (Gary Lovisi provides a rich sampling of pulp covers from those years in *Dames, Dolls, & Delinquents*, 2009.)

But basically, writers who were familiar with actual American locales, and cops, and reporters, and strippers, and eating-and-drinking habits, and speech patterns, and summer heat, and had been in the War and knew about guns and the basics of unarmed combat, had an edge over ones who'd never crossed the Atlantic, James Hadley Chase being a notable exception.

But there are exhilarating episodes and relationships in there, like in Pre-Code movies. And with so many titles, and such distances at times between a writer's best and worst writing, it would be rash to do any critical foreclosing. Maybe Hoggart's horrorscape still awaits out there, like King Solomon's mines, if one will just keep on beyond the next range of hills … and the next … and next ….

I'd be sorry, though, to see the chain-saws and earth-and-timber-moving machinery of Cultural Studies moving in on the region and trimming and tidying it with the kinds of "objective" descriptions of plots and categories that, while removing the thrill of the unknown, leave you as ignorant as before about the merits of a work.

XIII

How does Harold Kelly (Darcy Glinto, Buck Toler) look in such a broadened context?

During the Robin Hood years (1946–55), a lot of his creative energy was obviously going into his Westerns as Lance Carson, Clinton Wayne, and Bryn Logan, and his remarkable *Deep South Slave*. A number of his toughies were reprints, including bowdlerized texts of *Lady* and *Floozie.* Several of the new ones were pretty feeble, such as *Dainty Was a Jane, One More Nice White Body, Straight-Up Girl,* and *Dames are Deadly*.

But most of his subjects were offbeat in relation to the other junglies that I've read—an adoption racket, a dame passing as a male gangster, a prize-fighter expected to avoid sex while training, a spirited working lass taking to the roads and becoming a truck-stop girl, a young black Lothario refusing to knuckle under to the Georgia power system, etc.

In the weaker books, it's as if he simply wasn't trying. Purchasers weren't fussy about what they read, and the Robin Hood Press needed more titles. But when he was hot, he could build scenes of remarkable intensity, and he was usually exploring serious themes. Also—surprisingly, given what he'd done in 1940 in *Lady*—there's virtually no voyeurism in the post-war books.

He is especially notable for the breadth of his empathy with women, whether as feisty criminals (*Curtains for Carrie, No Come Back for Connie*), brave risk-takers (*Tough on the Wops, Blue Blood Flows East*), potential victims who fight back (*No Mortgage on a Coffin, You Took Me, Keep Me*), actual victims (*Lady—Don't Turn Over*), the maverick pre-*Thelma and Louise* Eileen Rourke of *Road Floozie*. And he is dead set against the internalizing of abuse as feelings of unworthiness that can destroy you, the way Miss Blandish (never a first name) is destroyed in *No Orchids.*

But he knew from inside what humiliation was like, and a would-be shaming trial figures in the only other book published over his own name, the nominal children's book *Monkey Goes Home* (Collins, 1949).

In a memorable episode in *Reluctant Hostess* (writing as Hank Janson), he has a poised, mature, and rich woman describe her servitude in a brothel:

> "It went on for five weeks. The [house] doctor had said toleration would come, but it isn't toleration you get to. It's an apathy of utter hopelessness. You have to accept that that is going to be your life for the future. You can see no possible way of escaping from it and you begin to feel so degraded that you cannot envisage going back to a clean and decent life even if the opportunity came. A misery settles inside you that is like a heavy ache that never goes. During the days you go through the motions of ordinary living, walking for exercise, eating your meals, even talking with the other girls. But you see yourself and the things you do as if they were some way off from you. You start by hating the people who have forced you to such a state but your feelings have to deaden. I guess you would go mad if they didn't. You end by having no feeling about them at all." (p.39)

And since there are no magic shields for the virtuous or innocent, and would-be dominators are implacable in their demands for surrender, there are moments of pure scary suspense in some of the books that I haven't encountered elsewhere except in MacDonald.

Kelly seems to me a much more interesting writer than Chase, who after four or five early books, settled down to an assembly-line competence, and turned out book after book that could indeed have been average American, with prose that translated easily into French, and plots that made them naturals for filming.

Kelly was Pre-Code, as it were, during that brief period, 1939–1941, when the attention of the government switched to weighter matters than sex and violence in pulo, figuring, maybe, that they helped to distract the citizenry from things going bump in the night.

He was a free spirit, protean as Darcy Glinto and Buck Toler (crime), Eugene Ascher (the occult), Lance Carson, Bryn Logan, and Clinton Wayne (Westerns), Preston York (SF), Hank Janson (Frances had sold the name), (Gordon Holt (racing), and two or three others. He was probably adversarial by temperament (*City Mid-Week* was moving in on occupied territory), and, much tougher-minded than poor Frances, he didn't let the bastards grind him down, despite his two losses in the

Old Bailey, the first for *City Mid-Week* and libel, the second for *Lady—Don't Turn Over, Road Floozie,* and obscenity.

His career also demonstrates the unwisdom of believing that the essential critical task is to connect up the dots in a writer's life and work, treat the resulting construct as his or her "mind," and decide whether it possesses the organic unity required if it's to be given serious attention as art (by definition a Good Thing).

He was living by his pen, at times he was obviously writing fast and carelessly, and his best works didn't improve his worst by osmosis. But equally, the latter didn't weaken the others, and in those he accomplished things that no-one else did. You would look in vain in the pages of Graham Greene for a passage of psychological acuity like the one quoted above, or passages as vibrant as ones in Kelly's Westerns.

Finding that scruffy paperback in the school locker was not an unmixed blessing. But I'm glad to have closed a circle and paid a debt. I wish I could have come up with more information. Maybe, while there's still time, abler researchers will have better luck.

About the Author

JOHN FRASER was born in North London, and has degrees from Oxford and the University of Minnesota, where he did a Philosophy minor, wrote the article on "American and British Poetics" for the first edition of the Princeton *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* and co-created with Thomas J. Roberts and others the quarterly *GSE*, which ran for three years.

From 1961 until his retirement as George Munro Professor of English, he taught at Dalhousie University. In 1990 he gave the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto.

His other eBooks are *Nihilism, Modernism, and Value*, *A Bit of This and a Bit of That about Poetry*, and *Desires.*

His three print books were published by Cambridge University Press. Articles of his appeared in *Partisan Review, Southern Review*, *Yale Review, Cambridge Quarterly, Studio International,* and other journals.

Reviewers found his widely noticed *Violence in the Arts* (1974) "both scholarly and extraordinarily interesting" (*New Republic*), "continuously stimulating" (*Economist*), "profoundly illuminating" (*Psychology Today*), the product of "an extremely agile and incessantly active mind which illuminates almost every subject it touches" (*Spectator*). A senior reviewer of *America and the Patterns of Chivalry* (1982) called it "a brilliant and utterly absorbing work. There are not many learned books which have the unputdownable quality of a thriller; this is one of them."

He was married to the artist Carol Hoorn Fraser (1930–1991), who is featured on his website, www.jottings.ca, which contains the equivalent of several other books, including his major revisionist anthology *A New Book of Verse.*

He is in Wikipedia as John Fraser (critic).