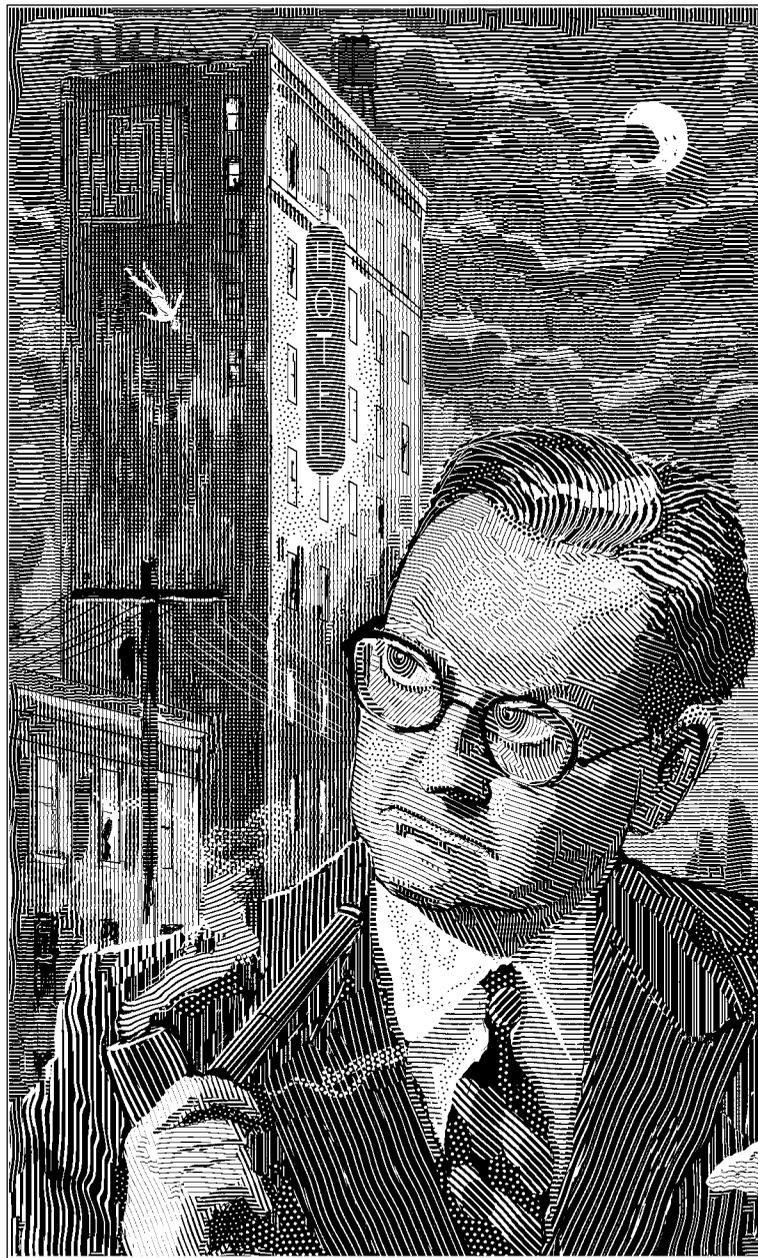


Essay by Christopher Flannery

THE CITY AND THE MAN



NOT LONG AFTER EL PUEBLO DE LA Reyna de Los Angeles, as some called it, was incorporated as an American city, Mayor Stephen C. Foster—graduate of Yale, physician, and member in good standing of the local vigilance committee—resigned his office to lead a lynch mob. Crooks, bandits, murderers, marauders, drunks, vagabonds, desperadoes, thugs, gangsters, pimps, and con men were crawling all over Los Angeles. Once the lynching was out of the way, the voters in a special election returned the mayor to office. He was one of the framers of the California Constitution and is credited with establishing Los Angeles's first public school.

The City of Angels was like the cities of men wherever you find them. Crime and folly re-

quired that some men be authorized to wield power over other men. But it was dangerous to invest the authorities with all the power that must be wielded and, besides, you must be careful not to taint them with the wielding. So irregular means of seeking justice would always be needed. Justice may be out there, but it was no easy thing to get, and no one with sense would be surprised to see injustice, crime, and folly going about in broad daylight arm-in-arm, largely undisturbed, in high and low places, to the end of time.

A few generations later, in the 1930s, now with over a million Angelenos rather than the scruffy few thousand at the beginning, the ways of the world, and of the city, had not changed. And these colorful, sad, and change-

less ways made work for a fictional private detective in the City of Angels—Philip Marlowe, hero of Raymond Chandler's novels, in whose pages one finds Marlowe conducting his irregular search for truth and justice while the city puts the best face it can on what justice it has to offer.

Chandler wrote seven novels, in addition to a couple of dozen short stories, a few screenplays, several essays, a smattering of forgettable poetry, and lots of letters, especially in the last decade of his life. His novels are what make him memorable as a writer, and in all the novels his hero—and his narrator—is Philip Marlowe and the setting is Los Angeles in the 1930s and '40s (though his last novel is set mainly in La Jolla). The



novels, collected by Chandler's first biographer, Frank MacShane, along with other writings, in a two-volume set for the Library of America, are *The Big Sleep* (1939), *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940), *The High Window* (1942), *The Lady in the Lake* (1943), *The Little Sister* (1949), *The Long Goodbye* (1953), and *Playback* (1958). *The Big Sleep* is the best known—director Howard Hawks turned it into a pretty good movie (1946), starring Humphrey Bogart (with Lauren Bacall), with a screenplay co-written by William Faulkner—but Chandler thought *The Long Goodbye* was his best, and he was right. *Farewell, My Lovely* is right up there.

Chandler's books offer us the image of a man who makes his world a more interesting place—and the first great image of Los Angeles. In surprising ways (well, they surprise me!), Chandler's hero, and his hero's work and dilemma, call to mind the world's first great private investigator, the Athenian who became the hero of Plato's dialogues, in whose pages one finds an image of the man and the city that seems likely to endure as long as cities and men endure. L.A. is no Athens, Marlowe is no Socrates, and Chandler is certainly no Plato—though he was cocky enough to liken his work to Shakespeare's—but if you're slumming in the rougher neighborhoods of American literature he's hard to beat, and one reason for this is that the comparisons are not altogether nuts.

Independence

THE CITY AND THE MAN ARE INSEPARABLE in Chandler's novels, as they are in Plato's dialogues. The city is the world within which the man conducts his private investigations. It makes those investigations possible and necessary. In L.A., when Marlowe came on the scene, there were 600 brothels and 18,000 unlicensed bars operating. The politicians, police, sheriff's office, and Big Business all collaborated regularly with organized crime in conducting the city's affairs. The newspapers were happy to sensationalize and Hollywood was eager to glamorize the spectacle.

In the most famous passage in Plato's most famous dialogue, Socrates concludes that until kings philosophize or philosophers become kings, there will be no end to injustice and turmoil in the cities of men. But philosophers, or wise men—the best of men—are hard to find, and even if you found one, he would have good reasons not to want to be king. Ignorance may have to force reluctant wisdom to assume power. It is a political riddle that will always be with us. The hard-nosed but straight-shooting Captain Webber explains it to Marlowe in *The Lady in*

the Lake, after revelations of some very nasty misdeeds by police officers under Webber's command:

Police business is a hell of a problem. It's a good deal like politics. It asks for the highest type of men, and there's nothing in it to attract the highest type of men. So we have to work with what we get.

Until there are philosopher-cops, there will be no end to mayhem in the cities.

Books mentioned in this essay:

Stories and Early Novels, by Raymond Chandler, edited by Frank MacShane. The Library of America, 1216 pages, \$40

Later Novels and Other Writings, by Raymond Chandler, edited by Frank MacShane. The Library of America, 1088 pages, \$40

The Raymond Chandler Papers: Selected Letters and Nonfiction, 1909–1959, edited by Tom Hiney and Frank MacShane. Atlantic Monthly Press, 288 pages, \$14

Raymond Chandler: a Biography, by Tom Hiney. Grove Press, 320 pages, \$15.95

A Mysterious Something in the Light: The Life of Raymond Chandler, by Tom Williams. Chicago Review Press, 400 pages, \$29.95

The Life of Raymond Chandler, by Frank MacShane. E.P. Dutton, 306 pages, out-of-print

Because there will always be crime and folly, cities will always need cops and jails, and because the cops will never be as wise and good as they need to be, cities will always need private investigators. Governed as it is by ignorance, the public machinery built for the sake of justice and in the name of justice seems unable to keep from crushing justice in its daily work. As Socrates tells it, the best a serious man can hope for is to preserve the justice in his own private soul against the relentless onslaught of the public injustice of this world, like a man huddling behind a wall as the foul winds blow. He tells of more than one instance in which, obliged by law to serve on a public council wielding power over other

Athenians, he attempted to bring some justice to the proceedings. Each time he failed; the best he could do, at the risk of his life, was to refuse to be a part of the injustices the authorities insisted on doing. He walked away and returned to his private inquiries. Philip Marlowe tried working for the Los Angeles district attorney for a while. But it didn't work out—it could never work out. As he tells wealthy old General Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*, who is thinking of hiring him: "I was fired. For insubordination. I test very high on insubordination, General." Anybody seriously concerned with justice would have to test high on insubordination, and would have to pursue such justice as he could find in private.

Marlowe explains the point to a tough and compromised but ultimately decent Lieutenant Breeze, who with a partner has been grilling Marlowe in his own living room in *The High Window*. Breeze tries to steer the conversation back to his complaint, which is that the private detective is holding out on them, but Marlowe won't have it. "I'm going to make a point," he says, "and it's an important point." And he tells a long story about a case in which a wealthy family protected their wealthy son from getting a murder rap he deserved.

Breeze said: "Make your point."

I said: "Until you guys own your own souls you don't own mine. Until you guys can be trusted every time and always, in all times and conditions, to seek the truth out and find it and let the chips fall where they may—until that time comes, I have a right to listen to my conscience, and protect my client the best way I can. Until I'm sure you won't do him more harm than you'll do the truth good. Or until I'm hauled before somebody that can make me talk."

Breeze said: "You sound to me just a little like a guy who is trying to hold his conscience down."

"Hell," I said. "Let's have another drink."

Private investigations are only possible for those who assert the independence to conduct them. Asserting this independence takes attitude, and Marlowe, like Socrates, had attitude in spades. The crooked cops or their bosses could rub him out like a bug, without breaking a sweat. The high-rolling crooks sneer at him and his \$25-a-day-and-expenses life the way Callicles sneers at Socrates in the *Gorgias*. "You're a piker, Marlowe," L.A. hoodlum "Mendy" Menendez tells him in *The Long Goodbye*. "You're a peanut grifter. You're so little it takes a magnifying glass to see you." Menendez, himself, boasting like Callicles,



doesn't mind pointing out that he has "lots of dough to juice the guys I got to juice in order to make lots of dough to juice the guys I got to juice." But Marlowe is "a cheapie, a guy cops can push around." This doesn't keep Menendez from doubling up "mewling" when Marlowe hits him in the guts with a right hook, just as a matter of principle. As Socrates became the judge of the city that presumed to judge him, Marlowe becomes the measure of his city's justice.

As Socrates tells his old friend Crito, if he lets himself be intimidated by threats to his life, how can he expect to be taken seriously when he tells people, as he always does, that it is better to die than to act shamefully. But nothing seems more arrogant than to appear indifferent to death. There is no greater assertion of independence. Marlowe has his own need to display this arrogance and independence to cops, crooks, clients, and even beautiful women. If he lets cops or crooks push him around, what could he offer his clients? Part of what he does offer them is his discretion—you can't beat a client's name out of him if he doesn't want you to. But he has to show his independence to his clients, too. If he was a lap dog he couldn't do for them what they want (or ought to want) him to do. He knows that his clients will often have reasons to lie to him or keep things from him, and he treats them accordingly. Some of them are being blackmailed; they don't want the cops involved. Private investigations are needed precisely in those dark corners of the city where public investigations will not do. On his better days he is helping someone who deserves some sympathy, some respect, someone vulnerable to the violation or corruption that cannot be purged from any city in this world. But a man has to make a living. As often as not his clients are trying to use Marlowe for their own dark purposes. If he didn't know this, he wouldn't be worth hiring. As he says in *The Lady in the Lake*, "most of the clients start out either by weeping down my shirt or bawling me out to show who's boss. But usually they end up very reasonable—if they're still alive."

It's the same with the beautiful women, who seem to fall into Marlowe's lap wherever he's sitting, or standing. He has to be independent of their charms, too, or he couldn't do his job. Not that he won't enjoy their charms, when business is slow. But his work requires him to ask embarrassing and intrusive job-related questions, even in the middle of a good kiss. And women, like anybody else, can take offense at that.

Socrates persisted in asking important people in the city of Athens a lot of embarrassing questions. This made them angry, and

eventually they put him to death. Marlowe's persistent questioning gets him shot, beat up, and dragged into jail, again and again. It is in the nature of these private investigations that they are annoying to everyone concerned: to the powers that have responsibility for enforcing justice in the city, to the forces of injustice, and even to the victims of injustice. Everyone has dark secrets they would rather not have dragged into the light of day. And the innocent bystanders of the world, if there are any, will always be fascinated by the spectacle.

The City

THE BEST OF THE COPS AND SOME OF their superiors know that they need Marlowe's independence, however annoying it may be, and however bad it makes them look from time to time. Their work and the work of the city go better with Marlowe around minding his own business. Still, minding one's own business seems to get tangled up with other people's business. Minding one's

Philip Marlowe is the kind of knight who knows that chivalry occasionally needs unchivalrous help.

business—doing one's own proper work—is the best definition of justice the interlocutors can come up with in Plato's *Republic*, but it is not very satisfying. Socrates did not liken himself to a gadfly for nothing. As Marlowe says to himself—in so many words—on many occasions, "I knew it was none of my business, so I went on in." In *The Long Goodbye*, contemplating washing his hands of a particularly dirty case, one part of him

wanted to get out and stay out, but this was the part I never listened to. Because if I ever had I would have stayed in the town where I was born and worked in the hardware store and married the boss's daughter and had five kids... chicken every Sunday and the *Reader's Digest* on the living room table, the wife with a cast iron permanent and me with a brain like a sack of Portland cement. You take it, friend. I'll take the big sordid dirty crooked city.

Every time.

Marlowe's investigations take him again and again down the troubled streets of the all too earthly City of Angels. This gives Chandler's novels their moodiness, their "smell of fear," the edge of anxiety or suspicion or worry, sometimes a world-weariness, an after-taste of lamentation. "It is not a very fragrant world," wrote Chandler, "but it is the world you live in." It was "a world gone wrong," in which "[t]he streets were dark with something more than night." Darker, somehow, for the brilliant L.A. sunshine, the palm trees and blue skies and shiny automobiles, the innocent girls from Kansas, now platinum blondes in Beverly Hills, and the always glittering Hollywood—where "anything can happen, anything at all."

Returning to his flat in the Hollywood hills after a hard day, Marlowe reflects on the city below him, again in *The Long Goodbye*:

I mixed a stiff one and stood by the open window...and sipped it and listened to the groundswell of the traffic on Laurel Canyon Boulevard and looked at the glare of the big angry city hanging over the shoulder of the hills through which the boulevard had been cut. Far off the banshee wail of police or fire sirens rose and fell, never for very long completely silent. Twenty-four hours a day somebody is running, somebody else is trying to catch him. Out there in the night of a thousand crimes people were dying, being maimed.... People were being beaten, robbed, strangled, raped, and murdered. People were hungry, sick, bored, desperate with loneliness or remorse or fear.... A city no worse than others, a city rich and vigorous and full of pride, a city lost and beaten and full of emptiness.

But that had been a bad day.

Chandler moved all around L.A. in the '30s and '40s, living with his wife Cissy in more than three dozen different places, usually for a few months at a time, until he finally settled in La Jolla in the late '40s. He loved to drive and had an eagle eye for detail that fills Marlowe's narratives with vivid local color. From Marlowe's office on Hollywood Boulevard or his rented bungalow in the hills above, to Santa Monica (Bay City in the novels), Malibu, back to Beverly Hills, downtown, across the Cahuenga Pass to the San Fernando Valley, and even east on lonely roads to the mountains beyond the orange groves around Claremont, Chandler created a new and lasting image of Los Angeles, weaving together with a magical style the city and the man who was his hero.



Frank MacShane, warming to the subject, wrote that Chandler used “the detective story to create the whole of Los Angeles in much the same way that Dickens and Balzac created London and Paris for future generations.” Maybe it is enough to say as does his latest biographer, Tom Williams, that Chandler’s work “came to define modern Los Angeles.” Whatever Chandler did, it was good enough for some local entrepreneurs to sell thousands of copies of the Raymond Chandler Mystery Map of Los Angeles, with directions to nearly a hundred locations from his books.

The Life

NOTHING OTHER THAN HIS WRITING would attract the attention of biographers to Raymond Chandler, but as he himself asked about biographies of writers: “Who cares how a writer got his first bicycle?” Still, since three biographies have been written of him, let it be stipulated that he was born in Chicago in 1888 and died in La Jolla in 1959.

He was born to an Irish Quaker immigrant mother and a father who worked as an engineer on the railroads and whose own Irish Quaker ancestors had come to America a few generations before. Chandler spent some parts of his childhood years in Nebraska and, when his father’s neglect and abuse caused his parents to separate, he moved with his mother to England. There, sponsored by an Irish uncle, he attended Dulwich College in south London between the ages of 12 and 17, got something of a classical education, displayed first-rate intelligence, learned to love London and England, and acquired the manner, habits, and accent of a middle-class English gentleman. When Chandler was attending Dulwich, a photograph of G.F. Watts’s portrait, *Sir Galahad*, hung in the school library, the knight in armor standing with a white horse. The image would stick in Chandler’s mind for a long time. (By the way, his first year at Dulwich, 1900, was P.G. Wodehouse’s last year.) He polished his French and German on the continent for a year (still supported by his uncle), tried his hand unsuccessfully and under avuncular duress at a position with the British civil service and then at various sorts of journalism, gave up, borrowed £500 from the uncle and returned to America first class, making his way to Los Angeles in 1913.

In 1917, he went to British Columbia and enlisted in the Canadian Army in time to see action the next year in the trenches in France. He was training for the Royal Air Force when

the Great War ended. Back in L.A., living with his mother as he did until her death in 1924, Chandler became a bookkeeper for an oil company, married a beautiful woman 18 years his senior (he didn’t know that at the time) who had been his friend’s wife (that he knew), and rose successfully in business until drinking and wild behavior got him fired in 1931. At which time he decided to do what he had always dreamed of doing, make himself a writer.

Chandler taught himself to write the way Ben Franklin did: by imitation. Franklin as a young man read essays in the *Spectator* and rewrote them in his own words, sometimes even setting them to verse. Chandler in middle age chose to imitate the crime fiction in the “pulp” magazine *Black Mask* and such places. Among other things, as he later told Gardner himself, he studied Earl Stanley Gardner, one of the most successful crime writers in America (and creator of Perry Mason). He did “an extremely detailed synopsis” of a Gardner story, rewrote the story, compared it with the original, and rewrote it again until he thought it “looked pretty good.” Looking back, he thought some of his early stuff was pretty crude, but he took more than a year to write his first story, “Blackmailers Don’t Shoot,” before submitting it to *Black Mask*. It was an instant hit. *Black Mask* editor Joseph Shaw thought the author must be crazy or a genius. “Any writer who cannot teach himself, cannot be taught by others,” Chandler thought. “Analyze and imitate. No other school is necessary.”

Most of Chandler’s short stories were written for the pulps (mainly *Black Mask* and *Dime Detective*) between 1933 and 1939—his apprenticeship. By the time he published his first novel in 1939, he was 51 years old. Of Chandler’s essays, “The Simple Art of Murder” remains a classic statement on the character of the detective novel. His letters, collected by Tom Hiney and MacShane in *The Raymond Chandler Papers*, were written mostly to people he did not know personally. “All of my best friends,” he wrote, “I have never met.” The most detailed biographical information about his hero Philip Marlowe is found in a five-page letter responding to an inquiry from a reader he’d never heard of. At least one literary scholar thinks Chandler’s published letters make “one of the best collections in the history of American literature.”

His first experience with a screenplay—learning by doing, late in the game—came in 1944, in a collaboration with Billy Wilder on what turned out to be the great film *Double Indemnity*. A few years later, he had a painful experience earning him partial credit for, though little influence upon, the screenplay of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train*

(1951); his last book, *Playback*, actually began as a screenplay and is published in that form, as well.

The saga of his writing the screenplay for *The Blue Dahlia* (1946) is a Hollywood story in neon. Alan Ladd, Paramount Pictures’ biggest star at the time, was called up for basic training in the Army in early 1945. The studio was desperate to make a movie with him before the Army got him. Casting about for material, they happened upon Chandler and a partially written story he had in a drawer. He set about writing the script as the film was being shot. Four weeks into the film, Chandler began to run out of gas. Among other things, he had gotten himself tangled up in the plot (never his strong suit). Panic ran through the studio like a naked chicken. They offered Chandler a \$5,000 bonus to get the script done on time; but he was already contractually obligated to do this, and his English public school gentleman’s soul took umbrage at the offer and froze his creative powers to a dead stop. With ten days left before Ladd had to leave, Chandler came up with a solution—he would drink his way to the finish. He launched his plan with a lunch at Perino’s that began with three double martinis and ended with three double stingers. Eight days stumbled by in a haze—doctors on call, six secretaries attending in shifts, Cadillac limousines ferrying pages from Chandler’s house to the studio almost line by line as shooting continued—but the screenplay was done, including rewrites, with time to spare.

Each of the three biographies of Chandler is competent. The more recent ones, Hiney’s (1998) and Tom Williams’s (2013) are the authors’ first books, written by young Englishmen. Each energetically scours the sources, and Hiney offers some eye-opening sketches of crime in L.A. in the ’30s and of censorship in Hollywood, but no great revelations seem to have emerged in the decades since the first biography appeared in 1976. Frank MacShane was an established American academic with some previous success writing biography when he wrote his Chandler book, and the quality of his writing and of his judgments is a cut above the others. He does a good enough job that his successors are left often with the unenviable choice of covering ground that has already been well covered or writing about things that are less relevant or interesting. The English interest in Chandler reminds us that in his time Chandler’s novels had a readership in England that was even more admiring than his American audience. In England he was more likely to be treated as a novelist; in America he was largely regarded as a crime writer. In the late ’40s, Evelyn Waugh, for what it’s worth, called him



“the greatest living American novelist.” But for anyone not yet familiar with Chandler, and wondering whether to become more familiar, it would be best, long before turning to any biography, to follow Chandler’s hint and consider his writing, starting with the novels, which have inspired a few readers, at least, to want to know how he got his first bicycle.

The Man

[D]own these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid.... He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world.... He talks as the man of his age talks, that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness. The story is his adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in.

If there were enough like him, I think the world would be a very safe place to live in, and yet not too dull to be worth living in.

These are the lines, from his classic essay “The Simple Art of Murder,” that are most often quoted to convey Chandler’s general conception of a detective hero, his work, and his relation to his city.

He presented his hero as a modern, worldly, vulnerable knight of the urban round table: “Phil Marlowe,” as a reliable character calls him to his face in *The High Window*, “The shop-soiled Galahad.” In the first scene of his first novel, *The Big Sleep*, Chandler introduces

the knightly theme. The well-dressed private detective enters the hallway of the wealthy client he is calling on:

Over the entrance doors, which would have let in a troop of Indian elephants, there was a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn’t have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. The knight had pushed the vizor of his helmet back to be sociable, and he was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. He didn’t seem to be really trying.

Further into the book, pondering with distaste the naked giggling homicidal daughter of the client who was in his bed (the daughter, not the client), Marlowe toys with pieces on the chessboard that is a standard feature in his rooms and reflects that “Knights had no meaning in this game. It wasn’t a game for knights.” This was just another way of saying what Marlowe would say some pages later when contemplating how much of a chance to give the cold-blooded murderer, Lash Canino, before pouring a few slugs into him: this wasn’t the time “to be a gentleman of the old school.”

Terry Lennox, Marlowe’s unreliable friend in *The Long Goodbye*, now masquerading as a Mexican and lying to Marlowe, stands on his honor when called on his lies: “*El honor no se mueve de lado como los congrejos*. That is, honor does not move sideways like a crab, señor.” Marlowe’s not buying. “You guys are always talking about honor. Honor is the cloak of thieves—sometimes.” Marlowe is the kind of knight who knows that chivalry occasionally needs unchivalrous help, a gentleman of the old school who knows it’s necessary in a pinch to relax school rules, a man of honor who understands that honor does sometimes have to move sideways, for the sake of honor itself, if it is not going to become empty pos-

ing. And, in any case, he wouldn’t go around talking about it.

And yet chivalry, and honor, and the old school rules matter. They are irreplaceable and irreducible. The world might need some cold-blooded killing, but the world is not reducible to cold-blooded murderers gunning one another down. Something above these things is always needed and is always present in Chandler’s books. Toward the end of *The Big Sleep* it is recognized in a passing moment by the butler (who himself possesses it to a degree), when he sees in Marlowe a certain quality, also shared by an Irish bootlegger, that makes a man worthy of regard and hard to resist. He calls it “the soldier’s eye.”

Because the hard-boiled detective story seems to look without blinking at a world of crime, folly, and injustice, some have supposed the genre to be depicting the world with “realism,” meaning by realism the recognition that in this world the strong do what they will and the weak do what they must, and that’s that. In modern times, something like this is what people usually mean when they speak of a Hobbesian world—a world governed by fear, a war of every man against every man.

But this is not the world of Chandler’s books. Like Plato’s Socrates, Chandler’s Marlowe understands that this is not realism at all, but a blindness to the most important reality. It is better to suffer injustice than to do it, as Socrates would say. The knightly formula would be—death before dishonor. Fear is not the ultimately governing passion in the real world because justice or honor is real and of decisive importance. Marlowe is a greater realist than Canino, and Chandler a greater realist than Thomas Hobbes—who turns out to be a strange kind of dystopian, who would build a world where fear is more real than justice or honor. Chandler is realist enough to recognize that that is crazy. His books endure, aside from their charm, because of the superior attraction of that realism. That moral realism, in fact, is the most essential ingredient of Raymond Chandler’s charm.

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