“How Did You Know He Licked His Lips?”: Second Person Knowledge and First Person Power in *The Maltese Falcon*

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“What Do You Want Us to Think the Facts Are?”
*Epistemology and Detective Fiction*

Classification is an occupational hazard for any theorist of detective stories—in part because there are so many convenient but competing axes for sorting them out. You can, for instance, differentiate novels according to the location of the guilt they uncover—say, between Hercule Poirot stories (where detective and criminal are kept rigorously separate) and Oedipal stories (where, as in William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust* or Raymond Chandler’s *The*...
Big Sleep, a key discovery is a discovery of the detective’s own guilt. Alternatively, you can organize them according to their treatment of time—between backward-facing stories (for instance, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s A Study in Scarlet) where the key events precede the detective’s intervention, and stories where the primary events are those provoked by the investigation itself—say, Sara Paretsky’s Bitter Medicine. It is also popular to distinguish stories stylistically, as between classical British and hard-boiled American.

In this essay I want to work along another axis, looking at detective stories in terms of the way they conceptualize the nature of truth. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that “when the novel becomes the dominant genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline” (15), and from this perspective the detective story would seem one of the most novelistic of subgenres. Granted, this is complex terrain that engages a number of intersecting questions, both epistemological and metaphysical. Nonetheless, I think we can draw a crucial, if rough, dividing line between two sorts of texts. The first relies on what we might call the Fort Knox notion of truth, a phrase with a double resonance for connoisseurs of early detective fiction, since one of the first attempts to chart out the “rules” for classical detective novels was Ronald Knox’s “A Detective Story Decalogue.” Fort Knox novels, often embodying positions associated with empiricism, realism, and especially positivism (as Knox puts it, “all supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course” [194]), rest on the twin assumptions that the truth exists and that it can be found through rational procedures. That is, their plots are constructed on the belief that the truth value of a particular claim can be determined according to some external and transcendent standard independent of the perspective or context of the individual making the claim, a standard that is available to the skilled detective. Most traditional detectives, from Oedipus and Sherlock Holmes through Mike Hammer and Travis McGee, take the Fort Knox position, assuming, as Michael Holquist puts it, that “the mind, given enough time, can understand everything” (141). Indeed, Ellery Queen built the notion of an independent standard and a single solution into the very format of some of his best novels, offering
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an explicit challenge to the reader at the point where all the necessary information to reach the one right answer had been provided.

Even many of the traditional novels that appear to trifle with these conventions end up firmly wedded to them. Queen's Ten Days' Wonder, for example, reads in part as a subversion of the Fort Knox position, suggesting that more than one solution might fit the available facts. Still, in the end, the novel does not equivocate about what really happened: we may be tricked by false stories, but there is ultimately a difference between true and false accounts, and they can be distinguished in practice, if not always in time to prevent misfortune. Similarly, Anthony Berkeley's The Poisoned Chocolates Case, which multiplies the number of possible explanations, ultimately determines one to be the true story.

In contrast, such postmodern detectives as Jacques Revel (in Michel Butor's L'Emploi du temps [Passing Time]) or Witold (in Witold Gombrowicz's Cosmos) resist the siren call of positivism. Philosophically, they're allied with what might be called the barter school of truth, a school often associated with what Katheryn Doran has aptly called the "seductive conflation of epistemological skepticism and metaphysical relativism." Unlike Fort Knox adherents, champions of this position believe that perspective inevitably influences any account (or attempted account) of reality. As a result, what will "count as" truth is always a context-dependent construction.

As I have suggested, there are numerous variations within this broad grouping. In Les Gommes (The Erasers), for instance, Alain Robbe-Grillet surprisingly combines metaphysical realism with his epistemological skepticism, suggesting that there is a true narrative of the events, although it is inaccessible to any of the characters in the world of the novel. Cosmos appears to be more thoroughly postmodern, suggesting that no transcendental narrative exists at all, although the novel's (probably coincidental) intertextual references to the life and music of Alban Berg confuse the issue. Still, despite their differences, the novelists in this second camp reject the belief that we can determine the truth of particular claims; at most, we make truth discursively and rhetorically by telling stories.
and negotiating among them, bartering truth claims in exchanges that are either taken up or not according to the needs of a particular social context (including its power relations). For these countercultural detectives, the search is not for some empirically verifiable "truth" but rather for some coherent story "about" the world, preferably one with enough persuasive power to gain acceptance from whoever needs to be convinced.

For the most part, these novels do not pursue their philosophical quarry all the way to the most radical skepticism (although Paul Auster, in his New York Trilogy, comes close). In particular, most do not deny the existence of brute material facts, and do not throw doubt on the possibility of direct observation of the present. But, much like Alain Resnais and Robbe-Grillet's L'Année dernière à Marienbad (Last Year at Marienbad), they suggest that the past (even the immediate past) exists only in the form of present material objects. "History" (and any detective story necessarily involves its characters in some attempt at historical reconstruction) is consequently a matter of inventing stories about those present objects. Any story that can account for those material objects has equal validity; whether or not it is accepted thus depends not on its fidelity to what is the case, but rather on its barter value for the particular context in which it is presented.

"The Soft Grey Sheen of Lead": Clipping the Wings of the Maltese Falcon

Traditionally, Dashiell Hammett's The Maltese Falcon has been read as a straight hard-boiled detective story, with little interest in erudite philosophical issues. This is not to say, of course, that the novel has not been widely read as a serious social critique. Liahna K. Babener, for instance, is typical in claiming that the novel's "target ... is the duplicity of the Horatio Alger myth" (78). But on the whole, there's been little interest in considering The Maltese Falcon as a philosophical novel fundamentally "concerned with stories and storytelling" (Schulman 400).
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There is good reason, of course, for the customary readings. The novel first appeared in the context of the early Black Mask school, and many of its surface features—its clipped, tough "masculine" dialogue; its complex, fast-moving plot; its cynical antisentimentalism—appear to invite the reader to apply the same reading strategies demanded by other tough novels of the period, rather than, say, the strategies demanded by such then avant-garde contemporaries as Woolf or Pirandello, much less the strategies later demanded by Robbe-Grillet and Auster. Yet different features emerge as significant for readers of different historical periods. And as we grow accustomed to thinking and rereading in postmodern terms, the stability of Hammett's novel increasingly begins to dissolve, as Percy Walton and Kathryn Gail Brock's parodic readings have in their different ways demonstrated. From the arrival of Brigid O'Shaughnessy in Sam Spade's office, it's a novel in which the plot consists not of events, but of continual acts of narrativizing and renarrativizing about events that may or may not have taken place. Even Lieutenant Dundy, the character most committed to meaning what he says (21), finds that he has to invent stories ("Nobody saw it, but that's the way it figures" [22]) and deal with the inventions of others: "What do you want us to think the truth is?" he asks Brigid O'Shaughnessy with a scowl of aggravation (75). The characters are not centered subjects, but assume a dizzying series of self-conscious roles that cast doubt on traditional notions of identity: Brigid O'Shaughnessy's carefully choreographed transformations in particular, from the timid Miss Wonderly clasping her handbag to the teary, love-wracked beseecher of the final confrontation, confirm that this is a world in which the equation between who you are and what your story is is more than a dead metaphor (22). The stability of gender, too, is undermined, not only by the dynamics of the Gutman-Wilmer-Cairo trio or the fight between Cairo and Brigid O'Shaughnessy over the boy in Constantinople (68), but even more by Spade's boyish but femininely seductive secretary Effie Perine. Novelistic clichés—the reliability of women's intuition, the joviality of the fat man—are turned inside out. Messages—even a condolence note to a lover upon her liberation from a husband she
detested—are severed from their senders. Clues—for instance, the hole in the newspaper that Spade finds in Cairo’s hotel room—are often marked by absence rather than presence, just as Archer’s murder in the San Francisco fog is celebrated by the erasure of his name from the door of the detective agency’s office.

To the extent that there is a story, it is a story of a search without a beginning. Spade’s first words to Brigid O’Shaughnessy may be “Suppose you tell me about it, from the beginning” (5), but since he doesn’t expect “it” to be believable, he hardly expects that it will have a real origin. More important, the search is a search without an ending, except the promise of endless deferral. It’s consistent, then, that in common with much postmodernist thought, the novelistic acid eats away at the distinction between fiction and history. Indeed—and it came as a shock when I called up the OCLC catalog on my computer to check this out—the historical texts that Casper Gutman uses to buttress his story about the falcon turn out to be “actual” historical works, and the stories that he tells fit the facts that we know. Thus, although Ernie Bradford’s version of the story puts into question the Knights’ power and their undiluted enthusiasm for Malta (which apparently required them, in addition, to garrison Tripoli: “It is indicative of the desperate straits to which the Order had been reduced that they agreed to the Emperor’s offer”), his account confirms the basic story of the “annual nominal rent of one falcon” (123). The assessment of Effie Perine’s fictional historian-cousin Ted (“the names and dates are all right, and at least none of your authorities or their works are out-and-out fakes” [139]) thus collapses the distinction between the authorial and narrative audiences.

Money—the anchor of capitalism—is deconstructed as well. Gutman may claim that the cash he hands to Spade is “actual money, genuine coin of the realm” that somehow transcends the merely discursive: “With a dollar of this, you can buy more than with ten dollars of talk” (174). But the novel represents a world of counterfeitters, too (119), and even Gutman’s apparently legitimate thousand-dollar bills can not only disappear, but even change the very nature of their being: at the end, the one remaining bill has been transformed from a payment into an “exhibit” (215-16).
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Then, too, although the novel has sometimes been treated as a Hemingwaysque endorsement of a masculine code of honor and loyalty, the novel's intertextual links with Prosper Mérimée's 1829 short story "Mateo Falcone" serve to undercut that code, too, as well as traditional bourgeois notions of the family. Mérimée's brutal little anecdote concerns a father who executes his own son out of devotion to a higher code of conduct—for the child, bribed with the promise of a silver watch, has turned a fugitive over to the government authorities, becoming "the first of his line to have committed a betrayal" (Mérimée, 65). Hammett twice inverts this scenario: when Gutman, who "feel[s] towards Wilmer just exactly as if he were [his] own son" (178), nonetheless agrees to turn him over to the police in exchange for the falcon, and again when Spade turns over Brigid O'Shaughnessy.

Most striking, of course, is the falcon/phallus itself (what Sam Spade calls a "dingus"): for the transcendental signifier that ostensibly gives meaning and value to the world of the novel displays the "soft grey sheen of lead" (202), as it turns out to be just another counterfeit of a unique original that may or may not exist. No surprise, then, that in this novel, pistols—for instance, the "tools bulging [Wilmer's] clothes" (95)—keep multiplying and changing hands, a thematic ploy that reaches comically Ionesco-like proportions when the guns are all (or nearly all) shut up in the closet during the long negotiation scene. No surprise, either, that the other variant of the phallus—the crucial fall guy—miraculously disappears from a crowded room.

The Maltese Falcon, like most other postmodern detective stories, refrains from challenging the existence of an observable material present, although like them it rhetorizes history. History becomes a matter of telling stories about present objects, and any story that can account for the material traces of the past—any story, as Spade puts it, that "seems to click with most of the known facts"—will "hold," as long as you have the power to persuade your listeners to go along with it (115). Nor does the novel confront the abyss by endorsing either despair or aesthetic free play. Rather, in common with such other macho preexistentialists as Hemingway,
Hammett seems to be trying to propose a way of controlling one’s environment (and preserving “self,” in body if not in soul) in a world where truth is relative and where violence (whether in the form of gunshots or of beams falling from construction sites) erupts without warning. Spade’s “way of learning is to heave a wild and unpredictable monkey wrench into the machinery” (86), and his refusal to “settle” into a “groove” (64) is, to a large extent, what ensures his survival and success, not to mention his status as a hero.

"Wait Till I’m Through and Then You Can Talk": Power and Narrative Technique

I do not want to overstate the extent of The Maltese Falcon’s postmodernism. As I pointed out, there are also numerous conventional signals that invite us to read the novel as a traditional hard-boiled text: this is a world of real violence and real corpses, without any of the ghostly ambiguities of perception that haunt Auster’s trilogy, and without any of the nagging ambiguities of plot that make the world of Butor’s L’Emploi du temps (where we never even find out whether or not there was a crime) such an unsettling experience. Still, the presence of these deconstructive counterforces fundamentally disturbs the equilibrium of the text; and the reader who picks up on the novel’s questioning spirit is apt to be taken aback when the novel’s postmodern unraveling itself falls apart in the paradoxically tight-knit ending.

The clarity of the conclusion is no doubt partly a result of the pressures of genre: Hammett was apparently not yet ready to give us a detective story without an ending. But there’s also a deeper sexual-political cause. If any poststructuralist interpretive doctrine has acquired general currency, it is the belief that texts assert what they’re at most pains to deny. And if the clear epistemological and metaphysical structures of traditional realist detective fiction aim to deflect our attention from metaphysical and political aporias, what is being furtively asserted by this text when it so steadfastly
refuses to assert anything at all? What I’d like to suggest here is that, through its very rhetorical structure, the novel deconstructs its own postmodern refusal to take a stand—its own rejection of what Casper Gutman calls “plain speaking and clear understanding” (105)—covertly reasserting precisely those traditional values it so ostentatiously undermines, and falling back on an unexamined myth of absence. And the novel does so because it reaches a rhetorical impasse where, in order to follow through on its own barter-school program, Hammett and Spade would be required to accept women as independent subjects.

The novel turns into a self-affirming artifact most clearly through its treatment of embedded narratives, stories within stories. In order to explain how this happens, I’d like to introduce two distinctions: one between two kinds of transmission as a story moves from one level to the next, the other among three types of narration. To begin with transmission: when light waves travel from one medium to another, one of two things can happen. If they hit perpendicular to the surface of the new medium, they continue on in the same direction, in a straight line; but if they hit obliquely, they are refracted, and move off at a different angle. Similarly, when a story moves from one medium to another, one of two things can happen. In straight line transmission, intervening levels of narration do not in any significant way deflect the story being told. In Voltaire’s Candide, the Old Woman’s tale has the same claim to authenticity as the narration that frames it. More elaborately, in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, Safie’s letters are presented with four levels of embedding. We know them only from Walton’s letters, which include Victor Frankenstein’s narrative, which in turn includes the monster’s story, which in turn includes the letters—or at least copies that he made of them, copies we’re told of, but never shown (108). Nonetheless, as readers, it is as if we have direct access to the letters; the intervening levels don’t interfere in any way with our rhetorical connection to the originals.

In refractive transmission, by contrast, each intervening level bends the story, so that our attention as readers is necessarily divided between what is narrated and the twists introduced by the
act of narration itself. Indeed, such embedded stories are thus both refracted and refractory, in the sense that they resist easy interpretation. Thus, for instance, in Mikhail Lermontov's *Hero of Our Time*, we learn about the characters as much from how they narrate as from what is said about them, and the differences between the accounts given by Pechorin and those given by Maxim Maximich are crucial to our sense of the novel.

Now either type of transmission—straight line or refractive—is in principle consistent with a Fort Knox notion of truth: for while the Fort Knox doctrine hinges on the assumption that the truth is potentially available, it does not follow that a particular individual will be capable of (or interested in) actually finding it. Much of Poirot's detection, therefore, consists of sorting out conflicting refracted narratives, some consciously false, some simply mistaken, in order to discover the transcendent truth at their origin. But while the Fort Knox notion does not necessarily entail straight line transmission, straight line transmission *does* entail Knoxism. Straight line transmission inevitably involves both the possibility and the actuality of identity between two versions of a story—not merely a possible partial overlap (as in *As I Lay Dying*, where Cash and Darl may partially confirm each other's narrative of Jewel's past), but an absolute match between the telling and the told, *as well as* a way of determining that that match has occurred. Because of this, we can't have straight line transmission in a world where the very act of perception changes (in some versions, even creates) what is perceived. The barter notion of truth therefore necessarily requires refractive transmission.

My second distinction is among first, second, and third person narration. Although this distinction is commonplace in narrative theory (enough so that as long ago as 1961, Wayne Booth called it "overworked" [150]), its value has been obscured by the grammatical terminology, which encourages us to concentrate on the surface manifestations of the text. But surface does not always match significant structure: Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* uses third person grammar, but the narrative has all the characteristics of a retrospective first person novel. I would like to propose, then, that
we reconsider the terminology, and think of narrative person not as a grammatical category—nor even what Genette calls a “narrative posture” (*Narrative Discourse* 244)—but rather as a rhetorical situation embracing not only the teller but the audience as well.9

To be schematic for a moment: let us assume that narrator A says to audience B that referent C did something. (I’m using the term “referent” here because the terms “subject” and “object” introduce too many ambiguities of meaning.) In the simplest type of what I’m calling third person narrative, the three positions (A, B, and C) are clearly distinct, and the third of them is, moreover, absent from the scene of reception. “A photograph of Mama Chona and her grandson Miguel Angel—Miguel Chico or Mickie to his family—hovers above his head on the study wall beside the glass doors that open out into the garden. When Miguel Chico sits at his desk, he glances up at it occasionally without noticing it, looking through it rather than at it.” So begins Arturo Islas’s *The Rain God* (3), and we know that Miguel Chico is neither telling nor being told the story. In first and second person narration, however, some of these positions are collapsed. In the simplest type of first person narration, it is the narrator and referent who are collapsed: “Last year, on the evening of March 22, I had a very strange adventure” (Dostoevsky 1). And in second person narration, most often found in spoken discourse (or its novelistic representation), it’s the distinction between audience and referent that’s collapsed: “You are about to begin reading Italo Calvino’s new novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveler*. Relax. Concentrate. Dispel every other thought” (Calvino 3).10

For the most part, these rhetorical categories overlap with the traditional grammatical categories. Thus most first person narratives in my sense are composed in the grammatical first person. But as I’ve suggested, *Intruder in the Dust* is rhetorically a first person narrative, since narrator and referent are identical, despite the grammatical construction that describes Chick in the third person throughout. Likewise, we learn at the end of Albert Camus’s *La Peste* (*The Plague*) that we’ve been reading a first person narrative in which the narrator refers to himself in the third person.
Despite such famous exceptions as Butor’s La Modification and Calvino’s If on a winter’s night a traveler, second person is rarely used as the top—that is, the most inclusive—level of narration (I’m calling on this rather informal terminology in large part because the more familiar terms Genette uses in Narrative Discourse—extradiegetic, diegetic, metadiegetic—are so cumbersome). Indeed, even some of the rare texts that are second person in grammar are not second person in rhetoric. For instance, Rex Stout’s How Like a God (1929) is written, except for the brief interchapters, in a grammatical second person. But, as the third person interchapters make clear, it’s really a variant of first person narration—an internal monologue that we might call narcissistic narration—in which the narrator is speaking to himself about himself.

This relative scarcity of complete second person texts, coupled with the popularity of Genette’s homodiegetic/heterodiegetic distinction (which seems to remove second person narration as a serious option [but see Narrative Discourse Revisited 133–34]), has resulted in a widespread tendency to brush second person narration aside. But while second person narration is rare on the top level of narrative organization, it’s found widely in smaller narrative units. In particular, as Robyn Warhol has shown, it’s found in direct address to the reader, especially in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction; and it is frequent in embedded narration—where it is a dramatized narratee rather than the narrative or authorial audience of the text as a whole that’s being narrativized. It certainly occurs at a crucial juncture in The Maltese Falcon.

What is useful about this reconception of person is that by stressing the relationship not only between narrator and story but also between narrator and audience, we get a handle not only on epistemological issues (the questions about what the narrator knows stressed by so many traditional studies of point of view) but on issues of power as well. In particular, this analysis underscores that second person narration, especially second person refractive transmission, opens up the possibility of feedback—feedback not in its current trendy meaning, as when a Dean tells faculty or students to provide some “feedback” on the latest course valua-
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tion form, but in its more precise acoustic/electronic meaning, the
screech that occurs when an infinite loop is created between a
microphone and a speaker that is simultaneously serving as both
the input and the output of the microphone. That's because in
second person narration, the referent of the story, being also the
audience, is present at the site of reception, and thus always has the
potential to insist on retelling his or her story in his or her own way,
a further act of narration that can itself become embedded in the
story that the original narrator is telling, and so on ad infinitum. In
contrast, a third person narration, even when refracted, has an
absent referent, and hence closes down the possibility for feedback.
When Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy the Flitcraft story,
for instance, his transmission is clearly refractive. The curve be­
tween Flitcraft's own story and Spade's story about that story
shows up in Spade's ironic stance toward the story he tells, in the
judgmental element introduced through the act of telling: "I don't
think he even knew he had settled back naturally into the same
groove he had jumped out of in Tacoma. But that's the part of it I
always liked" (64). But the feedback potential in that ironic distance
never drowns out the present rhetorical situation, for Flitcraft—if
he exists—isn't present, and hence has no opportunity to provide
commentary on the tale.

It is more difficult, however, to reduce feedback in second person
refracted narrative. There are two primary ways of silencing a
referent-audience: conversion and coercion. Conversion has sev­
eral variations. One can, for instance, seduce the audience into
accepting the narrator's version of the story by offering pleasure.
That kind of seduction forms the central intrigue in Marienbad, as X
tries to persuade A that his stories about what happened to them
last year are worth believing. In a very different way, we see the
same kind of technique when Spade tries to create a story that will
work with the District Attorney: "He's more interested in how his
record will look on paper than anything else. . . . To be sure of
convicting one man he'll let half a dozen equally guilty accomplices
go free. . . . That's the choice we'll give him and he'll gobble it up"
(180). Alternatively, one can mediate between conflicting stories
until some mutually acceptable version is found: that's what happens, for instance, in the conversation between Violet Stoke and Charles Watkins in Doris Lessing's Briefing for a Descent into Hell, or between Spade and Gutman when they negotiate a trade of the fall guy for the falcon.

But whether in the form of seduction or mediation, conversion-generated silencing places the audience in a subject position—a position to make choices. One can avoid that necessity through the second alternative, sheer force—what Spade resorts to when casting Wilmer as the fall guy. When dealing with men, these two alternatives seem adequate—even when dealing with gay men, although Spade (and Philip Marlowe, too) seems to prefer violence as an alternative to offering subjecthood. Violence is especially characteristic of his dealings with Wilmer. He alternately beats up and negotiates with Cairo, but he never extends the option of serious negotiation to Wilmer, who seems to get more deeply under his skin—perhaps because his "hard masculine neatness" (93) casts more doubts on the meaning of Spade's own masculinity than does the effeminacy of Cairo, with his smell of chypre. Spade beats up Wilmer before he tells him, "This will put you in solid with your boss" (121), and Spade's brief second person narrative before Wilmer is chosen as the fall guy ("Two to one they're selling you out, son") is similarly accompanied by silence rather than feedback ("The boy did not say anything" [184]).

Something quite different, though, happens in his final scene with Brigid O'Shaughnessy. There's certainly no literal violence at this climax of the plot (perhaps some residue of chivalry makes him squeamish about knocking her out—although it's significant that he's willing to force her to strip in his quest for the palmed thousand-dollar bill). But neither is Spade willing to give her the freedom to negotiate her future. This refusal is all the more strikingly noticeable because of its jarring contiguity with the lengthy give-and-take with Gutman. One cannot, of course, be absolutely sure of Spade's (or Hammett's) reasons for this: Spade may feel (although the prior events in this novel would hardly support this belief) that she is more duplicitous than Gutman. It
may be, as I've suggested earlier, that Hammett feels an aesthetic need to close off the infinite possibilities of his text.

Still, it's hard to ignore Spade's uncharacteristically obsessive insistence that he "won't play the sap" for her (212-15). He's told her earlier, half in jest, that "You don't have to trust me, anyhow, as long as you can persuade me to trust you" (65), and there is good reason to believe that, because of her sexual allure—because it's "easy enough to be nuts about" her (214)—her powers of persuasion are more than Spade wants to handle. Certainly her sexual power has been deadly for Thursby, Captain Jacobi, and especially for Miles Archer. Spade, of course, considers himself less "dumb" (208) than Archer ("You've got brains, yes you have" he tells his leering partner sarcastically when he starts to make his move on Brigid O'Shaughnessy [101], and less of a "sucker for women" than Thursby (207). But there's evidence that Gutman's claim "We mere men should have known better than to suppose ourselves capable of coping with her" (192) applies to Spade more than he would sometimes like to believe. After all, Gutman requires drugs to shut Spade up, but Brigid O'Shaughnessy manages to shut him up by simply putting "her open mouth hard against his mouth" (89).

In the final scene, Spade is intensely aware of this power as he reviews his past with Brigid O'Shaughnessy: "You came into my bed to stop me asking questions" (212). And he's well aware of the way that the continued presence of her body, always an embarrassment in an act of narration, makes the outcome of a life-threatening seduction or negotiation doubly doubtful ("Last night you came here with them and waited outside for me and came in with me. You were in my arms when the trap was sprung" [212]), especially since she is fully aware of both the danger of the situation and the source of her power ("God damn you—you've counted on that" [215]). There is much to be said about the reasons for and implications of Hammett's and Spade's attitudes toward women—it's significant, for instance, that both Brigid O'Shaughnessy and Effie Perine are consistently objectified by the author's (although not the characters') insistence on calling them by full name, first and last. But for my purposes here the effects, not the causes, are of primary
concern. For finding himself unwilling to have Spade either batter Brigid O'Shaughnessy or let her negotiate, Hammett silences her with a rhetorical, rather than a physical, coercion, a sleight of pen that reinscribes what Percy Walton has called the "dominant colonizing norm," a "singularizing effort . . . that . . . ignores difference when it accepts its own desires as more important than the desires of the space it seeks to dominate" ("Paretsky's VI." 203-4).

Specifically, in their famous final confrontation, second person narration is treated as a third person narration. That is, although Brigid O'Shaughnessy is literally both audience and referent of the discourse, Spade's account of her story is made definitive, as she is rhetorically objectified as absent and hence silent (her few remaining snippets of dialogue do nothing to challenge the narration). What makes this rhetorical sleight-of-hand possible? She says nothing because she has nothing to say: no feedback loop is started up because—and both Brigid O'Shaughnessy and Spade know this—no dissonance is registered between her perception and his. "How did you know he—he licked his lips and looked—?" she asks (209), and in asking this question, she affirms the consonance of their stories, and consequently affirms the straight line of his transmission. On the surface, perhaps, the potential for dialogue continues: "Wait till I'm through and then you can talk," he tells her (214). But because she has already accepted the congruence of the stories, she can do nothing but confirm the correctness of his version of her story; she tries one last barter—with body, rather than text (215)—but it's a futile gesture, and the doorbell rings just as she puts her arms around him.

It's worth distinguishing between Hammett's and Spade's performances here. It's Spade who tells the story, but it's the implied author who creates Brigid O'Shaughnessy's assent. That assent serves to end the story and contain the woman without violence, and its sheer dramatic power makes it easy for the reader to accept without question. But under the surface, the ending comes at tremendous epistemological cost. For in order to guarantee that assent, Hammett has to resort, at this key moment, to a straight-line embedded narrative. And in this apparently purely formal
choice, Hammett smuggles in precisely the Fort Knox conception of truth that his novel has been at such pains to resist. It grounds Spade’s story as true, but it deconstructs the patient deconstruction of foundationalism that forms the very basis of the novel’s epistemological project.

No wonder, then, that Effie Perine seems so depressed at the end—refusing to let Spade touch her—when she has to go along with this epistemological turnaround. As I’ve suggested, this “lanky sunburned girl” with a “boyish face” (3) has had gender-crossing license throughout the novel—as Spade says, “You’re a damned good man, sister” (160). (No doubt her name, with its echoes of “peregrine,” gives her some falcon/phallic privileges.) But when she says, “I know—I know you’re right” (217), she realizes that there’s no longer any opening for the kind of dialogue that has enlivened their relationship up until now. For most of the novel, Spade has given her the choice of siding with Brigid O’Shaughnessy, even against him (“You’re sore because she did something on her own hook,” she argues; “Why shouldn’t she?” [153])—and Effie Perine has belied the clichés about women’s rivalry by remaining steadfast in her loyalty to Brigid O’Shaughnessy, even though they’re both sexually attracted to the same man. But the ending of the novel proves that female bonding has been a mistake—that there is, in fact, a right and wrong to the situation, and that Effie Perine has simply been wrong.

Spade’s situation is no more upbeat than Effie Perine’s. Throughout the novel, he has prided himself on his flexibility and unpredictability. But although he enters his office with cheerful lines on his face and clear eyes, the superficially bland final sentences strike a very different note. Effie Perine enters Spade’s inner office to announce that Iva Archer, the indefatigable mistress Spade has been trying to elude for the entire novel (“I wish to Christ I’d never seen her” [27]), has arrived once again at the office. “‘Yes,’ she said, and shivered. ‘Well, send her in’” (217). The echo of his decision to turn Brigid O’Shaughnessy in to the police (“I’m going to send you over” [211]) underscores the connection between Spade’s rhetorical victory over Brigid O’Shaughnessy and his philosophical defeat.
For in the wake of the Knoxian solution has come a chilling kind of return to things as they were—and while sentimental readers may want to see that final shiver as a sign of despairing romantic loss, it's more likely that it comes from a resigned recognition that he has forfeited his philosophical decenteredness and that, like Flitcraft, he has found himself trapped once again in the same groove that he has been trying to jump out of for the entire novel.

Notes

1. Personal communication.

2. This distinction, of course, has close connections to Steven Mailoux's distinction between foundationalist accounts of interpretation and rhetorical hermeneutics in *Rhetorical Power*. There is, as well, a link to the two ways of conceptualizing truth often classed as correspondence theories (where statements are deemed "true" according to their correspondence to some determinable external state of affairs) and coherence theories (where statements are deemed "true" according to internal standards that include such things as consistency, inclusiveness, and logical relations). The distinction, of course, has been important for literary theorists as well, especially for the New Critics. See, for instance, Brooks and Warren (27). I am warned by my philosopher friends, though, that I do not want to wander through the thickets of this distinction. Special thanks to Elizabeth Ring and Katheryn Doran for their invaluable assistance on these issues.

3. For a fuller discussion, see my *Before Reading*, 176–83.

4. In defining the subgenre in this way, I am taking a substantially different route from that of Holquist, in his discussion of "metaphysical" detective stories. He sees postmodern detectives' recognition of chaos ("they dramatize the void" [155]), but does not discuss the novels in terms of the way they create a truth.

5. For the most part Schulman, too, views the novel from a social rather than an epistemological perspective, since those stories are motivated by "a market society world that systematically demands improvisation, acting, and the manipulation of appearances, people, and feelings." Still, he is one of the critics who recognizes the philosophical issues as well. See in particular 408–9.

6. My thinking in this direction was begun through conversations with Kathryn Gail Brock nearly a decade ago, and the influence of her "parodic" reading on the following paper is enormous. Walton's argu-
ments, in “You’re in My Burg,” similarly stress parodic elements in the text; and although she is less interested in determining an authorial reading than I am, the overlap between our essays is considerable.

7. See, for instance, Carutti: “Gli abasciatori di Malta vennero a rendere omaggio al nuovo Re e offrire il falcone, annuo tributo che Carlo V avea imposto all’Ordine dei Cavalieri gerosolimitani in ricognizione della movenza dell’isola dalla corona di Sicilia” [The ambassadors of Malta came to render homage to the new king and to offer the falcon, the annual tribute which Charles V had imposed upon the order of the Knights of Jerusalem in recognition of his granting of the island from the crown of Sicily.] (391). Thanks to Maureen Miller for help with historical research.

8. For fuller discussion of the difference between authorial audience, narrative audience, and narratee, see Before Reading, chapter 3.

9. See also Genette’s discussion of the problematic nature of grammatical categories, Narrative Discourse Revisited 104 ff. See also Bal 121 ff. In refusing to discuss grammatical difference, though, Bal skims over other differences that, as we shall see, really matter.

10. Of course, there are any number of possible variants. For instance, we might want to distinguish between “normal” third person and what I call third person private, where the narrator and audience are identical, as when someone writes a note to him- or herself, or a secret diary entry about someone else. And when we introduce the distinctions between implied author and narrator, or between authorial audience and narrative audience, the possible permutations increase radically.

For valuable discussions of second person narration in particular, see also Kacandes, Morissette, McHale, Richardson, and Bonheim. McHale’s “calculus” of “possible communicative situations” (96) provides one useful way of sorting out texts; Richardson’s distinction among three different types of second person narration—which he conceptualizes in a way quite different from mine—is likewise illuminating. Bonheim’s approach is, in places, similar to my own in its attention to which narrative positions have been collapsed; and his numerous distinctions, too, are often valuable in charting out this hazy area. But especially toward the end of the essay, he puts more stress than I do on grammatical surface. He also minimizes the importance of brief second person interpolations, as well as cases where “the use of the second person is . . . more a matter of rhetoric than of point of view” (71). Although he is here using the term rhetoric in a narrower sense than I am, his essay avoids treating rhetoric in the broader sense too, and hence the issues of power that are central to my argument.

11. For an excellent discussion of Calvino’s techniques here, see Phelan, chapter 5. Camus’s La Chute seems to begin as second person narrative, but it’s not really sustained, as much of the novel reverts to first person.
12. See also McHale's discussion of this sort of narration as "self-addressed interior dialogue" (101-4).

13. On the surface, this seems a third person narrative, and at least with respect to its past tense aspects, it is. But there's a double story here, and the main story is intended to narrate to the DA what his role will be: it is hence a future tense second person narrative—or, since the story is never actually told, a hypothetical future tense second person narrative. A Greek term would be useful to describe this kind of narrative situation.

14. Hammett uses a similar technique to create distance in *The Glass Key*, although there is it not tied to gender. For further discussion of Hammett and women, see, for instance, Marling.

**Bibliography**


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"How Did You Know He Licked His Lips?"


